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

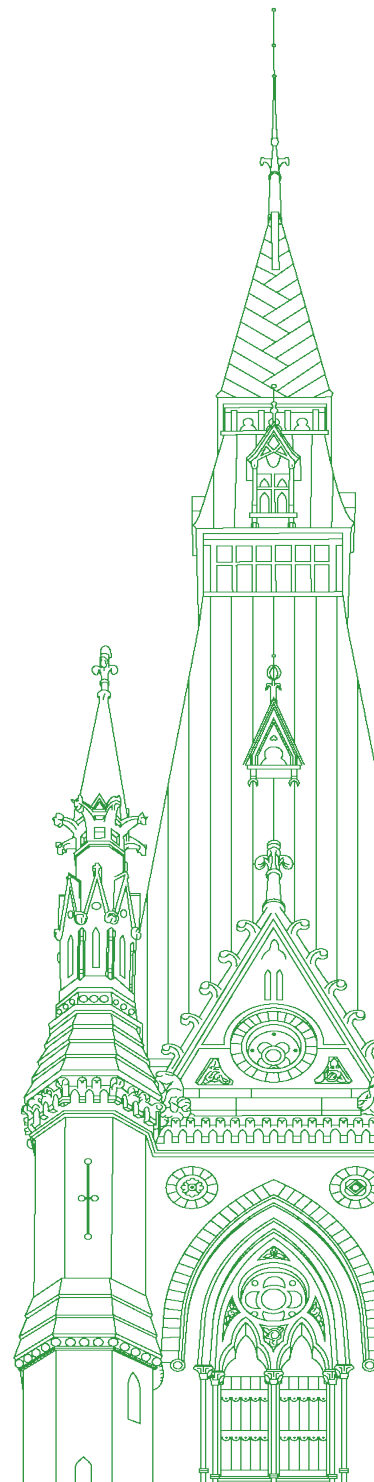
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Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey





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

Monday, May 30, 2022

• (1200)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)):** Committee members, we'll reconvene the meeting for the second-hour portion.

Welcome to the meeting, Minister Gould. Before we begin, I'd like to make a few comments.

As you are aware, witnesses can choose to speak in the official language of their choice. If there's an issue with the translation, please get my attention and we'll suspend while it's clarified. I would also advise those appearing to direct their questions through the chair. We will later proceed with rounds of questioning.

Again, I want to welcome Minister Karina Gould, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, and from the department welcome Lori MacDonald, senior associate deputy minister; Peter Simeoni, assistant deputy minister; and Evelyne Power, director general.

Welcome to the committee. I believe the minister will start with a five-minute opening statement, following which we'll open the floor to questions.

Madam Minister, you have the floor.

**Hon. Karina Gould (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development):** Thank you, Mr. Chair and colleagues. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the committee today about passport service delays.

It's important to acknowledge that we are meeting on the unceded territory of the Algonquin people.

[Translation]

Responsibility for the Passport Program is shared between Service Canada and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC.

[English]

IRCC manages the policy, forecasting, and systems and program architecture, while Service Canada manages the processing and delivery of passports to Canadians.

Before the pandemic, passport volume was predictable, moving through five-year cycles of low volume, around 2.5 million, and high volume, up to five million. This year, 2022, was forecast to be the last year of low volume before a surge in renewals begins in 2023. These cycles are planned for and forecasted.

[Translation]

The arrival of COVID-19 in Canada has had two major impacts on the Passport Program.

First, restrictions imposed to protect the health and safety of staff and clients at Service Canada centres have resulted in office closures and limited capacity both in our facilities and in program delivery.

Then, since people were not travelling, they were not applying for passports.

[English]

Demand and capacity were aligned. That changed this spring. With travel opening up, the number of passport applications has surged. Not only are we seeing those who would predictably be applying for passports on a five-year cycle. We are receiving applications from those who otherwise would have applied in the previous two pandemic years. We are seeing much of that volume arrive all at once rather than spread out during the year.

Meanwhile, Service Canada still had public health obligations to staff and clients. There was a mismatch between demand and the capacity to meet it. Statistics help tell the story. Beginning in April 2020, for the first pandemic year, Service Canada issued about 360,000 passports. During the next year, Service Canada issued about 1.2 million passports.

[Translation]

This year, in the months of March and April alone, Service Canada received nearly half a million applications. Service Canada now expects to receive 4.2 million passport applications this year.

[English]

That's more than three times as many as last year, with a huge proportion of that volume arriving now.

The fact of the matter is that, while we were anticipating increased volume, this massive surge in demand has outpaced forecasts and outstripped capacity. The government is acutely aware of the impact this is having on Canadians. We know that many people have been put in very difficult circumstances. That is why I have directed officials to work as hard as possible to meet the demand and to examine their operations to ensure they're doing everything they can to meet this demand—and officials have acted.

• (1205)

[*Translation*]

In every corner of the country, our staff are working overtime to help Canadians get their passports. Service Canada is hiring and training even more employees. Since January, 600 new employees have been welcomed to help process applications.

[*English*]

Just a couple of weeks ago, Service Canada was once again able to open all passport service counters. This is about a 40% increase, and it returns our centres to their prepandemic service capacity.

[*Translation*]

Waiting room capacity has also been significantly expanded, in line with health and safety protocols.

Despite this, processing times remain long, due to the high number of applications.

[*English*]

Ninety-seven per cent of Canadians who apply in person at a specialized passport office receive their passports in fewer than 10 business days. However, in light of the unprecedented volume of passport applications received by mail, about 96% of those who apply by mail receive their passports within 50 business days.

[*Translation*]

As we announced earlier this year, in response to demand, we have simplified the passport renewal process.

[*English*]

Applicants don't need to have a guarantor or provide their original documents and ID. These changes make renewing a passport easier and faster, while maintaining program security and integrity.

[*Translation*]

I also ask Canadians who are not planning immediate travel to check the expiry date of their passport.

[*English*]

For Canadians who have no immediate plans to travel, there are over 300 Service Canada centres that are available to receive passport applications in person. No proof of travel is needed.

I do encourage Canadians to check the expiration date on their passports and to ensure they have a valid passport before booking travel, unless, of course, there is an unforeseen emergency.

I also encourage Canadians to go to a Service Canada site so as to avoid accidental errors in their application. Applications by mail often have a rate of 25% with accidental mistakes that require verification and slow down the process.

Mr. Chairman, I want to assure you and members of the committee that Service Canada is working flat out to deliver passports to Canadians as quickly as possible. As members of Parliament, our offices have heard from constituents looking for urgent help, my own office included.

[*Translation*]

Frustrating situations have arisen at Service Canada centres as staff deal with the rising number of applications.

We know that Canadians are more excited about seeing friends and family and exploring the world outside our borders.

[*English*]

When that excitement bumps up against the reality of long lines and uncertainty, it creates stress and concern, and that is why we will continue to do everything necessary to ensure Canadians receive the service they are entitled to.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

I welcome your questions.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madam Minister.

I will now open the floor for questioning, beginning with Madam Kusie.

Madam Kusie, you have six minutes.

**Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC):** Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you very much, Minister, for being here today.

Minister, you addressed the foreseen demands, but the increase in demand for passport renewals should have been easy for the government to predict, as more Canadians needed to update their travel documents. Further, this is the 10-year anniversary of implementing the 10-year passport. A predictable increase in demand was foreseeable.

You talked about some performance measures. Between April 1, 2020, and March 31, 2021, Service Canada issued 363,000 passports, yet in the same time frame the following year, 1,273,000 passports were issued. This number is still down from the 2.3 million processed between April 2019 and March 2020. Canadians rightfully expect to be able to get basic government services such as passports from the Government of Canada.

Minister, when we look to the media, we see many horror stories, frankly, from Canadians. I have a May 24 story here from Global News. It states:

A B.C. family said they had to shell out \$3,000 for a new flight for their family vacation after they didn't receive all their passports on time.

[Ms.] Ventouras said her family has been trying to plan a trip for a while to go to Orlando, Fla., with [her] niece and nephew.

She said they had let the children's passports expire during COVID so in February they went in person to apply at the passport office and were told they would receive their passports in the mail by...April or [even] sooner.

Unfortunately, Minister, this states:

They didn't arrive.

"My husband went. The week we were supposed to leave, he went to Passport Canada," she said. "We got new passport applications in case they could do an emergency one. He was told we couldn't get an emergency passport at that time."

The office...requested the documents be sent to the Service Canada office in Surrey but they could not guarantee that the passports were going to arrive on time.

The week they were supposed to leave, the passports still had not come so...they made the decision to change the flight to leave from Seattle—

This of course also hurts our economy. It continues:

—as children do not need passports to fly within the United States.

The cost of buying new flights on Delta Airlines was \$3,000.

[Ms. Ventouras] said Service Canada told her staff are doing the best they can....

We recognize this.

The family also couldn't claim a flight change refund through travel insurance.

"When there was no responsibility, that was the frustrating part," she said.

Minister, I have another story. It's about a family who tried to go to Disneyland on a trip for a woman with terminal cancer. Unfortunately, after a passport delay it was put off for some time. The article states:

Ask Barb Walter's family, and they'll tell you the 56-year-old grandmother would give anything for her loved ones.

But since they found out she has terminal cancer, the family said they have been scrambling to give back to her with a trip to Disneyland in California.

They said they want to make the trip as a family so Walter can make lasting memories with her three beloved grandchildren.

I know that as a mother you will appreciate this. It says:

"This could very well be [the] last thing that she gets to do with us as a family while she's still in any capacity to be able to leave the house," said Brandon Williams, 42, Walter's son-in-law and the father of her grandchildren, speaking from [the] family's home in Hope.

"She wanted to take the family to Disneyland and make this trip happen any way possible. Part of her bucket list."

But the trip is in question, Brandon said, because of delays getting the kids their passports.

Williams' wife and Walter's step-daughter, Cheyenne Williams, applied in late April for passports for their three kids, ages three to seven—as soon as they found out....

It says, that they applied by priority mail in the Lower Mainland, and their flight from Vancouver to California is set for June 3. I hope they can make that flight.

Unfortunately, we are now seeing this extend into other services, as reported in a May 25 Global News article:

Backlogs and bottlenecks in passport processing through Service Canada appear to be causing problems for clients seeking other core services through the facilities, such as death benefits or employment insurance.

Minister, I looked at the dates of the announcements of the travel restrictions—the ones that should have been lifted—being lifted. On February 15 it was announced that on February 28, fully vaccinated individuals only had to produce antigen tests. April 1 was announced on March 17.

• (1210)

Minister, you had announcements this year regarding day care on March 28 for Ontario and March 31 for Nova Scotia, yet the first article, Minister, came out March 8 on these passport delays, which tells me you didn't prioritize these passports or these Service Canada services, due to your day care initiative. You should have taken care of these Canadians first before you continued this initiative. You should have made the difference in your prioritization.

As a result of that, Ms. Walters may not get to go to Disneyland with her family. The Ventouras family won't be able to go on its bucket list trip without paying another \$3,000, Minister.

I wish you would have prioritized things differently as a minister. As I mentioned, in the May 25 article, we are now seeing these passport bottlenecks spilling over to EI and CPP applicants, which has significant effects on our Canadian society.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Unfortunately, Minister, the time is up.

We'll now go to Mr. Long for six minutes, please.

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

Good afternoon to my colleagues.

Minister, thank you so much for coming before HUMA today.

Before I start, I want to thank you for the national child care program. It's unbelievable the impact it's having on families right across the country, but in particular, my riding of Saint John—Rothesay. Families are literally saving thousands of dollars per year. I want to thank you for your leadership on that. It's a transformational program, and you should be very proud of it.

With regard to passports, Minister, do you have any specific advice for Canadians who are planning their summer vacations and now realize they need to get their travel documents in order?

I've heard from many constituents. Obviously, we've all gotten calls, but in my riding of Saint John—Rothesay, my constituency staff have been dealing with a high volume of calls on this issue. Individuals who applied within an appropriate time frame are being bumped by those who are applying at the last minute. I've also heard that those who applied for renewal and who indicated that their upcoming travel was via land border and not via air have not been dealt with as quickly.

Due to this, many of my constituents are becoming very nervous, especially after media reports of long waits. They want to make sure we let them know the best way to proceed, so that their documents get processed in time.

Minister, what message would you like to send Canadians? What's the best approach here? What do you recommend that Canadians do to ensure they receive passports in time for travel, and what do you recommend to those who are still waiting?

• (1215)

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Thank you very much, Mr. Long.

Maybe I can start by addressing some of the things Ms. Kusie said, because she took up the whole time.

Some of those stories are heartbreaking, and we understand that this is challenging for Canadians. In that instance, if someone has urgent travel in that regard, I would recommend that they contact their member of Parliament. There is an MP line that can contact Service Canada directly. We want to avoid any of those situations. If you have that kind of urgent travel and you haven't received your passport, and it's seven days out and you replied ahead of time, please do contact your MP so that we can address those issues. For those who have contacted us that way, we have been able to get their passports in time, because we don't want that situation to occur.

With regard to your questions, Mr. Long, for anyone who has urgent travel, travel within 45 days or less, we recommend that the best way to get your passport in a timely manner is to go to a specialized passport office.

One of the changes that has happened is that, prepandemic, we would see about 80% of passport applications coming in through passport offices and about 20% by mail, but in the pandemic, that ratio has flipped. We are now back at full capacity at passport offices and have the ability to process in person at a much quicker rate. For in-person services, you see 97% of people receiving their passports within 10 business days. If you have urgent travel, please go to a passport office.

If your travel is beyond 45 business days, we would ask that you go to one of the 300 Service Canada centres around the country. They can take in your passport. They can't process it on site. The times are similar to what they would be if sent by mail. The reason we encourage people to go in person is that they'll actually see a Service Canada citizen officer who can check and review their application to make sure everything is there. Part of the challenge is that 25% of applications that come in through the mail channel have errors—accidental, but they require additional processing and verification time. This is just one way to make that process simpler.

Again, these offices are fully open and able to process people in a much quicker way.

I have just one other note, and then we'll let you get to your next question. I'll be very quick.

It does take longer to process children's passports than it would a simple renewal for adults, and that's because, as everyone can understand, we want to ensure that both parents are okay with the child getting a passport and with the travel plans. Unfortunately, we

do have instances where one parent might take a child, or want to take a child, out of the country without approval, so it is really important that this security check happens.

**Mr. Wayne Long:** Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Chair, I'll share the rest of my time with MP Collins.

**The Chair:** You have one minute.

**Mr. Chad Collins (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.):** Thanks.

Very quickly, Mr. Chair, through you to Madam Minister—and Minister, welcome again today—I know that you and your officials are aware that the volume of applications is poised to increase again early next year, as the 10-year passports that Canadians applied for a decade ago are poised to expire leading into the new year.

Could you relay to the committee what plans are in place to address the pending additional volume of passports that will come your way early next year?

• (1220)

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Thank you, Mr. Collins.

Actually, this is an important point to clarify. The volume that we're experiencing right now is not a result of the 10-year renewals. Those are starting in early January. Right now it is purely passports that have expired over the last two years or this year, or people who are seeking a passport for the first time—85% of the passport applications that we're getting are first-time passport applications.

I'll turn it over to Lori to talk about our plans for the upcoming surge.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

The time is over. You may be able to get that in with a follow-up question.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor.

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

Good afternoon, Madam Minister.



As my Conservative colleague Ms. Kusie said, our study on passport application processing times follows a ton of complaints from citizens about missed opportunities to get their applications answered. This has been reported in both the print and broadcast media. CBC/Radio-Canada reports that it is chaos. The reason we have chosen to pass this motion is so that you can tell us today what you intend to do to meet the needs of citizens, not to tell them what they should do.

I know that Service Canada officials work very hard, but you're supposed to be able to expect an answer that reflects the reality that you live in. These questions were predictable.

Currently, the 20 Bloc Québécois MPs' offices have 150 files to deal with regarding passports. I too could list several problems like those described above. Earlier, I heard you say that if people had problems, they could just call their MP's office. So here's my first question: do you see MPs' offices as having a supplementary role to that of Service Canada? My answer is no. If your answer is that they just forward those 150 files to you, as they do with EI files, I would say that's the wrong answer.

When you call, there's no one on the other end of the line, and you can't get an appointment. How can this problem be adequately addressed?

I find that a lot of things are blamed on COVID-19. We expect Service Canada to meet the needs of citizens, and right now it's not going well at all.

How do you intend to address the situation?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

As I mentioned, my office is here for you. We have a telephone line for members of Parliament, precisely to ensure that urgent cases are taken care of. I think all of us as MPs agree that when we have a chance to help someone, we want to do so, as we have done in employment insurance cases. My office has an employee who helps all Bloc Québécois members with employment insurance and passport issues, and we will continue to do so. I know that many of you have worked with my office staff. We don't want to see cases like those reported by Ms. Kusie, so we're going to do everything we can to fix the problem.

Of course, we have...

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** What are the short-term solutions?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Yes, I was getting there.

As I've mentioned several times in the House, we've hired almost 600 people since January, because we anticipated a large volume of applications. We have also changed processes, particularly in the call centres. I will ask my public service colleagues to give you more details on this. It is important to mention that in February we were receiving 50,000 calls per week, whereas today we are receiving more than 200,000 calls per week.

Ms. Power could answer that question.

**Mrs. Evelyne Power (Director General, In Person and Passport Operations and Strategies, Department of Employment and Social Development):** I'll start by talking about call centres.

First of all, as the minister has indicated, in February we were receiving 50,000 calls a week and in April we were receiving 1.2 million calls a week.

We have been working with Rogers and Shared Services Canada to update the technology so that Canadians have better access to services and do not have to call back multiple times. We understand very well that this can be very frustrating, and this is not the type of service we need to give Canadians. Now, when they call, customers no longer hear a quick dial tone indicating that all lines are busy, but they hear information about the services available in person, at 1 800 O-CANADA and on the website, as well as information about the availability of agents at call centres.

Currently, the number of calls per week ranges from 450,000 to 500,000, representing a 50% improvement.

In addition, we have added 73 agents to the 150 we had previously, plus those we are hiring to answer calls on the 1 800 O-CANADA line, which should help spread out the volume of requests. We get a lot of requests for information...

● (1225)

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Thank you, but, can we say today that people will be able to make an appointment and talk to someone at the end of the phone?

Also, can we go back to a 30-day waiting period instead of 50 days?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** As you have heard, the number of passport applications and the volume of calls is very high. We have put in place a number of measures, both in the call centres and in the Service Canada offices. In particular, we have hired more agents to receive people. Despite this, the volume of applications remains very high.

At the moment, people who apply for a passport by mail can take it for granted or be almost assured that they will receive it in nine weeks, while those who apply in person, at a passport office, can expect to receive it in ten days. So it really depends on how they apply.

That said, we are working 24/7 to improve services. The volume of requests is very high and it's not something we can fix overnight. It's going to take time.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

We'll now go to Ms. Zarrillo, for six minutes.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the minister for coming to speak with us today.

I want to speak about the mail-ins and some of the issues that have been coming through my office. Canadians who are waiting definitely feel that there's limited transparency in the process. They have little confidence, because the answers they're getting on the phone are varying, depending on who they call and on which day.

I'm going to talk about one specific case, Minister, because it came to your office this week. It came to me multiple times. My office has been trying to deal with it. There's a family who has been trying to get passports since March and received conflicting information from Service Canada. Finally, the family was told to go to a service centre in Vancouver and pay \$145. These are two essential workers who don't have the ability to get away, so this is a problem and a concern.

First of all, can I reach out to your office this week and deal with some of these passport mail-ins that have been in limbo since March, with conflicting answers when our office calls Service Canada?

Also, could you share some transparency for the citizens of Canada about what the process is and what prioritization is? Why have those who mailed in, in March, not seen a passport, some of them, while those who have the ability to get to a service centre seem to be prioritized? Could you provide some transparency around that?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** First of all, Ms. Zarrillo, my office will follow up with yours right now on that specific incident and try to get it solved.

I'll turn to Ms. Power to talk about prioritization and service standards.

• (1230)

**Ms. Evelyn Power:** As we've mentioned, because of volume, we are prioritizing clients with travel plans. The in-person services that are provided have up until now been limited. Right now, they're limited to anyone with travel plans identified within 45 business days. That allows us to move those folks as quickly as possible through the process.

The in-person process.... If you recall, the passport process is a paper-based process. It was never intended to be moved to the extent that it is through the mail service. Prior to the pandemic, 80% of our clients came to those in-person sites. We received their applications and processed them on site. We were able to do it successfully in the high nineties, so 97% to 98% of the time. That's not the case right now.

What we've required is in-person prioritizing of those with travel plans. To the extent that we can, in those mail centres, we identify the files where folks have identified travel, and we move those to the front of the queue for processing. We absolutely recognize the challenge that this presents to those Canadians who did the right thing and mailed in those applications in February and March. We're working aggressively across the department to identify the clients who require transfers to our in-person service, so that we can get those passports to them in time for their planned travel.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Thank you for those comments.

Could this committee or even the MPs please get a written summary of that, written information that can be shared with the MPs' offices and with caseworkers around the fact that mail-ins are not desirable at this time, that these are the workarounds and that these are the problems that are going to come up if you don't have access to come to the walk-ins?

Our offices need to have full and good information so that they can direct folks appropriately, so could we get that in writing, please?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Yes, Ms. Zarrillo, absolutely. In fact, the regional directors for Service Canada sent out correspondence maybe three weeks ago to all MPs' offices across the country with the most up-to-date information, but we can redo that as well. It didn't go to MPs directly. It went to your staff, so they should have that, but we can do that.

Your MPs' offices should have direct relationships with your local Service Canada director. They're very accessible and responsive, and they're very happy to follow up on that.

I would also note that Service Canada updated its website on Thursday evening to provide as much clarity as possible to Canadians seeking a passport.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Thank you, Minister.

Could there be some information about the \$145 expediting fee and the returns on that? I'm not sure that was included in the initial email about how to apply for those refunds and the timing on those refunds.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Sure. In the initial email, it was clarified that, if someone applied and their application was complete, and they had not received their passport within the service standard, then they should not be charged that. That information has been reiterated to all frontline Service Canada staff, both in person and on the phone, but we can certainly share where citizens can apply for a refund if they had been charged that fee erroneously.

**The Chair:** You have five seconds left, but we will get to a second round with you, I believe.

At this time, we have Madam Gladu for five minutes.

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being with us today.

Before the 600 employees were hired, about how many employees did you have processing passports here in Canada?

**Ms. Lori MacDonald (Senior Associate Deputy Minister, Employment and Social Development and Chief Operating Officer for Service Canada, Department of Employment and Social Development):** We had approximately 1,500, and we have around 2,100 to 2,200 right now.

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** It was about 1,500, so really, you're adding almost another third of your contingent, but the increase in passports.... You said that you're expecting 4.2 million this year. That's a 250% increase from the number you processed in 2021. Even if you've increased employees 30%, and the expectation is that things are going to go up 250%, and that's before we include the 10-year renewals coming at us next year, what plans do you have to further increase your staff?

I know you've increased hours, but what are your plans to address what looks to be a tsunami headed our way?

• (1235)

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Let me start, and then I'll turn it over to officials to take it from there.

One thing that's a bit of a challenge for us is that Service Canada doesn't do the forecasting. IRCC does the forecasting, and the original forecast for this year was for about 2.4 million passports, which gets us into the ballpark of where things were pre-pandemic.

Now, you can't necessarily forecast for human behaviour, and that's one reason we've made a lot of changes over the past couple of months. We did anticipate a big increase, a doubling, in the number of passports, but right now, we're seeing a quadrupling of the number of passports that are in demand, and we're seeing this happening all at the same time.

The difference pre-pandemic was that the reason it was predictable was that you knew there were about 2.5 million passports needing to be renewed, but they would happen over the course of the year. What we're seeing is, you know, a big chunk happening all at the same time.

I'll turn it over to Lori to talk about what we're doing in terms of planning ahead.

**Ms. Lori MacDonald:** There are a couple of things. Aside from the 600 we've already hired, we're hiring on a weekly basis, so we anticipate at least doubling that hiring over the course of the next several weeks. We have hiring processes under way constantly.

We're also realigning approximately 600 staff within Service Canada right now to the passport offices, so we'll take staff from other jobs. We do an evaluation with respect to where we have some flexibility to assign to passports. At the same time, one of the things that we put in place in anticipation of the 10-year passport was technology to support intake at all 317 Service Canada centres. That capacity didn't exist prior to the pandemic but it does exist now. It will help meter what happens in terms of people coming in with their passport applications.

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** Thank you.

Through the chair to the minister, there were 2,700 government employees on leave without pay due to their vaccination status. Of course, we know now that members from all parties are out gallivanting among the unvaxxed, so I wonder if any of those 2,700 might be able to be brought back to work in order to augment the workforce.

**Ms. Lori MacDonald:** Right now we're respecting the policy that's been put in place in terms of staff members requiring a vaccine. For Service Canada, about 249 were off and have refused vac-

ination for various reasons, but that doesn't impact our entire program overall. We have about 29,000 staff. Those 249 are spread across the department overall, so there is no impact on us really in terms of passport applications or processing. We meter out the work in other areas to augment that.

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** It's unfortunate that we can't bring them back, considering there are no mandates anywhere else and other countries have all dropped theirs. We certainly need the folks who are trained to do the work.

I could share similar stories to the ones that Mrs. Kusie indicated, of people who were unable to visit dying relatives. I had one particularly awful story of a fellow who had been in the country for 10 years from Vietnam and he had never been anywhere. There was an opportunity for him to go to a family wedding. Six months in advance of the wedding he actually applied for the documentation he needed to travel and heard nothing back. He escalated it through my office. I tried the line for MPs. I escalated it to the immigration folks as well and unfortunately he missed this life experience, which he can't get back.

You've indicated that people should go in person. We have had a lot of stories of overload at the in-person kiosks, where people are lining up hours before they open and they are still not able to be managed.

Is there any way that people can be aware before they show up of whether there is any chance of being processed that day?

**The Chair:** Before you answer, I need unanimous consent to continue as the lights are indicating a vote has been called. It's my understanding it's a 30-minute bell.

Do we have unanimous consent to proceed to close to one o'clock?

I see unanimous consent.

Minister, give a brief answer, please.

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I will actually turn it over to Mr. Simeoni to talk about the measures we've taken to get people through offices more quickly.

**Mr. Peter Simeoni (Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Canada, Citizen Service Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development):** In addition to all of the staffing we've been talking about, we've introduced an appointment system. The numbers we were looking at just this morning told us that we have 223,000 appointments between the months of April and August. That's a lot of space going forward for clients to find a way into a Service Canada centre.

Lineups have been a challenge. There is no doubt about that. We are changing how we're operating and we're moving staff around, so if there is a lineup in the morning all the counters get that line moving. As the day progresses and people are not waiting, we can do other things in the back. We've opened up waiting rooms as well. There are a variety of measures. We're trying to make it easier on people, particularly as summer comes. We do not want people lining up outside unnecessarily. About 11 of our 35 offices have chronic lineup problems. That's a lot, but it's not all 35. We're working on that and we expect things to get a lot better.

On contact centres, as of this morning we're looking at a 27-minute to a 55-minute wait time, which is not instantaneous, but at the same time it is comparable to what clients would experience with other utilities, for example, in the country. We can be reached.

• (1240)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madam Gladu.

Mr. Van Bynen, you have five minutes.

**Mr. Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Firstly, thank you, Minister, for sharing your thoughts with us here today.

I'd like to build on the reference to other countries. We've heard that increased demands for passports is an issue in many countries around the world, and others are facing similar situations. According to The Guardian, the U.K. passport office is advising that passport wait times have tripled and clients should plan accordingly. According to ABC in Australia, officials have also warned clients to expect longer than normal processing times. It seems that our counterparts are also grappling with this.

Could you please add some international context to what we're seeing here in Canada with passports? What does the scale of the demand and our response look like in comparison?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I think that around the world, and particularly in similar countries to Canada, there's a great demand to travel. People were at home for two years, so now they're ready to get back out and see the world. The situation that we're experiencing in Canada is actually not unique, and other countries are also struggling with the increase in demand and passports that have expired over those past two years.

To put it into context, in Australia, they're recommending at least six weeks to apply before a passport. In Ireland, it's about eight weeks for mail-in service. New Zealand has an online system so it's a bit faster at 22 working days. In the U.K., they're saying up to 10 weeks to get a passport. In the United States routine processing is eight to 11 weeks, and in fact, their expedited processing is five to seven weeks. In Sweden, it's 27.7 weeks to get an appointment for a passport, and in France they actually don't tell you what the wait time is but to expect serious delays.

That's not to give any excuses or justification whatsoever. It's just that when you design a passport system in Canada or around the world, you do it in a way to maximize efficiency. Because passports typically are quite predictable, they're not really built for these massive surges. Even though we've taken a whole range of measures in

terms of hiring an additional 600 staff, probably hiring another 600 staff and moving 600 internally, there is a huge demand right now.

The other thing I'll add on is that the Canadian passport is a document that has a lot of integrity. It's recognized around the world and it's a secure document. While we're able to expedite documents on an urgent basis, it has to go through a really rigorous process, because we need to ensure that integrity is maintained.

We're doing everything we can to speed it up, but we're, unfortunately, not out of line with many of our international counterparts.

**Mr. Tony Van Bynen:** I'd like to build on the issue around the expedited process that was introduced. There are risks and benefits to this new process. For example, are there any considerations related to security? What impact has the introduction of the new process had on processing times? What are the risks that might be related to that?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I'll turn it over to Ms. MacDonald for that.

**Ms. Lori MacDonald:** Integrity is one of the most important pieces of our passport program. That's why, when the minister referred to the new applications for people who've never had a passport before and children, integrity is a goal of that passport, so it takes longer in terms of reviewing that information. Above and beyond that, we do special training with our frontline staff on integrity and what to look for in terms of things like fraudulent cases or cases where we see interruption from other countries, as an example.

We work very closely with our intelligence communities to share information with us, and we have monthly updated sessions with our frontline officers, all with the goal of ensuring that integrity is achieved in each of our passport applications. That's one area we don't compromise on when we're looking at streamlining processes and supporting how much more efficiently we can process the passport. That's the first goal. We look at things we can do that are easier to streamline, that are low-hanging fruit, where we can omit something from the process to make it move more quickly. The example would be the new renewal process we put in place, where we now allow a passport to be 15 years old and a shorter processing time.

• (1245)

**Mr. Tony Van Bynen:** I'll cede the last few seconds of my time.

**The Chair:** You're so kind, Mr. Van Bynen. Thank you.

Next is Madame Chabot for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

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

Our perception is that something is wrong at Service Canada.

We're talking about the number of employees assigned to passport applications. A few months ago, we were talking about the number of employees assigned to processing employment insurance files. In both cases, the number of applications to Service Canada was predictable, but Service Canada failed to adapt.

Last week, I was in Rimouski, and I could see that some people were still waiting for their employment insurance benefits when they returned to work. In the case of EI, you have to be indigent to get the cheques; in the case of passports, it must be an emergency.

It seems to me that the organizational culture of Service Canada needs to be seriously changed, and that this must include additional resources, to meet the needs.

Are you committed to strengthening Service Canada to meet the needs of workers and citizens?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

With all due respect, I disagree with you. I have travelled across the country to meet with Service Canada employees, and they are dedicated public service employees. However, you have to understand that there has been an increase in the number of applications.

As we talked about the last time I testified before the committee, with respect to employment insurance, there are predictable increases in the winter and summer. The situation with the Omicron variant and the closures that it caused were not predictable. So there was an incredible increase in the number of requests during the winter, particularly in Quebec. However, as a result of conversations we had with you and other Quebec MPs, we took action. We then saw an impressive drop in the number of EI claims waiting to be processed, thanks to the actions taken by Service Canada. So I want to thank you for bringing this issue to our attention. Service Canada has responded to the request.

With respect to passports, we had anticipated an increase in the number of applications. However, our estimate was \$2.4 million. We now understand that this was not enough, so we are adjusting.

What I want to say is that Service Canada employees are dedicated. They work extremely hard, they work overtime and they work on weekends. When I spoke with them, I could see that they want to provide the services, but there is a great demand.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** I met a Service Canada employee who was exhausted. She said the culture within Service Canada is not a happy one. I believe that more resources are needed immediately to meet all the needs of citizens and workers.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madam Minister.

Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Now we'll go to Madam Zarrillo for two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think the urgency of the passport matter has been well expressed in the committee. I want to pivot to child care, because this is an opportunity for me to advocate for the French parents in B.C.

I wanted to share with the minister that I had a meeting with the francophone federation of B.C. recently around some gender discrepancies that happen in the francophone community. For example, gender-based violence initiatives are being funded through Canadian Heritage, rather than through Women and Gender Equality. One of the big concerns that came up in our conversation was the lack of a language clause in child care agreements between the feds and the province. This is a concern for francophone families who want to have service in the official language of their choice.

I'm wondering if there are discussions or if something is being implemented as a language clause in these child care agreements with the provinces to protect the official languages and access to child care in both official languages.

• (1250)

**Hon. Karina Gould:** Certainly. To reiterate, the department officials at Service Canada really feel and understand the urgency of passports and are working around the clock to address it, so thank you for raising that.

To clarify, there are official language clauses in every single agreement that we have with the provinces and territories, with the exception of the asymmetric agreement that we have with Quebec. There is a requirement that each province and territory create and maintain either the equivalent of or a number greater than the francophone population in their province or territory. That is in every single agreement.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** That's interesting, because I understand from them that it gets reviewed every five years, but what I heard from the francophone federation of B.C. was that, in these new child care agreements, it was missing. Are you saying that's not true?

**Hon. Karina Gould:** I will be happy to send it to you. All of the agreements are available on our website, as are the two-year action plans that have been negotiated. We can find that clause and send it through. It is part of the agreements.

We have negotiated agreements and action plans. They're two-year action plans. We then have implementation committee meetings between the federal and provincial or territorial governments twice a year to review progress and adjust as needed.

We're in the process of starting to renegotiate the next two-year action plan, and the agreement itself will be up for renewal within five years. That doesn't necessarily mean it will be renegotiated. It's likely that it would be renewed, hopefully.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** I would be really appreciative of that information. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madam Zarrillo.

If it's the wish of the committee, we will move to adjourn. We don't have enough time to get another round in.

I see agreement.

With that, Madam Minister, thank you to you and your officials for appearing and for giving detailed answers to the questions from committee members.

With that, the committee is adjourned.

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