



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

43rd PARLIAMENT, 2nd SESSION

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 009

Monday, November 30, 2020

Chair: Mrs. Salma Zahid



Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

Monday, November 30, 2020

• (1535)

[English]

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

Before we proceed, I have a health and safety reminder for everyone. I ask all members and other attendees who are participating in person to please make sure they physically distance themselves from others by at least two metres. Also, wear a mask unless you are seated and more than two metres from anyone else.

This is a hybrid meeting. Some members are appearing in person in the parliamentary precinct and others are appearing remotely. The meeting is being webcast and is available on ParlVu.

As a reminder to all speakers, please speak at a pace slow enough for interpretation to keep up. We will be keeping a list of raised hands if there is a need.

With regard to future business, the committee will meet with the minister and his officials on Wednesday, December 2, for a briefing session on the impact of COVID-19 on the department staffing level. The committee has invited senior officials from IRCC to appear on Monday, December 7, for the study of the impact of COVID-19 on the immigration system.

Today we will be hearing witnesses as we continue our study on the impact of COVID-19 on the immigration system.

I welcome Mr. Christian, assistant professor, Faculty of Law, University of Calgary; from Accueil Liaison Pour Arrivants, Yannick Boucher, director of services for immigrants, and Madam Marie-Laure Konan, director of occupational integration; and, from the Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic, Madam Avvy Yao-Yao Go, clinic director.

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

All witnesses will be provided five minutes for their opening remarks.

We will start with Mr. Christian.

Mr. Gideon Christian (Assistant Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Calgary, As an Individual):

Thank you very much, Madam Chair and honourable members of this committee, for this invitation.

I am a law professor at the University of Calgary in the Faculty of Law. I'm also the president of African Scholars Initiative, ASI-Canada, a registered not-for-profit organization that seeks to attract bright future scholars of African descent to pursue graduate education in Canada.

Speaking as a law professor, intellectual debate in my classroom is exceedingly informed when there is a diversity of opinions among my students. However, achieving such diversity becomes problematic when you have an immigration system that almost always approves study permit applications for students from countries located predominantly in Europe and which at the same time almost always refuses study permit applications for students from countries located predominantly in Africa.

As president of ASI-Canada, I can say that the greatest challenge we have faced in attracting bright future scholars of African descent to pursue higher education in Canada has always been dealing with Canadian immigration officers, especially at the visa office in Nairobi, Kenya. Study permit applications are routinely denied by visa officers relying on subsection 216(1) of the IRPR, a provision similar to paragraph 179(b) of the IRPR. The study permit applications are routinely refused because the visa officers are not satisfied that the applicants will leave Canada at the end of their studies.

This has resulted in the denial of over 80% of study permit applications in the visa offices in Africa. The Nairobi visa office is especially infamous for this. In fact, among my immigration lawyer colleagues in Canada, there is a common joke that when you prepare a study permit application for the Nairobi visa office, you prepare the application in anticipation of litigation. This is because the application will most likely be refused, resulting in judicial review before Federal Court of Canada, with the minister's counsel making an offer to settle and have the application sent back to the visa office for determination. Then the application is refused again. Then you come to the Federal Court to relitigate. Prospective international students often spend a greater percentage of the money meant to fund their education to pay the litigation fees arising from refusal decisions by visa officers.

Madam Chair and honourable members, I wish to also make a submission relating to family reunification in the context of Canadian children in Canada who are the children of foreign nationals outside Canada. For Canadian children whose parents are in countries that require visas to enter Canada, family reunification can be nightmarish.

I would like to narrate the sad experience of a five-year-old Canadian child. For privacy reasons, I will refer to her as “Baby G”. Baby G is a Canadian citizen who returned to Canada in 2018 with her mom, an international student. Baby G was very close to her father. This separation resulted in an adverse psychological impact on Baby G. The mom invited the biological father to visit Baby G in Canada in the hope that his temporary presence in Canada would help address the psychological problem.

The visa application was filed in the Nairobi visa office in September 2019 and was refused after 130 days. The visa officer was not satisfied that the dad would leave Canada because of his personal assets and financial status, even though the dad had submitted bank statements with a total balance of the equivalent of about \$66,000 Canadian. In reaching this decision, the visa officer gave zero consideration to the best interests of the Canadian child being adversely affected by the decision.

Immediately, litigation was commenced at the Federal Court challenging the decision. The minister made an offer to settle on the condition that the litigation be discontinued and that the application be sent back to Nairobi for redetermination. The applicant trusted the minister and the Crown, and discontinued the litigation in April 2020. To date the minister has failed to fulfill his undertaking to review this application or to redetermine the application.

• (1540)

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Christian. Your time is up. We have to move to our next witness.

Next up is Accueil Liaison pour Arrivants.

Mr. Boucher, I think you will be sharing the time with your colleague. You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yannick Boucher (Director, Services for Immigrants, Accueil Liaison pour arrivants, or ALPA): First, allow me to introduce Accueil liaison pour arrivants, or ALPA. The mission of ALPA, which has been actively involved in immigration for 35 years, is to provide immigrants with integration, francization, employment assistance and regionalization services.

An average of 4,000 persons, in all immigration classes, make use of ALPA's services every year. As a front-line immigration and socio-professional integration organization, we are here to today to offer the committee our field observations of the immigration situation in Quebec as it pertains to the subject of your study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the immigration system.

We should note from the outset that the current situation is exceptional, unprecedented in recent history. We are flying without instruments and doing all we can to minimize its impact on individuals, the human beings who are the focus of our presentation. We applaud this initiative, which is a special opportunity to inform Par-

liament about the situation of these people and to provide some perspective on the situation.

Today's application backlogs and processing delays stem from a structural problem that predates the COVID-19 pandemic. We had previously observed it, but the present situation has truly revealed and exacerbated the phenomenon. We have noted increased anxiety levels in applicants associated with administrative procedures and the uncertainty of not knowing whether they will receive an acknowledgement of receipt, for example, or whether their files are before the authorities who must review their applications. Applicants need an acknowledgement of receipt to gain continued access to Quebec's health insurance plan. Immigrants need reassurance in coping with these feelings of powerlessness.

Time is also a factor in the anxiety they experience. When documents expire, newcomers must refile applications, particularly for medical examinations. Depending on the size of family units, these costs may be increasingly costly for the individuals we assist. Consider the example of Ms. Belkacem—a pseudonym, of course—a social worker in Montreal whose Quebec acceptance certificate, a document valid for 24 months and required for permanent residency, has expired. As a result, if her permanent residency file is returned to her for additional information, for example, she may have to start immigration proceedings all over again and may even be forced to leave the country as she waits for a positive outcome.

We have also observed situations in which the documents of persons overseas were expiring, a situation that causes intense stress for those individuals. For example, it is hard for permanent residents whose permanent resident cards have expired to obtain permanent resident travel documents that allow them to return to Canada. A similar situation occurs for foreign students stuck in their home countries whose student permits have also expired. The same is true of those whose work permits have expired and may not be renewable or who have no way to find a new employer.

Anxiety as a result of administrative procedures may be exacerbated by situations of confinement, isolation or challenges associated with family reunification, which cause numerous family issues. Prolonged family separation—and we see this—often causes mental and physical health problems, a situation worsened where members awaiting family reunification are minor children whose only living parent is in Canada. We in fact see that many clients of ours who are protected persons have minor children who have remained in their countries. So we feel the situation has been complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In short, extended processing delays worsen a situation that is already tough for many people. The danger is that they can cause major disappointment with the host country, discourage plans to migrate here and undermine Canada's international credibility, as Louise Arbour recently noted.

The processing of temporary resident visas of course has an impact on family reunification, but I would also say that delays raise language issues for international students, mainly those from francophone Africa. Delays affect and undermine the weight that French carries in Canada as a whole. We also know that the pandemic has affected student immersion in francization training. Isolation slows students' progress in learning about Quebec culture, the language barrier is thus eroded, and a language gap appears that will truly be hard to bridge.

There are issues regarding the next generation of workers trained by our educational institutions.

- (1545)

We also work in partnership with businesses. Those businesses say they find it difficult to anticipate the situation. Many recruit labour internationally and devote considerable time and energy to recruitment efforts, but they still don't know when...

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Boucher. Your time is up. You'll get an opportunity to talk about that during the rounds of questioning.

We will now move to our third witness, Madam Go, clinic director of the Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic. She is representing the clinic.

Madam Go, you can start. You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go (Clinic Director, Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic): Thank you.

On behalf of the Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic, I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to speak to you this afternoon.

The pandemic has dramatically changed the way governments carry out their businesses and has led to some positive outcomes in the context of immigration, including much faster processing times for certain types of applications, as well as fewer detentions and removals. However, COVID-19 has also exposed and exacerbated pre-existing inequities in the immigration system, which are felt most harshly by members of racialized communities and people with precarious immigration status. Despite numerous emergency measures being put in place by the federal government, many of these issues remain unaddressed. Here are a few examples.

Parent and grandparent sponsorship continues to be subject to an arbitrary quota. The MNI requirement continues to deny racialized Canadians, especially women, an opportunity for family reunification due to the racialization of poverty in Canada.

The vulnerability of migrant workers has been laid bare by this pandemic, yet governments have been slow to implement measures to protect them from further exploitation and harm.

Domestic violence incidents have skyrocketed, particularly among women who are trapped in abusive relationships due to their immigration status, many of whom are denied status under the pilot project specifically created for family violence victims.

The government continues to use immigration status as a gateway requirement to access federal benefits and refuses to extend Canada child benefits to children, including those born in Canada, based on their parents' immigration status.

There are delays in almost all immigration and refugee programs, with a concern that dependent children will age out and become ineligible to be sponsored later on.

Also, processing times around the world are still not equitable, especially for countries with a significant racialized population.

On the refugee side, the travel ban has meant a complete shutdown of our borders to asylum seekers. Also, disappointingly, the federal government has appealed the Federal Court decision declaring the Canada-U.S. safe third country agreement unconstitutional.

Finally, while the government has made a welcome announcement to address the political crisis in Hong Kong, the five-year open work permit is available only for those with a university degree, thereby excluding a vast majority of pro-democracy Hong Kong activists.

The government mantra of "build back better" must apply to everyone, regardless of their race, gender and immigration status.

As such, we recommend the following immediate measures, including: expedite the processing of all extension applications for temporary residents in Canada; develop a safe harbour program for more Hong Kong activists and others in countries embroiled in political turmoil right now; allow family class immigrants already granted visas to come to Canada without delay; lock in the age of dependent children as of March 1, 2020, in all applications; and, extend the deadline for restoration of temporary resident status from 90 days to at least June 30, 2021.

Then, in the medium and longer term, we ask you to: implement a regularization program for all people with precarious immigration status; rebalance the overall system by increasing family reunification with relaxing criteria that are fair and inclusive; eliminate the MNI requirement for parent and grandparent sponsorship and remove the quota; end immigration detention; repeal the Canada-U.S. safe third country agreement; eliminate immigration status as an eligibility criteria for current and future government benefits; mandate IRCC and CBSA to collect and publish disaggregated race-based data for all classes of immigration; and, finally, mandate IRCC and CBSA to take proactive actions to address structural racism within the system.

COVID-19 should serve as a wake-up call that the survival of humanity depends on all of us working together and caring for and supporting each other, especially those who are the most marginalized. We hope our government will do the right thing.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present today.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Go.

Thanks to all three witnesses for their opening remarks.

We will now move to a round of questioning.

For the first round of questioning of six minutes, we will start with Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Madam Go, I have a number of questions for you regarding your expertise concerning Hong Kong.

My understanding of the announcement from the Liberal government and the Minister of Immigration a few weeks ago is that it primarily focused on economic immigration. In sum, from what they've said with the announcement, it will allow us to expedite study permits and work permits.

My concern is that it only services what seems to be a population that is young, educated and has some means. Are there other populations in Hong Kong that were left out of that announcement, from your perspective?

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: I do believe that a large number of people are left out. Not even all the young are included. There are a lot of young activists in Hong Kong who are still in high school. Many of them will not be able to afford the international tuition fee to come to Canada to study. They would not qualify for the open work permit program that is only for post-secondary graduates.

There are also activists who don't have high school or university education. There are actually a couple of people who are now in Canada seeking refugee status. We know for sure that they will not meet any of these requirements. They were lucky enough that they left Hong Kong before the lockdown, so they are now able to apply for asylum here. There are many others who are still in Hong Kong, in other parts of Asia or in other countries who won't be able to get here.

We recently had a conversation with the director of policy for the ministry of immigration. They are not changing any of the policy with respect to asylum seekers. I'm not sure how many of them would end up coming to Canada. In the program we have in place, those people who qualify will have other options. They can go to the U.K. or they can go to Australia. They don't have to come to Canada. I'm not sure how many people will actually benefit.

• (1555)

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you. I appreciate that.

I want to ask a little more and expand on the parents and grandparents program.

Our understanding is that right now, aside from that announcement, the Liberal government has mentioned that they will provide the parents and grandparents lottery, which is provided to anyone who wants to bring their parents and grandparents to Canada. That will, of course, also be an option for Hong Kong.

My understanding is that anyone who wishes to apply for this has to win the lottery. It comes about once a year in the fall. It just wrapped up in October. That may take two to three years if everything goes well and they're selected and they have all the proper travel documents. If the travel documents have been taken, we know it's going to be very difficult for them to be successful in the lottery.

Is my understanding correct or is there another, quicker way for grandparents and parents in Hong Kong who wish to join their families safely in Canada? Is there some other option that I'm not aware of that you may be aware of?

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: They do have the option of the super visa. They can come as a visitor, but that's not a permanent resident application.

With respect to permanent applications, the only option is through the lottery system. I would like to point out that parents and grandparents are the only ones who are subject to lottery. I don't understand why that is the case. They are also the only ones that have a quota.

The two factors combined mean that most people who want to sign up on January 1 or January 15 will not get in. They will not be selected. For the vast majority, they don't even have a queue for them to wait because they will not get in through the lottery.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: That's another question I had.

Are you familiar with how long study permits would take for someone who applied? The government has mentioned they are going to open this up, hopefully, in the first quarter. Let's say in the best case it's January. If someone goes to apply for these expedited study permits, how long would that normally take?

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: I'm not aware of how long the current process is. Of course, because of the COVID situation, it's kind of hard for me to comment on that right now.

I do think that they have been able to expedite some applications. If they do expedite student permits from Hong Kong, it probably wouldn't take too long. The question is who will actually qualify and how many will have the means to take advantage of that opportunity.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: My understanding is that the situation in Hong Kong is becoming increasingly dire. Democratically elected officials are being removed. The government is clamping down on civil liberties.

In your expert opinion, do you think that Canada should be ramping up our supports for those that are fighting for democracy and need to flee to safety? Do you feel that Canada is doing enough to show our support for the pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong?

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: So far, the announcement focuses on economic immigration, so it's not really a humanitarian application or program.

Canada should look at it more from the humanitarian perspective. We have made some suggestions to the minister. For those who are here in Canada right now, there are pro-democracy activists. Canada can easily open a program for them to apply, just like we did after what happened on June 4, 1989, in Tiananmen Square. We had a special program for Chinese nationals to stay in Canada permanently. We can have that for the people who are in Canada.

The Chair: We will now go to Ms. Martinez Ferrada for six minutes.

• (1600)

[*Translation*]

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

Allow me to welcome the people from ALPA, an organization from the riding I represent. I'm really glad to have you with us today.

I want to congratulate you on the outstanding work you do with the clientele you serve in Hochelaga and East Montreal and on Montreal Island. Thank you for your hard work.

As you said earlier, we took quick action to put a family reunification process in place. We committed to processing 6,000 files a month and 49,000 more by December. We facilitated the transmission of biometric information, applications and digital interviews, but we especially migrated from paper to digital files.

I'd like to hear what you have to say about everything that's been done during the pandemic. This proved that our immigration system had to be modernized. What else could we do to make the immigration process more efficient?

You talk about the situation in Quebec. I'd like to hear what you have to say about the immigration agreement between Quebec and Canada. What more could we do with respect to that agreement?

Mr. Yannick Boucher: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I'll answer Ms. Martinez Ferrada. I also thank you for the invitation.

We've experienced the changes along with you. I welcome the modernization effort, that is, the digital shift, that's been made by

both parties. It has helped us facilitate procedures and processes, which are very complex in many cases. In some instances, Quebec has made it a twofold effort because the Quebec government exercises some immigration powers. I'll come back to that in a moment in response to the second part of your question.

Institutional modernization is a good thing. We at ALPA have also experienced a digital shift. We've been working with immigrants remotely since March, and that has revealed inequalities and a digital divide, which I think has occurred in two areas.

The first area is access to bandwidth. That's extremely important, but not everyone can afford a home connection that's fast enough. These services cost money. Everything's being done remotely and by video. That's the first point.

The second area is digital literacy. You can acquire the tools, but you still have to know how to use them. When you modernize and go digital, you use PDF documents, for example. However, if you don't have access to a computer, it's extremely difficult to use those documents. Most people we help have an Internet connection, but with their smart phones, which have small screens. In many instances, forms aren't adapted to those screens. We have to assist people with the procedures, and our work, in a way, is done in twofold manner. We take the PDFs and complete them remotely.

We can't criticize all this modernization—you can't be opposed to virtue—but it does have the effect of doubling or tripling the time we spend working with every person we assist.

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Mr. Boucher, since we don't have a lot of time, would you briefly address the case of Quebec, please?

Mr. Yannick Boucher: Yes, absolutely.

The Quebec case is relevant because I think it currently takes an average of 26 months to get permanent residence in Quebec. So that's about two years. Earlier I talked about how all documents expire. So you can imagine the situation.

I think there are promising solutions in Quebec, given that it's quite easy to find a temporary springboard to permanent residence. I'm thinking here of the Quebec experience program, the PEQ, which is intended for students and temporary workers who can file their applications. I think it's important to capitalize on that.

The borders are closed right now. To renew our population in Quebec, we'll absolutely have to facilitate, and continue to facilitate, access to this springboard that temporary residents can use to become permanent residents. The fact that the borders are closed really complicates the situation. Quebec and the federal government will necessarily have to combine their efforts to facilitate matters. There's also the entire question of asylum seekers. It's mainly Quebec and Ontario that receive them. Unfortunately, we have very few services for them in Montreal.

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: You don't have any funding for processing refugee cases.

Is that correct?

Mr. Yannick Boucher: There's no funding for processing asylum claims. A small portion of the funding we receive is earmarked for housing assistance, but services for asylum claimants are currently nonexistent. They need those services. These people have work permits and therefore can work. They're already trying to contribute. We've seen that during the pandemic. Most of the people who were on the front lines in the health system and who were working as patient care attendants or concierges were asylum claimants. We're indebted to them for that and we must also be able to offer them services. Right now, though, the doors are closed to asylum claimants.

• (1605)

[*English*]

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

We will now move to Madam Normandin.

Madam Normandin, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Once again, thanks to the witnesses for their testimony. It will be a great help to us in drafting the recommendations that we include in our report.

My questions are mainly for Mr. Boucher.

We've heard about very long waits and people who've had to undergo medical examinations several times, which is very costly, even more so for an entire family. Do you know of any situations in which that just compromised the permanent residence applications of certain persons?

Mr. Yannick Boucher: ALPA handles a lot of those kinds of cases. Earlier I mentioned a situation we know of involving delays and expiring documents. Many problems are related to medical exams. Very few of the families we're currently assisting can afford the exams, and I should acknowledge all the efforts the community network is making. Through modest savings and fundraising, the network offers much needed support to these families. The community network abandons no one. It's not because it isn't funded to do it that it isn't doing it. They're still helping them. If there's any one thing that's really causing problems, it's these medical exams. We could cite a lot of examples.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you for the work you're doing, but maybe it's not up to community organizations to shoulder the burden caused by a slow-moving IRCC.

Do you feel the IRCC is transparent and supportive enough when you need to get answers for the people you represent?

Mr. Yannick Boucher: It's complicated. I'm not here to point the finger at anyone. However, we're in a tough situation. Since the borders have been closed since last March, the people we're assisting aren't newcomers. We're providing follow-up in their cases. They've been coming to see us for years. Caseworkers are overwhelmed just by the task of answering questions alone. Unfortu-

nately, we generally didn't have any answers to give for the first four or five months, and when we did get them, they were few and far between.

The situation has been resolved since the fall, but our network, our system and our communications department have worked hard to provide information as quickly as possible. I'd say things have been complicated, and they've probably been complicated for everyone. As I was saying, we aren't here to point the finger at anyone. This fall, we can see that information is flowing much more freely and that things are returning to normal. However, there's still a long way to go.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

With regard to delays, you mentioned that the pandemic didn't make matters easy. You already had problems before the pandemic, and they were exacerbated by the crisis. You could've done better if effective measures had already been put in place, particularly regarding digital technology and an overall reduction in delays.

Mr. Yannick Boucher: I said at the start of my presentation that the pandemic revealed pre-existing structural problems. You can see that everywhere, particularly in the health system. It's easy to say after the fact that there were structural problems, but those pre-existing problems were identified years before that. The pandemic just revealed and exacerbated them.

Now it's up to us to do what we have to do and try to head in the right direction to overcome these challenges and solve these structural problems. I think we're all aware of that.

• (1610)

Ms. Christine Normandin: I'd like to talk about the processing delays involved in renewing work permits, for example. Some people can't renew their work permits because they've renewed them too often. I'm thinking, for example, of certain working holiday permits, the WHPs.

What do you think about the idea of priority processing for the cases of people who are already in Quebec? That's a request that Quebec has made to the federal government. We should help people who are here and who might be in trouble if their permanent residence applications aren't processed quickly.

Mr. Yannick Boucher: Absolutely. We support that recommendation because it's very important. These people are already here. Most of them are already learning French, although some already speak French. They are workers. They are scattered across the province, in slaughterhouses, in the health system and elsewhere. We think it's very important to regularize their situation as soon as possible. They're renewing the labour force. It's not just for economic development purposes.

As I said earlier, it's also a mental health issue, a very significant one that is increasingly being documented. Although the pandemic has revealed certain structural problems, we shouldn't have to deal with its mental health consequences after the fact. We can see what's coming. Alarm bells are being rung in all the studies being published on the topic.

Ms. Christine Normandin: I'm going to ask a quick question because I have 30 seconds left.

I know that changes have been made regarding francization. A study permit and a Quebec acceptance certificate, a CAQ, are now required to continue francization training.

Should we facilitate access to francization?

Mr. Yannick Boucher: To ask the question is, in a way, to answer it.

I'm not here to play ideological games with the French fact, but, from a demographic, pragmatic and objective perspective, the fact remains that the French language is sensitive. If the French language in Quebec...

[*English*]

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

We will now go to Ms. Kwan for six minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to all of the witnesses.

My first question is for Ms. Go.

In your presentation you mentioned the situation for people in Hong Kong. You're absolutely correct to say that the government's announcements primarily focused on an economic stream and there is basically no agency stream. To that end, the biggest issue, of course, is how people will actually get out of Hong Kong to even make the economic application. As it stands now, if they're not in Canada already, they will not be able to make such an application.

Do you have any specific recommendations for the government to address this agency component?

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: We are speaking with the minister's office. We're hoping that the government can think of other ways of helping the Hong Kong pro-democracy activists come here. If these measures were in place, for various reasons, we would not want to publicize them. At the same time, we're not getting too many details as to what these measures may look like.

We also discussed the possibility of government sponsorship or private sponsorship, but this cannot be done with people in Hong Kong. They have to be in another country. We have shared with the

government the experience we had after June 4, 1989. At that time, there were other measures in place to help some of the activists leave China. The government is not giving me a lot of concrete information as to what measures, if any, it will have in place to assist those who are in Hong Kong right now.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

As far as we know, there aren't any programs in place to assist people to exit Hong Kong. That's a huge problem because if they can't exit, they can't get into a system for application.

Related to that, I want to raise the issue of family reunification. The family reunification stream for people is primarily spousal sponsorship and dependent sponsorships. There's no extended family sponsorship, for siblings as an example, or cousins, and so on.

Would you recommend that the government adopt an extended family reunification stream for the people of Hong Kong?

● (1615)

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: Certainly, I would. In fact, we used to have those kinds of programs in the 1960s and 1970s. The immigration family class was much broader at that time. We had an assisted relative program. It was much easier to come here under those kinds of programs. All that changed over the last 20 years. Even for parents and grandparents, we're making it much harder for them to come.

I would strongly recommend, as Canada is thinking of evacuating the 300,000 Canadians living in Hong Kong, that they should evacuate their extended families at the same time, at the very least their spouses, dependent children, adult children, parents, grandparents and siblings.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

I was a beneficiary of the 1970s program, actually.

I'll move on to a different area, on landed status on arrival, giving people PR now. The fact of the matter is that we're not going to meet our immigration level numbers this year because of COVID. The numbers are down pretty well on every single stream, so we have a lot of room to move. The government only announced that it would provide PR to people in the health care sector through the guardian angels program, even though it still doesn't have an application process in place.

Would you recommend that the government extend that PR status for all the other streams, for other migrant workers and people without status at the moment?

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: Yes, I would, certainly. We're proposing a regularization process for everyone who is in Canada right now with precarious immigration status. That would include migrant workers as well as people who work in all kinds of essential work. Even with some of the pilot projects that have been announced, they have certain language-speaking requirements that many of these workers may or may not meet. Even if they work in essential work, they may still not be able to take advantage of these programs.

Certainly we have a lot of temporary foreign workers, some of whom may also want to stay in Canada permanently. I would strongly recommend having a regularization program that would allow anyone with precarious status to apply in Canada right now.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Speaking now of caregivers, many caregivers have been impacted significantly by COVID. Their two-year work requirement has been interrupted and they're not going to meet that. Some of them have children who are going to age out.

Would you recommend that the government count the interrupted period of time towards their 24-month work requirement, as well as to freeze the age of the children so that they don't age out?

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: Yes. The COVID period, the entire lockdown period, should not be counted to reduce the 24 month—

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

Yes, Ms. Kwan?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can she just finish that thought very quickly?

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: My recommendation around the dependent children is that you count the age as of the beginning of the lockdown, so it doesn't matter when the lockdown is lifted.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Go.

We will now proceed to our second round of questioning.

We will start with Mr. Hallan.

You have five minutes for your round of questioning.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan (Calgary Forest Lawn, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you to all the witnesses for joining us today.

Dr. Christian, I'd like to get a bit more information on how hard a process it was to get your mother here. I know that it was a very difficult time for you, and I appreciate your comments today. If you could, give us a bit more background information on what you went through. Just go through the process and where things are.

Mr. Gideon Christian: Thank you very much.

Getting my mom here was a very big and difficult challenge. I'm a lawyer by profession, so one would assume that with my being a lawyer who is very competent with immigration law, it would be a smooth ride. Unfortunately, it wasn't.

First of all, I participated in the lottery system. I did that for about five years before, fortunately, in 2018 I was randomly selected to sponsor my mom. This was very exciting. I have two children. I work full time. My wife works full time, too, so we needed someone to help.

We commenced the application process and completed the application. My mom was originally from Nigeria, but she was a U.S. permanent resident in Texas.

Immediately we sent in the application. Normally the application is supposed to be processed at the visa office very close to where the applicant is permanently resident. Rather than having my mom's application processed in the U.S. or Canada, IRCC sent her

application to Accra, Ghana, for processing. That was about 12,000 kilometres away from where she was living.

Immediately when I was notified of that, I contacted the office to let them know that the application should be processed in the U.S. or in Canada, but I did not get any response, which is very typical. I had to apply for an access to information request. I used that access to information request to track down the officer who actually handled the application before it was sent to Accra. I began communicating with her to try to get the application back, but nothing happened.

I had to write a letter to the then minister, Mr. Hussen. Still nothing happened. Even when the new minister took over, I still had to forward it to them. It was not until I had to go public that an action was actually expedited to have the application processed.

The problem we experienced wasn't just a problem of being selected through the random process. Even issues with regard to processing of the application were a big deal.

• (1620)

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Thank you so much for that.

You mentioned the process. We had the minister here last week, but we still didn't get any solid or proper answers about the current program that we have for grandparents and parents. The program was paused at the beginning. I'm not sure why, because when they reopened it, it was with the same lottery system that we've seen before.

Right now we're struggling. I'm hearing from constituents from all over that there's just no transparency in what's happening in the current program that they opened up. It's been closed now for weeks, and still nothing—no timelines. The minister couldn't answer any questions about it, either. It seems that he didn't know.

Have you had any people whom you know, or have you yourself been dealing with the current process? Do you have any comments on the transparency side or on timelines?

Mr. Gideon Christian: Initially there was the lottery system. As I pointed out, the lottery system was replaced with what we jocularly refer to as “the fastest finger process”, whereby the fastest person to file the application will be selected.

Later on, the whole process was frozen, earlier this year. We were hoping that at least something better was coming up. When the announcement was made, it seemed we had returned to the same lottery system.

The problem with the lottery system is that you may have a situation in which an individual will never be able to sponsor their parent if they are not fortunate enough to be picked up in that system. There is no guarantee, no matter how hard you work, that you may be able to sponsor your parents, except if you randomly, by chance, get selected.

That's the process with this random system. We're looking at a situation whereby people who have played this lottery system over a period of time, at least—

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

We will now move to Mr. Regan.

You have five minutes for your round of questioning.

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Allow me to thank the witnesses for coming today and for their testimony.

Ms. Go, you previously appeared at another committee this summer in which you outlined recommendations for the government when developing measures for people possibly coming from Hong Kong. These included providing more temporary resident permits, work and study permits and options for permanent residence for people from Hong Kong.

The government has presented a new list of pathways to support Hong Kong residents who want to study, work or live permanently in Canada. These new measures specifically include faster processing of work and study permits, new parameters for the post-graduation work program, and helping families stay together through spousal and dependent work and study permits. It also included two new pathways to permanent residency.

Do you find these new measures helpful? Do they respond to your recommendations?

• (1625)

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: They respond in part to our recommendations but not to all of them. It depends on the situation of those individuals. They may or may not fit into the announcement that was made on November 12.

Also, certainly the situations of a lot of the people we are aware of who are now stranded in places like Taiwan and the U.K. are just as dire as those who are left in Hong Kong. Some of them may or may not be able to come in through the various measures the government has currently put in place.

That's why we also want to push for a more temporary resident permit-type program, because usually it's not tied to any specific criteria. Potentially more people would qualify for a temporary resident permit as well.

On top of that, we also think there needs to be a way of helping people leave Hong Kong. The piece that is really missing, as Ms. Kwan has mentioned, is how you help people leave Hong Kong. I understand the government may not be able to address that publicly, but certainly we at least share that kind of information with the people who are connected to the Hong Kong activists right now.

Hon. Geoff Regan: As I understand it, Ms. Go, the list of new pathways provided by the government is designed to enhance and increase the promotion of existing programs of pathways for Hong Kong residents looking to come to Canada. Also, the new measures have been created in part to reinforce existing trends being used by people of Hong Kong but also to allow additional pathways to permanent residency.

I'd like to ask Ms. Go and Mr. Christian what improvements to the current plan they would like to see?

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: Sir, just for Hong Kong people, again, I think that, for instance, it would be to remove some of the requirements around the education or the language, or at least lower them so more people can benefit from them. Why have open work permits for three years that only people with a university degree can apply for? Those people, among all the activists, have the most options elsewhere. I think that would be number one.

Again, because it's after three years, it's unclear to me what the pathway to permanent residency would be. We still haven't seen the actual applications, so we don't know exactly what criteria would be used at the end of the three years. Whether or not people will be able to stay in Canada after three years, we still don't know.

I think just having a temporary resident permit for more people with lower requirements would provide more stability for the people who choose to come here, and it would expand the groups that can come here.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Christian, I only have about 30 seconds, if you wouldn't mind answering the same question.

The Chair: You have 50 seconds.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you.

You're muted, sir.

Mr. Gideon Christian: I was having some sound problems. Can you please ask the question again?

Hon. Geoff Regan: I was asking about ways to improve the current plan in relation to Hong Kong in particular.

Mr. Gideon Christian: I think one way to do that would be to provide pathways for individuals there to be able to travel to Canada and gain a status in Canada, whether as students or temporary workers. At least create the paths to permanent residency for them, whichever pathway brings them to Canada, so that they can remain in Canada permanently and then contribute to the economy here.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now move to Madam Normandin.

You have two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'm going to direct my questions to Mr. Boucher

I'd like to hear what you have to say about the possibility of lowering barriers for access to francization, in particular by not requiring a study permit or by making it easier to obtain a study permit sooner.

Do you have any good recommendations to make to ensure that francization goes forward?

• (1630)

Mr. Yannick Boucher: With regard to francization, earlier we were talking about people from francophone Africa. I think it's really important to facilitate access to Canada for these people. It's extremely limited. I'd say that could be done by granting scholarships, for example, for people from the francophone world in general, but from francophone Africa in particular. There are ways to select people who already speak French but who achieve a level of francization that enables them to fit into a different culture. Learning a language also means learning about culture. We all agree on that. That's a recommendation on francization that I think is extremely important.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Perfect.

As regards delays, you mentioned the stress the process causes in immigrants. I'd like to hear you speak in general terms.

Can you make a direct connection between the challenges, the slow processing and the ability of newcomers to integrate? Do you think any one of those has a direct impact on the others?

Mr. Yannick Boucher: That's obvious.

We see it. Administrative procedures monopolize the mind. Talking about mental load, for example, this is an enormous mental load for immigrants. All this energy is spent on completing administrative procedures instead of on the right things, such as learning more about the society, fitting in and looking for a job. So we see this mental load weighing on the people we see every day, and it clearly stresses them.

Ms. Christine Normandin: So you can readily say that having to complete IRCC paperwork uses up energy that could otherwise be directed to francization, looking for a job, socialization and integration.

Is that correct?

Mr. Yannick Boucher: Absolutely.

It takes up an enormous amount of time and energy. It's an energy-consuming process.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Perfect.

Thank you very much.

I don't think I have enough time left to ask another question.

[*English*]

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

We will now move to Ms. Kwan.

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

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to touch on the issue around the reunification of parents and grandparents. The sponsorship, as we know, is now subject to the luck of the draw.

Ms. Go, you mentioned that this is the only stream, and you are absolutely correct, that is based on a lottery. This is also the stream that has run into problems for years and years and years now.

What do you think the government should do once and for all so that we can actually deal with the reunification of parents and grandparents in the proper way?

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: Once and for all get rid of the lottery system and just let people apply, just like with any other stream, and get rid of the quota. Then start putting in the resources that are needed to process the applications. What happened in the past—and this was used by the previous government as an excuse to introduce the quota system—is that there were very many applications and it created a backlog when they were not being processed in a timely manner. We only had a backlog because the government was not spending the resources to process these cases, as we do for other types of applications, including spousal applications or independent applications.

I think there should be equitable distribution of resources among the different types of immigration categories. Even within the category of family class there should be equitable resources.

I remember years ago appearing before a standing committee during a different government, during a different time. I was asked whether I should choose between my husband or my father, and which one is more important to me. I tried to explain that I could not choose because they were equally important. I wasn't even married at the time, and I'm still not married.

In our culture, father and husband, spouse, are equally important. I think that's the problem with the current system. It assigns more weight to a spouse than to a parent because it fits more into the western nuclear family model. With more and more people, racialized people in particular from different cultures, we can no longer make that assumption. The only fair and equitable way is to treat all family immigration the same.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I have a quick question on international post-grad students. Their work permits are not renewable and of course they are required to fulfill—

• (1635)

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

In order to end this second round, we will have two minutes for the Conservative member and two minutes for the Liberal member.

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

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank all the witnesses for joining us today. Your testimonies were excellent, so thank you for your time.

Madam Go, I want to get your perspective. Have you been made familiar with or are you aware of any intimidation that's happening within our Chinese community in Canada? We're hearing reports nationally that Chinese Canadians are being targeted by operatives from the Chinese Communist Party. I'm just wondering if you're hearing anything on the ground that concerns you, in the sense that we should do a better job to expedite the support for Hong Kong and to address concerns here at home.

Do you have any thoughts on that?

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: Sure. In fact, just half an hour before this committee hearing began, I received an email from one of my colleagues from Alliance Canada Hong Kong who has recently, or just today, written to Minister Bill Blair about intimidation cases that they have to deal with right now with respect to two of their members.

Certainly, it's a real issue that is happening to people who are here in Canada. It's not just an issue for Chinese Canadians. It is an issue for Uighurs and Tibetans. Our government really should pay attention to and try to support these activists in every way possible and deal with it.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you for your feedback.

Do you think the government should be doing more to address the Uighur situation in China and perhaps provide them with some sort of pathway to safety in Canada?

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: Yes. If we think that the situation in Hong Kong is bad, it's worse in Xinjiang, right? I think that—

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

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Ms. Go.

The Chair: We will now have the last round of questioning.

Mr. Dhaliwal, you have two minutes.

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

Thank you to all the presenters.

My question goes to Ms. Go.

Ms. Go, with regard to the parent and grandparent applications, I have some history. I first got elected in 2006. What Jason Kenney and the Conservative Party did was cut down the number of parent and grandparent applications to 5,000. They reduced the age of a dependent child from 22 years to 18 years. It was a first-come, first-served application. People prepared their applications, put in all that work and sent them to Mississauga. The first 5,000 applications got accepted and the others were out.

Since the Liberal government has taken over, if we average from 2016 to 2021, you will see that we have accepted four times the applications that the Conservatives accepted. We raised the age to 22 from 18. On the backlog, when the Conservatives were in power, it was a seven-year wait for parents and grandparents. We brought it down to under two years.

Would you say that the Liberal government has made improvements and that, in fact, the mess that was created was created by the previous government when it shut down the parents and grandparents category?

Ms. Avvy Yao-Yao Go: When the Conservatives implemented that program, there was a backlog of, if I remember correctly, over 100,000 cases in the system. They wiped it out by just refusing to process any of these cases.

The backlog has reduced because of two things. First of all, you're making it even harder for people to sponsor their parents and grandparents by raising the MNI requirement to MNI plus 30%. Many of the—

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

With this, our first panel comes to an end.

If any of the witnesses want to send some written submissions, please send them to the clerk of the committee and we will consider them as we draft the report.

On behalf of all the members, I would like to thank all the witnesses for appearing before the committee and providing their important testimonies as we continue our study of the impact of COVID-19 on the immigration system.

I will suspend the meeting for two minutes so that sound checks can be done for the second panel.

• (1640) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1640)

The Chair: Good afternoon, everyone. I call the meeting to order as we welcome our second panel.

On behalf of all the members, I would like to welcome all our witnesses appearing before us as we continue our study of the impact of COVID-19 on the immigration system.

Madam Normandin, do you have a question?

• (1645)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Madam Chair, since we have four witnesses instead of three, five minutes more will be allowed for opening remarks.

[*English*]

The Chair: We will see. If there is no technical difficulty, we'll see after the first round. I will determine how much time is left for the second round.

We have four witnesses on this panel.

I would like to welcome Roxane Hatem and Armelle Mara, representing Chercheuses de résidence permanente.

We have from Don Valley Community Legal Services, Nicole Guthrie, immigration lawyer.

We have Laurentian University represented by Robert Haché, president and vice-chancellor.

Our last witness for today is Spousal Sponsorship Advocates, represented by Ms. Misha Pelletier.

All the witnesses will have five minutes for opening remarks. We will start with Roxane Hatem.

You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

[Translation]

Ms. Roxane Hatem (Representative, Chercheuses de résidence permanente): I'm going to turn the floor over to Ms. Mara because she will be starting our presentation. We will share speaking time.

[English]

The Chair: You'll share the time. The total time is five minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Roxane Hatem: Ms. Mara, you have to unmute the microphone.

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Mara, you're on mute. Can you unmute yourself?

[Translation]

Mrs. Armelle Mara (Representative, Chercheuses de résidence permanente): Pardon me.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you. You can start.

[Translation]

Mrs. Armelle Mara: Madam Chair, honourable members, we would like to thank the committee for welcoming us today to hear our testimony on the delays involved in obtaining permanent residence in Quebec. Our aim is to draw your attention to the status of our applications.

My name is Armelle Mara, and I represent OÙ sont nos demandes de résidence permanente?, a group I formed together with Ms. Hatem. I am from Cameroon, and I came to Quebec as an international student in 2016. Although I filed my permanent residence application in 2018, I am still waiting and have not had a work permit since December 2018. I can assure you that many of us are in the same situation.

We are a group of permanent residence applicants who have been waiting for a decision since 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020. We already have our Quebec acceptance certificates, an essential step in applying for permanent residence. Despite that fact, we are forced to wait 26 months—and, in fact, as many as 32 months—to become permanent residents.

Having had enough of waiting for months and, in some cases years, without any prospects, we decided to take clear, proactive steps to alert public authorities. There are 3,900 persons in our group, and we have started up a petition that has gathered nearly 11,000 signatures to date. We also demonstrated in Montreal and Quebec City on November 13 to draw attention to our cases.

We have come to this pass as a result of the total lack of response to our applications. File processing times have virtually doubled. COVID-19 and the advent of teleworking have contributed to the complications we have experienced in filing applications in paper format. We are immigrants, and we are definitely seeing red!

I'm going to hand over to Ms. Hatem.

Ms. Roxane Hatem: Following on from Ms. Mara's explanations, I plan to cite some examples to illustrate the vulnerable position we find ourselves in today as permanent residence applicants in Quebec.

Waiting times have increased from 16 to 26 months, and even 50 months for investors. We have to pay renewal costs for work visas. These are closed work visas, which are paid for by both employer and immigrant, unlike what is done in the other provinces of Canada. Medical visits are valid for one year. Consequently, after a year, you have to pay again and see the doctor once more.

Our members include pregnant women, whose children will be Canadian, who are waiting for permanent residence, a situation that causes them stress and could affect their health. This has many consequences for us, workers who have been accepted by Quebec. We may wind up without jobs overnight. We can't renew our work visas any more. We are definitely in a vulnerable position. Once we have done all that and have waited 24 months for a decision in our case, we must wait months, in some instances, before receiving a confirmation email from IRCC offices in Montreal.

Our claims regarding these problems and what we are seeking from the government today are as follows. First, we ask that the government grant temporary open work permits to temporary residents who are waiting for permanent residence, as is done in the other provinces of Canada.

Second, we ask that the government give us a realistic completion date and undertake to meet it. According to our accounts, our files have been 100% complete since March 2020. We need to know how much longer we have to wait.

Third, the validity of medical appointments must be extended so that immigrants do not have to make another medical appointment one year later and pay more fees, which are costly, especially for families.

Fourth, we ask that the length of the delay in obtaining permanent residence be deducted from the required waiting period before we can apply for citizenship because we want to become citizens of Canada and to remain in the country. We want to be involved in society, but we unfortunately have to hold permanent resident status for two years in order to do so. The longer we wait for permanent residence, the more time passes, and the longer we have to wait to apply for citizenship.

Fifth, and this is one of the most important points, an acknowledgement of receipt must be sent to persons who submitted their files in 2019 in 2020. Some people who did so in July 2019 have not received an acknowledgement of receipt from IRCC. They do not know where their files are. They cannot access them online so they can monitor their progress. They fear their files will be returned to them at some point because they lack a document or their Quebec acceptance certificate is no longer valid. What are we to do?

These are our fears today...

● (1650)

[English]

The Chair: Sorry for interrupting, Madam Hatem, but your time is up.

We will now move to our next witness, Don Valley Community Legal Services, represented by Nicole Guthrie.

You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Ms. Nicole Guthrie (Lawyer, Immigration, Don Valley Community Legal Services): Good afternoon, Madam Chair. Thank you for having us as witnesses.

I am a lawyer at Don Valley Community Legal Clinic. We are one of the bigger clinics. We merged two former clinics, Flemingdon Community Legal Services and East Toronto Legal Services. We are funded by legal aid.

We have quite a large population in our area. Some of our clients include clients living in the Thorncliffe Park and Flemingdon areas. These areas have seen quite a number of COVID-19 cases, which of course has impacted our ability to provide services to our clients. We understand the uniqueness of these circumstances, and I do acknowledge that IRCC has been quite flexible in allowing extensions and has been understanding of submissions and other documents. The Niagara Falls office especially has been very good to us. However, a lot of our clients are still stuck in limbo because of the impact COVID-19 has had on IRCC services.

We think it would be helpful if IRCC would focus their attention on providing resources for several areas. As everyone has mentioned in previous presentations and in this presentation, processing times have gone through the roof. We think there are certain circumstances where IRCC could expedite applications, especially for overseas family members, such as those who are waiting for permanent residence and who are protected persons or family members such as spouses or dependent children.

It would be good if IRCC provided a clear set of criteria for officers to expedite applications from the get-go. Whether it's severe mental health issues or physical risks to family members overseas,

we think it would be good if IRCC could establish criteria so officers could expedite applications without our having to advocate or resort to temporary resident permits, which are almost always rejected.

We think there needs to be a clearer, more defined policy regarding dual intent. For instance, spouses who are waiting overseas can apply for a TRP and enter Canada while they wait for their applications to be processed. We have a number of our clients who have family members with pending spousal sponsorship applications being rejected for a TRP application because the officer seems to ignore the fact that a spousal application is pending, even when mental health issues are involved.

One of the things we see with temporary foreign workers is the need for a relaxation of LMIA requirements. There are a lot of temporary foreign workers here, especially caregivers, who have been in Canada for years working on work permits. The process of getting an LMIA has been impacted by COVID-19. We think IRCC should look into relaxing the requirement for these workers to get an LMIA. Maybe they could issue short-term—say, one year—COVID-affected work permits so these employees can support themselves and find work.

A number of applications have been submitted since March. We know that biometrics have been slowly coming back online but they are not up to the speed they were before. It would be really good if IRCC would continue processing other aspects of the application, like medicals and security clearances, instead of applications being put on hold while medicals and security clearances expire and clients have to do these things all over again and spend a lot of money. It would be really helpful if there could be concurrent processing of all these different areas of the application.

Temporary foreign workers are very much impacted by COVID-19. We have a large number of caregivers in our area. A lot of these caregivers have either applied for permanent residence under the interim program or are applying under the new pilot.

● (1655)

A lot of our clients do not have work permits—

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

We will now move to Mr. Robert Haché representing Laurentian University—

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Pardon me, Madam Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Yes.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: I have a point of order.

There was no interpretation at the end of Ms. Guthrie's presentation.

[English]

The Chair: For the whole period, for all five minutes...?

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: It was just near the end.

Could we work on that during the presentations of the other witnesses? I wouldn't want to waste any time.

[English]

The Chair: Yes, the clerk is looking into it. Before we start, we will make sure it is in order.

The interpreters were not able to interpret because of the low quality of the voice coming in. Maybe we can give one more minute to Madam Guthrie to just repeat her last minute.

Madam Guthrie, would you please bring the microphone nearer your mouth so that the interpreters can hear you clearly?

You will have one minute to repeat what you said in the last one minute.

Ms. Nicole Guthrie: My apologies. I will try to speak slowly and as clearly as I can.

As I said before, we would like IRCC to adopt a more flexible approach when it comes to biometrics and concurrent processing of other aspects of the application with regard to temporary foreign workers, particularly caregivers. We have a lot of interim caregivers and pilot project caregivers who have applied for permanent residence but have not been able to receive work permits. Under the previous live-in caregiver program, once an applicant had submitted an application, they were issued a work permit. Our clients are stuck in limbo. A lot of them do not have work permits and cannot move to new employers because they've been impacted by COVID.

It would be helpful if IRCC—

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

Now we will move to Mr. Robert Haché, president and vice-chancellor of Laurentian University.

You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

● (1700)

Mr. Robert Haché (President and Vice-Chancellor, Laurentian University): Thank you.

My name is Robert Haché and I am pleased to speak to you today from Laurentian University in Sudbury, in northeastern Ontario, located on the 1850 Robinson-Huron Treaty territory and on the traditional lands of the Atikameksheng Anishnawbek and Wahnapitae first nations.

First, thank you for the invitation. I also thank you for leading this study and for the critical work that parliamentarians are doing in this extraordinary time.

Laurentian University is a microcosm of Canada. We are northern, we are bilingual, we are committed to reconciliation and we are focused on internationalization.

The City of Greater Sudbury is a regional hub for post-secondary education and learning in northeastern Ontario with Laurentian University, Cambrian College and le Collège Boréal.

Approximately 6% of our students at Laurentian are international. They come from over 60 countries, with our most significant populations being from China, India, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran and Côte d'Ivoire.

[Translation]

More specifically, in recent decades, Sudbury has become a centre for francophone African immigrants in the north, particularly those from the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Ivory Coast. Many of these newcomers also have ties to Laurentian University, where they study, teach and work.

In May 2019, as part of the Action Plan for Official Languages 2018-2023, the federal government announced that Sudbury was one of the 14 welcoming francophone communities in the country. Pursuant to the plan, the Sudbury region focuses on supporting the vitality of the official language minority communities and increasing the proportion of francophone permanent residents in Canada outside Quebec.

[English]

We have been very fortunate to work with many of our embassies, particularly in Africa, and we are very grateful for the regional knowledge that these embassies or visa application centres have. Due to a central shift in visa processing for a number of African countries, however, international students have experienced challenges in realizing their desire to study in northern Ontario and to have their immigration applications accepted in a timely fashion.

Laurentian University has found that applicants from many African countries that have applications processed in Dakar, for example, have a higher refusal rate due to aspects of their applications that would be better understood by VACs in their respective countries that have the regional knowledge to assess their applications. The same has been experienced for Algerian applications being processed in Paris.

I strongly believe universities can be essential partners to the IRCC to help increase mutual understanding of, on our end, academic applications, our acceptance practices and rigorous credential evaluation, and on your end, immigration application standards and what immigration officers look for when assessing the applicant's academic path.

One recommendation to assist immigration officers would be to require study permit applicants to include their letter of motivation to study at our university with their study permit application. This would help immigration officers to better understand the academic journey that the student is proposing.

Many international students, and in particular francophone African students, feel at home in Sudbury and in Ontario's north. They will play a critical role in the economic recovery of our region. Working together, universities can help the federal government to leverage an expedited return of international students in a safe manner to help drive economic recovery.

Sudbury must remain a destination of choice for these students, who represent a pool of bright, engaged and committed talent that will transform our communities in positive ways.

Thank you again to all members of the committee for your work during the COVID-19 pandemic. With your support, we are committed to building stronger communities and a stronger Canada.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear.

The Chair: Thank you, Monsieur Haché.

We will now move to our last witness for this panel, Spousal Sponsorship Advocates, represented by Madam Misha Pelletier.

Madam Pelletier, you have five minutes for your opening remarks.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Misha Pelletier (Representative, Spousal Sponsorship Advocates): Madam Chair and distinguished members of the committee, families have had to face a heart-wrenching reality since the pandemic began. Prolonged separation for indeterminate periods and the passage of time merely heighten the fear and suffering that families experience. I am here representing 8,000 individuals.

The announcement on June 8 was briefly celebrated, until we realized we were excluded from the announced measures. Although we had the option of filing temporary residence visa applications, those applications have gone unanswered or have been denied under paragraph 179(b) of the immigration and refugee protection regulations on the ground that we are inadmissible as a result of travel restrictions. Families have thus felt they are victims of discriminatory treatment because those who come from developed countries are allowed to enter Canada, but not others.

Then came the announcement on September 25, which promised that processing would be expedited and priority given to family reunification applications. We waited with cautious optimism for those promises to be kept. An important point in the announcement was that interviews via videoconference would be introduced. However, our members are still waiting for the government to deliver on those promises. In actual fact, waiting times for interviews often exceed 18 months. The interviews are urgently needed to accelerate family reunification and to limit travel during a pandemic.

Although travel is a problem, IRCC continues to require us to travel in order to complete medical examinations. This process must take place in the home country of sponsored persons. Where that is impossible, we propose that medical exams be conducted in Canada as a last resort and that a visitor visa suffice for that purpose.

Today, nearly nine months after the pandemic started, generic responses from IRCC, claiming COVID-19 as an excuse, are still the norm. What measures are taken are slow. If, as announced, 12,000 decisions have been reached since October, we would appreciate an explanation of the reasons why so many families have seen so little change in their cases.

In addition, on October 30, dual intent was underscored in an instruction from IRCC concerning the visitor visa. We have observed limited positive results, but the delays and waiting have lasted

months. Many cases have also been denied. Although it is clearly stated that the applicant has an opportunity to address officers' concerns respecting the applicant's intent before his or her decision, very few of our members have been contacted.

The standards that frame paragraph 179(b) have been drafted in such a way that the applications of millions of Canadians would be denied. Applicants must own a house and a business and have a long travel history and thousands of dollars in savings. However, IRCC imposes these stiff requirements on applicants from developing countries, where economic conditions are often unfavourable. Do we characterize spouses from the United States or Europe during a visit in the same manner? The answer is no. This paragraph should be repealed.

The visitor visa as such has no clear protocol or directive and is highly discriminatory. For certain individuals, it is not an option. Consequently, we propose more economical and effective solutions.

In the short term, we propose that: criminal investigations be submitted with the initial file; biometrics be processed on arrival in Canada; visas should be issued electronically; and work visas should be issued at the port of entry.

In the long term, we propose that there be single window access to the IRCC site, which the representative and individuals may access with specific chronological file status, as well as online submission of permanent residence applications, with required original documents forwarded after the fact.

● (1705)

As we continue this study, we know that the findings and changes will take several months. During that time...

[*English*]

The Chair: I am sorry to interrupt, Madam Pelletier, but your time is up.

We will now move to our next round of questioning with Ms. Dancho for six minutes.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for being with us today. We appreciate their testimony.

Mrs. Pelletier, I have a few questions for you.

I know we have had a conversation previously, and I found your story very compelling of why there needs to be some change in this process. If you feel comfortable, would you share a bit more about your experience? My understanding is, if my memory serves me, you have been waiting for about two or three years for your husband's application, and you have a child together.

Would you like to share a bit more about that with the committee?

• (1710)

Mrs. Misha Pelletier: We started our first application in September 2018. This is our second application. When we started our first application, we did it here in Canada under common law. His visa had expired in the meantime, and he was asked to submit his application outside of Canada.

I have a child from my previous marriage, but he has become the stepfather of my child and is a very active member in our family. He was asked to go back and apply to come to Canada in April 2019. We needed to submit an outland application. He would be in Tunisia and I would be here. I went to Tunisia and we had to get married in order to start a new application.

Our application was submitted in August 2019, and another year has passed, so it has been two years that we are in the process now.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: It has been about 14 months since you put forward a second application after you were married, so you started afresh with that application.

What is the communication from IRCC been like with you? Have you done the interview process?

Mrs. Misha Pelletier: We don't need an interview since we lived together in Canada. We have a lot of proof of our Canadian lifestyle together. We're not pending an interview right now. We actually received the pre-arrival letter, but I have heard that it can collect dust for up to six months. With the delays and everything, you just never know.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: It's good news that you have received the pre-arrival letter and you will keep us posted, I'm sure.

Mrs. Misha Pelletier: Definitely.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: You mentioned the group you're with to advocate for families in a similar situation to you is 8,000 strong. What has been some of the feedback you have received from them in the past number of months? The Minister of Immigration mentioned he would process 6,000 applications every month for October, November and December, which is 18,000.

Have you received any positive or negative feedback?

Mrs. Misha Pelletier: We see there is movement compared to when it was COVID and all the visa offices were shut down. We're still waiting for interviews. We haven't received any interviews at this point, which is huge. Some people have waited over 18 months just for an interview.

There are also the expiries of the medicals, so they are being asked to do their medicals again even though these people are relatively healthy. It is not that easy to do medicals again. A person from Cuba, for instance, needs to travel to Tobago. It's costly. It can cost up to \$6,000 to do a medical again.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Has IRCC provided any options, or have you had any discussions with IRCC? Because of COVID and the expiry of medicals, do you know if there's any thought on extending the medical expiry date, and just applying the last one? Is IRCC open to that idea?

Mrs. Misha Pelletier: It's hit or miss. It depends on the file. From what I have seen, even a healthy young couple will be asked to do a medical.

It's confusing. We don't know why some people are given extensions and others aren't given extensions, but given the situation with COVID, you would think that at this point, everybody would at least have the extended medicals.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: You mentioned that no interviews are happening. Is that because they're not able to...? You have to do the interview in person. Is that it?

Mrs. Misha Pelletier: From what I heard, they were offering video conferencing, and that was part of the announcement on September 25. Honestly, from what I've heard, they're not equipped to do these video conferences yet. Considering that these are Canadian employees in these offices all over the world and we have the same communication, you'd think that by now, with COVID-19, they would have supplied these agents with the right equipment in order to do these interviews.

• (1715)

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Yes, it has been nine months, and you're understanding from certain visa offices that have Canadian employees, Canadian offices in other countries that would process and do these interviews, that they haven't been equipped with the technology in the past nine months.

Mrs. Misha Pelletier: Exactly. Most of them work from home, but still, there needs to be a quick, efficient way in order to serve people.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Did you have any remaining thoughts—we have about 20 seconds left—on how this process can be improved for folks like you and others?

Mrs. Misha Pelletier: At this point, we need to speed up the process by giving electronic visas as well. That would be great. Abolishing the paragraph 179(b) for visitor visas would be great as well.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Madam Pelletier.

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

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dancho.

Now we will move to Mr. Dhaliwal.

You have six minutes for your round of questioning.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you to all the witnesses who have come today.

My first question will go to president and vice-chancellor Robert Haché. Since August, our government has introduced temporary measures for students to study online from abroad until April 30, 2021, with no time deducted from the length of a future post-graduation work permit, provided 50% of the program of study is completed in Canada.

Do you find this an appropriate balance to maintain public health safety and avoid penalizing international students? What improvement would you suggest to the current framework for international students?

Mr. Robert Haché: I would say in the first instance that it has indeed been very helpful. We're quite thankful to the government for allowing students to study online. We're also, I will add, thankful that the government has now approved students to come back to the country. It has worked very well in most cases. I'll give a quick example. I meet regularly with small groups of students. I do it virtually now, and last week I was meeting with a student who was sitting in Côte d'Ivoire as he was having a conversation with the president.

There are some challenges with respect to the 24-hour clock and activities for students. Many of them are looking very much to come back to Canada, and we are amongst the universities that have arranged to allow for their safe and secure return and integration back as we do more face-to-face activities, hopefully starting in the new year.

With respect to additional measures, I really think for us at Laurentian, what we see, particularly with our francophone student population, is processing of visas and things that we can do to get them ready to come and to initiate their studies.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you.

This question will go to Spousal Sponsorship Advocates.

Family and spousal reunification is one of the top priorities of our government. Our recent announcement of spousal sponsorship increased the level of IRCC staff by 66% to make sure that we continue to address the backlog, which we inherited from the Conservatives, and as a result of the pandemic. We made sure that this increase would lead to 49,000 decisions by the end of this year. We're looking to pilot remote interviews as well.

How do you see these developments as helping to reduce the backlog but also aid in modernizing the system by decreasing system inefficiencies?

Mrs. Misha Pelletier: Mr. Dhaliwal, thank you so much for that question.

In our group, we have 8,000 members who we take care of, who we oversee. From what I've seen, these numbers are not adding up at this point. We have seen advancement. We've seen people receive their pre-arrivals or requests for a medical, so there's news coming in. I'd be very surprised if these files were actually finalized by the end of December, considering that there's a lot of backlog. As for actually speeding up the process in general, I wonder whether it's actually creating delays in other streams, such as the TRVs, the visitor visas.

Again, on the interviews, it sounds as though it's a pilot project and not an actual project that's happening for good. We haven't seen anyone receive an interview yet. I'm looking forward to hearing about that.

● (1720)

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: On the other hand, our government has also made some changes to the IRCC spousal application system. One of them is to make sure that, first, we digitize those paper-based applications, convert them from paper to digital form. This is a piece that we hope will bring spousal applications into the technological age so they can be processed from anywhere in the world.

How do you see that as an improvement on the previous system?

Mrs. Misha Pelletier: That is great news, but my question to that is actually, if you're digitizing these files, do you need uploads? Do you need us to send it by mail first, and then after that you digitize it, or can we just upload the actual documents without having to send them by mail?

To me, it's as though we're duplicating the work. We're actually sending out our file by mail and then you're digitizing it. It feels as though it's a duplication of work anyway, because you need to receive those documents by mail first. Why not just upload the file and then it's over with?

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Certainly. There are files that are sitting there. There are people who have already applied and the decisions have not been made. For even those applications, when we digitize them and those decisions are made, it will reduce that backlog in terms of time.

Particularly if we look at some other countries, and I'll give you a perfect example, in Pakistan, the applications are processed in London—

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

We will now move to Madam Normandin.

You have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

My first question is for Ms. Mara and Ms. Hatem.

I'd like to know more specifically which recommendations you're seeking as regards obtaining citizenship and calculating days. If my understanding is correct, you're asking that the number of days spent on Canadian soil during your permanent residence be used in the calculation for obtaining Canadian citizenship. You want the process to be quicker and, with respect to processing of permanent residence, you want to be less disadvantaged than persons in the other provinces.

Ms. Roxane Hatem: To obtain Canadian citizenship, you must absolutely hold permanent resident status for two years. Consider my own case as an example. According to the IRCC site, I should have received permanent residence in October 2020. The period between October 2020 and the moment I received my confirmation is "lost" time for the calculation associated with my citizenship. And yet it's not my fault that the delays are extremely long.

Ms. Christine Normandin: I'd like you to tell us about the fact that employers don't agree to pay for permit renewals. Have members missed opportunities, good and well-paid jobs?

Ms. Roxane Hatem: Armelle is a living example of that.

Mrs. Armelle Mara: Thanks for handing over to me.

Yes, we have a lot of examples. In my case, I filed my application in 2018. At the time, waiting times were 17 months. Now they're up to 26 months, and I still don't have permanent residence. I've been waiting for 24 months. In addition, I haven't worked since December 2018. Why? Because, when I submitted my permanent residence application, my post-graduation work permit had expired. I had to switch to a closed work permit.

However, it's hard to find an employer who wants to recruit you in those conditions. He has to go to the IRCC portal and complete an application for you, an application that he'll have to pay for. In return, you also have to file an application that you'll have to pay for and wait for. Some people have to wait for up to six months to get it. I didn't find any employers who were prepared to go through those steps for me. They were reluctant. They preferred to hire someone who was already a resident. So I've been waiting for two years, and I don't have a work permit.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

I have a question for Ms. Pelletier now.

Ms. Pelletier, did the announcement of October 30 on dual intent give you hope that more visas would finally be accepted as result of that?

• (1725)

Mrs. Misha Pelletier: Thank you for that question, Ms. Normandin.

Of course the announcement gave us hope, but it's up to the discretion of the officers. In other words, they have the power to decide whether to give us a visitor visa. In addition, waiting times for visas have exploded; they've gone from 10 days to 250 days. So I wonder if that's not because you're asking the same officers to process digital files. That might explain why there are delays elsewhere.

Ms. Christine Normandin: I see.

You represent a group that has a lot of people in it. Since the announcement, have you had the impression that more visas have been accepted or that you have had more negative responses based on paragraph 179(b)?

Mrs. Misha Pelletier: Yes. Today I asked the group whether there had been any refusals. I got at least five emails including documents citing paragraph 179(b) as the ground for denial.

It depends on the country concerned. It seems as though they're granting more visitor visas for Mexico, but the fewer for other countries. I think that communication is a major problem within IRCC and that visa offices don't have the same information everywhere.

Ms. Christine Normandin: I have an application that concerns both groups, that of Ms. Mara and that of Ms. Pelletier, who may answer one after the other, starting with Ms. Mara.

You have organized groups in which you can speak with each other and exchange information. Do you think you had to create this kind of group precisely because IRCC wasn't giving you enough information or didn't send you enough when you requested it?

Mrs. Armelle Mara: That's correct.

Thank you for that question.

That's even the main reason why we created these groups. Initially, we all thought we were isolated cases, but, once the groups were formed, we realized that a lot of us were in the same situation. The groups even became a source of comfort and gave us the strength to move forward. Our situation is very stressful and causes a lot of psychological problems.

Yes, we had to create the groups, and we needed them. We're increasingly trying to make ourselves understood. The media are talking about this, and that helps us.

Thank you.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Would you like to add to that, Ms. Pelletier?

Mrs. Misha Pelletier: Yes, of course.

I completely agree with Ms. Mira. Our group has the same feeling. It's fortunate that we teamed up because we're stronger together. That's how we mobilized and met the various opposition members so they could, I hope, make changes to immigration.

That's it.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Please answer briefly, with a yes or no.

Does being in a group help you determine whether the announcements IRCC makes actually work?

Mrs. Misha Pelletier: Yes. We often conduct surveys these days, in which people really participate and...

[English]

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

We will now move to Ms. Kwan.

You have six minutes for your round of questioning.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses.

My first question is for Ms. Pelletier.

Part of the issue, of course, and the frustration for families is that they can't readily get an update on what's going on with the files. Literally, people are not able to contact anyone. We were talking a bit about updating systems. Would it make sense for the government to provide a system whereby you can actually get online and find out what is the status of your application?

Similarly, if a TRV has been rejected, you would be able to get that information on the website when you go into your account, similar to that for your taxes. When you went into My Account you would be able to get all of your information.

Would it make sense for the government to actually proceed in this way?

Mrs. Misha Pelletier: Yes, absolutely. We came to the conclusion that there are a lot of callbacks, emails and calls to the MPs based on the fact that we're not accessing our information because we either have an immigration lawyer or a consultant accessing our file, and we don't have access. It would be logical to give one point of access as well as have only one website rather than two, like GCKey and cic.gc.ca, which we have right now. We have two websites to access, so it creates a lot of confusion for the applicants.

It would be great if we just had one site with all the information, and that's it, which both immigration lawyers and applicants can access at the same time.

● (1730)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

On a similar question, you raised the issue around expired medicals. Medicals are very expensive and you proposed that the government extend the period to which the medicals would apply.

Alternatively, could the government also ensure that the medicals are done at the end stage? That is to say, in the final step of your application, once everything's approved, you then get your medical done. Then, once you complete that medical, your application is approved.

Would that not make sense, so that you don't run into a situation where you have an expired medical over and over again and have to go through the process numerous times?

Mrs. Misha Pelletier: Exactly.

It's very costly for our members who travel from one country to another. For instance, someone in Cuba has to go to Trinidad and Tobago. It costs over \$5,000 or \$6,000. Also, Honduras.... They also need to travel in rural areas. It can be very dangerous.

The best thing to do is actually leave it for the end. That way they won't run into the same problem. Regardless of whether it's COVID or not, we would ask that it be done at the end of the application, rather than in the middle or near the beginning.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I'm going to turn to Ms. Guthrie.

Ms. Guthrie, you were talking about caregivers who are experiencing a difficult time in the face of COVID. Many of them are not getting their 24-month work requirements completed because of COVID. That's been interrupted.

Then the other issue, of course, is that some of their children are aging out with their PR application.

I wonder, Ms. Guthrie, if you can comment on that and what your recommendation is for the government to address this issue.

Ms. Nicole Guthrie: We would recommend that the government look at applicants who enter the program. Particularly for COVID at this point, it would be helpful if the age of children is locked in from March for applicants. Ideally, it would be great if, as with the refugee protection program, once someone applies to the program, the age of children is locked in on that date.

It would be helpful if similar criteria were adopted for the caregiver applicants.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: That would be locking in the age of the children so they don't age out.

On the issue around interrupted time, should the government, for example, count the interrupted time towards the 24-month work requirement?

Ms. Nicole Guthrie: It would be helpful if the government would be flexible and count that time, as well. It's very hard for caregivers to find employment. The processing time for work permits and LMIA's, which some caregivers still need, is really long and difficult.

At this point, the processing time is six months for a work permit only. LMIA's are similarly taking much longer, so you're looking at clients being unemployed for a year or a year and a half.

It would be really helpful to count that time.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I have one minute left. Do you have any other recommendations to make to the government in terms of changes in policy and approaches as a special COVID measure for migrant workers?

Ms. Nicole Guthrie: As I stated earlier and I wish to reiterate, it would be very helpful if all these workers who are waiting for permanent resident applications that are in process, like interim caregivers, or caregivers under the new pilot who have been told the processing time for a work permit is a year, could get short-term work permits that would help them to be able to work, and then be able to count that work time—or at least earn money, so they could help their families.

A lot of these are women of colour or single women who come to Canada and are trying to support young children and families back home. It would be really helpful if we could issue—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Madam Guthrie, but the time is up.

We will now—

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Madam Chair, will we adjourn the meeting soon?

● (1735)

The Chair: Yes. The first round has come to an end. We will now have the shorter second round. We will have four minutes each for the Liberals and the Conservatives and then two minutes each for the Bloc and NDP.

We will start with Mr. Saroya.

You will have four minutes for your round of questioning.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for bringing your feedback to us.

Listening to Armelle and Roxane from Montreal, it sounds like a Liberal *Nightmare on Elm Street*. My head got tired listening to the whole thing from Armelle. This system is supposed to work for you, not for the IRCC. The students bring in \$23 billion to the Canadian economy. They are tired of waiting. The system doesn't work for you. You sent 10,000 signatures to the minister, and you are still waiting. There is the cost of renewing the visas.

Armelle or Roxane, do you have any suggestions for the government or for the minister on what they should be doing? The system should be working for you, rather than working for somebody else.

[Translation]

Ms. Roxane Hatem: In our investigation of our situation, we learned that, in Quebec, files are apparently forwarded and processed in paper format. We don't have access to electronic versions to submit our applications for permanent residence.

When COVID-19 hit and IRCC employees couldn't work, our files weren't processed at all. My recommendation to IRCC is that it modernize the system for Quebec because submitting paper files doesn't work.

Then, as I said, we should really be given open work permits so we don't have to pay visa costs. Every time you change employers, you have to negotiate a new work visa. Sometimes employers even tell us they'll hire us if we pay for our own work visa. It's gotten to that point. So the suggestion is really that we should be given an open work permit, as is done in the other provinces of Canada.

I'll hand over to Ms. Mara.

Mrs. Armelle Mara: Thank you for your question, Mr. Saroya.

Yes, it's very difficult and really awful for us to apply for work visas in Quebec. Applying for a closed work permit to get a job is complicated. So it would really be appropriate to give us an open work permit, which would enable us to wait for our permanent residence without having to renew any permits. There are cases where officials renewed and granted permits for only six months, and the applicants had to redo the procedure afterwards. That's exhausting for the employer and for us. A work permit with an open term would be a gain for us.

[English]

Mr. Bob Saroya: There are many Liberal MPs listening today. You have all their ears. They're telling us that everything is hunky-dory, that it's good. What would you suggest to them needs to be done to get people like you—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Saroya, but the interpreters are asking if you could move your microphone closer to your mouth. They're having some difficulty hearing you.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Sorry. Can you hear me? Is that better?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you so much.

What I'm saying is that the students are young. They want to work. They want to stay in the country. They speak the languages. We should be working with the students. They could be working for the next 30 or 40 years in this country.

What would you suggest to this government and to the Liberal MPs who are listening to you right now? What should be done to make sure people like you are heard and the system is working for you?

[Translation]

Mrs. Armelle Mara: Thank you for that other question.

The system works for us because we're in Canada and in Quebec. We were accepted by Quebec. Is it normal that I, as a francophone, have already spent a year in Quebec to get a Quebec acceptance certificate, a CSQ, and that it takes 30 months to get permanent residence? That's a bit unfair for us, with our future plans. We're here for the long term.

All these permits constantly have to be renewed. Some people have families and children, some of whom go to school, and they can wind up overnight having to go back to their home country, after having...

• (1740)

[English]

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

We will now move to Madam Martinez Ferrada for four minutes.

[Translation]

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

First, ladies, allow me to thank you for your testimony today. I'm sure it will be a great help in drafting the committee's report.

I'd like to go back to the modernization issue. If the COVID-19 crisis has shown us anything, it's precisely that we need to modernize the system. It's also shown us that we need to work with a digitized system. However, I believe we've put several measures in place during the COVID-19 crisis, in particular biometrics and e-permits.

Incidentally, you mentioned open work permits earlier. We've also made it possible for workers who had closed permits to apply for open permits. Those permits are processed in fewer than 10 days.

We've just made a commitment respecting the analysis of family reunification files: 6,000 files per month, 49,000 in December. However, I think we have to monitor the data. Ms. Pelletier mentioned surveys earlier. As regards the number of files processed, we should just be careful not to toss out figures that we don't have, on the one hand. On the other hand, our work is ongoing.

I'd also like to revisit the matter of immigration to Quebec. As you know, Canada has a special agreement with Quebec. It's the only province with which Canada does have an agreement. We respect Quebec's jurisdictions and the immigration thresholds it has established.

I'd like to get your views on the issues respecting immigration to Quebec, on what could be done, while respecting Quebec's jurisdiction, to improve the immigration experience and increase the number of family reunifications, which our government obviously wants to do.

Are there any aspects you would like us to work on, whether it be modernization or immigration to Quebec? Both Ms. Mara and Ms. Pelletier could briefly answer that question.

Mrs. Armelle Mara: Thank you for your question, Ms. Martinez Ferrada.

I personally think Quebec should relax the rules for the applicants it has accepted. You can't be in Quebec, file an application and wait 18 months for an acknowledgement of receipt. That's too long. The CSQ is valid for only 24 months, then it expires. Quebec should try at least to relax the conditions for us so we don't wind up in a difficult situation.

I assure you that, in everyday life, it's so degrading, from a human standpoint, to go through what we're experiencing now. Furthermore, when you're separated from your family, it's awful and heartbreaking, I assure you. Sometimes you think your case is worse, but, when you see the cases of others opposite you, they're just overwhelmed and dismayed. Solving the portal problem as well would really help relax requirements.

Mrs. Misha Pelletier: Thanks very much for your question, Ms. Martinez Ferrada.

In fact, it would help is a great deal if we could upload our documents without having to send them by mail. Times have changed; we're living in 2020. It's definitely easier to make the process digitally accessible for people who submit their files, whether now or in the future.

As regards the 6,000 files per month, that's what we understood. However, we'd like to see some transparency on IRCC's part. How many files are really processed...

[English]

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

We will now move to Madam Normandin.

You will have two minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you. I have a quick question for Ms. Mara and Ms. Hatem.

You're simply requesting an acknowledgement of receipt of your permanent residence application. I understand that, on the one hand, it's stressful not knowing whether your file has been received. On the other hand, however, does that also create other problems in getting health insurance or anything else?

An acknowledgement of receipt is of course a very simple thing. I'd like you to say a little more about that.

• (1745)

Ms. Roxane Hatem: It goes without saying that it's impossible to access the site to verify the status of your application online

without an acknowledgement of receipt. IRCC can't confirm whether the application is complete. Consider the example of a man who got his CSQ in July 2018 and submitted his permanent residence application in July 2019. The CSQ expired in July 2020 because it was valid for two years. If he hasn't received an acknowledgement of receipt, he doesn't know whether his file is complete. If IRCC returns his file the next day, his CSQ is no longer even valid.

We met with people from Quebec's Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration, and we told them that the CSQs should really be extended. People who wait for an acknowledgement of receipt must be assured that their CSQ will remain valid.

No one really knows what the story is with access to the Régie de l'assurance-maladie, the RAMQ, and health care. For example, some people in our group had access to the RAMQ simply via their CSQ. However, others, including me, were told we had to have a closed work visa to access the RAMQ.

It would be good if the Quebec government could announce rules respecting what we are and aren't entitled to.

Ms. Christine Normandin: To sum up, it's really quite easy to issue an acknowledgement of receipt. However, there are consequences if you don't receive one. We aren't just talking about stress here but also about rather major consequences for you.

[English]

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

We will now move to our last round of—

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Can you just answer with a yes or no?

Ms. Roxane Hatem: Yes.

Thank you, Ms. Normandin.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we will move to Ms. Kwan.

You have two minutes for your round of questioning.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I'm going to ask Ms. Guthrie to finish her last thought. She was cut off in the previous question to her.

Are we having technical difficulties, Madam Chair?

The Chair: Madam Guthrie, you are on mute. Would you unmute your mike, please.

Ms. Nicole Guthrie: I'm sorry. I'm having technical issues that we are trying to sort out.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Madam Chair, I hope that my time will be restarted.

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The Chair: Please proceed.

Ms. Nicole Guthrie: I'm sorry. What was the question?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm just trying to give you some time to finish your last thought, because you were cut off in the last question. You were talking about caregivers.

Ms. Nicole Guthrie: Yes. I'm sorry.

I was talking about the fact that there have been a number of caregivers impacted by the COVID-19 restrictions. A number of them are without status, whether they're waiting for their work permit under the interim program or under the home pilot program.

I do not know many caregivers who have received work permits under the home child care program. We were told back at the end of October or beginning of November that the program was closed.

It was interesting that a few days before we were told that, the minister said they had increased the number of immigrants that they were accepting, but a few days later, the caregiver program was closed to new applicants. This is an important program, not just for immigrants, but also for women who are working in Canada, who have to work full time.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: In 20 seconds, what would you recommend that the government do?

Ms. Nicole Guthrie: We would like the government to adopt some of the old caregiver program requirements. The language program is an issue. The work permit that is not issued.... The bridging open work permit is not a bridging open work permit when applicants have to wait a year for their work permits to be processed.

We'd like the government to put in more resources. Processing times have gone up again. Applicants have been waiting for over a year for their work permits and have not been able to work. It would be good to put more resources in and issue open work permits to long-term caregivers who have been here for years.

• (1750)

The Chair: Your time is up, Madam Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The Chair: With this, the round of questioning comes to an end.

On behalf of all committee members, I want to thank all the witnesses for appearing before the committee and providing important testimonies as we continue our study on the impact of COVID-19 on the immigration system.

I'm sorry for the technological issues. We will keep working on making sure there are no issues.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>