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Chair: Mr. Sean Casey



Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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• (1830)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 10 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of September 23, 2020. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website.

So that you are aware, the webcast will always show the person speaking, rather than the entirety of the committee. I'm going to dispense with the rest of the formalities, because all of the parliamentarians and witnesses have heard it all before.

I'm going to point out two things. Please open the mike before you speak and close it when you don't have the floor. Also, please address all comments and questions through the chair.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee will continue its study of the supplementary estimates (B).

We have with us here this evening the Honourable Ahmed Hussen, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development. From ESDC we have Lori MacDonald, senior associate deputy minister, Employment and Social Development and chief operating officer for Service Canada; Catherine Adam, senior assistant deputy minister, strategic and service policy branch; Cliff Groen, senior assistant deputy minister, benefits and integrated services branch, Service Canada; Janet Goulding, associate assistant deputy minister, income security and social development branch; and Mark Perlman, chief financial officer and senior assistant deputy minister. We have, from CMHC, Romy Bowers, senior vice-president, client solutions; and Lisa Williams, chief financial officer.

Minister Hussen, thank you for being with us. You have the floor for five minutes.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

It's a pleasure to join you and all the committee members and to stand before you again today to speak to the 2020-21 supplementary estimates (B) for Employment and Social Development Canada.

As I already spoke to the issues in the estimates during my appearance last month, I would like to focus on other important updates for the committee.

[Translation]

Since my last appearance before the committee, our government has taken major steps towards a Canada-wide early learning and childcare system.

[English]

In last week's fall economic statement, our government took a major step in laying the foundation and the groundwork for a Canada-wide early learning and child care system. First we announced a significant investment of \$420 million for provinces and territories to support the retention, attraction and training of early childhood educators.

We are also investing \$20 million over the next five years in the creation of an ELCC secretariat to build capacity and work with stakeholders to build this very new Canada-wide system.

Budget 2021 will lay out the plan to provide affordable, accessible, inclusive and high-quality child care from coast to coast to coast. This is something that's very important to parents. This will also include enhanced support for before- and after-school care for older children, in order to provide all parents with the flexibility needed to balance work and family.

• (1835)

[Translation]

The fall economic statement offers great news for families related to the Canada child benefit.

[English]

We recognize that the challenges facing parents through the COVID-19 pandemic have been very significant and that bills continue to pile up. That is why we made a commitment to increase the Canada child benefit next year by nearly 20% for middle- and low-income families with children under the age of six.

Households making less than \$120,000 per year will receive an additional \$1,200 per child, spread out over four payments in 2021. For those making over \$120,000 and who receive the CCB, they will receive half this amount. This will help 1.6 million families keep up with the increasing costs of raising children during these challenging times.

[Translation]

Allow me at this time to talk about our work towards ensuring that every Canadian has a safe and affordable home.

[English]

Our government strongly believes that all Canadians should have a safe and affordable place to call home. As communities across the country continue to deal with the impacts of COVID-19, we know that having a safe and affordable place to live is more important than ever before.

In light of that, the rapid housing initiative is the newest program under the national housing strategy that aims to address the urgent housing needs of at-risk Canadians. This program will quickly create some 3,000 new, permanent affordable housing units for Canadians who are experiencing homelessness or living in temporary situations, including in shelters, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The funds will be split between two envelopes. The major cities stream will have \$500 million going to the 15 municipalities that have the highest concentrations in numbers of Canadians experiencing homelessness. The projects stream will have another \$500 million envelope going to other municipal governments, provinces, indigenous governing bodies, organizations and not-profit organizations.

[Translation]

We will be in a position to provide more details concerning funding to these cities in the coming days. In fact, this morning, I had the pleasure of making the first announcement for funds to the City of Ottawa related to the rapid housing initiative.

[English]

In addition to the initiatives I just mentioned, we've also announced funding of more than \$400 million for communities under Reaching Home. This is Canada's anti-homelessness strategy to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, we've just announced, through the fall economic update, an additional \$299.4 million for Reaching Home for the year 2021-22. These funds will enable communities to extend and expand their emergency response and it will provide them with the flexibility to deliver more permanent housing solutions. It will also help prevent at-risk Canadians from becoming homeless in the first place by supporting targeted interventions to enable people to stay housed.

The Government of Canada will continue its work to support all Canadians, especially those who are most vulnerable, as we build a more resilient country that is safer, fairer and more inclusive for everyone.

[Translation]

I will be pleased to answer your questions.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

[English]

We're going to begin with Mr. Vis for the Conservatives for six minutes, please.

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Thank you, Minister.

In the supplementary estimates, CMHC sees close to \$361 million in total voted spending and \$512 million in total statutory spending, which is over \$870 million. From the perspective of a taxpayer, what is one area in CMHC or ESDC where you've noticed your government could do a better job with the funds allocated? Where are you falling behind?

What could be improved in your department or would you recommend no changes to the operation of Employment and Social Development Canada?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'll focus on CMHC because that was the first part of your question. I believe, and I've said this before in response to your question and others, that the processes for processing applications under the national housing co-investment fund could be sped up a little bit, and it has. The processing time has been improved by over 50%, but I believe there's still room for improvement there.

There are other processes that we can speed up, together with municipal governments and other bodies, to speed up the approvals process for affordable housing proposals that come to CMHC. That's the first one I would focus on.

● (1840)

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you. I appreciate that response.

In the response our committee received yesterday, you did state that you would look at process improvements. On the other hand, as it relates to the co-investment fund, are you doing anything to look at simplifying the actual application? Are you doing anything to make it easier for external organizations and to help them conduct and complete the applications in a more timely way?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We want that fund to be used extensively by non-profits, other organizations and governing bodies from coast to coast to coast. As I said, we've sped up the process. Kudos to CMHC for doing that. They recognize that there's still some work to do there.

There is seed money available as part of helping proponents be in a position to put together a very compelling application. That seed money has been used extensively by many organizations.

Beyond that, I'll also turn to Ms. Bowers to provide any additional comments.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you. I'll just go forward with another question. I appreciate your response.

Housing providers and contractors, including those in my riding, have highlighted that the modular construction-only requirement for new builds under the rapid housing initiative excludes local suppliers, tradesmen and contractors from involvement in those projects and revitalizing local economies. Instead, these benefits will flow to larger companies in established urban centres.

Will the restriction be lifted in a future funding round to support rural and remote livelihoods, where they might benefit more from sourcing their materials locally?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I will turn to Ms. Bowers for this aspect of the question.

Ms. Romy Bowers (Senior Vice-President, Client Solutions, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation): Thank you, Minister, and thank you very much for the question.

As the minister mentioned, there are two project streams—the major cities stream and the project stream. When we're evaluating the applications for the project stream, which is due at the end of December, we will take into consideration local factors like the ones you've mentioned.

Mr. Brad Vis: I'll ask one more question to Ms. Bowers, just quickly.

Following up from our last committee meeting, when I asked for a breakdown of the Government of Canada housing investments, I did receive that list of information totalling \$1.1 million, give or take, on families or individuals who have been helped by government programs, but the disclaimer stated that these numbers were conditionally committed. Can we get an updated table for this committee with the actual number of households that have been helped by the government or CMHC?

Ms. Romy Bowers: We'll provide that clarification. Thank you.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you.

I'll come back to you, Minister Hussen, on the first-time home-buyer incentive.

CMHC was expecting 20,000 borrowers in the first six months of the original program, yet only a quarter of those estimates have actually been approved for funding in the first seven months. This failure has proven that a shared equity mortgage is not what prospective homebuyers want. I understand in the recent economic statement that your government doubled down on the program.

Do you expect the amended incentive to perform better in Toronto, Vancouver and Victoria? What metrics will you be using to determine the success of this program or whether it should be cancelled?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Our government introduced Canada's first-ever national housing strategy, and the first-time homebuyer incentive is an aspect of that. This will help middle-class families achieve the dream of home ownership by lowering monthly mortgage payments without increasing down payments. The fall economic statement, as you say—

Mr. Brad Vis: I understand the parameters, but what metrics are you going to use for success in the three new categories for Victoria, Toronto and Vancouver?

• (1845)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, I think the honourable member can appreciate that this is something we've announced that we intend to work on, and obviously we will talk to all concerned to make sure that we get it right and that we expand the eligibility. We want to make sure that this program works for these three areas, and the way to do that is to work hard to expand eligibility and get to the point where we have more folks from those parts of Canada who use it. That work is ongoing, and I can't prejudge the incentives that we'll put in there to make sure that there are more folks who will use it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vis. You're well past time.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Next we go to Mr. Turnbull, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thanks, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the minister for being here tonight. It's great to see you, as always, and I really appreciate you and your team, and your leadership during this pandemic.

As you know, Minister, I'm extremely passionate about social innovation and social finance. You are also well aware that Canada is blessed with a very strong charitable and non-profit sector that is becoming more and more entrepreneurial. Earned revenue streams have been predicted, for quite some time, to continue to grow within the charitable sector. We also have many social entrepreneurs and co-operatives across Canada, estimated at about 30,000 plus, the last I checked.

Minister, can you tell us about how our government is moving forward on the social innovation and social finance strategy for Canada? In particular, how does this work take on new significance and relevance in the context of COVID-19 and the impending economic recovery?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'd like to recognize the work that the member has conducted with respect to really highlighting the importance of supporting the social innovation and social finance sector. Our government understands that for us as a country to solve the often complex challenges faced by communities, we have to look beyond traditional approaches. That is why we will be creating a social finance fund, so that we can find new ways of helping Canada's most vulnerable people while continuing to focus on strengthening the middle class.

This fund will give charitable, non-profit and social purpose organizations access to new financing to implement their innovative ideas, and by investing \$755 million in a social finance fund, we'll also help generate up to \$2 billion in economic activity and help create and maintain as many as 100,000 jobs over the next decade. So far, with the investment readiness program, we've seen the over-subscription of that program. We've seen how critical it has been to build the capacity in social purpose organizations. COVID has actually highlighted the need for more investments in the space as a way for us to not only recover better but to recover stronger.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Minister.

I have just a quick wrap-up question on this before I move to another topic.

In your view, then, does the work on social innovation and social finance really help us solve systemic problems, support the non-profit sector and create a more inclusive and resilient economy at the same time?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, it does. When you look at everything from creating jobs to solving the housing crisis in many parts of Canada to tackling poverty and all the various kinds of challenging and complex social problems we face, the social purpose organizations and the social finance approach really do offer an alternative, and in fact sometimes a more sustainable funding stream for organizations to do amazing work.

I always point to a small social purpose organization in London, Ontario, as an example. It uses a business approach to generating profits to build affordable housing units for homeless youth, while also hiring them in the local business. It's like a very interesting virtuous circle, and they have managed to leverage it to attract more investments, not just from the community but also from the Government of Canada through the national housing strategy.

• (1850)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Minister.

I want to talk now about the early learning and child care investments, which are extremely important.

I was paying attention to the fall economic statement and was very pleased to hear the Minister of Finance talk about some substantial investments in a Canada-wide system. I've heard from many constituents just how important it is to have a more equitable economic recovery.

Can you speak to the specific investments in training and retention within the early child care educators space? Tell us why they are so important.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: First of all, I appreciate your bringing up this topic. For many parents in Canada, especially women who are not in the workforce because of the lack of affordable and high-quality child care, this is a necessity, and they need action on this now.

It's difficult to speak about setting up a truly national system of affordable, inclusive and high-quality child care and increasing the affordable spaces without seriously engaging in a workforce development strategy. This means we have to make necessary investments, together with the provinces and territories, to not only retain

the existing early childhood educators but actually increase their numbers. We have to provide supports for training and provide tuition supports, bursaries, wage top-ups—whatever it takes—to make sure that this is a sector that is supported. This is because, without them, it will be difficult to increase the affordable spaces and it will be difficult to deliver high-quality child care.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Turnbull, and thank you, Minister.

[Translation]

Ms. Chabot, you have six minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good evening.

Mr. Minister, thank you once again for being here and being available, we're grateful to you.

My first question will be about this announcement of which you seem so proud, the one about daycare services, childcare services.

I am a member from Quebec and I myself took part in setting up a vast early learning network in Quebec over 25 years ago. We also have reduced-contribution daycare services. You point out the great advantage this will carry for women, the economy and work-life balance. These are precisely the objectives we are pursuing. I remind you that we are unique.

You're also announcing a federal secretariat that will oversee this and would therefore receive a budget. In the past, you have always had bilateral agreements with the provinces, but now you will have a secretariat. As you know, the secretariat will not serve our needs at all in Quebec. Do you have any agreements or have you discussed this with the provinces so that Quebec can get its share of the money allocated to the secretariat?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you.

Quebecers have every reason to be proud of their daycare system. It's an innovative model.

We want to export the Quebec model, but we don't want to tell Quebec how to manage it.

[English]

What we are doing with the federal secretariat is making sure that we have coordination of ELCC policy across the Government of Canada, engagement with stakeholders in this space and engagement to produce high-quality research and data analysis and to share best practices. As I said, Quebec offers a very innovative model, and Quebecers have every reason to be very proud of the system of early learning and child care. In many ways, this national system that we intend to set up will have many elements from the Quebec system.

• (1855)

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: You don't need to answer right away, but my question was, since the secretariat will not serve Quebec, would Quebec would get its fair share of the funds that will go to the secretariat. You can answer it later if you wish, but I will need an answer.

Mr. Minister, I'm addressing my second question to you because you are the minister responsible for Service Canada.

You say you're concerned about families, and I'm sure you are. However, for several weeks now I have been raising the major issue that some people are facing. They are applying for employment insurance benefits, and somewhere along the way, they have received maternity or Quebec parental insurance plan benefits. But their files are now completely blocked, and your Service Canada agents—I applaud them—are telling them to call their members of Parliament, and that their files are blocked because the agents have no clear instructions on how to process them.

Are you aware of this problem? Are you discussing this with your colleague responsible for these programs, Minister Qualtrough, to resolve the issue for these individuals?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you for your question.

[English]

The specific issue that you raise is obviously something that is more in the portfolio of Minister Qualtrough. I can speak with regard to Service Canada. We have reactivated 100% of the Service Canada centres in Quebec, and we're very much engaged to make sure that Canadians are able to access the services they need and to continue to make sure that Service Canada is there to help them.

In terms of your earlier question with respect to fair share for Quebec, of course we will have bilateral agreements, including with the \$420 million that was stated in the fall economic statement for workforce development. Quebec will obviously be.... We will be having discussions with the Province of Quebec with the intention of making sure that we work with Quebec to address its priorities when it comes to the training, retention and expansion of early childhood educators in Quebec. With regard to that federal investment of \$420 million, we will obviously work with Quebec to make sure that we address any priorities that Quebec has with respect to early childhood educators.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[Translation]

Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Next is Ms. Gazan, please, for six minutes.

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

It's nice to see you again, Minister, and thank you to the rest of the witnesses for being here.

My first question is a very simple yes or no question.

Minister, do you recognize the right to housing as a human right, yes or no?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Of course.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I say that because you often refer to people as vulnerable people when we're referring to people that are unsheltered. I would argue that these are people who are having their human rights violated.

The government recently announced funding for rapid housing and Reaching Home primarily targeted toward indigenous housing projects and women. You're well aware that 70% of the unsheltered community in Winnipeg is indigenous. Although the \$12.5 million was greatly appreciated and very welcome, it was grossly inadequate to meet the needs of people who are literally losing their lives in my backyard.

As you know, Manitoba is in a real crisis. We're currently having outbreaks in our shelters. We're running out of space in isolation facilities set up to house unsheltered individuals who've contracted COVID. This wouldn't be a crisis in the first place if there hadn't been years of underinvestment in affordable accessible housing in our city, which is resulting in people losing their lives.

We're in a dire situation. It's now winter and we need greater investment in housing. When is this going to happen?

• (1900)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I, of course, understand the urgency of the situation. I understand the great need, especially exacerbated by COVID. The fact of the matter is that we have—from the very beginning, prior to COVID and during COVID—invested heavily in affordable housing in Reaching Home, and now with the new rapid housing initiative. Throughout all of those elements, the Province of Manitoba and the City of Winnipeg have been recipients of those federal dollars. In fact, Mayor Bowman was very much appreciative of Winnipeg's share of the rapid housing initiative.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Yes, and again, Minister—

The Chair: Ms. Gazan, you took a minute and a half to ask the question. He should be allowed a minute and a half to answer it.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mayor Bowman expressed publicly that federal dollars were critical to enabling Winnipeg to rapidly deliver affordable housing for those in most need in Winnipeg. Is the challenge completely solved? Absolutely not, and I'll be the first to acknowledge that.

At the same time, we have dramatically increased federal investments in Reaching Home. This new rapid housing initiative is making a difference in Manitoba and Winnipeg, and national strategy housing dollars continue to flow.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Minister, I appreciate the funding allocation, but it is grossly inadequate to meet the needs of our community at the present time, which is resulting in the loss of life.

I'm really asking you—and you didn't answer my question, Minister, with all due respect, and I do respect your work—when are we going to get more money so that we stop losing lives in my community?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: There has been \$670 million, through the national housing strategy, invested in Manitoba since we came into office. We've helped over 46,500 people in Manitoba

Ms. Leah Gazan: I'm going to move on to the next question.

The answer is that we're not getting any more money.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I didn't say that. You're putting words in my mouth.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I asked you when, and you're giving me a reiteration of funding that's already been spent, which I've indicated is totally inadequate. When will we be getting more money, so that people don't continue to die in my community?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We've demonstrated that we have sought additional dollars to respond to the acute needs. If you look at Reaching Home, the dollars that are flowing are additional dollars, beyond the base amounts, and rapid housing is completely new. That is a billion dollars that was not part of the national housing strategy before. Those are additional dollars on top of the regular housing streams.

I'm not suggesting that the problem is completely solved, but we'll continue to work together with provincial and municipal leaders in Manitoba to make sure we continue to address the problem.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Minister, knowing that the situation is dire, I have to say, and again, I do respect you very much, that I'm still not getting a clear answer about getting funding in our communities, something that's not just based in Winnipeg Centre but other communities around the country, including East Vancouver, where there has been an outcry in the need for support for women. In fact, this week a woman had a baby in a toilet stall. We know the situation is dire.

I wonder whether there are any plans and when more money will be released to deal with these life-and-death matters at this time.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I completely agree with the honourable member. The need is acute, the need is here and the need is now. However, it is also fair to say that we have responded, and we have responded in a very robust manner.

We've listened to municipal leaders. We've listened to advocates in the homelessness sector, people such as Tim Richter from the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness. All of them have indicated clearly, across the political spectrum, that a rapid housing initiative is a very timely response to COVID-19 and its impact of displacing people into the streets. We have provided additional dollars three times to the Reaching Home program, and we've announced additional increases to that program for next year, giving certainty—

• (1905)

Ms. Leah Gazan: Minister, again, it's not enough.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Next is Mr. Schmale, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Minister, thank you for attending. It's great to see you again.

When will you take action on the seven recommendations in the HUMA report entitled "Supporting Families After the Loss of a Child"? As you know, these recommendations are a path forward for ensuring grieving parents do not have to endure further hardship or suffer any undue financial or emotional distress as a result of government programming.

To date, there have been no concrete steps taken to implement those recommendations, and it has been nearly two years since the report was tabled. Can you explain why the report has not been moved forward?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, the honourable member raises a really important issue. There is no more difficult loss than that of losing a child, and of course, our government recognizes that compassion and understanding at the onset is key to ensuring that families get the support they need during this really difficult time.

The EI sickness benefit is available to help eligible parents take up to 15 weeks off work to support them through the grieving process. We've also modernized the Canada Labour Code to make sure that federally regulated private sector employers offer grieving employees the time off they need to deal with their loss.

We'll always be there for Canadian families.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Minister, with respect to the child care benefit top-up included in the fall economic statement, if the bill doesn't come to pass by winter recess in the House, what will happen to the top-up?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Everything we've proposed in the fall economic statement, including the top-up to the Canada child benefit, is subject to the support we can obtain as a government from parliamentarians.

Of course, my hope and desire is that parliamentarians of all stripes will support this measure and will support our proposal to provide more supports to families with children under the age of six. The short answer is that we hope to get support for these measures.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: If support for the overall package isn't available, would you consider supporting a separate vote on the child care benefits, basically carving it from the rest of the bill in order to ensure that parents receive this benefit?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Then we would have to engage in a very lengthy process of what you are willing to support, or your party is willing to support, in the fall economic statement and what you're not willing to support. In this appearance, I don't think that is something I'm really able to engage in.

What I can tell you is that the families need that support now and I would hope that all parliamentarians, including your political party, support our measures to support families with children.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Speaking of the supports now, let's talk about child care, something you mentioned before with the child care secretariat.

Can you tell us how the new secretariat will be structured, how many public servants will be allocated to this secretariat and what department they would report to?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: They would be housed in ESDC, but I'll turn to the ESDC officials to answer the question, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Catherine Adam (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic and Service Policy Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

To answer the honourable member's question, it's still very early days in the announcement. As the minister has said, it's envisioned that the secretariat would be housed at ESDC. We're still working through its structure. The intent is to make sure that we have people in place who are able to work with provinces and territories to be able to learn, particularly from the model in Quebec; to be able to disseminate research and information on child care to child care providers as well as to ministries in provinces and territories; and to begin to do the legwork with our stakeholders and with provinces and territories around the Canada-wide system.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: That's excellent. Thank you.

Minister, you mentioned high-quality child care a few times in your report. What determines quality?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Quality is determined by, obviously, the environment in which the children receive early learning and child care. I really want to emphasize the early learning part. It's not just child care. It's also early learning. It is also determined by the highly trained early childhood educators who are available to deliver the high-quality programming for these children.

• (1910)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: If you're talking quality—

The Chair: Mr. Schmale, you're out of time. Thank you.

Thank you, Minister.

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

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Good evening, Minister. I want to thank you for taking time tonight, and I want to also thank you for the great work that you and your department are doing for all Canadians.

Minister, one of the biggest challenges and frustrations I've faced as a member of Parliament in my riding of Saint John—Rothesay is the fact that 1,500 people are on a wait-list for affordable housing. That number continues to grow year after year. To me, that's not acceptable because housing is a human right. That's why I've been advocating for unprecedented federal investments in affordable housing since I was first elected on HUMA in 2015. This advocacy and the work I've been able to do with you and my other colleagues

here tonight has paid off in spades with the introduction of our national housing strategy.

I've consistently heard positive feedback about the investments we've been making in affordable housing, in collaboration with the provinces and territories, from affordable housing proponents in my riding. Both they and I are eagerly awaiting an agreement from the Government of New Brunswick to implement our groundbreaking Canada housing benefit in our province.

Minister, there's still a lot of work for us to do. We need more direct federal investment in affordable housing and that's where the co-investment fund and now the rapid housing initiative come in. Since the announcement of the rapid housing initiative I've been working closely with Develop Saint John and proponents to help get the applications in. We're extremely excited about it. I've heard much positive feedback from them so far on the program.

Minister, I know we've had some issues with the barriers to applying for the co-investment fund in the past, so I'm wondering what you've seen in terms of demand for the rapid housing initiative across the country.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I want to highlight the important point that the honourable member raises with respect to the Canada housing benefit. This is a game-changer because it is a portable support for rental payments for people with severe housing needs. It is not tied to a building or an apartment. It will do a lot to deal with all the folks who are on housing wait-lists.

In terms of the rapid housing initiative, I'm equally very excited for the second envelope, which will help non-profit organizations, provinces, municipalities, indigenous governing bodies and groups to apply. We aim to disburse that money through CMHC very rapidly, so it's not just that the housing will be built or provided rapidly, but we also expect those dollars to flow as quickly as possible and be committed before the end of this fiscal year, March 31, 2021.

It is proceeding well. We hope to get as many projects as possible from all corners of the country, including in the north. I believe the rapid housing initiative is a great example of the federal response to the feedback that we've gotten from many folks on the ground, who were saying that we needed to deliver housing solutions that provided supports to those who have been displaced by COVID and to those whom we have helped through Reaching Home dollars, to provide temporary shelter and then move them to permanent housing solutions through the rapid housing initiative, in addition to the other streams in the national housing strategy.

Mr. Wayne Long: Minister, I'm going to jump in.

With respect to the two initiatives, the direct federal initiatives, the co-investment and now the rapid housing, can you elaborate a little more on how you see both these programs fitting within the overall national housing strategy?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: As I said, rapid housing will target folks who are experiencing homelessness or who have obtained temporary shelter as a result of COVID-19 but who don't have a permanent home. That's the priority population, obviously. We are inviting, as I said, non-profits and others to apply for the second envelope before December 31, 2020.

The co-investment fund is a fantastic program. Again, we partner with provinces, municipal governments and non-profit organizations to build deeply affordable housing.

It would be remiss of me not to also mention the rental construction financing initiative. That program, as noted in the full economic statement, is going to get, through additional supports, another \$12 billion in financing. This is a program that allows for the construction of further rental units across the country in places where there's a lot of pressure on the rental market. Putting more rental units on the market reduces the pressure on the rental rate as well as building up mixed housing and contributing to accessibility and energy efficiency.

• (1915)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Long.

[Translation]

I now give the floor to Ms. Chabot for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Minister, earlier I asked a very specific question about employment insurance claims. You know that new measures have been made more flexible. However, some files are currently blocked by Service Canada because somewhere along the way, the claimant has received maternity or Quebec parental insurance plan (QPIP) benefits.

I will ask the officials about this later. You have yet to answer the question, but at least you did say, or it's what I heard, at any rate, that all Service Canada locations will be reopened. This is not what we have been seeing.

With all due respect—and I had asked the question on November 4—not all Service Canada locations have reopened, although a great many of them have. However, I want to let you know that the scheduled outreach sites are still closed.

I could tell you about the struggle, if I may use that word, or about people coming together in one of our constituencies, Rimouski—Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, in the beautiful Bas-Saint-Laurent region. Some people are trying to get a scheduled outreach site reopened there. They need it, and these sites are often in rural areas, where Internet service is not available everywhere. In addition, they have to travel many kilometres to get to a Service Canada location.

I understand that these locations have not reopened across Canada. Is reopening them a priority for you?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, our government is committed to ensuring that Canadians have access to the Service Canada services they need, and we have already reopened over 300 Service Canada centres across the country, including all locations in Quebec.

We are currently gradually and safely reopening Service Canada centres across the country.

[English]

Mr. Wayne Long: Mr. Chair, on a point of order, I think the minister might have his interpretation overlapping. I'm getting both voices very loudly.

The Chair: Minister, could you check to see whether you have your interpretation on English, French or floor?

[Translation]

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We are currently gradually and safely reopening Service Canada centres across the country. We base our decisions to reopen on public health recommendations, and we also want to ensure that as many Canadians as possible have access to a Service Canada centre.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Ms. Gazan, you have two and a half minutes, please

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, you indicated to me that you agree that the right to housing is a human right. I'm sure you saw today the bulldozing of an encampment of the unsheltered community in Montreal, where people lost everything. You indicate that you agree this is a human right.

Why isn't that reflected in your government's laws, policies and operational practices, and for that matter, in the kind of funding you provide to ensure that human right?

• (1920)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, I really want to address this point that the honourable member keeps repeating about funding. It's really interesting. When the New Democratic Party put its ambitious housing plan to Canadians, they didn't have any ambition, with respect, nothing close to the national housing strategy. They put forward a plan to invest \$65 million in housing, which is so seriously out of line with the realities on the ground.

I'm not saying that the problems have been solved, but I want the honourable member to acknowledge not only the federal leadership but also the significant resources that our government has brought to the table. The fact of the matter is that municipal leaders and many others have recognized that the federal government is not only back in the housing game, but is making a serious difference on the ground.

I was in Ottawa today making an announcement regarding the rapid housing initiative in Ottawa. There will be a number of units and three different projects, so the work continues, but to suggest that somehow we lack ambition is, I think, unfair. It is completely hypocritical for the NDP to suggest that.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Minister, with all due respect, human rights should not be a partisan issue. You've heard me say that before.

I say that because I have people who are perishing in my community. We saw what happened in Montreal. We see what's happening in East Vancouver. I don't think it's appropriate at this time, particularly in the time of COVID, to discuss that rather than discuss what is needed to ensure people are housed.

Is your government going to put more money forward to ensure that people are housed going forward so that, should we see ourselves in a pandemic again, people will not perish because their human rights are being violated?

The Chair: Give a short answer, if you can, Minister.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, I will give a short answer.

Look, we've spent \$193.5 million for 3,127 homes in Vancouver east, so we are there. We will be there, and we'll continue to be ambitious with respect to meeting the needs across the country for affordable housing.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Next is Ms. Falk, please, for five minutes.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm passing the floor to MP Schmale.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you very much, Mrs. Falk.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I want to continue on the theme where we left off. When you're talking about quality, and you're basically saying, or at least Minister Freeland said in the outline of the fiscal update, that Quebec was going to be the model that the federal government was going to use. If quality is determined by the government and a government child care model is imposed across the country, shouldn't

parents have the opportunity to choose what they think is quality, whatever that option is?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I want to thank the honourable member for really giving me an opportunity to express our government's position on this.

Quebec is a model but so are other like-minded OECD countries that have moved forward on this.

Speaking of choice, it is the Conservative vision that removes choice from women. When you deny people access to affordable and high-quality child care, what happens is that mainly female parents are not able to access the workforce, so by providing affordable child care—

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Okay, you lost me there.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Let me finish.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: You've gone off the rails here.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: You asked me a question. I have to finish.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I completely disagree with what you just said.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: You can disagree with me, but I have to finish my answer.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: How is ensuring more money in parents' pockets and competition in the marketplace with maximum flexibility in choice reducing the ability for parents to choose their course of action?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Parents are facing as high as \$2,000 a month for child care. The Conservative vision does nothing to address that challenge of affordability, while doing nothing—

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Neither does yours. Yours is five years out, plus.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We have a philosophical difference of opinion, which is that you believe that not providing affordable child care spaces and investing in early childhood—

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Just because the government isn't providing it doesn't mean it isn't going to be there. Parents have the ability to choose.

You and your government actually enhanced the child care benefit, so it's not as if you said, well, this is just crazy. You actually invested in that—

• (1925)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: What we did was we stopped sending cheques to millionaires. That's what we did. You were sending cheques to millionaires.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: You did the same with the CERB and the seniors' benefit, so way to go.

Why don't we focus on how we're going to maximize the ability for parents to choose what is best for them?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We are not creating a national system that is mandatory for parents. Parents do have a choice to do what they want with respect to their situation, but what we're offering is actually what you're talking about, the choice. It is your lack of vision that is not offering them the choice of affordable and high-quality child care. That is the issue. The issue is they're facing a monthly bill of \$2,000.

Under our plan, we will make child care affordable, and every single country—

Mr. Jamie Schmale: How? I'm curious.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'll answer that. By investing in the creation of affordable child care spaces and investing in the workforce. Every single country that has done this has benefited immensely and has closed the gender gap between men and women in the labour market.

You talk about choice. That's the choice we're offering parents, not sending cheques to millionaires, which is what the Harper Conservatives did when they were in office.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: How are you going to ensure there's choice in the marketplace if the government is dictating what "quality" is?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We're not dictating anything. What we're doing is being led by the evidence to create high-quality, affordable child care. Parents are not mandated to use it, but I can tell you, many parents are waiting for our government to finally move on this.

The last time we were close to doing this, you joined the New Democratic Party to sink our plan to build a national system of affordable, quality child care. I hope you don't do that again this time.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Are you saying that the majority Parliaments in 1993, 1995, 1997, 2000, and a minority in 2004, with the NDP foaming at the mouth for a national day care program, wasn't enough time?

Now we have five years for a new secretariat—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We aren't sending cheques to millionaires; I can tell you that.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Is that your excuse? Why don't we start enhancing the benefit?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: You sent cheques to millionaires so I don't think you can lecture anybody about choice and about helping parents. You sent child care benefit cheques—

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Regardless, people had the choice.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: —to millionaires, and we stopped doing that.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Parents had the choice—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'm so proud of the fact that we stopped doing that.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: —but you're not giving choice—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We're not mandating anything.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: The government is determining what is choice. The vast majority of kids in Canada do not go to government care. They use a parent, grandparent, relative or a neighbourhood service. How are you going to make people pay for it? Then,

only if they're rich enough, they go outside the system if they want something different.

The Chair: Mr. Schmale, we're past time.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: By closing the—

The Chair: Minister, go ahead and give your answer. Mr. Schmale, please don't interrupt him.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: By closing the gender gap and making sure that more women are able to go into the workforce, we will not only increase our GDP, but we will actually have more government revenues at the provincial, territorial and federal level.

Secondly, we will benefit from kids who have a better start in life. That's the choice we're offering parents. It's not mandatory. It's much better than sending cheques to millionaires, which is what you did when you were in government.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mr. Schmale.

The last round of questions will come from Ms. Young. You have five minutes, please.

Ms. Kate Young (London West, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to say that the honourable colleague across the aisle forgets to realize that a national child care program would put \$100 billion into the economy. That's according to the Ontario Chamber of Commerce. That's something I wanted to leave with the member.

Minister Hussen, thank you so much for joining us again tonight. As you know, I represent the riding of London West, and London is one of the 15 major cities that can access the rapid housing initiative of \$500 million. We're very happy about that. London has been very hard hit by poverty and homelessness for a variety of reasons, and we know that in order to tackle this problem we need a number of different initiatives. We're working closely with the City of London in an effort to solve this problem, both in the short and the long term.

As of 2016, the number of renters in severe housing need in London was over 7,000, and through this rapid housing initiative, London is to receive \$7.5 million. I'd like to talk to you about the number of units that this would potentially build and how we are arriving at that number, and if that number can increase, depending on each city that is earmarked for this money.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: What the honourable member refers to is the importance of investing rapid housing initiative dollars in places like London, which are facing housing shortages and challenges with respect to homelessness.

London is a major regional hub for a lot of transient folks who come from northern Ontario, as well as from Windsor. We're proud of the fact that we have worked with Mayor Ed Holder, a former Conservative member of Parliament, who is very supportive of the rapid housing initiative because he feels that this is a rapid housing solution to London's homelessness challenge. It will translate to roughly.... To get a picture of what number of units would be produced by that, if it's a 100% federal contribution, that's about \$300,000 per unit. Now, if the proponents in London also bring additional dollars, land or other incentives to the table, we could produce even more units in London.

Secondly, the municipality and the non-profits of London, Ontario, can also take advantage of the second envelope within the rapid housing initiative—another \$500 million—for any projects that exceed the allocation for London in the first envelope of the municipal stream.

● (1930)

Ms. Kate Young: I wanted to thank you for mentioning the Youth Opportunities Unlimited in London—YOU. They are a great model that you highlighted.

Do you see that as something that could be replicated in other communities across the country?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Absolutely. In fact, I see it frequently, after engaging with the social finance and social purpose sector right across the country, both in urban and rural parts of Canada. I see how incredible they are in terms of tackling local challenges with respect to local community concerns.

The London Ontario Youth Opportunities Unlimited is an example I use frequently to demonstrate an organization that is using a business approach to create sustainable lines of funding to solve a real community challenge, which is a prevalence of homelessness among London and area youth.

They have done that. They have successfully built an affordable housing unit next to their coffee shop. They have accessed national housing strategy dollars to build two additional buildings that are doing more than just providing housing. They are actually training cooks and providing child care, as well as creating a job bank at the first level of those buildings.

It's a great example. I have seen, in fact, many other organizations do the exact same thing across Canada.

Ms. Kate Young: Thank you very much, Minister Hussen.

I hope you will be able to come to London when we open that next phase of YOU.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I look forward to that. Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Young.

Minister, thank you very much for making yourself available and for dealing with the many questions over the last hour. We're going to continue on now with officials.

Minister, as they say, you are welcome to stay, but you're free to leave. We appreciate your being with us.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate all the committee members' questions.

The Chair: Colleagues, I don't think we're going to need to suspend because all of the witnesses we need for the next hour are here and ready to go. We have excused the minister, so I think we can start right in with questions.

Is there any problem with that approach, Mr. Clerk?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Andrew Wilson): That is no problem whatsoever, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We're going to begin with the Conservatives, for six minutes.

Mr. Schmale, please go ahead.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you again, Chair, and thank you to our witnesses.

I want to continue on with the child care aspect.

Can the officials explain more about the leadership structure under this new secretariat? Specifically, what will it look like? Who will be on the panel, if there is one? How will you examine the various options that are in the marketplace, including the host of parental choice that could be available, while ensuring that those voices that are asking for non-government methods are heard?

● (1935)

Ms. Catherine Adam: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

It's a big question the honourable member has asked around the structure of the secretariat. I just wish that we could give you some broad strokes really of the secretariat. It is very early days.

The issues that you've outlined are important. These are issues such as making sure that a secretariat is created that is able to engage with stakeholders, to hear from parents, to hear from the provinces and territories and to work directly with them to make sure that we are taking on board all of the views that there are. However, it is very early days so I am sorry that I wouldn't be able to provide you with an organizational structure in terms of size, scope, who is leading, how it's led, what the level would be. Quite frankly, I am looking forward to being able to work with people to have that opportunity, but unfortunately at this stage it is still too early.

Your point about listening to voices and engaging is an important one. It was what was done in the development of the multilateral framework in 2017. We continue to do this and engage regularly with provinces and territories. There's an expert panel that advises us and the minister in particular on data reporting. This would be the work that we would want to continue to do.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: How do you think the secretariat would differ from what the department does already?

Ms. Catherine Adam: I think there's a lot more that needs to be done and can be done. We certainly have seen that over the last few years, most recently in the impacts of the pandemic on women's labour market participation, but even just what we're seeing in terms of some of the fractures and some of the gaps that provinces experienced when child care centres were looking at having to close because they weren't sure about how to handle personal protective equipment and how to make sure that centres were safe during the pandemic for children.

We've realized that there are some gaps in the system. We've realized that there are some needs that we need to look at to see how we can best be responsive to them, not just from the federal government but to help support provinces and territories in uncovering best practices and sharing them.

It is really a bigger project and a bigger scope than what we have seen. It is much more than what we currently have in place to be able to engage with all Canadians, with all stakeholder groups, and to be able to work effectively with provinces and territories on this new vision.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I know it's early days based on the answer to my first question, which was more to get a sense of where you were and where the department was in the planning. Do you see that the provinces will continue potentially to have the lead in the child care debate?

Ms. Catherine Adam: I'm not a constitutional expert but I do know that in terms of what we have with the multilateral framework and the bilateral agreements currently in place with provinces and territories, we work with them hand in hand as they establish what their priorities are and what they see needed in their communities. We work to make sure that we are supporting, through federal dollars, shared goals and objectives.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Based on what the minister said and based on what you're telling me, how do you foresee a system being set up that will allow maximum flexibility and choice if the federal government is leading the charge on this?

Ms. Catherine Adam: I think we currently have that with all due respect, Mr. Chair, and to the honourable member.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: We do now, yes.

Ms. Catherine Adam: We have a very strong multilateral framework that all the provinces except Quebec signed on to. Quebec agreed to the principles within it and has an asymmetrical agreement. This has been very much already, since 2017, work that's been done jointly with provinces and territories. I don't see that changing at all. It's really just continuing that work going forward with the vision the minister articulated here tonight.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Interesting.

Do you think the vision includes the fact that children have to go to day care to experience and receive early child learning?

Ms. Catherine Adam: I think the minister answered the question when he said that a choice is there. No one is compelling, and certainly that would not be what we have done with the federal investments since 2017. The focus has been on ensuring there is inclusive child care. I will use Saskatchewan as an example. It very early on wanted to move to make sure that children with hearing

disabilities had accessible and inclusive child care and to make sure that early childhood educators were able to respond to the needs of children with different abilities.

There is still the element of choice. All parties involved in this, all the provinces, territories and stakeholders, are looking for ways to make the child care system that is there affordable, accessible for families and of high quality, and that includes issues of inclusivity so that children who are in care have a safe, secure space that supports their learning and achievement. That's not to say that there aren't other models. The minister spoke about OECD nations. However, what we have in the multilateral framework and the bilateral agreements is focused on the regulated child care sector.

● (1940)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Now obviously—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Dong, please, you have six minutes.

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thanks to all presenters for being here tonight.

First of all, I want to ask about Service Canada. We all know that COVID-19 has created some real difficulties in our public service and at Service Canada and their operations this year. We know that millions of Canadians rely on the important work and services they provide.

What are some of the ways Service Canada has adjusted its operations this year to meet the unique circumstances and challenges posed by COVID-19?

Ms. Lori MacDonald (Senior Associate Deputy Minister, Employment and Social Development and Chief Operating Officer for Service Canada, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you very much for the question. I'd like to spend a few moments just talking about what we've done over the past 10 months in terms of serving Canadians.

Earlier, we heard a question with respect to the opening up of Service Canada centres. Just for context, we have 317 Service Canada centres across the country. To date, we have 302 that have reopened again. The last 15 are very small offices that have unique challenges with respect to safety and security, but we do have plans in place to open them up early in the new year.

In addition, though—and this references the earlier question with respect to outreach services—we've not been able to return to our typical outreach services where we would send staff in person to do “in-reach” to certain areas, but what we have done is that we've created two new models to reach all Canadians across the country.

The first model is what we call e-service, whereby people who don't have an office near them are able to fill out a form and connect with us online. We return a call to them within 48 hours. We've seen significant uptake in that, and we've actually processed multi-thousands of applications as a result of this new e-service. That has actually taken the place of the formal visits we would have done in outreach previously.

The second process we've put in place is a new outreach call centre that allows people to call into us on a very special number, and this is supporting particularly our rural and northern areas, where people don't have access to Service Canada centres. We've seen significant uptake in that area as well. In fact, we've increased our capacity to deliver services in those areas by 50% pre-COVID. An example would be that last year, when we did outreach services in person, we processed about 11,000 service requests. This year so far, during COVID, we've processed over 20,000 services.

We have put those two new services in place.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you.

What about our resumption of in-person service?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: We have, as I indicated, opened up 302 of the 317. They are all open and providing services each day. The only times that we're closing now is if we actually have an incident of a COVID case in our offices and we're required to clean. We use a cleaning service, and we open back up again. Those are available across the country. In fact, we have 93% of the Canadian population able to access a Service Canada centre within 50 kilometres of their residence.

Mr. Han Dong: What about regions or cities such as Toronto, where they're facing a lockdown, and areas like that?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: What we're doing at this time is continuing to be open, but we're following public health guidelines. We have not yet had to close as a result of that; however, we do have a process in place if that were to happen. What we will do is immediately go to appointments being set up so that we don't create line-ups outside our Service Canada centres.

We don't want to be contributing to any of the close contacts, but at the same time, we want to continue to offer services, so we actually have a process in place—contingency planning—in order to continue to provide services.

• (1945)

Mr. Han Dong: That's great. Thank you.

I want to ask about CMHC. We learned from the fall economic statement that the government is providing new resources to enable the rental construction financing initiative to provide an additional \$12 billion in new lending over seven years. How do you plan to roll out these additional funds in the coming years?

Ms. Romy Bowers: Thank you very much for that question. In response, I will say that the RCFI program that we launched almost four years ago has been a very great success.

We have a great team that works with housing providers across Canada to make sure that the applications are processed in a very timely and efficient way. From our perspective, we have been granted \$2 billion in additional funding, and we have the capacity to deliver on that, based on the firm foundation that we have established in terms of delivery capabilities.

Mr. Han Dong: How would that help big cities such as Toronto and ridings like mine, Don Valley North?

Ms. Romy Bowers: The principal way is by creating supply. When you look at the 10 years prior to the launch of the rental con-

struction financing initiative, you see very few new units and purpose-built rental being created.

Since the launch of the program, we have seen, especially in the large cities, very significant take-up by developers but also by non-profit associations. We feel that by creating additional supply in supply-constrained markets, we create additional housing choice for middle-class Canadians and additional supply puts the pressure on house prices as well.

All in all, we think it is very positive.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bowers.

Thank you, Mr. Dong. That's it; that's all.

[Translation]

Ms. Chabot, you have six minutes, please.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

I'm going to ask short questions.

I would like to come back to Service Canada. I also asked this question in the last round.

First, I thank you for being here for two hours.

I'd like to clarify that when asking my questions, I'm asking about Service Canada's scheduled outreach sites.

Are you able to confirm for me that these sites have not reopened? As they have not reopened, do you intend to reopen them and, if so, when?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Thank you for your question.

[English]

The outreach sources are not open at this time. What we've done is create an alternative service delivery. There are two components. One is our e-service, whereby clients can email us—we have a specific address—and fill out a form, and we call them back within 48 hours. The second service is our outreach support centre, whereby we have connected, particularly in our rural and northern areas, with a number of third party sources to assist us to reach clients.

Both of those services are provided in areas where we previously had staff who would do the mobile services. We intend to reopen them as soon as possible, as soon as our staff are able to travel, and [Technical difficulty—Editor] services will continue, as well as the alternative service delivery model that we put in place.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I believe they may possibly reopen.

Thank you for your clear answer, they have not reopened. You replied that you intend to reopen them, but it will be when the staff can travel.

I believe that staff can already travel. I will add that you can decide to maintain electronic services, but they do not meet needs at all. You know the problem very well, we regularly bring it up in the House. There are Internet network problems and, even when they do not face those problems, Quebecers and Canadians have trouble using the form services, which do not work at all for a category of Quebecers and Canadians. In our opinion, Service Canada should be accessible across the country to reach as many people as possible.

I already asked my second question at our last meeting as well.

There was a deadline for applying to receive a one-time non-taxable emergency payment of \$200. This payment had been provided during the COVID-19 period to seniors who are entitled to the guaranteed income supplement.

Some people submitted their application before the September 11 deadline, some even several months before the deadline. We have actual cases of people in this situation. However, because their application was not processed on September 11, and I stress the word "processed", they still have not received their payment and they are being told that the deadline has passed. It's the processing of applications that's at issue, not when people submitted their application.

Do you have a solution in sight?

• (1950)

Mr. Cliff C. Groen (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Benefits and Integrated Services Branch, Service Canada, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you very much for your question.

We totally agree that processing applications is very important.

When the one-time payment to seniors was announced in May, we introduced measures to ensure that we were able to pay the maximum possible for all seniors. In July, we issued an initial payment to all those who were already receiving old age security or the guaranteed income supplement. After that, another period followed to ensure that all applications were processed. Eligibility for the payment depended on eligibility for old age security or the guaranteed income supplement in June 2020.

We set a deadline to receive all applications, September 11, since the payment was available until the end of September. After that, we no longer had the authority to make the payments. That is why we set up a team dedicated to this, to make sure that as many applications as possible got processed. As a result, we reduced the time it took to process applications.

Ms. Louise Chabot: How many applications didn't get processed?

Mr. Cliff C. Groen: I know that about 6.5 million people have received the payment. During the months of July, August and September, we processed more than—

Ms. Louise Chabot: How many applications remained on the shelf?

Mr. Cliff C. Groen: A very minimal number of applications were not processed, certainly under 1,000. I don't have the exact number. Often we didn't have all the documentation we needed to be able to establish applicants' eligibility.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Groen.

Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Next is Ms. Gazan, for six minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first question is for the deputy minister.

In Winnipeg, we had an extremely troubling international news story come out of our city yesterday. It was that trench fever, a rare disease that afflicted World War I soldiers, of which only four cases have been known to occur in Canada since the 1990s, has appeared four times in the past two months in Winnipeg. This is an illness that is known to have infected people in crowded refugee camps during war time.

Dr. Carl Boodman, a Winnipeg doctor, has treated four patients in the last two months, all of whom had lived in shelters. We know this disease is serious, and we also know this disease is potentially fatal in many cases. The Canadian Medical Association Journal has said that this disease is a result of poverty. When I look at the rapid housing initiative, while any sort of monies are welcome, they are completely and utterly insufficient.

Currently, I have members of my community in hospital during a global pandemic with poverty-caused illnesses that haven't been seen in this country in nearly 100 years. The Prime Minister indicated he is not interested in a guaranteed income.

Is your department still exploring that option to ensure that people can live with dignity and human rights in this country?

• (1955)

Ms. Lori MacDonald: As a policy department with respect to housing, poverty and social programs, we look at all options with respect to what that might mean for income supplement. Basic income, employment insurance and all of those things do get conversation in our department. At this time, we're looking at what would be the best possible options going forward.

I'll ask my colleague, Janet Goulding, to share any comments she may have.

Ms. Janet Goulding (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Income Security and Social Development Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thanks, Lori, but I have nothing further to add.

Thank you.

Ms. Leah Gazan: My next question is for Madam Goulding.

I had an opportunity last week to speak with a constituent in my riding, Al Wiebe, who has lived experience with homelessness, regarding the membership of the newly appointed national housing council. He was greatly disappointed with the fact that the council did not include one single person with lived experience of homelessness.

As you know, the work of the national housing council is critical in implementing the national housing strategy. It's also essential that those who have first-hand experience with the impacts of homelessness guide the work. In fact, this was noted in the National Housing Strategy Act, which encourages including people with lived experience.

I'm wondering if your department is open to reconsidering selection, to ensure that people who have experienced homelessness are also included on the council.

Ms. Janet Goulding: Thank you for the question, but I will have to defer to my colleagues at CMHC. The national housing council is a CMHC initiative. Perhaps Ms. Bowers could respond.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Okay. Thank you.

Ms. Romy Bowers: Thank you very much for the question.

In determining the members for the national housing council, there was a robust selection process that took into consideration a number of factors, including lived experience, as Ms. Gazan mentioned, professional expertise of the various nominees and their experience in the housing domain.

All these factors were taken into consideration in choosing members who we believe are very well qualified to provide us with guidance and instruction in terms of developing the national housing strategy further.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I don't argue that everybody on the council is of really high standard, but I do ask why nobody on the council has actual lived experience with homelessness, such as Al Wiebe, who is a very well-known homelessness advocate.

I'll move on to my next question. Many of the witnesses from our urban, rural and northern indigenous housing study have cited the need for a separate urban indigenous housing strategy, which has also been advocated by many housing experts who serve urban indigenous people across the country, including the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres.

Will your department be open to creating and adequately resourcing an urban indigenous housing strategy?

Ms. Romy Bowers: I'm not sure who that question is addressed to, but I'm very happy to take it.

That is a decision for the government to make, but from the perspective of CMHC, we are here to support the government's direc-

tion in terms of co-developing an urban, rural and national indigenous housing strategy in conjunction with indigenous people to serve indigenous peoples.

We are ready to provide our expertise in this area and are ready and willing to provide the capabilities that we as an organization have to move this policy work forward.

• (2000)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bowers.

Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Next, we will go to Mr. Vis for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Perlman, what's the operating budget of Employment and Social Development Canada?

Mr. Mark Perlman (Chief Financial Officer and Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Department of Employment and Social Development): Right now, taking into account the supplementary estimates (B), our operating budget is about \$885 million from the consolidated revenue fund.

Mr. Brad Vis: How many staff are employed at Employment and Social Development Canada?

Mr. Mark Perlman: Right now it's roughly 27,000 people.

Mr. Brad Vis: You're the chief financial officer. Therefore, ultimately you're responsible for overseeing the use of funds under the operating budget. Is that correct?

Mr. Mark Perlman: That is correct.

Mr. Brad Vis: If the Auditor General were to conduct an audit of your department, where do you think they would find the most areas where the services could be improved or money could be saved?

Mr. Mark Perlman: We have a very elaborate evaluation organization within our department. That group is constantly looking for improvements and adjustments. I cannot pinpoint any one particular area, but I know we're always looking for continuous improvement within the organization.

Mr. Brad Vis: Do you think the amount of time that a Canadian needs to wait on the phone to contact an agent at Service Canada is acceptable?

Mr. Mark Perlman: I know our agents work incredibly hard with the resources and volume they're working with.

Mr. Brad Vis: That's not what I asked.

Mr. Mark Perlman: I cannot speak to the funding we have that has been provided to us by the Government of Canada versus the volumes we get. I know this year our volumes have been increasing tremendously.

If you want to speak to the program, Mr. Groen is in charge of the call centres and processing, if you want to get into that level of detail.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you.

Mr. Groen, I am on very short time, so I will ask you to please report back to the committee on the last time you conducted an internal audit on the telephone services provided to Canadians through your department. Thank you very much.

My next question is to Madam Goulding. Has the Province of British Columbia asked for the federal government to play a role in provincial child care, yes or no?

Ms. Janet Goulding: I'm sorry. That's for Ms. Adam.

Mr. Brad Vis: I apologize.

Ms. Adam.

Ms. Catherine Adam: Mr. Chair, thank you for the question.

I'm not sure—

Mr. Brad Vis: Please give a yes or no answer.

Has the Province of British Columbia formally requested that the federal government play a more active role in provincial child care?

Ms. Catherine Adam: I can say that the Province of Manitoba, as a signatory to—

Mr. Brad Vis: Therefore, no, British Columbia has not. That's my question.

Ms. Catherine Adam: I have not had any communication from Manitoba that they specifically—

Mr. Brad Vis: No, I'm asking about British Columbia.

Ms. Catherine Adam: I'm sorry.

Even there, British Columbia is also a signatory to the 2017 multilateral framework. They are a partner with the federal government in the multilateral framework and the funding that is provided to provinces and territories for early learning and child care.

Mr. Brad Vis: Did the Province of British Columbia ask for a national framework or did they ask for direct transfers?

Ms. Catherine Adam: To my knowledge, the Province of British Columbia, as do other provinces, continues to work with ESDC on an ongoing basis on a range of issues related to implementing both the current funding for early learning and child care, as well as, during the pandemic, needs that the provinces and territories identified.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you.

I have one more quick question. I apologize that I'm going really quickly, but it's a big department.

Is it the position of Employment and Social Development Canada, given the recent economic statement, that the provinces are not meeting the child care needs of their citizens? Is that why the Government of Canada needs to play a more active role in this area of provincial jurisdiction?

Ms. Catherine Adam: I would say that what we have had as communication with provinces, particularly in the early days of the pandemic, was a real concern over the pressures that the systems they have were facing and what providers were facing. Those conversations have led to further discussions in terms of what provinces and territories are identifying as some of the gaps for the needs.

• (2005)

Mr. Brad Vis: Then it's generally the position of the department that the federal government should play a more active role in this area of provincial jurisdiction, even though, according to your previous answer, no provinces formally asked for a national child care program.

The Chair: Please give a short answer. We're out of time.

Ms. Catherine Adam: With all due respect to the honourable member, I don't believe that's an accurate characterization of what I've said. We work closely with provinces and territories through a number of tables, but particularly through the multilateral framework and there are agreements in place with each of the jurisdictions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vis and Ms. Adam.

Mr. Brad Vis: For the record, Minister Hussen's comments were inappropriate.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Vaughan, you have five minutes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan (Spadina—Fort York, Lib.): Thank you very much.

I'll go back to Ms. Adam.

B.C. had the option to opt out and not receive federal funding if they wanted to run the system themselves. Is that not true?

Ms. Catherine Adam: Yes, absolutely. The money is transferred to provinces and territories based on an agreement that they co-sign and codevelop with us.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of choice, it's much like driving. If you have back roads, you can choose to use back roads. But if you want to drive on a highway and there isn't a system of highways to choose, you don't have a choice, really; you simply have an option to think about a choice. Building a system provides the choice. It's not the right to have a choice. You need the system to choose and to engage in. That's why there's a choice involved in all of the accords. In fact, all of the accords accommodate informal care as well as other forms of child care beyond government-run or government-sponsored child care. Is that not true?

Ms. Catherine Adam: The agreements in place allow provinces and territories absolutely to meet the needs and priorities in their jurisdictions, using federal funds, within the context of the multilateral framework they are all signatories to and agreed to and co-developed with the federal government.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of Service Canada, the mobile units in Quebec have not been restaged due to public health orders. As part of the assessment on not opening the mobile sites while we've reopened all of the permanent sites, the choice on the mobile sites is about spreading COVID as much as it is about protecting the workforce and about the public health needs of those mobile units. They are hard to create as safe environments from disease in a pandemic like COVID. That's why they haven't opened.

Is that correct in terms of Service Canada?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: A number of factors go into not opening up those centres, and those are many of those factors. As well, we do have an alternative service model in place. One is email and one is telephone as well to reach those people who are either not literate with electronic forms or don't have access to them.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Thank you.

In terms of CMHC, the question was about when new investments will come, recognizing that the billion-dollar investment in rapid housing is the first instalment and is part of our commitment, enunciated in the throne speech, to end chronic homelessness. There are second and third instalments already under development as we move towards the budget.

Ms. Romy Bowers: Yes, that's correct.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: We don't know the date of the budget or the amount in the budget, because that's a decision for the finance department. The minister wouldn't have the date of the budget or the exact amount that will land in the budget, because that's not a decision he makes. That's a decision the government makes through cabinet, through finance. Is that right?

Ms. Romy Bowers: That's correct. These are all government decisions, absolutely.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Our commitments to end chronic homelessness, to bolster the co-investment fund with new capital dollars and the other commitment for an urban, rural and northern housing strategy, all of which were contained in the throne speech, are contained in the throne speech so that we can deliver them in the budget that is expected early in the new year.

Ms. Romy Bowers: That's correct. We're committed to supporting government and delivering the promises in the fall economic statement.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: It's safe to say that more help is on the way—in particular, help for people living in the most precarious and vulnerable settings and, in particular, people who are indigenous in urban settings who are homeless.

Ms. Romy Bowers: Yes. CMHC is focused on serving the most vulnerable in our society.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: All three of those programs, in fact, serve indigenous urban people in urban settings who are homeless or precariously housed: the urban, rural and northern strategy, the rapid housing strategy and the co-investment fund. Indigenous community and housing providers can apply to all three of those in order to meet the needs of their communities.

Ms. Romy Bowers: Yes. We strive to serve our clients by offering them the whole suite of programs that we have under our jurisdiction.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of the mobile housing component of the rapid housing initiative, while the units themselves are built nearby and not often transported far distances because of the fragility, the reality is that they're assembled on site by local employment. They do generate local employment because they're assembled on site, even though they may be manufactured at a regional—

• (2010)

Mr. Brad Vis: On a point of order, nothing's been assembled on site.

The Chair: That's not a point of order.

Go ahead.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: For example, the two projects under way in Toronto right now were built outside of Toronto and trucked to Toronto. They are being assembled in Toronto by local labour. Is that not true?

Ms. Romy Bowers: That's correct.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: It's the same project that's under way in Vancouver, B.C. In fact, B.C. is the place that started modular housing and has been using the local workforce to both build the modules and assemble them on sites when the projects are approved.

Ms. Romy Bowers: Just as one point of clarification with respect to the rapid housing, we're just in the process of dispensing funds. The construction has not yet begun. We expect that there will be similar types of projects to those found in Vancouver and Toronto.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: You don't build them on another continent, ship them across to Canada, put them on a train and take them to a local community. They're assembled more or less close to the site before they're built finally. That's the model of modular housing that has been embraced. It has to be quick. You can't wait six months for delivery.

Ms. Romy Bowers: That's correct. There's a 12-month limit for the construction.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Okay. In terms of—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vaughan and Ms. Bowers.

[Translation]

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

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to ask a question about the student loans mentioned in the fall economic statement. \$329.4 million was announced to eliminate interest on Canada student loans and Canada apprentice loans for fiscal 2021-22.

Since these programs do not apply to Quebec students, can you give us the details about compensation for Quebec students further to this announcement?

[English]

Ms. Lori MacDonald: I'll ask my colleague Mr. Perlman if he has any details on that.

Mr. Mark Perlman: I apologize that I don't have any details on that, but I'm sure we can do a follow-up for you.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you. I am mainly interested in how Quebec students will be compensated for this program.

My other question I have already asked. You are aware that the employment insurance claims of people who received money during their parental leave are caught up in an administrative maze. All these claims are frozen, sometimes for months, because of a lack of clear policy. That's what Service Canada agents are telling claimants. They are telling them to call their members of Parliament. We feel it's unacceptable.

Are you working with the department responsible to get clear instructions for unblocking claims so that people can receive assistance?

Mr. Cliff C. Groen: Thank you very much for your question.

Priority processing of all claims is very important to us. That's why we introduced measures to ensure the transition from CERB to EI. We took action to ensure that processing was done in a short period of time.

As a result, we have a number of services paid within 28 days of the application date. Under normal circumstances, we achieve this goal 80% of the time. Since the transition to EI, we have been reaching that goal 95% of the time. That's a significant improvement.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Why are claims being blocked, especially for those who have received Quebec parental insurance plan or maternity benefits?

The Chair: You don't have much time left, Ms. Chabot.

I will allow a brief answer.

Mr. Cliff C. Groen: We're aware that delays have occurred with some benefit claims, particularly for parental and maternity leave.

This is due to the difference between the maternity leave program and eligibility for certain items. Over the past few weeks, we have issued new instructions to our agents. We are processing all applications that have experienced these delays on a priority basis.

• (2015)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Groen.

[English]

We have Ms. Gazan, please, for two and half minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much, Chair.

My question actually is for Madam Bowers.

In the last meeting where the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development appeared, not this meeting but the one prior, I actually broke down some of the dollar amounts for the distinctions-based indigenous housing strategy.

Would your department be able to provide this committee with the dollar amount per capita that each of the distinctions-based indigenous housing strategies provide each year?

Ms. Romy Bowers: We'll take that question away and will provide that information to you.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Okay. Thank you.

I also asked department officials during the last meeting how many low-barrier, 24-7 safe spaces have been newly funded since the report was released on murdered and missing indigenous women, girls and two-spirits a year and a half ago. We know that call to justice 4.7 calls on the government to fund such spaces as life-saving measures.

Is your department able to provide that number?

Ms. Romy Bowers: Yes, we are able to provide that number to you.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Okay.

Don't you have that number available here today?

Ms. Romy Bowers: In response to the report on murdered and missing indigenous women, there was a funding announcement made in May 2020. The funding was for \$44.8 million over five years to construct 10 new shelters, on reserve, across the country. This would be under the CMHC's shelter enhancement program.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I'm speaking not just about a shelter, sorry. It's a 24-7, low-barrier safe space, which is different from shelters, solely for women who are experiencing domestic violence, for example. I'm wondering about that number.

Ms. Romy Bowers: Unfortunately, I don't have that level of specificity, so again, unfortunately, I have to take that question back and we'll provide that information to you.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Yes, I asked that—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bowers.

Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Two and a half minutes goes fast.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Yes, indeed, it does.

Mr. Kent, you have five minutes, please.

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for this evening's appearance.

Minister Hussen, in mid-October, referring to the major city stream of the rapid housing initiative, said that, because cities had already identified properties to buy or plans for modular housing, he expected to see "a lot of housing being built before the winter".

From the minister's remarks, your remarks, Ms. Bowers, and your correction of Mr. Vaughan's comment, is it true that no work is being done now because you're still in the assessment phase?

Ms. Romy Bowers: With respect to the first stream of rapid housing, which is the major city stream, we have signed our agreements with most of the municipalities and the funding is out the door. As you can imagine, we have a guideline that the construction must be finished within 12 months, but there is a range of different construction schedules in terms of when these buildings would be in place.

Hon. Peter Kent: When is the first construction to begin?

Ms. Romy Bowers: I would have to get back to you with that particular piece of information.

With respect to the project stream, when we're prioritizing the different applications that we get, we are prioritizing those projects that deliver housing more rapidly to the extent that proponents can commit to getting houses on the ground more quickly. We would prioritize those.

Hon. Peter Kent: Do you expect, since it's early December now, almost mid-December, that Minister Hussen's expectation of getting all of the money out the door before March, two and a half months from now, will be met?

Ms. Romy Bowers: We have just received the investment plans from the various municipalities that contain this level of detail. We're in the process of assessing that, so we'll be able to provide a little bit more detail once we've done that assessment.

Hon. Peter Kent: Please send that to the committee. Thank you.

Minister Hussen mentioned in his opening remarks the additional \$299 million for Reaching Home that will, among other things, he said, help prevent at-risk Canadians from becoming homeless in the first place by supporting targeted interventions that enable people to stay housed. Can you give us an example of a targeted intervention?

● (2020)

Ms. Janet Goulding: The kinds of targeted interventions imagined there are rental arrears payments or utility arrears payments and short-term rent supplements to help people maintain housing while they're stabilizing their financial situation.

Hon. Peter Kent: What's your expectation of the number of people who might be helped by this additional \$299 million or part of the additional funding?

Ms. Janet Goulding: As my colleague has mentioned, it's early days for this initiative. The funding was just announced in the fall economic statement, so we will be working through the development of a proposal on how we might implement the funding through our Reaching Home network and work with them.

One of the main considerations will be, though, the extent to which they require additional funding in the upcoming year to maintain COVID-related measures in terms of social distancing, but we are very hopeful—I think we all are—for a vaccine and hoping that those measures won't be required much longer.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you.

The national housing strategy talks about the 10-year, \$55 billion-plus plan to create 125,000 new housing units. The indigenous housing caucus talks about a 10-year plan at a cost of about \$25 billion for 73,000 needed units.

Can the department provide figures showing what portion of the national housing strategy would address indigenous urban, rural and northern housing for those two sets of figures, the 125,000 new units or the indigenous housing caucus's estimate of 73,000 units?

Ms. Romy Bowers: We can certainly provide a breakdown for the national housing strategy. We have to go into a little bit of detail about the different programs, because some of the programs are contribution-based programs and others are based on loans. Depending on the composition of the funding, this determines the number of units delivered, but we could certainly provide clarity as to the assumptions that we use in serving our indigenous communities.

Hon. Peter Kent: If you could provide that to the committee, thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kent.

The last questioner for the evening is Mr. Vaughan, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Thank you.

This question is on the rapid housing initiative. The decision whether to build or acquire is a local decision made by local cities. We have in fact empowered them to make the right decision, based on the right set of circumstances, based on the population they have to serve.

Is that not how the program was designed?

Ms. Romy Bowers: Yes, that's correct.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: We're not, then, pushing modular housing onto communities. We've simply made an option available to those who might have access to supply.

Ms. Romy Bowers: That's correct. We recognize that housing is a local issue and we have built maximum flexibility into this program.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The expectation is that most of the housing will actually be acquired—distressed assets, things such as old motels or abandoned housing that gets refurbished immediately—to house people quickly, and not necessarily be through construction.

Ms. Romy Bowers: That's correct. Refurbishment is one major category for the RHI.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Let me turn to child care. Virtually every significant study on early learning and child care suggests that the sooner you get children into structured learning environments, the better they do in school and the better they develop intellectually over the extent of their life.

Ms. Catherine Adam: Yes, that is true. Numerous studies have pointed to the importance and the long-term value of early learning and child care that is of high quality.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: That's why, in places such as Toronto, where there is a 67,000-family wait-list to get into subsidized or structured child care, the demand is coming not from provinces or cities but in fact from parents to support a national system with national standards funded across the country.

Is that not why we're supporting the choice that parents are asking us to make?

Ms. Catherine Adam: We have heard from numerous stakeholders, including parents, about the importance of high-quality, affordable accessible child care.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: We're aware that for single parents and certainly, in my family, where both my parents passed before my children were born, not everybody has a grandparent to hand a child to so that they can go to work. This is especially true for single parents and especially immigrant families, whose extended family may not even be in the country.

That's one reason that structured child care needs to be presented as a choice. It's so that families can make the choice that suits them best. That's why we're building a child care system. Is that not right?

● (2025)

Ms. Catherine Adam: What we do know is that there are families across Canada in a multitude of differing situations: newcomers, low-income families, middle-class families living in centres where child care is highly expensive or those in child care deserts where there are simply not enough spaces. There is a wide variety of pressures that families are facing.

We are certainly working with provinces and territories, looking for ways to respond.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: There are young children with developmental disabilities, with physical disabilities, with autism, with a whole spectrum of needs for whom, if you don't get them into quality child care early, professionals don't have the capacity to provide services to help them develop and attain the highest quality of life and performance in their lives.

That's another reason that structured and regulated child care is so critical. It's to make sure that the most vulnerable children in our communities get the additional support they couldn't get from their families but need in order to live full lives.

Ms. Catherine Adam: A number of research studies point to exactly what the honourable member has just stated, yes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: When we make dollars available to the provinces, they have the option to opt out and not receive those dollars and not extend child care to vulnerable families in their communities.

The other side of it is that when we put federal dollars into the system, we expect certain standards to be met in terms of child-to-teacher ratio, in terms of training, in terms of quality, to make sure that our children are safe. Studies have shown that unregulated child care is actually dangerous for children and their lives, and

regulated child care ensures that a much higher percentage of kids are kept safe in an environment in which parents can trust that their kids will be properly cared for.

That's another reason that structured and high-quality child care that is affordable is such a fundamental way to make sure that everybody has a choice in this society, in contrast with simply hoping that parents can take care of their child.

Is that not why we are also looking at exploring and funding child care across the country, including early learning?

Ms. Catherine Adam: In 2017, all provinces and territories signed the multilateral framework, other than Quebec, which agreed in principle.

In that framework there are sections that deal with exactly what you are speaking to, the inclusivity, which is the way we ensure that all children...and provinces and territories also believe this. The multilateral framework is an important piece. All children—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: We also know that the indigenous community wants an indigenous-led and a culturally significant and specific child care approach, to ensure that their family structure and their culture are appropriately delivered. That also requires federal dollars because it's a federal responsibility right across the country.

Ms. Catherine Adam: Yes, and in 2018 the federal government worked with all three distinction-based groups and also with urban indigenous people on a codeveloped indigenous early learning and child care framework that spells out for each of the distinction groups their community's aspirations for their children. It speaks to the necessity of culturally appropriate child care with highly trained ECE workers who have curricula that are adapted to aboriginal children and are culturally sensitive.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I have one last question.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Vaughan. That's all the time we have for questions, because we do have a bit of committee business.

Witnesses, could you just stand by for one second?

Colleagues, almost exactly two hours ago, you would have received from the clerk a proposed budget for the urban, rural and northern indigenous housing study. I'll give you a minute to pull up that budget.

To all the witnesses, I really hope you enjoyed your time here this evening. I hope some of you enjoyed it so much that you'll come back and join us again on Thursday. For those of you who aren't so fortunate as to be with us on Thursday, I'll take this opportunity to thank you for your support over this session in appearing before the committee. This has been one crazy year where there have been very high demands and expectations of you. To all of you, I hope that over the next little while you'll get some time with the people you love, and if we don't see you on Thursday, I'm sure we'll see you in February. Thank you so much for being with us.

Colleagues, hopefully now you have in front of you the budget for the urban, rural and northern indigenous housing study. It's

probably one of the smaller budgets that you will see, but I would be happy to entertain a motion for its adoption.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I move the adoption of the budget.

● (2030)

The Chair: Mr. Kent beat you to it.

Is there any discussion? There is consensus all around.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: There being no further business to come before this meeting, I declare the meeting adjourned.

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