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Chair: Mrs. Salma Zahid



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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting 22 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

The Board of Internal Economy requires that committee members adhere to the following health protocols: Maintain a physical distance of at least two meters from others; wear a non-medical mask unless seated, and preferably wear a mask at all times, including when seated; maintain proper hand hygiene by using the hand sanitizers provided in the committee room, and wash your hands regularly with soap. As the Chair, I will enforce these measures. Thank you all for your cooperation.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House Order of January 25. I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You may speak in the official language of your choice. At the bottom of your screen, you may choose to hear the floor audio or English or French. With the latest Zoom version, you do not need to select a corresponding language channel before speaking. Your “raise hand” feature is on the main toolbar, should you wish to speak. Remember that all comments should be addressed through the chair. When you are not speaking, your microphone should be muted. The committee clerk and I will maintain the list of the members seeking to speak.

Before we begin, I have an important reminder for all members. Members' assistants should please advise the clerk if the House administration has migrated them to the new email account to ensure that they continue to receive all committee email. I know that IT services has been working with different offices to make that change happen, so please let the clerk know.

I also want to let everyone know that there will be no meeting on Monday, April 19, as it's a budget day, so we will allow all members to participate in the events related to the government's budget presentation.

There is one more housekeeping thing that I wanted to remind all members of. In regard to the virtual sign off on committee reports, in the interest of health and safety during the pandemic, the committee staff will meet virtually to carry out the usual proofreading of committee reports after the committee adopts them, to correct any typos that might have been missed during the drafting. To ensure the quality of work, virtual sign offs may take up to three

working days. Members may contact the clerk if they have any questions.

I would also take this opportunity to welcome Mr. Peter Schiefke to the committee.

Welcome, Mr. Schiefke.

Mr. Peter Schiefke (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee is resuming its study of labour market impact assessments under the temporary foreign workers program.

As a reminder to our witnesses, you have up to five minutes for your opening remarks and you may split your time among each other within an organization, if you wish.

Today in our first panel, I would welcome Beth Connery, chair of the labour committee of the Canadian Horticultural Council. Representing Food and Beverage Canada, we are also joined by Kathleen Sullivan, chief executive officer, and Daniel Vielfaure, co-chair, as well as being deputy chief executive officer, Groupe Bonduelle. Our third witnesses for today, from the United Refugee Council Canada, are Jagdeep Singh Bath, coordinator, process improvement, and Mr. Singh Rajpurohit, GA chemical machine operator.

I would like to welcome all the witnesses for appearing before today's committee. Thank you.

We will now start with Madam Connery, chair of the labour committee of the Canadian Horticultural Council.

You will have five minutes for your opening remarks. You can start.

• (1535)

Ms. Elizabeth Connery (Chair, Labour Committee, Canadian Horticultural Council): Thank you very much for the opportunity to address the committee today.

I have a title there, but in my day job I am a vegetable and fruit grower in Manitoba. That means I have to live with all of these rules on an ongoing basis.

Agriculture stands ready to be an integral part of the economic recovery of Canada as we emerge into the post-pandemic era. One of our major limiting factors is the availability of labour. In the fresh fruit and vegetable industry, which is what I represent, mechanization is being developed as technology advances. However, when you go to your local grocers, most of the produce you see and buy is still being hand-harvested for you. This creates a labour demand that is not met by Canadians who have little interest in rural, seasonal employment. They are understandably looking for something that will pay the bills year-round. For these labour intensive and seasonal crops, having timely, reliable and consistent labour in place during our season is crucial to our success and to our financial viability as a business.

In our search for employees, a labour market impact assessment has become a part of our toolbox in accessing the agricultural stream of the temporary foreign worker program. As an industry which, by definition, is rural and far away from the major population centres and labour pools, access to workers can be very problematic. Many rural locations around the country have been able to demonstrate labour shortages for decades. Last year was an especially difficult year with COVID and the pandemic. Two in five employers were indicating that they could not find the workers they needed. Delays and missing foreign workers meant that many acres of produce went unharvested.

SAWP jobs are seasonal—usually four to eight months in duration—and employers have no capacity to offer year-round employment to these workers. The full-time positions on farms are filled by Canadian workers when we can find them. This is in line with our hire Canadians first policies. When we do have the opportunity to transition a worker to a year-round position, the current model is usually to apply through provincial nominee programs and try to help these employees become eligible. Very often, it is difficult for them to qualify through our immigration system.

We would like to thank the government for the concerted effort that has gone into refining and improving the LMIA process over the last few years, in particular the team lead by Katie Alexander. Increased collaboration within government and with industry have given us all a better understanding of the processes and roadblocks involved. This has resulted in a shortened timeline, which is appreciated by all employers. In fact, work permit processing in IRCC can sometimes be the bigger processing challenge for us. A direct line of communication between ESDC and IRCC for changes needed on work permits would speed the process.

The online LMIA application is a great tool and we use it ourselves. As with any other program, tweaking will improve it, but many employers are using it as part of their TFW application process. Third parties are involved in the LMIA process, but many of the employers, especially in the western provinces, do their own LMIAs and find it very useful. Expanding the online portal to include groups like WALI in B.C., F.A.R.M.S. in Ontario and Ferme in Quebec and allowing them to vet applications before submission could improve the quality of the online applications being received.

There are ongoing concerns around potential fees to access the agricultural TFW streams, which hold the potential to make a program prohibitively expensive for producers. These streams provide

critical access to labour for Canadian food production. In particular, the SAWP stream is an annual application.

There's also been discussion of a trusted employer designation for employers who have demonstrated consistent quality employment opportunities for TFWs over a period of time.

● (1540)

The Chair: There are 20 seconds left.

Ms. Elizabeth Connery: Verification through the current integrity audit system could ensure standards are upheld to maintain status in the program. This type of model could also feed into simplifying the LMIA and other processes for employers over the long term.

In closing, thank you once again for the opportunity to speak with you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Connery.

We will now move on to Ms. Sullivan, the chief executive officer of Food and Beverage Canada.

Welcome, Ms. Sullivan. It's good to meet you again. Please begin.

Ms. Kathleen Sullivan (Chief Executive Officer, Food and Beverage Canada): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My name is Kathleen Sullivan, CEO of Food and Beverage Canada, a national association representing Canadian food manufacturers. I am joined by my co-chair Daniel Vielfaure.

Food manufacturing is one of Canada's largest and most important industries. Found in every province, this sector is critical to Canada's food sovereignty and economic well-being and in supporting the country's primary agriculture sector.

Throughout COVID-19, food manufacturers have continued to operate, demonstrating their commitment, and that of their workers, to ensuring that Canadians have the food they need. As this work continues, our sector is eyeing the future, ensuring that we have the foundation for recovery, stability and growth. Critical to this is labour. Canada's food manufacturers are, and have been for a number of years, facing a labour crisis. We are the largest manufacturing employer in Canada, with almost 300,000 workers, but we estimate that the sector is short 30,000 workers, or 10% of our workforce, on any given day. By 2025 we expect that number to double.

This morning Food and Beverage Canada released its workforce and recovery action plan, a plan that is focused on addressing the industry's labour needs. As that plan notes, foreign workers are critical to our future and to ensuring that Canadian companies can produce the food that Canadians require.

I'll now turn to Daniel to speak directly to the TFW program.

Mr. Daniel Vielfaure (Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Groupe Bonduelle, Chief Executive Officer, Bonduelle Americas, and Co-Chair, Food and Beverage Canada): Thank you, Kathleen.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

I am Daniel Vielfaure, the DCEO of Bonduelle Group and CEO of Bonduelle Americas. Bonduelle is a global food company specializing in frozen and canned vegetables. Here in Canada, Bonduelle is responsible for mostly all of private-label canned and frozen vegetables found in your grocery stores, in addition to such brands as Bonduelle, Arctic Gardens, Del Monte and Green Giant.

Bonduelle is one of Canada's largest food manufacturers, employing almost 2,000 people at eight facilities—four in Quebec, three in Ontario and one in Alberta. Bonduelle is also a Canadian success story of a French privately owned company that chose to invest in Canada and to use Canada as its North American and South American headquarters.

As Kathleen said, labour is the biggest challenge this sector is facing. It is the biggest challenge our company is facing. Without workers, Canada's food plants cannot operate. Without workers, companies like Bonduelle will stop investing in this country. At Bonduelle our business is seasonal. Corn, peas and beans are harvested just once a year. If Bonduelle does not have workers available at harvest time, we cannot package these products. That means there will be no Canadian corn, peas and beans in the grocery stores for the rest of the year. It is that simple.

Temporary foreign workers are critical to Bonduelle's business, but we are often criticized for hiring them. I would like to address some of that criticism head-on.

First, at Bonduelle we hire temporary foreign workers because we need to. Like many food processors, Bonduelle operates in largely rural areas—areas that have seen depopulation over the past decade; areas that no longer have a labour base to support our sector.

Second, hiring temporary foreign workers does not save Bonduelle money. Hiring temporary foreign workers costs Bonduelle about 30% more than hiring Canadians.

Third, we treat our temporary foreign workers as we do any of our workers at Bonduelle. Temporary foreign workers are part of our employee family and part of our community. Many of these workers return to their jobs at Bonduelle every year. Temporary foreign workers are eligible for all of our employee programs and supports. In Bonduelle's unionized plants, temporary foreign workers are part of the union.

Despite the importance of these workers, the temporary foreign worker program seems designed to make their employment in

Canada as difficult as possible. Even in normal years the TFW program is overly complex. Approval times are lengthy and do not align with our needs. Limits are imposed on the number of workers we can bring in. In the case of returning workers, the process is highly repetitive. Wages are also an issue, with ESDC often requiring wages that are in excess of industry standards.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

Mr. Daniel Vielfaure: Okay.

Based on my experience with the TFW program, there are some changes that are desperately needed. We need to simplify the program application. Application fees should be reduced or eliminated. We need to create pathways for the permanent residency of workers. Many of our workers would be happy to stay in Canada and bring their family here.

I will close by repeating what I have already said. Canada needs foreign workers, and temporary foreign workers are a vital component of this sector's workforce. The federal government should be facilitating temporary foreign workers in coming to Canada and supporting companies in hiring them.

Thank you.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now hear from Jagdeep Singh Batth, representing United Refugee Council Canada.

Mr. Batth, you can start, please. You will have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Mr. Shaitan Singh Rajpurohit (Chemical Machine Operator, United Refugee Council Canada): Hi, Madam.

My name is Shaitan Singh Rajpurohit. I'm replacing Mr. Jagdeep Singh Bhatt.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Shaitan Singh Rajpurohit: Good afternoon, Madam Chair, and ladies and gentlemen.

Before I start, allow me to thank the members of the committee for their kind invitation to appear before the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

My name is Shaitan Singh Rajpurohit, and I have been living in Montreal. It is my understanding that the committee is currently reviewing the usefulness and efficiency of the requirement for the labour market impact assessment under the temporary foreign worker program.

In my humble opinion, LMIA's are very important for several reasons. First and foremost, they are one of the very few measures in the Canadian immigration system that are intended to assure Canadians that the system will not accommodate the immediate needs of the market without considering the employment needs of the people.

There are thousands of people looking for employment in Canada, people who have lost their jobs in the pandemic and others who are young players. They are people who immigrated here in recent years and who have not yet found a steady job, and others who came on temporary work permits and remained in Canada, as well as refugee claimants. However, from labourers to computer experts and medical doctors, many are underemployed. They have a range of skills and work experience, and they are already living and working in Canada. They are familiar with the Canadian people and the workplace culture, and even with the Canadian climate.

It is very important for us and all Canadian businesses and citizens that the unemployed and underemployed be properly documented and considered before allowing the entry of more temporary foreign workers.

Of course, there are difficulties for some employers finding people locally for some jobs in some sectors. However, we don't believe that the only solution is to waive the labour market impact assessment to create more temporary foreign workers. This option is costly to employers, and it creates lots of problems in the workplace due to the high turnover of temporary employees.

The Canadian government should rather maintain the requirement of the labour market impact assessment, consider other means to retain temporary foreign workers who are already settled here, and increase the employment of local people. Amongst possible means to do that, labour market experts have identified several avenues, such as improved recruitment platforms and practices, expanded professional training opportunities, better mechanisms to recognize foreign diplomas, more French language courses in the workplace and, from my own personal experience, one of the best means to ensure a better use of all available people in the workforce is to provide them access to permanent residency.

Precarious migrants and refugee claimants often work in health and social services; in food production, processing and distribution; and in security services and in building maintenance. Many are also key to maintaining computer systems, factory equipment and industrial machinery. Because of their expired, precarious or temporary immigration status, many of them are abused by unscrupulous employment agencies and employers, and they are living in constant fear of losing their jobs or being deported from the country.

To address that and to avoid wasting this experienced labour force, the Canadian government should act to regularize the status of migrants so they can work here in optimal conditions.

According to recent media reports in Quebec, barely 30 people have benefited from it so far.

In addition to excluding a significant number of people—

• (1550)

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

Mr. Shaitan Singh Rajpurohit: Thank you, Ma'am.

Along with human rights defenders, trade unions and numerous other civil society organizations, we believe that an effective regularization program should provide permanent residency to all temporary foreign workers requesting it, and all refugee claimants and all non-status and precarious migrants who are already inside Canada. This should be made a top priority over ease of recruitment of ever-increasing numbers of temporary foreign workers.

Thank you, Madam Chair, and all committee members.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rajpurohit.

Now we will go to our round of questioning, starting with Mr. Allison.

Mr. Allison, you have six minutes.

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the witnesses here today as we talk about temporary foreign workers and labour shortages.

My question is for you, Ms. Sullivan. I know we've chatted before. During your testimony, like Daniel, you alluded to the fact that this is not a sample. It's complicated, meaning that it's not straightforward. You guys have cycles. There are a number of different things. I'm sure I could even add Elizabeth into the mix in terms of seasonality, etc.

Just talk to us. I've read your document. You guys are actually looking for more of an overhaul rather than more tweaking, more pilot projects and things like that. Talk to us, Kathleen. Tell us your thoughts on whether this requires some tweaking or a major overhaul. I've also got a follow-up question on the economic piece.

Ms. Kathleen Sullivan: In terms of the broader labour question, like any workforce, ours is quite broad and diverse. We hire line workers, scientists and managers, so we try to fill those jobs through a number of different sources. Definitely, when it comes to foreign workers, we have a deficit in our sector, and I would argue, across the country, in the number of Canadians we have available relative to the number of jobs.

Foreign workers are really critical to our workforce, and I would argue they're critical to the makeup of Canada as a whole. That's in terms of both full immigration—people coming to Canada full-time—and the temporary foreign worker program. Since we have so many seasonal jobs, Mr. Allison, we do require temporary foreign workers, and that is just a normal part of how our economy functions.

We need to create a program that facilitates and recognizes the importance and contribution of these workers. The current program is far too complicated. We've been talking about this for years, as you know. We need to actually develop a program within the temporary foreign worker family that meets the seasonal needs of primary agriculture and food processing to ensure that we can maintain the supply chain for our food.

Mr. Dean Allison: Thank you.

My follow-up question is for you, Daniel. Quite clearly, you guys—not just your company, but companies in general—could invest anywhere you want. A lot of people have plants all over the world, and this is part of the decision-making that determines whether you will stay ultimately or grow ultimately in any country. This is certainly a large piece of that puzzle.

I don't think government always understands that when you have a thriving, growing sector, access to capital, regulations, costs of...all these things are what make it complicated or difficult, including for your decision as to whether or not to invest. This labour piece really could be a deciding factor in what you said before about whether you'll stay and grow here or you'll look at trying to grow plants in other parts of the world—if you have those options.

I realize that Food and Beverage Canada has lots of international players, so you guys are competing for capital decisions every day in trying to get people to invest, including you guys deciding whether you want to invest. This labour piece certainly has to be a key part of that. Is that correct?

• (1555)

Mr. Daniel Vielfaure: That's totally correct. [*Technical Difficulty—Editor*] the North American businesses were presenting to the group for our capex budgets, and we were asking for \$50 million that we would invest this year, the coming year, in Canada. Some of it is for automation. We will try to invest in automation so that we can solve some of the labour challenges that we have.

On the other hand, you need to understand with regard to temporary workers that it's tough to automate a job that lasts three months. The machine is there for a year and it doesn't amortize as fast as if that machine were working the full year.

We need these workers. We need them in rural areas where there is depopulation, and we need them to make our operation survive. If we don't have them, we will choose other places to make our future investments because it's becoming the largest challenge that we face.

Mr. Dean Allison: Thank you.

Elizabeth, in your answer to my question, you made it very clear that all of you guys, if you could, would hire Canadians. This is what I try to explain to people, that hiring Canadians is always your first priority. It's easier. Otherwise, you have to worry about filling out applications and about housing and all of those kinds of things.

You guys are also, along with Food and Beverage Canada, some of the biggest users of the temporary foreign worker program and some of the agricultural programs. Talk to me once again about how critical it is for you guys. Really, just to be able to produce the

food, it's as simple as being able sometimes just to harvest and [*Technical Difficulty—Editor*] that we can't harvest it in the fall.

Ms. Elizabeth Connery: Yes, that's exactly true. I'll give you an example. Last year, with COVID-19, our workers came from Mexico and Jamaica, but they were late. We grow asparagus, which means they arrived partially into our season, and my estimate is that we lost \$350,000 to \$400,000 in income. That had a huge impact on the viability of my farm. That happened across the board and it happens every year.

It's incredibly important that we are able to access workers.

Mr. Dean Allison: Thank you very much, Elizabeth.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Allison.

We will now move on to Mr. Regan.

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

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

I'll also start off with Ms. Connery.

At the beginning of this study, we heard from officials from Statistics Canada, ESDC, and IRCC, the immigration department. One of the things we heard is that in 2017, 26% of Canada's workforce were immigrants. The figures also show that while temporary foreign workers represent 2.9% of the Canadian workforce overall, that percentage rose in agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting to over 15%, as I'm sure you probably know.

Obviously, immigration is very important for labour in a number of ways. Have you seen a major labour market change since the pandemic and can you explain where you've seen shortages and where you think gaps can be addressed?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Madam Chair, I don't want to interrupt my colleague, but I am telling you that we no longer have interpretation.

[*English*]

The Chair: Could you please repeat the question, Madame Normandin.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: I don't want to interrupt my colleague, but apparently, we no longer have interpretation.

Hon. Geoff Regan: So perhaps I should ask the question in French?

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Clerk, could you please check.

Thanks, Madame Normandin. We will look into it. I'll stop the clock.

Hon. Geoff Regan: If we keep speaking in English, we'll know if the interpretation is working, because Madam Normandin will tell us in due course, I'm sure, as she starts to get interpretation.

She's getting it now.

May I start over, Madam Chair?

The Chair: Yes, please do.

We'll go back.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you.

The question is for the Canadian Horticultural Council.

Early on, we heard from officials at Statistics Canada, Employment and Social Development Canada and IRCC, that in 2017, 26% of Canada's workforce were immigrants. The figures tell us that while temporary foreign workers represent 2.9% of the Canadian workforce, in the agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting industries that rose to over 15%.

Obviously, immigration is important for labour. How have you seen the labour market change since the pandemic and can you explain where you've seen shortages and where the gaps can be addressed?

Ms. Elizabeth Connery: Yes, I certainly can.

Immigration is very important labour for our country, but the reality is that we are out in the rural areas, where there isn't public transportation, and very often immigrants are going into the large centres where there are vibrant immigrant communities that support them and can give them all the supports they need.

Therefore, it's very difficult to have them come out to the farm. I have done this; I've supplied work for farms. Very often the people you get are ones who have their very first jobs, who have never worked before, and we can provide some of them with a reference when they're finished. But there just aren't enough of them who are even interested in trying that. We are very much reliant on the temporary foreign workers who come in from other countries. In particular, in horticulture, we tend to use SAWP, which is a stand-alone program that is very well regulated and the contracts are done with the sending countries, so those countries know exactly what their citizens are walking into.

They're long and ongoing programs that have been with us for 50 years. We are well familiar with these workers; many of them come back year after year. If there is a position that opens that we cannot fill and that becomes a year-round position, very often we will go to those employees and see if we can help them immigrate to fill those positions. But the reality is that on my farm, I start harvesting asparagus in May and I finish harvesting carrots and broccoli and squash in October, and that's it. Canadians, rightfully, would like a job that will pay the bills year-round. There is nothing wrong with that, except that it leaves us looking for someone to do a job in a time frame when there is no one available.

Some people have suggested students and that kind of thing, but it also doesn't encompass the time frame, May to October, for any of the school years that are encompassed. It does mean that we go looking outside of our sources. Certainly, here on our farm,

we've been using the SAWP program since the early 1980s, so there's been a demonstrable lack of local labour for 40-plus years.

• (1600)

Hon. Geoff Regan: Let me turn to Food and Beverage Canada, if I may, Madam Chair, in relation to migrant workers. On the question of making migrant workers part of a federal strategy in addressing labour shortages, how has the pandemic impacted access to labour and employment for employers and for migrant workers during this period? What are some of the obstacles you see in filling gaps in the labour market? If you wish to answer the first question that I have, please do.

Ms. Kathleen Sullivan: I'll start in general and then turn to Daniel because, obviously, he's got first-hand knowledge from his company. Broadly, when we talk to the breadth of our members across the country, when we went into COVID-19 we were facing a very serious labour shortage and still are. This very strange phenomenon is going on whereby we have very high unemployment rates in the country and yet as an industry we are still facing very high vacancy rates.

As Beth has talked about, that largely has to do in some cases with the seasonal nature of the jobs, the fact that jobs aren't where the people who are looking for work are, and the nature of the jobs in some cases. That's definitely a structural issue that we really have to figure out, and I don't think enough time has been spent on the part of policy-makers in federal and provincial governments on understanding the structural issues that are going on here. The pandemic has made very clear to us that this is a structural problem.

Daniel can probably talk to you about the specifics of his company through the pandemic.

Mr. Daniel Vielfaure: I certainly can. It has complicated things a lot. Here I am speaking of all of the tests and everything that needed to be done to make sure that the housing would respect all of the regulations needed to protect the employees and the workers themselves, and also the other workers, the local workers, who would work close to these people in the plant. All of these measures are adding costs and prove that if we're continually hiring these foreign workers, it's certainly not to save money. It's because we don't have a choice. You said it: If we can hire Canadians, we'll always do that first, because it's not only much easier, but also much cheaper because we don't incur all of these other costs, and as businesses we want to be competitive.

I also operate a plant in the U.S. I don't have that problem there because I hire Puerto Ricans who automatically have the same rights to work as Americans, and I don't need to pay special permits and special this and special that. It's an advantage that I have as a company south of this country.

• (1605)

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

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

[*Translation*]

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

I thank the witnesses for being here.

My first questions will be directed primarily to those representing the Canadian Horticultural Council and Food and Beverage Canada.

You talked about possibly having trusted employer programs. You also said that the same employees generally come back year after year to meet the same demand for work, in the same setting. So the needs are predictable.

Would it not be easier for you if the duration of LMIA's, work permits and visas were extended? Would that be a feasible option, since the situation is practically the same every time?

Mr. Daniel Vielfaure: It's kind of like Groundhog Day: We do the same thing over again every year. We provide the same justifications of our need to use the same people to fill the same jobs. Every year, we face the same reluctance and the same barriers. It's unbelievable: we have to redo everything we took care of the previous year.

Sometimes you have new people processing applications, but sometimes it's the same people who approved them the year before. They tell us they have to follow the rules and procedures for the current year. Obviously, we would welcome a solution like the one you are proposing.

That said, some workers have been with us for 30 years. Although they come back every year, we wouldn't expect to get a 30-year permit.

But surely the process can be streamlined when the same person from the same place will be in the same position in the same company, the same plant. It makes no sense to start the process over as if it had never been done before.

Ms. Christine Normandin: In the same vein, perhaps they could consider having more sector-specific LMIA's or work permits, targeting certain types of jobs, for example, or certain regions where, COVID-19 aside, the unemployment rate is generally fairly low under normal circumstances.

Would that option give employers more flexibility?

Mr. Daniel Vielfaure: I can answer that question as well.

[*English*]

For sure, it would.

In the small communities where we have our plants, because our facilities are in rural areas near agricultural land, when these workers come in it's a feast. The population of the village grows automatically. There's investment. They spend money, they go to the market, they do this and they do that.

We can certainly have that. It's a great way of populating the regions that are depopulating with original Canadians. Clearly, we could do that.

That's why I was suggesting, and I was under pressure, that we should allow these workers to become immigrants after two or three years, much more easily. They've shown they like the country and they understand the country. Most of them start learning the language in which they work. It would be great if they could bring their families and populate these areas that badly need more people.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Actually, I'd like to talk to you about the fact that we would like to see Canada grant permanent residency to those workers who are here year after year. Often, those workers might like to get training while they are working. I have often heard that request in my constituency. However, their work permit does not allow them to do it. For example, some people say that they would like to do agricultural training and improve their skills so that they can be more involved in the decisions made by the operation, or improve their French, which would help them in their efforts to obtain permanent residency. However, right now, they can't do that.

Would that be worth exploring, in your opinion?

Mr. Daniel Vielfaure: Yes, it would definitely be helpful.

I'll give you an example. In our plants, people who have that work permit are hired for low-paying positions that don't require any special skills. Yet we need forklift operators. We could train these individuals. It only takes three or four days. They could earn a little more money. As I said, these workers have the same conditions as Canadian workers. However, their work permit does not allow us to train them for another job. They have come as workers in low-paying jobs and we can't improve things for them after they arrive. It's completely ridiculous, but that's the way it is.

Ms. Christine Normandin: In the same vein, permits are often closed and tied to a single employer. Yet employers in my constituency tell me that the various companies could plan seasonal rotations and provide jobs for workers throughout the year. They could move from one company to another as needed. For example, they could help address a major labour shortage in a specific location.

First, it could help employers better meet their workforce needs. Second, it would give employees more flexibility to get training with other companies and earn an annual salary. What are your thoughts on that?

• (1610)

Mr. Daniel Vielfaure: Ms. Normandin, the situation is worse than that. I have four plants in Quebec and I don't even have the right to move employees from one to another. So we are a long way from a situation where various companies could share employees. I would love to be able to have a partnership where employees could be hired at a ski resort in the winter and come back to work for me the following summer, so they would have work year-round. It's much worse than that. We're tied to farming.

[English]

The Chair: You have 15 seconds left.

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Vielfaure: There are times during the year when I may need more staff in one plant and fewer in another. For example, one of my plants may have a surplus of crops, because the harvest was very good. But I can't assign my workers from another plant there to meet the needs. It's absolutely ridiculous.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much. That's all the time I had.

[English]

The Chair: We will now move on to Ms. Kwan.

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

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

Thank you to all of the witnesses for your presentations.

My first question is for the Canadian Horticultural Council.

Earlier, you had expressed frustrations with the difficulty that TFWs are having to begin when trying to get hold of the company the federal government has contracted out, Switch Health, to do the 10-day testing. This has resulted in their being unable to start work, and then they have to be in isolation because they are presumed to have a positive COVID test. This, of course, is problematic, given that you have a limited window of time with respect to the workers.

Has that issue been resolved by the federal government? How have they responded to these concerns?

Ms. Elizabeth Connery: We keep getting new techniques to interact with Switch. It has come down to their allowing some provinces to do the testing, rather than Switch. Particularly western provinces are doing this. B.C. already had their workers in quarantine. I believe Manitoba for sure, and Saskatchewan and Alberta, I believe, are all doing provincial tests and supplying the results to the federal government.

It is difficult, because their labs are in Toronto, which means we are relying in rural areas on some courier to pick up the samples and get them there on time and have them back. If you're doing it on day 10, it might take two days to get there. It's a whole, big thing.

They are working on it. There's not a satisfactory solution that I know of yet. I know that there are people sitting there waiting beyond the days, and it is very hard on these workers to stay isolated

for that length of time. They've come up here to work to earn money to send home, but they're sitting essentially in their bedrooms or somewhere similar to that all day for 14 days. It's very difficult on their mental health, and the delays are very disturbing. We're trying to create a good environment for our employees, and it's very hard.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Do you have any specific proposals for the government to address this situation? This came up some time ago. This was before the committee resumed our hearing on this, during the break. Still it doesn't sound to me as though there's a satisfactory resolution to it.

Do you have any suggestions for what action the federal government can take?

Ms. Elizabeth Connery: It depends on what provinces want to do. Certainly the provinces that have stepped up and said they would do the tests make life easier for those of us who are the employers in those places.

There are employers who have said they are willing to hire a company to come to do the test. I think the question is a case of collating the results and releasing people from quarantine when they get a negative result, but if the government doesn't have it yet, are they allowed to actually leave their quarantine or not?

A combination of many things would probably help. I know some farms are actually hiring nurses to come to do the tests, and they are driving all the way to Toronto to drop them off. They get quick results when they do that, but it can be an awfully long drive, and the samples have to be kept in good condition during that drive.

• (1615)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes, it's not necessarily a resolution for everybody. That's certainly an ongoing issue that needs to be addressed.

With respect to the longer term, I think all of you spoke about the need for workers for your farms, for the sector.

Canada used to have an immigration program that targeted lower-skilled workers. That is now gone. Would it help if the government brought back an immigration program that targeted lower-skilled workers?

This applies, by the way, in all of the various sectors. I'm hearing from employers everywhere where there are shortages of workers. Of course, I'm setting aside the COVID situation.

Would you support the call for an immigration permanent residents program targeting lower-skilled workers so that we can have the full range of workers to fit the needs of Canada?

Ms. Elizabeth Connery: I think that primary ag would certainly appreciate it. There are many industries, such as dairy and beef and grains and all of those things, that need people who would come in year round, or very close to that, and a program like that would certainly help them.

When we're bringing people in for merely four to eight months, it may not be as good for us, although if it were a program that is something like what ag stream is now, whereby they could go home and come back while still on the same permit, it would certainly help.

Ms. Kathleen Sullivan: From a food processing standpoint, that is 100% the case. As I said at the beginning, we're short about 30,000 workers on any given day.

Temporary foreign workers are just a part of our workforce. We are short of permanent workers. There's a structural deficit, when it comes to filling our labour needs. We welcome immigrants coming into Canada, 100%.

The immigration system is, as you know, made up of a number of different streams, and there are a few pilots here and there. In Manitoba, the provincial nominee program has some ability to bring in certain occupations, such as butchers, for example, but we 100% need to really start to value the contributions that—

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

We will now move on to our second round of questioning. We will have four minutes each for the Conservatives and the Liberals, and two minutes for the Bloc and NDP.

We will now start with Mr. Saroya, who will have four minutes for his round of questions.

Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you to all of the witnesses for coming to speak to us.

My first question is for Kathleen. Since back in the 1970s, I've been hearing the same thing: We can't find people to plant or to pick the fruits and vegetables and so on. You mentioned that you are short 30,000 people every single day.

How are you going to solve this issue? What could we do to help this? Give us any example, if you can, of what committees and MPs can do for you?

Ms. Kathleen Sullivan: I would say there are three big areas where we all should be focusing. One is skilled trades. We have a massive deficit in this country when it comes to skilled trades—things like electricians and millwrights. That affects all manufacturing sectors. I'm sure Elizabeth will tell us that it trickles down to the farm level as well. Without those workers we simply cannot expand the industries we have. They will start to contract.

The next major theme is foreign workers. We absolutely need more people to be working in our economy. Other countries are in the same position, so if we don't move quickly to start to attract these workers to Canada, we will be left out.

The third issue, of course, is automation. In food and beverage manufacturing, we absolutely should be doing more to take a look at automation and robotics. The challenge there is that Canada's food sector has a large number of mainly small and mid-sized companies. Implementing automation and robotics there—and I would imagine in primary production as well—is a very expensive proposition. Daniel even spoke to the challenges when we're looking at seasonal industries and implementing automation and robotics.

We're going to need some sort of strategy to focus on that. I think we need industry and government to really start to work together on these three themes or, frankly, there is no answer. These industries

will start to contract. We will see the industries get smaller rather than grow, which is our goal.

• (1620)

Mr. Bob Saroya: Does anybody else want to talk on the same topic?

Mr. Daniel Vielfaure: As much as you're saying that the situation existed in the 1970s—and I agree—it's getting worse every year. It's getting to a point right now where it's going to break.

Honestly, there are some investments that our head office in France is challenging, not because of the value of the investment, but because they believe we cannot find the workers to make it work. Growth is challenged right now.

Mr. Bob Saroya: On something Mr. Rajpurohit talked about with these temporary foreign workers coming to Canada for these short-term jobs, did you see if they're being abused with longer hours, with less money or no place to sleep and stuff like this? Have you or anyone else seen it from any angle?

Anybody else comment.

Mr. Shaitan Singh Rajpurohit: Yes, I've seen it many times, mostly in Vancouver.

I want to talk today for the small businesses—the smallest companies are family-owned businesses—and how we can replace the LMIA's by asylum seekers. I want to say that small businesses or family-owned businesses have hired asylum seekers who are qualified for the particular job or are trained by the companies to fill the places and fill the labour gap. Since they have invested in training and integrating asylum seekers in the job, getting permanent resident status for them will not only help them, but—

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

We will now move on to Ms. Dhillon, who will have four minutes for her round of questioning.

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

I will continue with the United Refugee Council Canada.

First of all, I want to say thank you very much for the important work you do, especially here in Montreal. We're very familiar with you. Your focus is always on asylum seekers and refugees. You mentioned in your opening statement about giving status to those who have been waiting for a very long time because they're already integrated into the community at large. You also spoke about abuse that they're facing with their employers.

Can you give us some examples, please, of the kind of abusive situations that have been brought to your organization's attention?

Mr. Shaitan Singh Rajpurohit: I'm always being contacted by friends in Vancouver. I many friends there in houses. From multiple societies, people are saying that many of the companies are hiring people. Forty-five thousand dollars is the starting rate to provide the LMIA. After that, if they've not completed that year, they will fire that person. So it's very difficult time for those people. The companies pay minimum wage and yet they declare that they are paying \$26 an hour. That is abuse, ma'am.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Thank you.

Are these employees aware that it's possible to seek help when it comes to workplace abuse? There are several government programs to help employees in such a situation. Are you aware if they actually seek out help when it comes to this?

Mr. Jagdeep Singh Batth (Coordinator, Process Improvement, United Refugee Council Canada): Madam Chair, I would like to answer this question. Thank you for it.

There have been many media reports recently. There have been media interviews and investigations as well, with some of the foreign workers probably not being that aware of their rights or about the proper process. As one of our esteemed members has mentioned, the processes are complicated. If it were simplified, it would be easier, not only for the employers but for employees as well, in streamlining the entire thing.

If you allow me 30 seconds, I would like to add one more thing.

A point has been raised about the low-skilled workers. Instead of calling them “low-skilled workers”, I would call them the “workers with core skills”. Even if somebody's highly specialized, whenever they go to a new process or company, they always have to be trained so they can work on a particular process or in a particular field. I think that many of the people who have these core capabilities are already present in Canada.

If we talk about the abuse, there could be a different type of abuse, like mental or emotional abuse. If I'm working in a particular field, I don't dare to change. I think that if I change, because of my status, I may not find a good job, so I just stick to it even if I'm underemployed, or even if I'm not satisfied with my job.

• (1625)

The Chair: Sorry for interrupting, Mr. Jagdeep Singh Batth, but the time is up.

We will now move on to Madame Normandin for two minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like you to make a general comment on the state of affairs for farm workers.

Actually, this has already been addressed briefly, when we talked about what happened with Switch Health, for example. In March of last year, the pandemic was new and we had to adapt to it quickly. Now, we have the benefit of a full year of dealing with COVID-19. Do you consider the measures currently in place to be adequate?

Are there things that we could have improved? I will again refer to the possibility of extending work permits and visas, for example. If such measures had existed, could we have avoided these types of problems, given that some visa offices abroad are closed right now?

Mr. Daniel Vielfaure: I will go ahead and respond.

In our case, they are not farm workers, but we were allowed to keep employees longer than the original permit allowed. So there was some adjustment to the COVID-19 situation. In that regard, I have to acknowledge that efforts were made.

[*English*]

Ms. Elizabeth Connery: I would say that having a longer term would certainly have helped with this.

Over this COVID period, on and off, lots of different offices in sending countries or in the commissions in those countries have been closed. Processing applications and processing work permits and those kinds of things have been very problematic. Trying to get things done in a timely fashion has been very difficult for them down there.

If we had something where you knew that these people had been coming back for years and you said that this is good for however many years, then we certainly could have just continued to bring them up. It might not have addressed the fact that we have to find a chartered flight for them this year, but it would certainly have simplified a lot of the paperwork that has to go into it, yes.

Ms. Kathleen Sullivan: If I could just—

The Chair: I am sorry for interrupting, Madam Sullivan, but the time is up. If you want to add something, you can always send a written submission if you don't get the opportunity.

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

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to build on the answer from Mr. Batth on the issue around workers who are already here, the people who are refugees and undocumented workers who are already here. If they were given status, they would actually be able to fill some of these jobs. What would you recommend the government do in this regard?

Mr. Jagdeep Singh Batth: In this regard, I would recommend that we first of all give permanent status to the people who are present here. They are present here because they want to be here. They want to work for Canada. They want to be equal partners in the growth and success of this beautiful country.

The second thing is that they are very resourceful. You might realize that many of the temporary workers or refugee claimants have found jobs by themselves without any help from the government. They are pretty resourceful. Not only that; they are doing diverse kinds of jobs. I guess, if they are given a chance.... As Madam Normandin said in her very beautiful comment, workers should have the ability to move from one business to another as need be. I believe if they are given permanent residence, then their inter-business migration will be easier. They won't have to stick to one job. Whenever they find or feel that there is a job in another field, they can obviously go ahead and take advantage of that.

Another thing is that we have two generations. The old generation, or the current generation like me, have at least the core skills—

• (1630)

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

With that, our first panel comes to an end. I want to take this opportunity to thank all our witnesses for providing important input toward this study.

If there is anything you would like to add, or if you didn't get the opportunity to talk about something, you can always send us a written submission. We will take that into consideration when we go into the consideration of the report.

Thank you, everyone. I will suspend the meeting for a few minutes to allow the witnesses for the second panel to log in.

• (1630) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1635)

The Chair: I welcome all our witnesses to this panel today as we resume our study on labour market impact assessment under the temporary foreign worker program.

I welcome Universities Canada, represented by Wendy Therrien, director of external relations and research, and Paul Davidson, president. We are also joined by Mr. Syed Hussan, executive director representing Migrant Workers Alliance for Change. I also welcome The Neighbourhood Organization, represented by Maria Esel Panlaqui, manager of community development and special projects, joined by Jennifer Rajasekar, manager of newcomer support services.

Welcome. As a reminder to all the witnesses, you will have five minutes for your opening remarks and you can split your time among the members of your organization.

I will start with Mr. Syed Hussan. You have five minutes for your opening remarks. You may please proceed.

• (1640)

Mr. Syed Hussan (Executive Director, Migrant Workers Alliance for Change): Honourable members of Parliament, thank you so much for inviting me to speak to you today on behalf of the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, which serves as the secretariat for the Migrant Rights Network, Canada's only national migrant-led coalition. Cumulatively, Migrant Rights Network member organizations are directly connected to tens of thousands of farm workers, care workers, international students, refugees, asylum seekers, postgraduate work permit holders and undocumented residents.

I'm happy to answer questions about details, but I really want to begin by focusing on the big picture. The labour market impact assessment regime does not meet its most commonly stated objective of ensuring that Canadian workers are hired before foreign nationals.

The two largest LMIA industries are agriculture and food processing and care work. Few Canadians or permanent residents apply for these jobs under existing conditions. Not only that; there are well over a million non-permanent residents with the ability to work in these sectors—on study or work permits or in other streams. or who are undocumented—and employers can and do hire them instead of Canadian citizens.

Neither does the LMIA regime meet its second stated objective, which is protecting foreign workers. Migrant workers do not have direct, enforceable rights under LMIA. There is no legislation that governs enforcement and no court or legal process to turn to for workers to denounce violations of their rights.

Neither is there any meaningful mechanism for ESDC to ensure that workers receive reparations for violations of their rights. All that exists is a tip line, but by law, ESDC is barred from sharing the fact of inspections, and even results of inspections, with the workers who make the complaint. Most inspections are pre-announced, and rarely do they result in increased employer compliance, never mind better worker protections.

Take a moment right now to put yourself in the shoes of a migrant worker hired through the LMIA system. If you were in a low-wage job and you could be fired, made homeless because you live in employer-provided housing, couldn't immediately move to another job because your permit bars you from doing so, and if you could not return in the future to the country where you worked because employers have control over who gets invited back, would you speak up about your exploitation?

Now think about it inversely. If you were an employer and you knew all this, would you take shortcuts, push your workers harder, and in the worst cases carry out wholesale exploitation and discrimination?

The real objective of the LMIA is to provide a veneer of legitimacy to Canada's employer-restricted work permit programs, and employer-restricted programs are a system of indentured work. Strip away the talk of protecting Canadian and foreign workers and you find a system that ensures that racialized, low-wage workers are made highly exploitable for sectors that seek to generate massive profit. Canada today is the fifth-largest agri-food exporter in the world, thanks in large part to immigration rules that provide a captive work force to the industry.

The LMIA regime also ensures the continued availability of low-wage labour for sectors such as care work, where women's work is historically undervalued. Immigration laws permit the ongoing failure to invest in high-quality universal public programs such as child care and elder care.

The question before you isn't just about LMIA's; it's fundamentally about whether we want a fair society in which everyone has the same rights, the same access to justice and the same opportunities, or one that favours a system of growing inequality.

I'm calling on you to be part of remaking a fairer food system and a just care economy. This fair society must include full and permanent immigration status for all migrants, including farm workers, care workers, students, refugees and undocumented people in Canada today and must grant landed status on arrival for all migrants in the future. A multi-tier system of immigration whereby some have permanent residency and therefore rights to health care, family unity and freedom from reprisals, while others are temporary or without status, engenders exploitation.

Migrant workers have been saying this to you for decades, but it's not just them. Let me quote an op-ed published on May 5, 2014, in the Toronto Star about the TFWP: "this is a basic issue of fairness." It says: "Canada needs to re-commit itself to bringing permanent immigrants here who have a path to citizenship." This was authored by then-MP, now Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Moreover, Minister Carla Qualtrough said just in June of 2020 about the LMIA-based program "There's a power imbalance that exists in this system".

By denying migrants the rights that come with citizenship, laws and lawmakers are tipping the scale in favour of abuse, exploitation, exclusion and death. I'm calling on you to do the right thing. You have the power to act and ensure status for all. That time is now.

Thank you very much.

• (1645)

The Chair: Thank you.

Before we go to the next witness, I would like to remind all members and witnesses that photographs are not permitted during the committee's proceedings. Please take note of that.

We will now go to The Neighbourhood Organization, and will start with Madam Jennifer Rajasekar, manager, newcomer support services. You will have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Thank you.

Ms. Jennifer Rajasekar (Manager, Newcomer Support Services, The Neighbourhood Organization): On behalf of TNO, The Neighbourhood Organization, and all of our staff working closely with temporary foreign workers, including migrant workers and caregivers, we would like to thank the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration for giving us the opportunity to speak today.

The TNO, The Neighbourhood Organization, is a well-established, community-based social settlement service agency providing a wide range of programs and services supporting low-income, marginalized newcomers, refugees, and the immigrant community. TNO is a non-profit registered charity funded through generous donations, government grants, foundation supports and corporate partnerships.

TNO offers unique and customized programs designed to provide services to support temporary foreign workers, including immigrants, caregivers under the previous caregivers program, as well as under the home child care provider and home support worker pilot program. TNO has demonstrated a commitment to breaking down barriers to improve service provision and address the service

gaps by adapting innovative approaches in response to the unique and complex needs of the vulnerable workforce as well as advocating for them.

For decades, Canadian families have relied on foreign caregivers to look after their children and elderly and support Canadian families. Migrant caregivers, by extension, support the Canadian economy. Considering the vital support these caregivers provide and the personal sacrifice they make, they deserve respect, dignity and compassion. Please don't make it more difficult for them to come here and take care of Canadian families.

We welcome some of the changes to Canada's live-in caregiver program that were announced in 2019, such as occupation-specific work permits, open work permits and study permits for family members. However, the available evidence from migrant caregivers themselves indicates that, overall, the program continues to be problematic insofar as it retains the temporary nature of the system and therefore doesn't address the precariousness of these workers. Further, the current pathway to permanent residency is characterized by restrictive requirements that continue to present significant barriers to caregivers.

Although we have previously stated our position on the residency status for caregivers, it bears repeating that we believe that addressing the issues inherent in the program requires that migrant workers be provided landed status upon arrival. The permanent solution is permanent residency. By doing this, caregivers and their families would be able to more fully participate and contribute to Canadian society.

Now I ask my colleague, Esel Panlaqui, to continue with this.

Ms. Maria Esel Panlaqui (Manager, Community Development and Special Projects, The Neighbourhood Organization): Thank you, Jennifer.

For many of our migrant caregiver clients, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened their employment conditions. There continue to be many abusive and inconsiderate employers who force these workers to work long hours without compensation. Some employers do not allow migrant caregivers to leave the residence—not even for a walking exercise that will reduce their stress levels—and many caregivers simply have no time for themselves. Because of their precarious status, caregivers cannot advocate—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Excuse me, Madam Chair, but the witness has no mike.

[*English*]

The Chair: Sorry for interrupting. I've stopped the clock.

Madame Normandin, you had your hand raised.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: We have no interpretation.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Clerk, can you look into it?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Leif-Erik Aune): Yes, our IT ambassador will contact Ms. Panlaqui by phone as soon as she's finished her intervention with a view to optimizing her audio, and we'll try to find out what the problem is. Thank you.

• (1650)

The Chair: We cannot have, Mr. Clerk, the translation while she is talking?

The Clerk: I hope so. She might wish to start talking again and we'll see. Perhaps she could talk more slowly and as clearly and loudly as possible.

The Chair: Ms. Panlaqui, could you please speak a bit louder and a bit slower so we can get the interpretation.

Can you please try to say a few words.

Ms. Maria Esel Panlaqui: Okay.

For many of our migrant caregiver clients, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened their employment conditions. There continue to be many abusive and inconsiderate employers who force these workers to work long hours without compensation.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. Is this working?

The Clerk: Unfortunately, the audio is having a detrimental impact on our services. I'm not sure exactly why, but it's causing injury to the ears. If the witness doesn't have a headset, then under the circumstances, it might be helpful if Ms. Rajasekar gave the intervention on behalf of the organization.

The Chair: Ms. Panlaqui, do you have a headset?

Ms. Maria Esel Panlaqui: Unfortunately, I don't have a headset.

The Chair: You have two remaining minutes, because Ms. Rajasekar talked for three minutes. Is it possible that she can talk on behalf of the TNO?

Ms. Maria Esel Panlaqui: Definitely, yes.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay, so we have two minutes left for The Neighbourhood Organization.

Ms. Rajasekar, you can continue for the next two minutes.

Ms. Jennifer Rajasekar: Thank you.

Due to COVID-19, employees are working for long hours. Kids are off from school, thus the volume of work has increased and, in some cases, doubled. Many migrant caregivers are confined to employers' homes and have less time to study for the test. As a result, they are having difficulty preparing for and passing the language test. In this case, caregivers have been known to take the English language test as many as five to ten times, which is not only inconvenient but also costly.

We highly recommend that the federal government ease barriers to permanent resident status, eliminating the English language test and removing the requirement of one year of Canadian post-secondary

education. Furthermore, we would like to endorse the Migrant Right Networks recommendations in "Behind Closed Doors: Exposing Migrant Care Worker Exploitation During COVID-19". This is the modified interim program they recommend.

It should also reduce the work experience requirement to 12 months and allow for care work in either child care or high medical needs streams to count towards the one year requirement; remove the requirement for one year of Canadian post-secondary education; and remove the English language test prior to permanent residency. Starting in 2014, the new pathways program mandated that caregivers meet a higher official language proficiency benchmark to qualify for permanent immigration to Canada.

We also recommend the implementation of effective measures to reduce processing times for applications for caregivers, family reunifications and refugee eligibility assessments for citizenship. Data shows applications were moving slowly even before COVID-19 lockdowns reduced the immigration department's processing capacity last year. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the IRCC processing time has slowed to a concerning level. Most immigrant caregivers are concerned with their status, especially those with implied status. According to a recent article in the Toronto Star:

...there's a backlog of at least 9,100 applications for permanent residence. That matches the kind of numbers that government saw back in 2017, when processing time was known to be as long as five years.

Many workers who applied in 2020 are still waiting for notifications that their family application is completed. Applications could be returned for minor non-compliance, and clear instructions to officers to exercise flexible accommodation and process applications should be issued; otherwise, applications would be returned after many months, and caregivers who otherwise would benefit from implied status would become out of status.

• (1655)

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Rajasekar. Your time is up. You'll get an opportunity to talk further when we come to the round of questioning.

Now we will go to Universities Canada, and Mr. Paul Davidson, president of Universities Canada.

You will have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Mr. Paul Davidson (President, Universities Canada): Good afternoon, Madam Chair. Thank you very much for the opportunity to appear before the committee today.

With me is Wendy Therrien, who leads our public policy and public affairs work.

On behalf of Universities Canada and our members, thank you for the invitation to speak with you today, and thank you for the extraordinary work that all parliamentarians continue to do during this challenging time.

I had the pleasure of appearing before this group just last November to discuss international students. As you may recall, Universities Canada represents all 96 universities across the country. Taken together, Canada's universities are a \$38-billion enterprise. Universities employ 310,000 people and are often the largest employer in their community. They are social and economic anchors during these tumultuous times.

Canada's universities are an integral part of the team Canada approach to the COVID-19 pandemic, from mitigating risk to finding a vaccine and accelerating Canada's economic and social recovery.

Universities appreciate the challenge now facing Canadians: balancing the optimism of the vaccine and restarting the Canadian economy while continuing the health measures necessary to keep COVID-19 at bay.

It's the role of attracting talent to drive economic recovery that I want to discuss with you today. Today's global competition for talent is the 21st century gold rush. In a world economy increasingly powered by ideas, Canada is in an enviable position, but it's a position that will be challenged. We are a country of open communities. We have an accessible, world-class, bilingual post-secondary education system. We have taken steps like the temporary foreign worker program to make coming to Canada attractive to highly skilled individuals.

You might have heard the Governor of the Bank of Canada, Tiff Macklem, highlight in a speech recently that a well-educated and diverse workforce will be our greatest asset in driving Canada's prosperity.

Since we last spoke in November, there have been two significant developments in ongoing global competition for high-skilled talent. First, President Biden is putting forward a strategy to modernize the U.S. immigration system. It includes boosting funding to improve visa processing and making it easier for STEM graduates to work in the United States. It also streamlines visa applications for highly skilled workers and their families.

Second, the United Kingdom formally exited the European Union, and the U.K. government then launched an aggressive campaign to attract the world's brightest minds to study and do research at British universities. The campaign includes new multi-year work permits for international students to work in the U.K. after graduation.

It's clear that the global competition for talent remains fierce. While our international brand remains strong, Canada will have to work even harder to secure the world's brightest minds.

Since the onset of the pandemic, Canada's universities have been working closely with both the federal government and provincial counterparts on a central pillar of talent attraction: the safe return of over 200,000 international students studying at universities each year. Those students contribute over \$22 billion to the Canadian economy and support 218,000 jobs. Even more important for the purposes of this committee is the fundamental role international students play in building Canada's highly skilled talent pipeline.

While many international students have spent the last year learning online, they are all ultimately seeking a Canadian experience. In

the coming weeks, the next cohort of international students will be deciding whether to accept admissions offers from universities in Canada or from other competitor countries. Visa processing times and travel restrictions will be important factors in their decision-making. It's critical that Canada conveys our openness to their eventual, safe arrival.

The question of talent attraction extends beyond international students. Government measures such as the temporary foreign worker program and the international mobility program are essential to talent attraction. Universities use these programs to attract the best and brightest faculty and researchers to Canada, improving the learning experiences for Canadian students while also strengthening Canada's innovation ecosystem.

For example, these programs helped Dalhousie University recruit two scientists as research chairs to work with Dr. Jeff Dahn, the industrial research chair for Tesla at Dalhousie. For the past five years, Dr. Dahn's group has been filing patents on battery technology for Tesla that could lead to a new battery cell enabling a million miles in a battery pack. It's projects such as this one that demonstrate why the temporary foreign worker program is so critical and why strategic investments to boost Canada's visa processing capacity is a cost-effective solution to build on the success of these programs and ensure that Canada is best positioned to drive the economic recovery from COVID-19.

• (1700)

We appreciate the work by all members of this committee to help Canada recover from COVID-19. We look forward to partnering to build a stronger Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davidson.

Now we will move to questions, starting with Mr. Hallan for six minutes.

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

Thank you to all of the witnesses for being here today and for sharing and being a part of this intervention. I'd just like to say that it's very encouraging to hear things, especially from Jennifer, about how we need to be very compassionate. We need to help those people who are already here. I've talked about this a few times in the committee as well.

I think Mr. Hussan would agree as well that for the people who are already here, who are the low-hanging fruit, it would make sense to help find them an easier pathway to PR. After all, they are also 50% processed, so it would be a lot easier to get them into PR.

Mr. Hussan, would you agree? For the people you're dealing with, is this something that they have an appetite for? As well, how do you see that pathway to PR for the low-wage workers?

Mr. Syed Hussan: You know, there is a pathway for care workers, and as you just heard, it's not a pathway; it's a minefield. We don't need pathways. We need immediate access to permanent residency. Every year, tens of thousands of people come to the country with permanent residency and others are put on temporary programs. Why the separation?

Just 20 years ago, there were 60,000 temporary work permits in Canada. Since then, there's been a 600% increase to over 400,000 today. There are 1.6 million people in the country, or one in 23 people, who are non-permanent residents. That's one in 23 people. In the communities that many of you are in, that percentage is much higher. That means that this many people don't have access to labour rights, health care, education and other protections and can't protect themselves.

We believe that everyone who is in the country should get permanent resident status immediately and that all low-wage workers in the future should be able to come to the country with permanent resident status on arrival. The specifics of—

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: I'm sorry, Madam Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Yes, Madame Normandin.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Unfortunately, we have no interpretation.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Clerk, could you look into it?

• (1705)

The Clerk: Madam Chair, interpretation advises that the issue has to do with the device. So the usage of the device is not the issue. It's the device itself that's inadequate for our purposes, I'm afraid.

Mr. Syed Hussan: Okay. Let me go back to the previous headphones I was using.

My apologies again. Could you let me know if this is better or more appropriate?

The Chair: Madame Normandin, is it better?

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: I guess it is, because I can hear the interpreter.

[English]

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Hussan, you can continue. I will start the clock again.

Mr. Syed Hussan: All I want to say is that, absolutely, we support full and permanent immigration status for all migrant and undocumented people in the country right now.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Mr. Hussan, thank you for that.

This question is for the combination of Mr. Hussan, Maria and Jennifer.

We heard a bit about the violations and some of the things that are going on, not just for these workers who are coming here. Can you talk about some of the hardships that some of these temporary foreign workers are facing, just one example, and what a solution could be for those people?

Mr. Syed Hussan: Maria, do you want to start?

Ms. Maria Esel Panlaqui: I can start.

I think the solution really is to address the root cause. These people are suffering and experiencing so many challenges because of the precariousness of their work and because of the temporary nature of their immigration status in Canada.

The solution would be to give them permanent residency upon arrival. Also, as has been mentioned repeatedly, all those people who are here should be given permanent residency status, especially those who have been affected by the changes in 2009 to Canada's caregiver program. Many were left out because of the higher criteria or eligibility for language and education. Many of them actually are the most affected, because now they are not qualified for PR; they are the ones who kept renewing the work permit and they are the ones who need to get an LMIA. They are the ones who experience these additional barriers to get through. Specifically, COVID-19 makes it even more difficult.

• (1710)

Mr. Syed Hussan: Maybe I'll just give you two examples.

First, we did a survey of our membership: care workers, farm workers, international students and work permit holders. On average, we found that they were having \$10,000 every year stolen in wages. That is to say, they were working overtime but were not being paid for it or were working longer hours that weren't being acknowledged, across the board, across the membership, across the country.

That's because, as I mentioned earlier, if you put yourself in someone's shoes, you can't speak up. You can't assert the rights you have if you don't have citizenship. That's it. We have a multi-tiered system.

There are many other examples that we're happy to provide in writing.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Thank you for that.

I want to focus a little bit on the caregivers program.

There's an advocacy group that I talked to a few weeks ago. They were saying that the program is basically non-existent for them. We have a couple of cases, even in my own office, in which the applications are sitting in Edmonton and are not being touched at all. This is causing an immense amount of hardship on families and people who are in need of these caregivers.

On top of all that, the processing time is 12 months, but some of these applications aren't even opened yet. When does that period of 12 months truly start? We don't have any clarification on that.

Can you all please speak a little bit about your thoughts on this current caregiver pilot program and what things you're seeing that are wrong with it and what can be done to help fix it?

Mr. Syed Hussan: Our report "Behind Closed Doors" was the one referred to, in which we document that, in fact—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting.

Mr. Hallan, your time is up.

We will now move on to Mr. Dhaliwal, who will have six minutes for his round of questioning.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.): Madam Chair, as you and other committee members know, students across the country who have run into difficulties because of the pandemic have greatly benefited from the changes that the government made for their education plans to continue with minimal disruption.

The government has also made a tremendous amount of change and adjustment for international students to amend their study permits so they can complete their work placements for their degrees. It has also brought in measures to increase access to postgraduate work permit programs for those that have expired because of the pandemic.

We all know that students play a key role when it comes to fulfilling our needs for the work force. There are always more methods by which to innovate. I would like to hear from the witnesses today where they see room for improvements to the role that international students can play during their time in Canada.

Mr. Syed Hussan: Perhaps I'll start with one key thing. We just saw Stats Canada release its report showing that international students had their tuition raised 7.1% during COVID-19, while regular domestic students had their tuition raised by 1.6%. At a time when people were struggling and people around the world were losing work, universities and colleges chose to actually extract more money from these people who were struggling.

We also know that this meant that people were working but couldn't get access to most of the income assistance programs. For example, the CESB was not available, and the CRB was very difficult to access.

It was not just that. Because these students have no other choice but to work, they're working in warehouses, they're working as food delivery workers and are facing the exact same labour exploitation that other migrants are. Absolutely, I think we need a single-tier immigration system. That is the number one—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. I've stopped the clock.

Madam Panlaqui, could you please mute yourself?

Thank you.

Please resume.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Madam Chair, I do not agree with the witness, Mr. Hussan, on this one. In fact, our government has done great work when it comes to students. We gave them an equal opportunity

to that of any other Canadian when the CERB was first given.

Mr. Syed Hussan: The CESB is not available, sir; it's very clear. We have 24,000 international student members whom we just served during COVID-19.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: I tell you, I don't have to get into this—

Mr. Syed Hussan: We can provide you the evidence.

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

Mr. Dhaliwal, please resume.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you.

We can't agree with him. I'm going to move on to my next question, Madam Chair.

We have already heard during this committee meeting, even from Mr. Syed Hussan, who mentioned the exploitation of workers, which has been an issue around the Lower Mainland in British Columbia as well, and it concerns me and many of us [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] in appreciation about addressing...

When it comes to labour shortages, it's important to show that the foreign workers are not going through this possible abuse or exploitation. Finding faster and more certain ways to PR status for the temporary workers is good. In fact, this government brought in 27,232 applications with the lowest mark ever—the 75 score.

These are the types of steps government is taking. Are there any other special areas that the witnesses would recommend that government focus on to help temporary workers to PR status?

Anyone...?

● (1715)

Mr. Paul Davidson: Mr. Dhaliwal, I'll jump in.

I want to thank you for acknowledging, and let me also acknowledge, some extraordinary work done by the public service over the last year in being innovative, adaptive and flexible in addressing the needs of international students. I would add that Canada's universities have increased their financial assistance to international students, but that more work needs to be done.

You're asking most recently about temporary foreign workers. I would make the broader case about visa processing. I think we have a very strong policy environment right now, but the operational reality is very challenging, as we've heard from other witnesses here today about how to make sure we clear backlogs effectively.

I just want to underscore the point that Canada has done well historically by immigration and we're very fortunate to have a country where there's all-party support for immigration. We need to preserve that.

We also have to be very mindful that the competition is increasing. Mr. Biden, during his transition, talked virtually every day about increased expenditures for research and increased openness to immigration. That's going to be a very powerful draw. The work the United Kingdom is doing in offering results on visa processing within three weeks stands in stark contrast to the time frames that Canada can offer. That's no disrespect to the public servants; it just means that the stakes of the competition are that much stronger and we're all going to have to up our game.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Mr. Davidson, I'm going to raise a question. When I go out to see my constituents, one issue they raise is that these international students are taking spots from the local students. Could you elaborate on that, that it's not true? I tell them that it's not true, because the international spots are reserved only for them and the local spots are created by the provincial government.

Mr. Paul Davidson: I appreciate the chance to speak to that, because that's an ongoing challenge that we face as well, to convey—

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

We will now move on to Madame Normandin for her six-minute round of questioning.

[*Translation*]

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

First, I will ask Mr. Davidson a quick question, then I will turn to Mr. Hussan and Ms. Rajasekar.

Mr. Davidson, you talked about visas taking a long time to process. I'd like to link that with the issue of biometrics. We've heard about hotel workers from France who can't come here because we can't process their work permit applications, quite simply because we don't have their biometric data. It's not for security reasons.

Do your recommendations include obtaining foreign workers' biometric data when they arrive in Canada?

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Davidson: Thank you very much, Madame Normandin.

I'm going to ask my colleague, Wendy Therrien, to address this issue. She's been working closely on it.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Wendy Therrien (Director, External Relations and Research, Universities Canada): Thank you for the question, Ms. Normandin.

Yes, biometric processing for international students is tricky as well. We fully recognize that it's a major problem, and one of the reasons why it takes so long to process visa applications here in Canada.

We would like IRCC to adopt efficient procedures to accelerate access for international students and others to the Canadian market. If that means returning to a system where employees don't have to open files several times, but are able to deal with all the issues at the same time, that's what we would prefer.

We also see that things are changing fast and we need several tools in order to put our best foot forward.

• (1720)

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

Mr. Hussan and Ms. Rajasekar, among other things, you mentioned temporary foreign workers who are mistreated by their employers. It's almost like they are taken hostage. This is because they often have a closed work permit and can't choose another employer when they are mistreated.

I'd like to hear what you think of possibly issuing work permits that would be valid for certain sectors or job types in certain regions, for example, as opposed to closed permits. They would let foreign workers go to another employer if they are mistreated.

Do you think a measure like that could also improve working conditions, because, in a way, there would be greater competition for workers?

[*English*]

Mr. Syed Hussan: Absolutely. I think labour mobility is key, but it's very important that labour mobility programs, like sectoral programs, do not use the LMIA. For the last two years, ESDC has been pushing for LMIA-specific sectoral permits, which is to say that you can only change jobs if some employer has an open LMIA. This is almost impossible to do and doesn't actually guarantee labour mobility.

I think, though, that as much as possible, people's ability to move is essential. However, as we saw with COVID-19, 1,600 farm workers initially got sick—over 2,000 eventually—and three passed away. That has continued. There is more than labour mobility. The entire infrastructure of temporary immigration means that it is not possible to protect yourselves, even in the time of a public health pandemic. This is why our central recommendation is a single tier, which means everyone in the country has the same immigration status. That is the only way you can access all your rights.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: What are your thoughts, Ms. Rajasekar?

[*English*]

Ms. Jennifer Rajasekar: Maybe my colleague, Esel Panlaqui, will answer the question.

Ms. Maria Esel Panlaqui: Yes, it's the same thing with us. It's the precariousness of the workers' situation that makes it hard for them to assert their rights. Even with sectoral work, we would assume that there still are workers who are intimidated and scared to assert their rights and leave their employers, because they need to have connections, for example, to find new employers. That is why, in addition to this immigration policy, there should be an initiative by the federal government to ensure that workers are made aware upon their arrival in Canada of the programs, supports and groups that can assist them.

It's really a combination of good immigration policy and a strategy that would widely inform the workers about their rights—the education component. Again, we've been seeing that all these things are happening—we were hopeful that the caregivers' conditions would improve after the occupation-restricted open work permit—but after two years of announcements of big changes, we didn't see any improvement in their situation. We see that the issues are similar to what we've been having for so many years.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: I'm not clear on something, Mr. Hussan. You would like all workers to have the same status upon arrival. However, as we know, people can arrive in the country in different ways. For example, some can obtain permanent residency from abroad. Others arrive as temporary workers.

I'm not sure I understand how you'd like to proceed. Perhaps you could clarify that for me.

[English]

Mr. Syed Hussan: As I mentioned, just over 40 years ago, most people who were entering the country—

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

Mr. Syed Hussan: Oh yes, sorry, I forgot. Most—

The Chair: No, no, your time is up, Mr. Hussan.

Mr. Syed Hussan: I can provide that in writing. Thank you.

The Chair: Yes, that would be really good.

We will move on to Ms. Kwan before we end this panel. This will be the last round of questioning.

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

• (1725)

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

I'll go first to Mr. Hussan.

Earlier in the pandemic, your organization issued a report called “Unheeded Warnings - COVID-19 & Migrant Workers in Canada.” In that document, you highlighted the significant problems, the suffering and abuses, that workers had been subjected in Canada, not just during the COVID period but throughout this entire time.

My first question to you is the following. Has the government addressed any of those concerns that you highlighted in the report? Even in the face of the report, you're still recommending that the

government bring forward an immigration program that recognizes all these workers and provides status to them, and also that future workers who come to Canada would have landed status on arrival.

Can you just elaborate on what the government really needs to do at this time?

Mr. Syed Hussan: A report was issued in June 2020 looking at the conditions during March, April and May. It followed the work we had done previously. I can tell you that a year later we are in not the same crisis but a much deeper crisis. The housing conditions are bad, if not worse. The labour conditions are the same. The overall experience of migrant workers....

We are now in a third wave. People keep losing work, and people keep facing further exploitation. Either there are no vaccines or if there are vaccines, it's coercive. Last year when I was at committee, I called it “a human rights catastrophe”. We had migrant and undocumented people in conditions of great suffering.

Now I'm at a loss for an adjective. The federal government has made minor reforms. Twenty-seven thousand people were given permanent resident status, but only if they had high-wage work experience, which doesn't exist during COVID for most people.

The low-wage workers are the essential workers. They are the construction workers, the cleaners, the health care workers, the delivery workers, the retail workers and the workers in grocery stores. Those are the people we rely on. Those are the people we call “essential”, but those are the people we deny permanent residency in this country.

It's a very simple solution. We need to turn away and transform the immigration system away from one where there is temporariness and some undocumented persons. I'm saying have no work permits but just permanent residency for everyone. There is no other way to get any other rights in this country. That's just it. It's not about whether you stay or go; it's about whether you can access any basic rights.

Thank you.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

My next question is for our representatives from TNO with respect to the caregivers.

You highlighted a litany of problems with the program, the new pilot, and with how workers, caregivers, are really unable to get through the system, particularly with the multiple barriers around language and language testing and the education requirements. I wonder if you can elaborate on that component and on what the government should do with respect to those kinds of criteria faced by caregivers.

Ms. Maria Esel Panlaqui: I can talk about that.

I think all we have to apply here is the principle of “good enough to work” and “good enough to stay”. These workers are able to provide care and work. These requirements are additional layers of barriers that are not necessary and are definitely not connected to their ability to provide work. I think they should be eliminated.

I mentioned earlier that we've been working with a lot of caregivers who were left out and excluded from the new interim pathway that was introduced in 2018. Many of them now—and even because of the pandemic—have been experiencing multiple barriers and challenges. Some of them have lost their status.

We have this four-page brief, and we weren't able to finish everything we wanted to say. We can submit it so that you can refer to it for the report. We would like the federal government to provide open work permits and permanent residency to those people, as well as to those who have become undocumented as a result of those changes.

Moving forward, we are also calling for permanent residency for future workers upon their arrival as well as for those who are already here.

Again, we will share our submission with all of you.

• (1730)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

We learned that IRCC hasn't really begun tackling the new application processing for caregivers. Prior to COVID, it took about 39 days for the government to process the applications. Now that number has jumped up to 344 days.

Are you seeing that on the ground in terms of the delay in processing applications? Also, as a result of COVID and the impact of COVID, many of the workers are not able to count that lost time towards their two-year work requirement. As a result, some of the children are aging out.

What are your recommendations for addressing those concerns?

Ms. Maria Esel Panlaqui: As we mentioned, we would like to recommend for the children who are now too old to qualify that the regulation 117(9) pilot be extended and enhanced to ensure that those families are able to reunite in Canada and that there be no absolute barrier in place. Also, cases of gross misrepresentation should also be dealt with through existing—

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

To all of the witnesses, if there is anything you have not been able to discuss today that you would like to bring to the attention of the committee, you can send the written submissions, and we will take them into consideration while we are in the process of drafting the report.

With this, our panel for today comes to end. I want to take this opportunity to thank all of our witnesses for appearing before the committee and providing important input as we continue this study. Sorry for the IT issues we had for interpretation. We will make sure that we take due notice of those for our next meeting.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.

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