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Chair: Mrs. Salma Zahid



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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.)): I call to order meeting number three of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

I want to say a few words about health and safety. I just remind all attendees in the room to maintain a physical distance of at least two metres and to wear a mask as long as physical distancing is not assured.

This is a hybrid meeting; some members are appearing in person in the parliamentary precinct and other members are appearing remotely.

I remind all members to please speak at a pace slow enough for interpreters to keep up. Do not speak over one another. The clerk will be tracking the raised hands, in case someone wants to speak, and keeping a speaking list for the chair.

Pursuant to the order adopted by the House on September 23, all questions shall be decided by recorded vote except for those decided unanimously or on division.

The meeting is being webcast, and is available also on ParlVU.

Today we have some committee business at the beginning, and then we will start the study on the impact of COVID on the immigration system. Before we go into committee business, I want to let everyone know that the clerk has distributed a revised calendar of possible upcoming meetings. The meeting schedule is determined by the whips of all parties. We have the information for the next meeting, which will be held on Tuesday, November 3 from 3:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.

I want to inform all members about some deadlines. The committee has the main estimates for 2020-21. The deadline to report the estimates to the House is Friday, November 27. The deadline to report supplementary estimates (B) 2020-21 to the House is not later than three sitting days before the final sitting of the supplementary period ending not later than December 10, 2020, or three sitting days before the last allotted day in the current period, which has not been allotted yet. The IRCC advises that members may request individual briefings by the department on the estimates. The clerk can compile the names of members who wish to receive individual briefings.

These were some of the deadlines I wanted to give and some opening remarks.

First, we will begin today's meeting with committee business. We had the subcommittee meeting, and the committee business for today is to adopt the first report of the subcommittee on agenda and procedure. The minutes of the meeting have been circulated by the clerk to all the members. Can I have the motion to adopt the report by the subcommittee on agenda and procedure?

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.): I so move.

The Chair: Do I have unanimous consent to adopt the motion of the report of the subcommittee on agenda and procedure, which has been circulated?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Today we are starting our study on the impact of COVID-19 on the immigration system. The committee will start hearing from the witnesses today.

For our first panel we have, as individuals, Chantale Munger, pedagogical advisor, Cégep de Jonquière; Santa J. Ono, president and vice-chancellor, University of British Columbia; and Chantal Dubé, research and content writer, representing Spousal Sponsorship Advocates, as well as Syed Farhan Ali and Roomila Mirza, associates.

I welcome all of the witnesses. Thank you for appearing before the CIMM committee.

We will start with Chantale Munger.

You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Ms. Raquel Dancho (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Madam Chair, I have just one comment before we begin.

The Chair: Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I have a question for the committee. Do we have an update from the minister with regard to when he will be able to appear before our committee in response to Jenny Kwan's motion that was passed last week?

The Chair: We don't have any answer as yet. I will update the committee as soon as I have information on that.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: As you are doing your consultations on that, I suggest that we also consider an evening committee meeting for that. My understanding is that there are two of those that we could get into the queue for each week, when we may be able to meet with the minister, if that's more amenable to his schedule.

The Chair: I will find the information and update all committee members.

We will start hearing from the witnesses.

The first witness is Chantale Munger.

You have five minutes, Ms. Munger. Please start.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chantale Munger (Pedagogical Advisor, Cégep de Jonquière, As an Individual): Good afternoon, everyone.

Thank you for having me here and for giving me the chance to appear before this committee.

First, I want to speak a little bit about the economic impact of Canada's colleges and institutes. According to an analysis by Colleges and Institutes Canada, known as CIGan, in 2014-15, the economic impact of colleges and institutes was valued at \$190 billion. In 2018, international students contributed \$21.6 billion to the country's gross domestic product, or GDP.

According to another impact analysis conducted in the spring on the effects of the pandemic, the losses amount to \$3.1 billion in the 2020-21 academic year alone. In 2018, Canada welcomed 572,000 international students, which constitutes an increase of 154% in eight years. If the market were to collapse as a result of the pandemic, Canada would lose \$10 billion over the coming academic years. This amounts to a 46.5% drop in revenue, according to CIGan data.

According to the latest overview of international activities provided by the Fédération des cégeps, which comprises 44 CEGEPs, there were 167,000 international students in 2019. This is a key issue in terms of the CEGEPs' vitality. Sixty per cent of CEGEP leaders consider international recruitment very important, compared to only 40% in 2014. This interest is even more acute in the regions, outside the major cities, because the major centres already attract immigrants. The regions must step up their efforts to attract this population.

CEGEPs in the regions are particularly active. The visibility and viability of the programs are at stake. CEGEPs must also make up for the shortfall resulting from the declining population. They also play a major role in territorial vitality. They provide a large pool of skilled workers and training for the labour market. CEGEPs are also major employers in the regions.

To recruit students, CEGEPs must deal with many challenges involving the immigration procedures. There's a world of difference between the reality of our students who wish to study abroad and the reality of the students whom we manage to recruit. International students must go through a maze of requirements from the federal government, the provincial government and the department of education. They must apply for a Quebec acceptance certificate, or CAQ, a study permit and an internship permit. They must provide their biometric data—which is very complex—and they must sometimes undergo medical tests.

Students who wish to do their internship in Quebec don't have an easy time. Quite the contrary. In our view, the requirements are disproportionate. The students must first go through all the steps taken by foreign workers—

• (1540)

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry. Can you please stop? I think there is some interpretation issue. We have to stop the clock.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chantale Munger: Okay.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry. We just have to figure out the interpretation. You have to speak a bit louder.

[*Translation*]

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Leif-Erik Aune): Ms. Munger, this is the clerk speaking to you.

Can you raise your microphone?

Ms. Chantale Munger: Okay.

Can we continue?

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes, please. We will restart the clock.

Please start.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chantale Munger: I was also talking about students who wish to do internships in Quebec. They don't have an easy time. Quite the contrary. In our view, the requirements are disproportionate. The students must go through all the steps taken by foreign workers, even though the internship will be just a few weeks long and they have the support of the two partner institutions. We're also not allowed to provide assistance because of immigration laws. In this situation, it's very difficult to ensure reciprocity when working with the other universities. It's easy to send out interns, but very difficult to take them in.

I also want to bring up two ironies. The first concerns the large number of students who receive a refusal letter from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC, even though they have the language skills and a scholarship from the Canadian government. These students are mainly from African countries with French-speaking populations.

• (1545)

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting you. Your time is up. Maybe you can talk further when we come to the rounds of questioning.

The next witness is Santa J. Ono, president and vice-chancellor, University of British Columbia.

Santa J. Ono, you have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Dr. Santa J. Ono (President and Vice-Chancellor, University of British Columbia, As an Individual): Good afternoon.

First let me say that it's an honour to join you today from UBC on the traditional ancestral and unceded territory of the Musqueam people. I want to further acknowledge the traditional territories from which each of you join us.

Canadians have long understood that our open, multicultural society is a major competitive differentiator and a major key to our long-term prosperity as a nation. The current moment offers an opportunity for Canada to be more competitive for international talent and to bring more economic value and more skilled immigrants to Canada. Our population is aging. These new skilled immigrants will be crucial to guaranteeing the long-term quality of life for all Canadians in our post-pandemic recovery. Other jurisdictions, such as Germany and the United Kingdom, have prioritized attracting and retaining international students. Canada needs to ensure that we aren't placing ourselves in the position where we can't compete and attract this much-needed talent.

International students are also a major contributor to Canada's research enterprise, and enrich the learning environment for all the Canadian students on our campuses. Importantly, many international students choose to stay and make Canada their home, representing a major source of highly skilled talent needed for the Canadian economy, a resource we know that Canada needs especially as we emerge from this pandemic. As many of you know, international students bring significant benefits to Canada, economically as well as socially. International students contribute more than \$20 billion per year to the Canadian economy. They play a significant role in Canadian post-secondary revenue. Last year, at UBC alone, of the \$650 million in undergraduate tuition revenue, more than 60% came from international undergraduate students.

It goes without saying that COVID-19 continues to have profound impacts. That is particularly true for the post-secondary sector in our ability to welcome international students and researchers. I want to thank the federal government for its extraordinary efforts to ensure that Canada continues to be a leading global centre for international education and a destination of choice for international talent. I want to particularly thank Minister Mendicino, Minister Bain, Minister Ng and the many public servants who have worked collaboratively with universities; the U15, of which I am chair; Universities Canada; and the Canadian Bureau for International Education to address new and unique pressures facing our immigration system and to create supports for international students in light of the pandemic.

In that spirit, and in recognizing the incredible challenges that face the government in operating our immigration system during a global pandemic, there are a few areas in which we can continue to make improvements together. The first is the responsibility being given to the post-secondary sector to manage and support the quarantine of students entering Canada to study. We're doing so very successfully. The second is to improve processing times for study and work permits, particularly as we gradually return to in-person instruction and research across Canada. The third is greater flexibility in the processes that reflect these unique times. The fourth is to build an even closer tie between the immigration department and universities as we work through permit processing issues and many specific challenging individual cases. The last one is to ensure that international students and researchers continue to be seen as an es-

sential part of Canadian society as we look to such new pandemic measures as eligibility for an eventual vaccine.

I look forward to your questions and our discussions.

Thank you.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ono. You finished your opening remarks in slightly over four minutes, which is good.

Our third witness, from Spousal Sponsorship Advocates, is Chantal Dubé, research and content writer.

Ms. Dubé, you have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Ms. Chantal Dubé (Research and Content Writer, Spousal Sponsorship Advocates): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Through my involvement with the Spousal Sponsorship Advocates over the last several months, I have been a witness to the suffering of many couples and families as they try to manage the worries and difficulties of the pandemic, all the while contending with isolation from their immediate family members, who form their primary support network.

When the pandemic took hold and government processes were halted, hills became mountains. As Canadian spouses and partners, our ability to travel to visit with our foreign spouses was nullified due to border closures and essential quarantine measures, and air travel became a risky proposition and a scarce commodity.

With that change of circumstances, the impact of notorious temporary resident visa refusals for foreign spouses on the grounds of paragraph 179(b) became more than a nuisance; it became a very real barrier to family reunification, leaving us effectively unable to visit with one another, unable to witness the birth of a first-born child, unable to provide family care during a medical or mental health emergency and unable to provide the support that may have prevented such emergencies from occurring in the first place.

Our spouses are regularly denied TRVs due to fears they will overstay their welcome, and yet no one in their right mind would put the long-term goal of permanent family reunification at risk by doing such a thing.

Our applications for spousal sponsorship regularly linger in the system for absurd amounts of time due to fears that our marriages are not genuine, and yet the overwhelming majority of relationships are genuine, even if they may be unusual. The government's measures that are in place to protect against unauthorized migration and marriages of convenience are measures that impose hardship on all in order to catch a small few.

I would like to draw the committee's attention to the brief that has been submitted by the Spousal Sponsorship Advocates and to make its members aware that we have collected several examples of personal testimony related to this issue that are available upon request. The brief puts forth information and evidence to demonstrate the extent of the impact of existing government policies and processes as they apply to spousal sponsorship as well as recommendations. It speaks to the profound effects they have had on individuals and families as compounded by the global COVID-19 crisis over these last seven months.

To provide you with a personal example of that damage, I give you Mr. Syed Farhan Ali.

Mr. Syed Farhan Ali (Associate, Spousal Sponsorship Advocates): Thank you very much, Chantal.

Thank you, honourable Madam Chair and honourable members of the committee.

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to highlight the issues we have gone through during the 34-month process of my spousal immigration case. I will try my best to squeeze the miseries of 34 months into two minutes.

The current system basically lacks compassion and empathy. For 34 months we have suffered through severe mental stress, anxiety, depression, feelings of deprivation, lack of sleep and appetite, and most importantly, suicidal thoughts. I missed the birth of my kids, but thanks to the United States that granted me a five-year B-1/B-2 visa in 2016 by knowing only that my wife is Canadian and that I wished to see her.

I was somehow able to see my kids after a couple of months in the U.S. I missed their births. We have spent thousands of dollars on travel, etc. I missed their first step and their first birthday. My wife takes care of six kids and a sick mom, and she has faced all the storm alone up until now.

Regarding the process, it's stressful and unclear. It leaves the applicant in the dark. There are long, silent gaps after the submission of additional documents, causing unnecessary delays and stress, while other streams get approved in six to eight months. With visas being denied for applicants from developing countries because of paragraph 179(b) judging the application on the basis of wealth and properties, relationships mean nothing. Why would someone stay in Canada and jeopardize their case? Spouses are immediate family; we are not tourists.

These are a few of the many issues we faced. We need the sympathetic—

• (1555)

The Chair: Mr. Farhan, I'm sorry for interrupting. Your time is up. We will have to go to the rounds of questions.

Thanks to all witnesses.

We will now start with our first round. We have Mr. Hallan for six minutes.

Mr. Hallan, the floor is yours.

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

First and foremost, I want to thank the advocacy group. We had a rally over the weekend, which most of my honourable colleagues attended. Just to hear the courage all of you in sharing your personal stories and what you've had to overcome so far, just like some of the testimony we heard here today....

It was very disappointing to see that no Liberal ministers showed up for that rally—even though they were invited—to hear the real-life impact that you all are facing with these delays and what's happening.

It really is more personal when you hear these stories. We hear about these through our offices. We try to help accommodate...but these are real-life impacts on your lives. Thank you for sharing your stories.

Again, many courageous stories were told. There were many heart-wrenching testimonies from the many speakers at that rally.

I also want to give you a little more opportunity, a minute or so—I know that's not enough time—to share a brief overview of what was spoken about inside that rally, and a brief overview of what the concerns were.

Mr. Farhan, could you please share a little more of your experience?

Mr. Syed Farhan Ali: Thank you, sir. Thank you very much.

The main thing we have suffered is that there were so many unpredictable delays in the processing. If we are asked to submit additional documents, it means another six months to get a reply from them.

There are two different systems, ECAS and GCMS. Some people have access to GCMS and some people have access to ECAS. Those on ECAS are totally in the dark. It's a dark tunnel. We get an update, like your medical is clear or whatever, and then there's nothing again.

Criminality checks, "security checks" as they call them, cause a long delay after you pass your eligibility. My eligibility took two years. Mine is a second marriage, and it's a huge, huge red flag. It took me a long time to justify that my marriage is genuine and I love my wife and kids.

There are so many things we have suffered, we have gone through. We have spent thousands of dollars to meet each other just to hold my kids in my arms. We have been through a lot, and so many mental stresses, health issues and anxiety. We have been through a lot.

Now my application has been approved, thankfully—thank God for that. Because of the support of my group, we got it approved. Still, I'm here in Pakistan and I'm waiting to be united with my family.

Thank you.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Again, we appreciate your courage in sharing and being a voice for the rest of the group. We're so glad to hear that your application was finally approved. I know there were so many others who spoke at that rally whose applications aren't approved. They're in such dire need for this.

You touched on some very, very important things. I want you, and if Ms. Dubé would like also, to chime in on these.

We know that these delays have real-life impacts, especially on people's personal lives, not only just for the sponsors but for the applicants—the whole family. As you said, there are missed birthdays. You don't hear your kids speak for the first time, or even see them walk. These are major milestones for any parent. I'm a parent, as well. You want to be there, to hug your kids. You don't get to celebrate holidays together. The effects that are mental and physical on your health are enormous, not to mention the financial burden, because that's a huge burden on its own.

I'd like you to chime in on what you've been hearing from the rest of the group as well as some of the other heart-wrenching stories. I really want to put on record where you feel that the Liberal government has failed, or this minister has failed, in being able to respond to you properly.

• (1600)

Ms. Chantal Dubé: Thank you.

Just to be clear, I think a lot of the ongoing issues that we are facing have been around for many years. We certainly don't want to pin them on any government in particular. We only wish for them to be addressed in such a way that the system can be improved on an ongoing basis well into the future so that others won't have to suffer the same troubles that our group members have suffered.

We have stories of members who have been through multiple attempts to bring their spouses to Canada over the course of many years. They have been refused for reasons they could not understand. They have children between them. The pandemic, with the additional seven-month delay to the existing lengthy wait times, is simply the straw that broke the camel's back for many people.

We are, in a sense, pleased that we now have a community that has gathered across the nation to share these stories. As I noted previously, we have many of these stories written and prepared. They are available to the members of the committee upon request.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we will move to Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Dhaliwal, you have six minutes. Go ahead.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you, Sister Salma.

My heart is with many couples like the Farhan Ali's, who are the victims of a poor regulation, regulation 4. I want to remind the honourable Conservative members that this regulation 4 was brought in by Jason Kenney at the time and puts the onus on the couples to prove not only that the marriage is genuine, but that, in fact, when they entered into the marriage, their intentions were to be husband and wife. That is what is causing a lot of problems, and it was created by Jason Kenney and the Conservatives.

My focus right now is a question that will go to Dr. Ono and Chantale Munger on students in particular. When we were going through the last election we were hearing a lot of outcry from parents that the international students were taking the spots that were for local students here. In fact, I agree more with both of you. We know that international students contribute to our economy and provide immense economic, cultural and social contributions to Canada.

Dr. Ono, could you elaborate on how international students enrich your campus and institution as a whole, and British Columbia as a whole, when it comes to particularly this problem?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chantale Munger: First, it isn't true that foreign students are taking the place of our young people. In fact, CEGEPs in the regions lack students because of the declining birth rate. This is now the case almost everywhere in Quebec. We have the necessary equipment and facilities to take in students. We have a labour shortage as a result of the lack of students in various technical programs tied to the industrial sectors and in the health field and other fields. Companies have vacancies. There's a real need for companies to partner with schools and educational institutions to find the necessary workers.

The irony that I mentioned is also the fact that students are successfully recruited abroad, but their applications are rejected when they've completed all the steps. We also see companies looking abroad to try to find workers, whereas we've managed to find them.

Why look for workers who have been trained elsewhere, when we can bring in young people who speak our language and who want to take training that's completely adapted to the workplace? They'll want to stay and they'll choose a region to live in afterwards.

Moreover, out of the 3,000 students attending Cégep de Jonquière—

● (1605)

[English]

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: How about Mr. Ono.

Dr. Santa J. Ono: Thank you very much.

First of all, let me say to your point that the international students who apply to our university and to many of the universities across Canada that they compete in a completely separate pool. What happens is that we have funded seats for domestic students. You know that's the case at UBC, and we first fill those seats. Then each faculty looks at how many more additional students they can bring in who are international.

The truth is that, first, the resources that international students bring to the institution allow us to educate more Canadians than if these students were not at our university. That's number one. The impact is to increase the availability of education for our domestic students.

Second, as you know, there's a great learning environment that results from having different people with different perspectives together in the same class. I submit that it's very good for the world as well to have different people from different places with different ideas and cultures coming together.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: We have made many changes, like to working hours and also counting the times your overseas students have been doing their studies overseas. What are some of the other improvements you suggest to [Inaudible-Editor] framework for international students?

Dr. Santa J. Ono: We're very grateful for the changes that have been made. We think there's an opportunity, first, to look at processing times for student permits, visas, and cooperative or work-integrated learning opportunities. Obtaining these permits continue to be a little bit of a struggle for our students and our post-secondary institutions. If we can work together to decrease the time for receiving those study and work permits, it would make the system of students coming to Canada much easier. It's really critical, as I said, because we're in a global competition for these students.

One other concrete thing that can be done is to waive the biometric collection abroad for a limited time to allow students to start co-op jobs during the pandemic as soon as they apply for the work permits. There's no way for them, for example, to give biometrics, due to closure of the VACs in their countries or regions.

The Chair: Sorry for interrupting, Dr. Ono, but your time is up. Maybe you can go into further detail with someone else when we go around.

Next we have Ms. Normandin.

Ms. Normandin, you have six minutes. The floor is yours.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Munger, I have some questions about what you talked about at the end of your presentation, students coming from French-

speaking Africa. I gather there's a dichotomy: on one hand, students are offered scholarships, and on the other hand, they are denied and not granted study permits.

As far as you know, why are study permits being denied? What would you recommend so this doesn't happen and so Quebec doesn't lose French-speaking students, given that it's already struggling to attract them?

Ms. Chantale Munger: In our view, the dichotomy lies in the fact that students from countries such as India and Pakistan benefit from timely processing, whereas the students who make up our particular pool, those from French-speaking Africa, do not. We manage to attract and retain students from the Ivory Coast, Guinea and the like. These are high-achieving students who receive merit scholarships. Once they've gone through the whole process, however, they're denied study permits. Insufficient funding is usually the reason that's given, but they're receiving annual scholarships of \$16,000. Either no checks are being done or the different departments don't communicate with one another.

Therefore, my recommendation is to grant permits to students from French-speaking countries who have received scholarships.

● (1610)

Ms. Christine Normandin: I have another question.

You said that regional universities have to work harder to recruit international students than universities in large urban centres do. I'd like you to talk more about that and tell us what would help regional universities and CEGEPs.

Ms. Chantale Munger: Earlier, we were discussing the huge needs that are apparent in the regions. I have to point out that international students help to alleviate the labour shortage and to keep at-risk programs alive. A number of programs have to shut down for want of students. It's important to ensure that both the region and the CEGEP thrive.

As far as recommendations go, I should mention the importance of improving immigration services and processes. They are plagued by a tremendous number of challenges; people report considerable wait times, closures and mistakes. All of those have been exacerbated by COVID-19, which has led to the closure of post offices and biometrics collection centres, longer processing times, errors, and inconsistencies.

Another recommendation would be to reinstate services that used to be available, including a helpline people could call to ask an IR-CC employee questions and obtain information. I would also recommend better training for immigration officers and better communication between centres so fewer errors are made during this particular time. In addition, assigning more staff to review files would reduce excessively long processing times. It takes 15 weeks for a study permit for France and 25 weeks in the case of Senegal. Students need access to better services as well; although a helpline for students exists, it isn't accessible. Sometimes, they can't get an answer or the line simply isn't available.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Ms. Munger.

You brought up the fact that, even for very short internships, the process is very onerous. That's discouraging not only for students, but also for anyone wanting to take on interns. The process is so long, and there's no way to know when the person will get their permit.

I'd like to hear your thoughts on what could be done to make things easier for students simply wanting to do an internship, especially if it's a short one.

Ms. Chantale Munger: What CEGEPs are trying to do is participate in internationalization. It's about offering a range of experiences. We host international students and we send our students abroad. Hosting international interns and sending Canadian interns abroad requires some reciprocity. If we want our students to benefit from international learning opportunities such as internships, but we can't take interns, there's no reciprocity. Why would international students come to Canada, where the system is extremely complicated?

First, the process to accept students who have been granted study permits needs to be streamlined. The government has to make it easier to host and attract talent and to offer students internships without going through the international mobility program. Under the program, student interns are considered workers, despite being in the country for just a few weeks. Exchanges are possible thanks to co-operation agreements with other learning institutions around the world.

Another important measure is to allow students to have their biometrics collected when they enter Canada, not when they're in their regions. Some of our students and interns come from countries that don't necessarily have collection centres. For instance, Réunion Island has no such centre, so students have to go to Mauritius for biometrics collection. It also poses challenges in Africa, where the process is highly complicated.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Ms. Munger.

Do I have time for another question?

• (1615)

[*English*]

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: I have only enough time to ask the question, so I'll wait until my next turn.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we will move to Ms. Kwan.

You have six minutes.

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

Thank you to all of the witnesses for taking time to come to our committee. I'd like to direct my questions to Ms. Dubé and Mr. Farhan Ali.

The immigration committee, back in 2017, studied the issues of family reunification. Back then, we heard from witnesses that it was almost impossible for family members to come to Canada through a temporary visa. In fact, if they were submitting a spousal sponsorship application, it seemed to be worse because having close ties in Canada almost automatically got people a rejection based on 179(b), under which an official could cite—based on your travel history, the purpose of your visit and your employment prospects in your own country—that did not meet the criteria to return to your own country after your visit.

To that end, some witnesses suggested that 179(b) should be done away with in the visa applications for spousal sponsorships. I'm just wondering if this is the position of the SSA, to call on the government to suspend the use of 179(b) for spousal sponsorship applications for temporary visas.

Ms. Chantal Dubé: Madam Chair, I wish to inform committee that that is indeed correct. We have experienced extremely high levels of rejection, regardless of the fact that we have been approved as sponsors. Clearly we can ensure that our spouses are taken care of while they are here. We can ensure that they will return when it is time for them to return.

It is essential, especially in times of crisis like now, to be able to be reunited with our spouses. In some cases, we cannot travel to their countries. In some cases, it's not safe to do so. Understandably, we are concerned for their well-being, and it would provide us with a great deal of comfort to know they are safe in our homes, at least for a visit.

Yes, we wish that something could be done to suspend paragraph 179(b) as it applies to the spouses of Canadian citizens.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: In the case of Mr. Farhan, your application has been in process for 34 months. Last Friday you finally got your approval after much to-do: lots of advocacy from the group, from MPs, from me on your behalf, and finally the application has come through. Yet you have had visits to the United States, you have an approved travel visa through the United States, but you cannot get one to Canada. Is that correct?

Mr. Syed Farhan Ali: Honourable Jenny Kwan, thank you so much for mentioning my case here.

Yes, that's correct.

At the time of the birth of my daughter—July 2017—we applied for a Canadian visa from the New York embassy. My wife was pregnant. We drove all the way from Buffalo to New York. My wife and I were present at the consulate general of Canada's office in New York. We applied for a TRV, begging them to please allow me to be there for the birth of my first daughter. Those moments were emotional. We were so hopeful that my wife.... We mentioned in our application that she was pregnant, and we both were present at your office in New York: "Please allow us to be together at this precious moment that's not going to come back again."

In three or four days, our application was returned. The same thing, paragraph 179(b), was the hindrance, the reason they rejected it. I am in the U.S.A. The U.S.A. granted me a visa to visit based on only four questions. They never asked me for a bank statement or any employment history. The only thing they asked me about was why I was going to the U.S.A.

I told them that my wife is Canadian. I didn't have a Canadian visa. Please allow me to see my wife.

The lady at the other counter looked at the computer for a couple of minutes and granted the visa.

I had no idea for how long. When I got the passport, it was for five years. It's still valid for another half year.

I am really grateful to them. Canada is known for prioritizing family. When we got rejected in 2017 at the time of the birth of my daughter, we were shattered.

My wife went into a severe depression. She took Pristiq, a medicine for depression, which then caused severe issues for my daughter. She is severely autistic because of that medicine.

• (1620)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Mr. Farhan.

You bring up my next point.

In the cases where processing of a spousal sponsorship application is severely delayed—and this happened prior to COVID—one of the suggestions back in March 2017, again at the immigration committee, was that there should be a special temporary visitor's visa for spousal sponsorship applications for family reunification so you can come to Canada while your application is being processed. Does the SSA support—

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, sorry for interrupting, but your time is up. We will have to move to our second round of questioning.

Mr. Saroya, you have five minutes.

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

I also want to thank all of our advocacy groups coming here, and especially Farhan Ali. You have the courage to come up. What you went through is a shame, I would say, on the current government system. They keep blaming the previous government, which has been gone for five years. Rather than fixing the issue, they are still talking about the previous government. Even in Surrey, B.C., last month, the parents of a 21-year-old kid who had drowned were not

allowed to come to bury their child. Stop blaming the previous government. The idea here today is to fix the issue. This is what this committee is all about: fixing the issue. Regarding the 21-year-old kid, in India somebody felt sorry for him. They let the parents come without the special permit to come to this country.

Let's talk about the real issues here. Please stop blaming the previous government. Let's work together to fix the issues.

Let's start with the students.

The students come to this country. They spend about \$23 billion a year. They bring this to the Canadian economy. As well, if you come to Ontario, you see every Tim Hortons, every Wendy's, every McDonald's, every Pizza Pizza, almost all the restaurants, are run by these students. The owners in this fast-food industry are asking to make life easier for these students, and to issue them the visas. We still have plenty of issues with that problem.

I would like to see if Chantale Munger and Santa Ono can speak a little more on this issue of the students who are going through that problem.

Dr. Santa J. Ono: I'm happy to reply, if that's okay.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Absolutely.

Dr. Santa J. Ono: First, it certainly is an important issue. We have to solve it with urgency because other countries, as I pointed out, are streamlining their processes as we speak, and we're in competition for these outstanding students who do contribute in a major way to the Canadian economy.

I want to make a suggestion, and that is to lean on our universities through creating closer ties between IRCC and the universities to help with the permit processing issues and to streamline specific challenging individual cases. What I'm suggesting, to be very clear and succinct, is to think strategically, recognizing the role institutions already play in filtering and clarifying students' questions. We encourage the development of a case-specific channel for designated learning institutions. A case-specific channel for DLIs is critical to fill a gap in IRCC's client service model and increase the efficiency in IRCC's delivery model. It's a specific recommendation that I think will be a big help in the months ahead.

• (1625)

Mr. Bob Saroya: Absolutely.

Chantale Munger, do you want to add something? If not, I have another question.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chantale Munger: Yes, Mr. Saroya.

There's so much talk about immigration and the considerable efforts being made to attract workers, but we already have trained workers who are here and want to stay. I don't understand the issue as far as the government departments go. From where I stand, there seems to be a disconnect between what the government says and what it does.

The Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship says it wants to attract French speakers with the skills the labour market needs, but when those workers are already here, it sends them back home. If they want to stay here, why doesn't the department take the time to assess their skills, determine whether they would benefit the workforce and, if so, give them a chance to stay and work here.

[English]

Mr. Bob Saroya: I have a follow-up question.

The Chair: Sorry, you just have 10 seconds.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Okay, I'll stop. Thank you.

The Chair: We will now move to Mr. Serré.

Before Mr. Serré starts, I want to ask all the witnesses if it is possible for you to have headsets. It makes it easier for the interpreters, for the translation.

Mr. Serré, you have five minutes.

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

[Translation]

Many thanks to all the witnesses for sharing their insight with the committee today.

[English]

I have a few questions. I'll address the first one to Ms. Munger and also to Syed.

Syed, I really want to thank you for sharing your story. I know that it's been really challenging for you and your family. I'm glad to hear that things have been approved in the process, but when we look at the pandemic and the difficulties and the challenges we've had here, I want to hear some comments on the operational issues and some of the immigration streamlining here.

For example, last month, we increased the number of decision-makers by 66%. We also are digitizing a lot of the processed applications, so we look at now finalizing 6,000 applications a month, and nearly 50,000 by the end of the year.

From your experience, and knowing how we're fixing the system, I want to get your comments to see how you feel about this. Will this help members of your organization?

Mr. Syed Farhan Ali: Thank you very much, honourable MP Serré, for giving me a chance to further clarify things.

As for my case, everybody knows that it took 34 months. We applied for GCMS notes: CSIS, RCMP and CBSA. We applied in August. We were in the dark: where does the application stand right now? There was no communication from IRCC. In the middle of September, we started getting the notes. Everything in the notes was clear. The eligibility was clear. As you said, that 6,000 was the target.

Now, what I'm trying to point out is that the security chapter was blank. There was no information there, as usual, so my wife and my two little kids went on a protest in front of Mr. Marco Mendicino's place for six days, rain or shine. That brought the attention of MP Stewart to my wife and my kids. MP Jenny Kwan, who is a very respected and honourable MP, contacted us. When Jenny Kwan's

office contacted IRCC, she discovered that my application was only done in September. The file was collecting dust on the table. After she inquired, the very next day I got a decision made, and the day after that I got the express passport. That's the performance that we can see. There are so many people I know in my own country, my own fellow men in Pakistan, who have been stuck for years now, some for four or five years.

Thank you.

• (1630)

Mr. Marc Serré: Exactly.

Ms. Munger, can you answer the questions about the decision-makers, the digitization of applications, the process we're going through now and how we're trying to fix the system moving forward?

[Translation]

Ms. Chantale Munger: I think Ms. Dubé would be a better person to answer that question.

[English]

Ms. Chantal Dubé: Yes. Thank you.

We can say that our group was very pleased to hear about the announcement and we have begun to see some small indications of results. We do have concerns, however, in that the total amount of files that will be processed by the end of this year just does not approach the amount of PRs that were intended to be distributed this year for spouses of Canadian citizens.

We are very eager to know if increased measures will continue on into the new year in order to process those additional files that will need to be processed. We are also obviously very eager simply to be reunited for a visit as soon as possible, so we do urge the government to look at solutions for temporary resident visas for our spouses.

Thank you.

Mr. Marc Serré: Ms. Dubé, were you aware that when we took over in government that there were 75,000 spousal applications in the backlog that we're trying to correct?

Ms. Chantal Dubé: Yes. I have done the research and discovered a lot of the patterns that existed prior to this, and I do recognize that the Liberal government has increased the number of TRs issued over the years for spousal sponsorship.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but the time is up. With that, we come to the end our first round.

I want to thank the witnesses for their important input to this study.

If there is anything you want to highlight for the committee members that you have not been able to share today, you can submit it to the clerk of the committee.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: On a point of order, Madam Chair, we started our meeting at least four minutes late, according to my time, because of technical difficulties and what have you. It was seven minutes, according to Ms. Normandin.

If we hadn't actually started late, we would have been able to get through our second rotation, per our routine motions, wherein Ms. Normandin and I would be able to get our two and a half minutes' worth of questioning. I'm hoping to be able to do that, and that there's goodwill from the committee members so that we can finish this panel with our two and a half minutes.

I see a thumbs up from MP Dhaliwal. I'm hoping we're able to do that, Madam Chair, before we move to the next panel.

The Chair: Ms. Kwan—

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West, CPC): On that same point of order, my only concern is that if we go over the time here, are we going over in the next one?

The Chair: I want to clarify, Ms. Kwan, that you want to take the time out of the second panel, because we have three more witnesses for the second panel, and we have to end our meeting at 5:30.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I would really like to get an answer from Ms. Dubé to my question, so I would prefer to get my two and a half minutes in this round, if I may.

The Chair: Do we take the time out of the next panel?

Some hon. members: No.

The Chair: We don't have unanimous consent on that. There is already a member saying no. They don't want time out of the second panel.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Madam Chair, on the point of order, I'm willing to take the speaking time I would have to question the second panel and use it for this panel.

[*English*]

The Chair: We have to end the panel here. If we go for extra time, we will have to take that time out of the next panel, and I don't have unanimous consent for that.

With this, we will end the first panel here. We need to suspend the meeting for two minutes so that we can get the three witnesses set up. The Clerk will do a quick sound check for the witnesses on the second panel.

● (1630) _____ (Pause) _____

● (1635)

The Chair: I call the meeting to order. For this round we have three witnesses appearing before us.

We have Chantal Desloges, senior partner from Desloges Law Group. She's no stranger to the CIMM committee.

Our second witness an individual, is David Ojo. Welcome, David.

The third person is representing Faces of Advocacy, Dr. David Poon, its founder.

I welcome you all. Thank you for appearing before the committee.

We will start with Chantal Desloges. You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

● (1640)

Ms. Chantal Desloges (Senior Partner, Desloges Law Group, As an Individual): Thank you very much.

Thank you to the committee for inviting me today. I am an immigration and refugee lawyer with over 20 years of experience. I'm also the co-author of an immigration and refugee law textbook. I run a law firm in downtown Toronto with 12 staff, and we do immigration only on a full-time basis.

I base my comments today not only on my own experience and that of my staff. I've also taken the liberty of canvassing my colleagues from coast to coast to get some opinions from other lawyers as well.

The state of file processing from approximately March 2020 to July 2020 made evident a very alarming state of unreadiness for a large-scale disaster and an inability to adapt quickly in an unexpected emergency. From March to July, most immigration lawyers would tell you, there was virtually no movement on any immigration file and most of our time was spent trying to explain to clients that we didn't know what was going on and we had no way of finding out what was going on, and we didn't know how long anything was going to take.

If we turn first of all to the family reunification impacts, for sponsorship of spouses even up until now, just to get an acknowledgement of receipt is taking four months or even longer. That means four months or more just to find out whether your file is even complete and has been entered into processing. Even worse, if a client has submitted a file that's incomplete, they've wasted four months before they find out that their file is not in the queue and they have to start all over again.

In my view, the processing times posted by IRCC on the website are no longer accurate. The processing times for overseas and inland spousal sponsorship still say 12 months from start to finish, but there's no way that that could possibly be accurate if an acknowledgement of receipt is taking at least four months. Most spousal sponsorship interviews at visa posts have been cancelled, and I haven't heard of any of those interviews being rescheduled as of yet, and I have not heard of any provision being made for video interviews. I had one such case that was postponed in March and to date, there is still no news as to when it will be rescheduled. Given the prevalence of video technology, it's hard to understand why these interviews cannot be done remotely.

Another complication to consider is that many couples right now are physically unable to get married to even start their sponsorships. In 2015, the immigration and refugee protection regulations were amended to eliminate the recognition of proxy marriages, meaning marriages for which both spouses were not physically present in the same place at the same time during the ceremony. That eliminates now the possibility of people doing online weddings by video technology. Just the other day, I spoke to a couple, with the woman in Canada and the man in China. They want to get married, but she cannot go to China because of travel bans and he cannot come to Canada due to a lack of a visa, so for who knows how long, they cannot get married. It's very heartbreaking.

Even if the couple resides together in Canada and is not separated by distance, these delays have serious impacts, because the applicant, usually does not have health care coverage while they're waiting, and if they have children, they are not covered either. Some of these children are going to school in Canada and taking risks with respect to COVID and they don't have any health care coverage.

One of my colleagues mentioned that they have a lot of family reunification cases pending dealing with the consulate in India. No decisions are being issued despite numerous follow-ups and requests. Additionally, applications submitted after March are being held up because biometrics can't be done for many people because visa application centres are closed.

Unlike the case with sponsored parents, sponsored spouses have a very difficult time getting visas to visit their spouses in Canada. Visa refusals of this kind are very common. One of my colleagues described it as the kiss of death if you're a spouse trying to get a visitor visa for Canada, because officers simply don't believe that you're going to go home after your visit once you get a chance to reunite with your spouse in Canada.

With respect to international students, they are in an extremely difficult situation. Many have had to defer their admission several times. Many have lost money. Many do not know if or when they will be able to come to Canada to study at all. They've dropped courses. For many, graduation is now going to be delayed because of the pandemic.

One final comment with respect to the parents and grandparent sponsorship lottery is that the lottery system is much better than the systems that have been in place previously, but it needs to be weighted so that people who have tried more than once to sponsor their parents will have a better chance in the lottery than those starting for the first time.

● (1645)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Desloges.

We will now move to our next witness, Mr. Ojo.

You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Mr. David Ojo (As an Individual): Thank you, Madam Chair.

[Technical difficulty—Editor]

The Chair: Mr. Ojo, can you please stop? I think the interpretation isn't right.

We will go to our next speaker and, meanwhile, we can figure that out.

Mr. Ojo, we'll come back to you after the next witness. We will try to figure out if there is a problem that can be corrected.

Can I please request Mr. David Poon to give his opening remarks?

Mr. Poon, you have five minutes.

Dr. David Edward-Ooi Poon (Founder, Faces of Advocacy): Thank you very much to the committee for having me.

My name is Dr. David Edward-Ooi Poon, founder of the Faces of Advocacy. We are a grassroots Canadian organization of over 8,700 people on a campaign to safely reunite families in Canada during the COVID-19 travel pandemic. From my understanding, we were directly responsible for the October 8 extended family and compassionate travel exemptions. We are thankful to the workers in the ministry who pulled off that task.

COVID-19 exposed a number of systemic inequalities in Canada. Immigration was not immune to that. I have maintained that I do not believe the government set out to intentionally keep families apart. I believe we just fell through the cracks. But there are some things that must not fall through the cracks. Family is one of them.

I am here to loudly and clearly make the case for collaborative, transparent immigration reform in Canada. The IRCC is using an antiquated, outdated and grossly ineffective IT structure that disproportionately affects Canadian families in a completely inconsistent manner. It is so opaque and so unwieldy that even the ministry workers who want desperately to help cannot help those they want to. This is a problem.

I am not here to berate any hard-working ministry employee. I am not convinced that these are the faults of only one minister or decision-maker. But there are significant, systemic flaws in the immigration process today. For us to fix it together, we must know how it failed—and it has failed. I want to work collaboratively with the government to address these concerns to help this government and any future governments ensure that the mistakes of the past seven months are not repeated ever again.

There are eight recommendations in our report. I will highlight five.

Number one is consistency for all. When the COVID-19 travel restrictions came in, what Canadians heard from the IRCC, CBSA, Canadian embassies, their MPs and the airlines was not consistent. My own partner was given a travel authorization by the Canadian embassy and was denied when she landed in Toronto. In times of crisis, there must be an established, structured chain of communication from the Canadian government that is uniform, widespread and publicly accessible. No one should be told one thing by one official and a completely other thing by another.

Point two is compassionate exemption. The travel restrictions began in March 2020. Compassionate exemptions were given in October 2020. There were seven months of miscarriages left unsupported, seven months of births held in solitary, seven months of cancers fought alone, and seven months of deaths without a final embrace. Donna McCall was a Canadian ICU nurse and a mother who died saying goodbye to her adult children on FaceTime. Committed partners, siblings, grandparents—I actually do understand how long that took to figure out. That was a systemic change that required a lot of different groups and different stakeholders. I understand that there were delays to get that to happen. That's why I'm so thankful to the government that it happened, albeit much later than I wanted. But in no scenario on earth is it acceptable that the NHL was allowed to play in Canada before Donna's children were allowed into the country. I state this again very clearly: NHL players were able to navigate the system of stakeholders, immigration and public safety to play in Canada—all of them foreign nationals—before the children of a dying Canadian mother were allowed into the country. This is what happened. There must be a principle that states that above any broad travel restrictions, compassionate exemptions must be publicly available and accessible to Canadians. I strongly suggest calling it “Donna's rule”.

• (1650)

Point three is upgraded IT infrastructure. We need a cohesive, transparent and trackable system for IRCC. The extended family exemptions opened on October 8, 2020. According to our internal tracking, about 200 of those exemptions were not approved by the promised 14-day turnaround time. The 14-day mark comes in about 24 hours. Interestingly, though, applicants after October 15 have been approved expediently, and we're thankful for that—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Poon, but I will have to stop you there. Your time is up. Maybe you can talk in the round of questioning.

Now we will go back to Mr. Ojo.

Mr. Ojo, you have five minutes for remarks. Before you start, the clerk would like to talk to you for a quick second.

Over to the clerk.

Mr. Clerk.

The Clerk: Mr. Ojo, we're going to try to improve your audio quality. Could you please turn off your video? Thank you so much.

The Chair: Mr. Ojo, you have five minutes for your opening remarks. Please start. The floor is yours.

Mr. David Ojo: Okay. Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to take a moment to thank all members of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration for allowing me to appear virtually today to speak on the impact of COVID-19 on the immigration system, with specific reference to the renewal of expired confirmations of permanent residence.

As contained in my written submission to the clerk of the committee, there are four main sections I have written about: one, instructions from the IRCC; two, responses from affected IRCC clients; three, the realities; and four, recommendations and conclusions.

I am delighted to introduce myself and to highlight a few pain points and present our plea.

My name is David Ojo. I am a Nigerian and an approved permanent resident with an expired confirmation of permanent residency due to my inability to travel to Canada during the COVID-19-induced global lockdown. I began the immigration process in 2018, received the invitation to apply in April 2019, and eventually submitted my application on May 25, 2019. My application was finally approved on December 2019.

I had planned to travel to Canada on March 25, 2020. I even left my job in February the same year. However, due to the travel restrictions in my own country, I was unable to travel, and now my permanent resident visa and COPR have expired. I am a chartered accountant, a seasoned ex-banker, and an active member of a group of approved PRs with expired COPRs in Nigeria, as well as other multinational social networking groups where information sharing is done.

I represent the affected COPR holders who are exempt from the current travel restrictions in Canada, both with expired CPRs and PRVs.

We have all since left our jobs, sold our properties and liquidated our investments, terminated lease agreements in our respective home countries, withdrawn our children from school in a bid to settle permanently in Canada, but have long been waiting on the IRCC to issue a travel authorization letter.

We have complied with the IRCC's instructions to raise a ready-to-travel web form, many of which were raised since the last four to five months.

We have been seriously impacted by the long and inexplicable delay from the IRCC, with no end in sight. In August 2020 I started an online petition addressed to the Government of Canada and the IRCC to fast-track issuance of the travel authorization letter for the expired COPR holders, which has so far gained over 3,000 supporters.

I have been interviewed by Max Hartshorn of Global News Canada and Shelby Thevenot of CIC News Canada to share my story and those of others waiting on the IRCC to extend their COPRs and issue travel authorization letters. Sadly, I am still waiting on the IRCC to settle in Canada.

Honourable MPs, please permit me to request the following.

One, the IRCC should be prevailed upon to close all expired CO-PR cases in 2020 and not carry them forward to 2021, as all expired COPR holders are still hopeful to arrive in Canada this year. Our lives have since been at a standstill. We are highly skilled economic migrants, and we bring skills that will be valuable in driving economic growth through the pandemic and beyond.

Two, an issuance of authorization letter should be automatic and not conditional. This will increase the processing timelines, and also reduce the already stretched IRCC workforce and help channel resources towards the processing of pending applications.

Three, I request the waiver of re-medical requests and other expired documents, as determined by visa officers. This becomes necessary as these are already approved files, in addition to the cost implications and inconveniences of carrying out medical examinations.

Lastly, as an alternative to authorization letters, an instruction could be sent to the immigration departments of the home countries of all the affected IRCC clients to allow boarding with expired CO-PRs or PRVs.

Once again, I extend my sincere appreciation to this committee for allowing me to appear as a witness for the study on the impact of COVID-19 on the immigration system. Thank you.

• (1655)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ojo.

Thank you to all the witnesses for their opening remarks. We will now start our first round of questioning. We will start with Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Dancho, you have six minutes.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to say thank you to the witnesses for joining us today. Your testimony was excellent and very powerful. It's just great to have so many expert witnesses on today's panel.

I have a number of questions. My first will be for Dr. Poon.

Dr. Poon, I first want to say a sincere thank you for bearing this burden over the last seven months as you got together Faces of Advocacy and brought this issue to national attention. It's really been heartbreaking to hear the stories you've brought forward, but I'm very grateful that you have. This committee may not have come together as quickly without the work that you've been doing, so thank you for that.

Dr. Poon, you know that on October 8, as you mentioned in your testimony, the minister announced a special reunification process for adult children and committed couples separated because of the border closures. My understanding is that the deadline that the minister promised is in fact tomorrow. I'd like you to share with the committee your experience talking to those who've applied.

Do you have confidence that the minister's deadline of tomorrow will be met and that families will be able to be successfully reunified as was promised by the minister on October 8?

Dr. David Edward-Ooi Poon: Thank you, MP Dancho. I will make sure that the world knows that my team has been fantastic in bringing Faces of Advocacy together.

In regard to tomorrow's deadline, we were promised 14 business days to hit that time. I have been in contact with IRCC. I've given a list of the people whom we are calling "the missing 50", even though the numbers are closer to 100 to 200 people who have not been processed. We were promised that it would be 14 business days. I believed them. I do not think we will hit the 14th business day. This is very concerning.

People who applied on October 8 and 9, just after it started, have been approved very fast, and we're grateful for that. However, the majority of people who applied on the 8th and 9th apparently appear to be American. Those people have not been processed expeditiously, with the commitment that we were promised.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Dr. Poon, for that. I appreciate it very much.

My next question is for Mr. Ojo.

Mr. Ojo, thank you for joining us all the way from Nigeria. I greatly appreciate your testimony today.

Just for folks who are watching from home, you were approved to come to Canada and move your life here. You are highly skilled and are going to bring a lot of economic growth to our country. You and many others across the globe were approved to come but have been unable to come since then because of the border closures. Your application has since expired, and we know that there are thousands of people across the globe who have expired PR applications. I can't imagine the financial and emotional implications this has had on you and the thousands of others across the world. My understanding is that you haven't really heard anything from Canada as to when you'll be allowed to come. You listed a lot of really great policy options that I think are worthy of discussion.

Since we have limited time, Mr. Ojo, I would love it if you told the committee this: If you could speak to the Minister of Immigration and explain to him what's a stake for you and the thousands of others, what would you say?

• (1700)

Mr. David Ojo: Thank you, MP Dancho.

If I had an opportunity to speak with the Minister of Immigration, it would be about the issuance of the travel authorization letter. We were promised this travel authorization letter in June or July, four to five months ago. We all waited for about three months before IRCC said that we had to submit our ready-to-travel web form and include our settlement plans. We did all of that.

It's been a waiting game. All we do is send in mail. We send in mail with our work forms. We try to call and we are told to wait. We are told to wait indefinitely. It is difficult considering the fact that we all left our jobs. Our lives are at a standstill. It is difficult for us to continue.

In a nutshell, if I had the opportunity to meet the Minister of Immigration, it would be very simple and clear: You promised an authorization letter. It has always been that immigration matters. If immigration matters, you need to prove it to us. It's not about sending it on the website to say you have to submit your web form. We have submitted it, and you need to live up to your word.

Let me be very clear: it's the authorization letter.

Thank you.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Mr. Ojo. From really all the testimony today, but particularly from that of the two Davids, I'll say that it is clear that the issue at stake is that there's no clarity, and really no dignity, given to those who are waiting. There's really just very little, if any, communication at all given to the folks whose lives have been overturned, and I really appreciate your honesty today.

I do hope the minister hears your comments.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: You have 45 seconds left, it's a six-minute round.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I'll go back to Dr. Poon.

In 30 seconds, can you tell me a little bit more about the email campaign that you recently started?

Dr. David Edward-Ooi Poon: We want to ensure that people are processed in a timely fashion. If the two-week turnaround time is kept, we are very happy.

We want to make sure that the temporary residents who are contributing to society in Canada are also included under the same exemptions. We also want to make sure that things are happening in order to allow consistent and fair processing.

If there were a method by which to have a better computer system and IT infrastructure for the IRCC, that would allow trackable, transparent methods for us to check in and see how we're doing and abate the anxiety that we're having about our applications, that would also help the other David, as long as there were a transparent system of communication.

The Chair: Thank you. We will end here.

Now we'll move on to Mr. Reagan.

Mr. Reagan, you have six minutes.

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and allow me to also thank the witnesses for appearing today.

By the way, I recognize that the five-minute opening statements do not provide a lot of time, but I do hope that you'll have an opportunity during the questions and answers to cover the material that you would like to cover, although I know that even an hour is not very long. That's the nature of this work, I'm afraid.

Dr. Poon, speaking of the five minutes, you were talking at the very end about your internal tracking and what happened after October 15. Could you complete that part, please? I'd like to hear the rest of that.

Dr. David Edward-Ooi Poon: Thank you very much for your time.

People who have applied after October 15 have been processed quite fast. We've seen times of as short as six days. If anything, all those people in the first few days, if they reapplied, would probably be processed faster.

The conflicting message is this. IRCC has told us not to reapply. We will slow down every single person. We are following the rules. To the first people who were given a broken form, they said do not worry; we'll take care of you.

Well, the fact is they followed the rules; they followed the forms, and they were not treated with the 14-day promised turnaround time. That is our major concern. However, if you applied after October 15, our internal tracking shows that you're pretty good, and we do thank the ministry workers for putting that together.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Are you aware of what changed in relation to that length of time?

Dr. David Edward-Ooi Poon: If I were to speculate, I would say the first two or three days of applications have been lost on the computer system. The rollout was [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. While I thank the ministry for pulling this new system together, the new system must work on day one, and I was reassured that first-day applicants would not be adversely punished. I do believe they have been adversely punished in this scenario, and this speaks to a wider issue of needing immigration reform.

If there were an upgraded IT system for IRCC, the ministry workers would be able to help us much better. I do believe the ministry workers have the best intentions. I do not believe they have the right tools.

We need a systemic reform that is very transparent and trackable for applications.

If you were to ask me straight out why this was the case after the 15th, my best guess would be that the initial applications were lost, but on the 15th the system was working, and so everyone after the 15th has been treated exactly as they're supposed to be.

• (1705)

Hon. Geoff Regan: Let me ask you about your suggestions on how to accelerate the process for reunification.

You've talked, of course, about the IT system; maybe that'll be the focus of your comments and perhaps you have other suggestions, but maybe there are other things you would like to focus on.

Dr. David Edward-Ooi Poon: Thank you for the opportunity.

The IT system is a huge ask, but we do believe it is necessary to bring Canada into a new generation of a post-COVID world, in which immigration helps Canadians and is accessible to Canadians.

We also suggest the following. We need an ombudsman to operate for the people when it comes to IRCC and CBSA issues. There is currently no independent oversight of those two bodies.

At the moment, Faces of Advocacy has taken that role, so I'm very grateful that we've had high-level conversations with people working at the ministry of IRCC, and well as Health and CBSA and Public Safety.

However, it should not require the strength of a 9,000-person grassroots movement led by a guy with a gaming headset in order to get justice for these people. It should be done in a manner that is easily accessible to the public, and this ombudsman is how we could deliver that transparency. That is something that I have a lot of ideas on, and on which I can get more information.

When it comes to making the system better overall, CBSA has a mandate to be transparent, and right now the only system we have for any communication by the general public is to email an inbox that already has, according to IRCC, 17,000 requests in it.

If we have an urgent thing, if Donna McCall's children needed to see her before she died, this is an ineffective system that needs to be overhauled.

Everything comes down to infrastructure and resources, and that is what the Faces of Advocacy will be [*Technical difficulty-Editor*].

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you very much.

Madam Chair, how long do I have?

The Chair: You have one minute and 50 seconds.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I was hoping to ask Ms. Desloges about the situation at the border.

Obviously, there have been unprecedented challenges at borders, not just for Canada, but for other countries around the world. I know the government has tried to move as quickly as possible to assist international students. I'm aware that since August, they've introduced temporary measures for students to study abroad, with no time deducted from the length of the future post-grad work permit.

Do you think what they've done there is an appropriate balance between maintaining public health safety and trying not to penalize international students?

Ms. Chantal Desloges: I'd say it's an appropriate step, but I don't think it has struck a balance yet.

In preparation for today, I canvassed one of my colleagues who is an international student recruitment agent. What she was telling me is that there are still a lot of courses where universities and colleges require an in-person component. For example, there's lab work, or there are specific co-op requirements or something like that. These students are really being left out in the cold, because they can't complete all of their studies online even if they wanted to.

She was also telling me that the government is now moving towards this system where certain colleges, universities and other schools are either approved or not approved to receive international students, even if they're a designated learning institution. One example she gave me was of a person who has paid \$78,000 in tuition for a very prestigious private school and is now unsure whether they are even going to be able to come to Canada at all.

I would further point out that—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Desloges. The time is up. We will have to move to Ms. Normandin.

Ms. Normandin, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I, too, want to sincerely thank the witnesses on the panel for their participation in our study.

My first questions are for Ms. Desloges about the issuing of temporary visas in sponsorship cases.

I'd like you to comment on the reasons that are usually given for denying someone a visa when they are the subject of a sponsorship application.

• (1710)

[*English*]

Ms. Chantal Desloges: Sure. I'm happy to elaborate on that.

With the visitor visa, the legal test is whether the person will return home after they're finished visiting Canada. Anything about their situation, whether it's something to do with their attributes or with their behaviour, that might suggest they have no motivation to go back home after their visit is going to be a problem. You can imagine that when someone is married to a Canadian and wants to come to visit their spouse or common-law partner in Canada, one of the main suspicions in the mind of the officer is the motivation for them to go back home after their visit.

In the law, there is this concept called “dual intention”, which means that you can have a long-term intention to remain in Canada permanently but simultaneously have a short-term, legitimate intention to visit and go home while you're waiting for your paperwork to process.

I think this concept of dual intention is not very well used when it comes to spousal, common-law or conjugal relationships. It works very well for parents, for other types of relationships. However, there's something about the spousal relationship that makes officers disbelieve that the person is going to go back to their country, even when they have excellent ties to their home country, even when they have children they might be leaving behind in order to make that visit to Canada.

Something really needs to be done about that situation, because it creates so much pain for people.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

You must have anticipated one of my other questions. I actually wanted to hear your take on how subsection 22(2) of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act is being applied. In practice, I don't think it is being applied correctly in sponsorship cases. Am I correct to think that?

[*English*]

Ms. Chantal Desloges: If you're talking about dual intention, it's not exactly that it's not correctly applied; it's that they are very miserly with its application. You can't say that there's anything legally wrong, it's just that they're so suspicious and the tendency is to just refuse and refuse. I was saying earlier that one of my colleagues called it the “kiss of death” if the person you're coming to visit in Canada happens to be your spouse or common-law partner.

Systemically, I think there are some issues too. People who are visa exempt for Canada, who when they come to the border have exactly the same legal test as everyone else, seem to have a much easier go of convincing an officer of dual intention; whereas a person from a visa-required country has a much more difficult time persuading an officer that they have a genuine intention to go back home after the visit.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

As far as supporting documentation goes, whether it be proof of employment, proof of income or proof of emotional or family ties to their home country, when the person is denied the visa, do you think the reasons are adequate?

Do you think the degree of procedural fairness is adequate when the person is denied the visa?

Are the reasons adequately explained, or is section 179 merely cited?

Would you say the documents people provide are properly consulted?

[*English*]

Ms. Chantal Desloges: That's an interesting question.

The refusal letter an applicant receives is a generic format letter, with some boxes ticked off saying, “We don't believe you're going to return home at the end of your visit.” They give you some generic reasons, which very seldom shed any light on what's actually at play.

To get the real reasons, you need to order a copy of the computer notes from the decision-maker to see what the actual rationale is.

May I say that those decisions are often very easy to challenge in Federal Court because they lack justification and transparency. It often seems that the officers have not properly reviewed all of the documentation, or maybe did it in a hurried manner. When they've listed the reasons, they've failed to really justify, with a logical analysis, why they've reached that conclusion.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Aside from exempting visa applicants who are being sponsored from the application of subsection 179(b) altogether, would it be a step in the right direction to make it mandatory to provide the reasons for denying the visa and explain why each piece of supporting documentation was not accepted?

[*English*]

Ms. Chantal Desloges: They do have an obligation to justify every refusal. It's just that they don't have to tell you right away what that justification is. If you were to take it to court, yes, the judge is going to look at whether that decision was properly motivated. I'm not sure whether it would make a difference if the officer had to give that justification off the top to every single person. They are really under a lot of time constraints.

One good idea that one of my colleagues suggested is that they should allow the posting of bonds for people. If there's a doubt as to whether they're going to go home after their visit, why not allow for the posting of a substantial financial bond to guarantee they're going to go home?

• (1715)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

Madam Chair, I think I'm out of time.

[*English*]

The Chair: Your time is up. Thank you.

We will now move to Ms. Kwan. You have six minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses for your really excellent presentations.

I just want to build on Ms. Desloges's comments with respect to dual intent and TRVs, and the times that people are often simply rejected. With respect to that, what are her thoughts on the government embarking on providing a special temporary visa for those who have a sponsorship application in place?

Ms. Chantal Desloges: That's interesting, because I had given that subject some thought in preparation for today. Why do we have a super visa, for example, for parents and grandparents, who may or may not be in the sponsorship process, and we don't have anything really similar to that for spouses?

If you're sponsoring your mother to Canada, it's usually not that difficult to get a visa for your mother to visit you while her sponsorship is going on; yet if that person is your spouse, there seems to be this real recalcitrance with granting that request. It doesn't seem to make any logical sense because, if you're sponsoring your spouse, the last thing you want to do is to make a mess of your case by violating immigration law and then putting your sponsorship in jeopardy.

Does it require a special type of visa? Maybe additional clarifications in terms of policy.... A super visa itself, actually, is not a special type of visa. It really is just a temporary resident visa with specific conditions and extra leniency attached to it.

Something like that could be developed for spouses as well. If the minister were to say to officers that he wants a little bit of extra consideration for spouses, and to take X, Y and Z into account the way they do with super visas, that could be a very good solution, in fact.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much. That's exactly what I was thinking—having a similar special visa like that of the parents and grandparents super visa concept.

Just building on this, I have a boatload of cases of people stuck in the system. Mr. Ojo, you talked about a certificate of PR. People actually cannot get their certificate of PR and now are stuck in limbo. I even had constituents who had to leave the country because they could not get their certificate, and without that certificate, they could not get a work permit. On and on the loop goes.

With respect to that, I called on the government to honour biometrics, and they finally just began to move in that direction. Would your suggestion, then, be for the government to honour the previous certificate of PR so that people could move forward with their application without being stuck?

Mr. David Ojo: Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

If I got your question correctly, you are asking about the certificate that would allow a spouse [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] to migrate to Canada, right? I think it's okay, but most importantly, these [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] who are currently exempt really need the travel authorization letter. That would allow—

The Chair: Mr. Ojo, I'm sorry for interrupting. We can't hear you properly. Can turn your video off so we can have better voice quality? Thank you.

Mr. David Ojo: Thank you, Madam Chair.

To go back to what I was saying, it's all about our travel authorization letter. If the Government of Canada, the IRCC, would issue the travel authorization letter.... Because as things stand, we cannot board with the expired travel documents. We need these travel authorization letters—which have been long promised—to be issued to everyone, of course, so that we can travel. It's been eight to nine months of doing nothing.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay. Thank you.

This brings us to this question of transparency and accountability as well, Dr. Poon, and that's what you raised. For a long time the NDP has called for an ombudsperson in the immigration system. This is a problem that didn't occur just because of COVID. This has been an ongoing problem with successive governments.

Am I hearing you correctly that what we need now is an ombudsperson who can oversee complaints, who can investigate, for example, systemic issues that exist in the immigration system, so that we can make corrections in these areas and move forward to support people such as you and others who are struggling in the immigration system?

• (1720)

Dr. David Edward-Ooi Poon: I thank the ministry for allowing me access to high-level workers. Because of that, we were able to quickly identify that the form was broken. We were able to quickly identify that the Americans had no place to message, and we are able to quickly identify the missing 50 or 200, depending on how many we actually confirm.

Because of this, we need an ombudsperson, not only for IRCC, but for the CBSA as well. Just today, we had a reply back from the IRCC. Whether it's a system error or human error, they say, "Your form was not filled." I looked at the form myself. It was the October 8 form completely filled. The challenge is that the October 8 form was flawed.

Now, if this person had no ombudsperson, if the Faces of Advocacy did not exist, there would be no way to bring it up to the high-level people, so I'm thankful to the ministry for allowing me that connection. But we need someone official. We need an ombudsperson, and the Faces of Advocacy will fill that role until that position is there. Or we can take it—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm glad that Faces of Advocacy is doing such tremendous work, but there are of course many other people who are not getting that support. The system shouldn't be that way.

Dr. David Edward-Ooi Poon: Correct.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: For example, I know individuals where the ministry itself admits it made an error and still the person has to go through the entire process from the beginning, which is really putting their lives into upheaval. That's the reality of where people are at today. We have situations where the ministry staff, the agents, for whatever reason, would give differing information to people, and this goes on and on.

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

We will now move to our second round. Before I give the floor to Mr. Allison, I just want to remind all the members to please direct the questions through the chair.

Mr. Allison, you have five minutes.

Mr. Dean Allison: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Once again, thank you to our guests for being here today.

Dr. Poon, I love your headset. I think I'm going have to get one just like that.

I certainly agree with all of your statements as well. I think we could spend more time exploring this stuff.

Chantal, I would like to direct some of my questions to you.

I agree with the statement you made about the posting of bonds. It has always made me curious over my years as an MP: If immigration officials are worried about people leaving, why not have them post a bond or something? It just makes perfect sense. I think there are probably more tools we could use to make some of these things happen. As was said in all of the testimony today, there are lots of disconnects, right, in terms of what's good for one and what's not good for the other, and there are just the inconsistencies.

Would you like to expand on that again, Chantal? Because there were some good thoughts you had there as you were moving through it.

Ms. Chantal Desloges: On the issue of the bonds?

Mr. Dean Allison: Yes.

Ms. Chantal Desloges: If I'm not mistaken—I'd have to go back to double-check this—I believe there is a legal mechanism that allows it, but I've never seen it actually used. It is interesting to me that people in Canada who have already violated Canada's immigration laws and are in detention can post a bond to get released from detention, and yet people who are incoming to Canada, who have not violated anything, and just want to show a measure of good faith, cannot do the same thing. That doesn't make any sense to me.

You mentioned the disconnect. I really liked what Mr. Poon said earlier about this concept of transparency. The system is extremely opaque the way it is now. Even for professionals like me who have devoted more than 20 years to navigating this system day in and day out, it's still very opaque. I do agree with Mr. Poon as well that part of the problem is the very antiquated IT structure. Through the course of my career, of course, you chit-chat with officers from time to time when you're dealing with people on a daily basis. One thing that I keep hearing from people over and over again is that the people who work in the government, as well-intentioned as they are in wanting to do their jobs properly, are really hampered by this very ancient IT system. Why did it take so long for us to be able to hold a citizenship hearing on Zoom, as they're doing now? The private sector has been doing this for 10 years. Why is it impossible for an embassy abroad to interview a person for a spousal application by video? Why do we need to do everything in person? It doesn't make sense.

I guess I would just close out that comment by saying that there are a number of really great initiatives that have come out of this too, because necessity is the mother of invention, including for example, holding hearings on Microsoft Teams, and landing people by email instead of making them do this ridiculous flag-pulling, leave Canada and come back in again, and making a headache for CBSA. There have been a lot of really great things. I really hope

the ministry takes this opportunity to make some of these initiatives permanent.

• (1725)

Mr. Dean Allison: Thank you.

I guess my follow-up to that would be this. Bonds are a potential option. What about private sponsorships for bringing people in? I just want to know your thoughts on that and whether it's some way that we could personally guarantee these people, or look at whatever those mechanisms are, as happens with refugees.

Ms. Chantal Desloges: That's interesting. When someone applies for a visa to visit Canada in the first place, most individuals have an invitation letter from a person in Canada who's inviting them for the visit, whether it's for business purposes or personal. Those invitation letters are not enforceable. A person can say, of course, that they want to invite their brother to come to visit them for six months, and they guarantee you that he's going to go back home; but at the end of the day, you're dealing with another adult person. There's no way that a Canadian or permanent resident could really guarantee what someone else is going to do, so I'm not sure that any kind of enforceable undertaking would really work in that scenario. I just don't think it's possible logistically to have some enforceable mechanism whereby you're responsible for the conduct of another grown adult. I don't see how that would work.

Mr. Dean Allison: I have one last question in the 20 seconds I have left here.

Both panels discussed students. They come here and spend their life savings doing so, and yet we only allow them to work 20 hours. Do you have any thoughts about increasing that to help them deal with some of the international students' bills? I've seen students living in hotel rooms, a whole bunch of stuff. Are there any thoughts as to whether they should be allowed to work more hours, personally?

The Chair: A 10-second answer, please.

Ms. Chantal Desloges: I don't think they're allowed to work more hours during the academic session because they are supposed to be studying full time. However, they really should be allowed to work more hours during non-academic breaks, for example, during COVID.

The Chair: Thank you. Your time is up.

We will now move to Ms. Martinez Ferrada for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I have much to say. First, thank you all for being here today.

Mr. Poon, from Faces of Advocacy, I'd like to pass on my regards to members of your organization with whom I've spoken regularly over the past few weeks. Your organization helped make exemptions possible.

It's worth noting that the pandemic has created an unprecedented situation. I have no doubt that some of the things we've done have led the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship to make changes for the better, as Ms. Desloges mentioned.

We are in the second wave of the pandemic. How do we balance the safety of Canadians and the desire to reunite families, which is a priority? As you know, Canada was one of the first countries to adopt a family reunification program.

Kindly keep your answer brief, as I have other questions on the subject.

Dr. David Edward-Ooi Poon: Madam Chair, I would answer in French, but I don't speak it very well.

[*English*]

An unnecessary dichotomy has been presented to the Canadian people: be with your family and everyone dies, or stay apart forever and everyone lives.

The sheer fact that we can have NHL players, film people, truck drivers and essential workers come to Canada safely means that there is a safe third path. I tell all Canadians watching this right now: the Faces of Advocacy don't want our mothers, our sisters or our loved ones sick. We certainly don't want your families sick. We will uphold every public safety guideline.

If the question is why you want to be with your family when the world is in trouble, I ask in response: If the world is in trouble, who do you want beside you?

• (1730)

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Thank you, Mr. Poon.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Desloges, I'd like to follow up on what you said about the initiatives the government has taken. Which of them should be adopted permanently?

[*English*]

Ms. Chantal Desloges: Yes, I have a couple of ideas in regard to that.

I think citizenship oath-takings by Zoom are a wonderful initiative. It means you don't have to congregate people in one room. You can do it person by person. For women who cover themselves for religious or cultural reasons, this is a much more palatable option for them as well.

The other thing is the landings by email. If a person is already in Canada and has met all the qualifications for landing, there's really no reason to call them in for a personal interview or send them to the Canadian border to go into the U.S. and come back in and create more work for CBSA officials.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Thank you.

[*English*]

Sorry to cut you off. I want to make sure I put in a question here.

Mr. Ojo, thank you for joining our committee from so far. It's a pleasure to have you here.

We know that the pandemic has made processing a COPR difficult because of the patchwork visa applications. The office has been open. We are developing a new process for extending COPRs electronically. I know these were approved before March 18.

I want to know how you think this would help people like you to have this process extended electronically.

Mr. David Ojo: Thank you, Madame Ferrada.

I think that was one of the suggestions we gave the IRCC at some point, to say the only path that is left in this immigration process is for us to become permanent residents.

Our applications have been approved. It took six months. Some of us did the process for a year or two.

It would be a very good idea for IRCC to introduce an electronic landing procedure. That's the only thing we need now. We need to be confirmed as a permanent resident. The only thing we have is our confirmation of permanent residency, and it has expired. Because it has expired, as I mentioned earlier, no airline, no immigration department will be willing to board any of these expired COPRs.

It is simple and very clear. Thank you.

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Thank you very much.

Quickly, Mr. Poon—

The Chair: Your time is up, Ms. Martinez Ferrada.

If the members and the witnesses are okay, we can have two more rounds of questions: two and a half minutes from Ms. Normandin and two and a half minutes from Ms. Kwan. We can end with Ms. Kwan.

Is everyone okay? Can the witnesses stay?

We seem to be in agreement.

Ms. Normandin, you have two and a half minutes for your questioning.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

My first question is for David Edward-Ooi Poon.

Some people, such as unmarried spouses, have to fill out the IMM 0006 form to obtain authorization to enter Canada. One of the problems we've heard about is how hard it is to find commissioners of oaths during the pandemic. Have you heard about that, as well?

I'd also like to hear your comments on the possibility of having more services available remotely, including access to commissioners of oaths.

[English]

Dr. David Edward-Ooi Poon: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Madam Chair, the first issue with the form was that it did not have a signature panel for [Technical difficulty—Editor] Canadian. That meant an entire day of people with a form that notaries would not sign. Now this was rectified by the Faces of Advocacy with our high-level discussion, but, without an ombudsman, later on how would this get fixed?

The second issue is that there was no clarity if you could use it online. I asked IRCC, but we never got the exact answer. However, it does appear that online has been accepted. The problem is that if the Faces of Advocacy did not exist with its public messaging, how could any of the Canadian people fill out the form properly, and how would the first few people even know that their issues were being processed since there's no transparency in a system that doesn't allow them to check? This is the major problem, and that is how we're going to fix it.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

Mr. Ojo, I'd like to ask you something about your group.

Is there anyone who received their confirmation of permanent residence after March 18 and, because of that, can't come to Canada right now and complete the process?

• (1735)

[English]

Mr. David Ojo: Sorry, I didn't get the question. Can you repeat it?

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: I was wondering whether any members of the group you represent had received their confirmation of permanent residence after March 18 but were unable to come to Canada, even if their country allowed them to travel.

[English]

Mr. David Ojo: In the group I represent, we are individuals whose applications were approved before March 18, 2020, so we are exempt from the current travel restrictions. The only thing that is left, I think, since—

The Chair: Mr. Ojo, the time is up. Sorry for interrupting.

We will have to move onto Ms. Kwan.

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

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

My question is this. I think it was mentioned that IRCC.... In fact we're doing Parliament virtually, we're doing committees virtually, and yet we can't seem to really get the ball rolling with virtual interviews or for citizenship swearing-in ceremonies to really move forward so that people can get their status.

Maybe I'll start with you, Ms. Desloges. Going forward, do you think the government should be utilizing technology to facilitate these kinds of processes for interviews and for citizenship tests, for example, and in order for swearing-in ceremonies to take place?

Ms. Chantal Desloges: Absolutely. This is technology that the private sector has been using for decades. It's baffling to me how we can't use it in IRCC matters.

A couple of weeks ago an entire refugee hearing was done online via Microsoft Teams. That is perhaps the most sensitive subject matter I could even imagine. If the Refugee Board can hold a refugee hearing online, it is beyond me why a visa officer cannot also interview a spousal sponsorship applicant or a visa applicant online. This technology is out there. It's available to everyone. It's as secure as it could possibly be. You're never going to have a perfect system, but anybody who has a bank account has personal information online. I think the government just has to accept that there's going to be a little bit of a risk that will have to be taken in order to bring the system into the 21st century.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Just to build on bringing things into the 21st century, it's very confusing to me how we cannot have an online system for representatives or for the applicant to go online to check the status of the application instead of having to phone into IRCC and then often getting inconsistent information and contradictory information. What are your thoughts on that?

Ms. Chantal Desloges: Yes, the computer system and the IT infrastructure at IRCC are notoriously out of date. I really think that the government of the day has to bite the bullet and just invest in upgrading that infrastructure. Yes, it's a headache; it's difficult, and it's going to be expensive, but if you look at the human cost, and even just the literal cost of all of these mistakes and inaccuracies and all of this back and forth—

The Chair: Ms. Desloges, I'm sorry for interrupting you, but the time is up.

Thanks to all for this. We have come to the end of the round of questioning.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of you witnesses for appearing before the committee today. If there is anything that you want to highlight and have not been able to discuss with us today, you can send in written submissions to the clerk of the committee as we continue this study.

On behalf of all of the members, thanks to all of the witnesses for appearing before the committee and providing important information as we get through this.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Madam Chair, before we close, I—

The Chair: I can't hear you, Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Before we close, Madam Chair, I wonder if we can also ask the clerk to extend that offer to the first panel of witnesses to ensure that they too can submit additional information. As we noted, many of the panellists were cut off—even for them to provide a quick answer. I think it would be very useful and helpful if we extended that invitation to them to submit further comments if they would like to.

• (1740)

The Chair: We will do that. I did say that at the end of the last panel, but if this panel has any issues they want to raise, please send in your written submissions.

With that, thank you to all members for joining the meeting.

The meeting is now adjourned.

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