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Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey

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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Committee members, attention, please, as we are going to begin today's meeting. The clerk has advised me that we have a quorum and that the witnesses appearing virtually have been tested, and all have been approved.

This is meeting number 127 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, meaning members, as well as witnesses, are appearing virtually.

I would like to make a few comments before we begin.

Please direct all questions through me, the chair. Wait until I recognize you by name before you speak.

To get my attention, for those in the room, please raise your hand. For those appearing virtually, use the “raise hand” icon at the bottom of your screen.

You have the option to participate in the official language of your choice. In the room, interpretation services are available, using your headset. For those appearing virtually, click on the globe icon at the bottom of your screen and select the language of your choice.

If there is an interruption in interpretation, please get my attention. We'll suspend while it is being corrected.

As well, here is a reminder for all those participating in the room—and I'll be the first—to please turn off any alarms on your devices before the meeting begins, and refrain from tapping the mic. It does cause popping, which can be harmful to the interpreters.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, February 8, 2024, the committee resumes its study of Canada without barriers by 2040.

Before I introduce the witnesses, we have some new members joining us today. We have Mrs. Stubbs, Mr. Majumdar, and Madame Bérubé. Welcome. *Bienvenue*.

From Level Playing Field Incorporated, we have Thea Kurdi, accessibility educator and policy strategist, by video conference.

From March of Dimes Canada, we have Amanda MacKenzie, national director, external affairs, by video conference.

From the Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility, we have Christopher Sutton, chief executive officer, also by video conference.

Each of you will have five minutes for opening comments.

We'll begin the five-minute opening comments with Mr. Sutton.

Mr. Christopher T. Sutton (Chief Executive Officer, Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for the opportunity to present to you today on behalf of Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility.

As a national leader in communication accessibility, we represent the interests and needs of people who are deaf, deaf-blind and hard of hearing. It is critical that any vision of Canada without barriers by 2040 consider the specific challenges and unique accessibility needs of this community.

My name is Christopher Sutton. I'm wearing a dark suit with a baby blue shirt and navy tie. I have a short beard, dark hair and am wearing glasses. I serve as the CEO for Wavefront Centre, and it's been an honour to address this committee in the past as an expert on accessibility.

Throughout my career, I've had the privilege of working to advance the rights and opportunities for people with disabilities across corporate, non-profit and government sectors. This work is deeply personal to me as it comes from my own experience growing up with barriers and my desire to ensure that others do not face the same challenges.

Despite my education and my professional success, I continue to navigate daily challenges as someone living with an invisible disability. This ongoing reality drives my commitment to creating a more inclusive and accessible society for everyone.

I previously appeared before this committee during its review of Bill C-81, the Accessible Canada Act. At that time, along with many others in the disability community, I expressed strong support for the bill's passage. Although recommendations were made to strengthen it, the act was seen largely as a significant step forward in creating a barrier-free and accessible Canada.

Now, over five years after the passage of the Accessible Canada Act, we are seeing this impact take shape through the development and adoption of standards. A key outcome has been the introduction of accessibility legislation in other jurisdictions, such as British Columbia, which is modelled after the federal act. These jurisdictions sought leadership and support from the federal government and the bodies established under the act as they created their own standards and regulations.

In my community, we've also seen an increase in the demand for sign language interpretation, captioning and other communication access. I believe this was due to the visibility of these services during the pandemic, which has made it a common practice for emergency and other situations. This demand has been positive, but at the same time has created bottlenecks in providing the level of services to meet the overall needs and demands of the community.

While progress is evident, much work remains to be done to fully realize a vision of an accessible Canada. Last week was International Week of Deaf Persons, a global celebration observed to show the significance of the deaf community. It was really exciting that the deaf flag was raised in Ottawa and many other cities across Canada. It is a powerful symbol of growing visibility and national recognition.

Still, we all know that my appearance before this committee was cancelled due to accessibility barriers. This highlights the complexity to access but also reflects the necessary cultural challenges of being aware of potential issues and finding solutions to ensure that everyone can have equitable access.

Despite the advances made, particularly since the implementation of the Accessible Canada Act, we still have a long journey to achieve a barrier-free society by 2040. Our communities continue to encounter challenges that require substantial attention, resources and action. The unfortunate events of last week serve as a reminder that accessibility is not just an aspiration but a fundamental right, demanding a collective commitment to dismantling barriers that remain.

In the following, I'll highlight some key areas that we believe are necessary for people who are deaf, deaf-blind and hard of hearing so they can fully participate in all aspects of Canada without barriers.

Communication is a fundamental right in order to participate in society. For individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing, everyday interactions, whether accessing services, attending school, going to the doctor or participating in the workforce, can be negatively impacted by communication barriers. While Canada has made great steps, accessibility to employment, education and public services continues to be a challenge each day.

At Wavefront, we recognize and see these barriers that individuals face daily and their inability to participate in their communities

or advance their careers due to lack of appropriate accommodations.

- (1105)

To address this, we've advocated increased investment in technologies such as captioning, sign language interpretation services and audio accessibility technologies. Beyond technologies, we must ensure that service providers, employers and institutions understand how to support communication access and make it a priority.

For people who are deaf-blind, the barriers are even more complex. A colleague of mine who will be presenting today will go into the challenges of this community in more detail. You'll learn how these individuals face isolation, which can lead to significant challenges in addressing essential services like health care and social support. The pathway to Canada without barriers must include targeted strategies for supporting the deaf-blind community through programs that provide specialized training, tactile communication methods, intervenor services and other personalized support services.

I'm just going to highlight a few more items that we believe are necessary to achieve a barrier-free Canada around 2040. I've submitted my notes in advance, so you'll be able to read about these items in more detail.

We are advocating and encourage expanded funding for sign language interpretation and intervenor services.

We also want to see the funding expanded for specialized training and professional development for sign language interpreters and intervenors. This is not only to allow them to enhance their skills to interpret in these specialized areas but also to allow deaf individuals who use sign language to gain meaningful employment in these areas of work; they may be unable to do so because they don't have the specialized interpreting services provided for them.

We also believe it's important to expand funding for technology and infrastructure development. This is to allow broadband Internet and other services to support video relay services and remote interpreting platforms in remote communities or in areas where Internet connectivity remains a challenge.

We also, as with interpreting services, require advanced funding for captioning and interpreting training programs, because there are very few programs in this country at this time.

We believe in the stronger enforcement of accessibility standards across private and public sectors.

We want to see inclusive design in education and employment to ensure that people who are deaf, deaf-blind and hard of hearing have equitable access to opportunities.

Finally, the Hearing Health Alliance of Canada proposed a road map. We urge the Government of Canada to develop and adopt a comprehensive national hearing health care strategy. This strategy will ensure that hearing health is prioritized across the country and addresses the gaps in service delivery, awareness and accessibility.

Finally, we ask the committee to ensure that this work is not done in silos and that you continue to use the philosophy of “nothing about us without us”. We encourage you to consider the changes needed and to recognize the importance of ongoing consultation with the communities impacted by the decisions you make. It is essential that voices of the community and people with disabilities are heard throughout this process, ensuring the needs are reflected in policy development and implementation.

Thank you for the time today and for including the perspectives of organizations like Wavefront Centre for Communication Accessibility in this important conversation. Together, we can work toward a Canada where no one is left behind due to communication barriers.

I thank you again and look forward to addressing any questions you may have.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sutton.

We'll now move to Ms. Kurdi for five minutes. You have the floor.

Mrs. Thea Kurdi (Accessibility Educator and Policy Strategist, Level Playing Field Incorporated): Thank you so much.

I know I'm not in the room today, but if you would please put your phones down, that would be appreciated.

My name is Thea Kurdi—pronouns she/her—and I'm a late middle-aged woman with short white hair. I'm also a first-generation settler of European and South Asian descent, and like over eight million, or 27%, of Canadians I am disabled, with several invisible disabilities, including hearing loss, which means you can't tell just by looking at me. I identify using identity-first language as my disabilities are integral to who I am.

Thank you to MP Bonita Zarrillo for inviting me back to speak to this committee, this time to share my 24 years of career experience as a built environment accessibility specialist and as a board member of the Universal Design Network of Canada.

Throughout my career I have seen and heard it all. I have completed accessibility drawing reviews on projects of all sizes and types, including the West Block; conducted countless building audits, including Parliament Hill; and contributed to accessibility design guidelines for large corporations in all levels of government, including the UA standards for the parliamentary precinct.

I've also developed courses like the Introduction to Successful Accessible Design for the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, and authored articles on accessibility in urban planning, and because I'm obviously lazy, I also worked part-time as a post-secondary instructor for 17 years in the architectural program at Sheridan College, and since then for seven years as a guest lecturer at many universities and colleges, all the while presenting at confer-

ences across Canada and around the world about accessibility in universal design.

First, please note that I agree and endorse the recommendations you received from the AODA Alliance.

Accessibility is a lot more than just buildings and outdoor spaces, but our buildings, cities and outdoor spaces are the physical infrastructure that either supports or sabotages all of the other accessibility policies and goals.

Unfortunately, we're already off track. With only 15 years and three months left until the 2040 deadline, we need decisive, motivated action to avoid failing as badly as Ontario will have done by the end of this year.

For 40 years, since we changed the Canadian charter and human rights code, it's not that there's design or accessible design; legally, it's a choice between good design for everyone or discrimination. The failure to adequately address accessibility is a failure to uphold the principles of equity and justice.

Our failure and reluctance to quickly adopt specific, modern, evidence-based disability inclusion requirements for more than manual wheelchair users into our building legislation not only perpetuates inequity but also stifles economic growth.

Accessibility is what in part the Conference Board of Canada has projected will unlock \$16.8 billion in GDP by increasing our economy's productivity capacity. Accessibility in design opens markets like tourism and attracts and keeps a diverse, skilled workforce, and of course customers.

However, we are each worth more than our economy can measure. Inaccessibility is hurting people, families and communities every day that we allow barriers to persist and new barriers to be created. Inclusivity not only enriches our communities; it strengthens our social fabric.

The current piecemeal, out-of-date and deficient requirements for accessibility in building codes and procurement speak volumes. They trap too many people into lives of poverty, with unsuitable or no housing. To this day, there remains no alignment between our building code and the enshrined rights of the Canadian charter and the human rights code. Rewriting our building code will finally make accessibility a fundamental and integral ingredient from the start.

To this day, the building code still exempts most housing from accessibility and doesn't include visitability or age-in-place requirements. No amount of building certifications that certify nothing or building code harmonization will address these problems. We must stop token gestures and superficial changes. Real progress means a budget for our post-secondary and continuing education programs to retrain faculty and have supervised program redesigns.

- (1115)

There are also too many outdated and conflicting policies and programs that bureaucracy and gatekeepers are hanging onto. Government staff and obligated organizations seem to lack the knowledge, power or courage to make decisions that fully address accessibility. As long as enforcement is not used, people will continue to not take this act seriously. General misunderstandings happen because without alignment, these codes, policies and standards provide only minimum accessibility—a floor that cannot be fallen through, not the ceiling this act requires.

Also, many use the CSA's B651, the national building code and ASC standards only as goals, with no motivation to do better. Many use budgets and value engineering to do the bare minimum, treating accessibility in the built environment as a budgetary concern rather than the human rights issue it is.

In conclusion, we believe those with lived experiences are important to hear from, but we also need to leverage the expertise of experienced accessibility specialists in all of the areas the act covers. They will help you achieve your goals. Commit, please, to decisive action now to ensure we help people as soon as possible.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for your opening comments.

We'll now go to Amanda MacKenzie, from March of Dimes Canada.

You have five minutes.

Ms. Amanda MacKenzie (National Director, External Affairs, March of Dimes Canada): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for inviting March of Dimes Canada to speak to this committee today.

My name is Amanda MacKenzie. I'm the national director of external affairs at March of Dimes Canada, or MODC, a leading national charity and service provider for people with disabilities. I'm a white woman in her forties with glasses and brown hair, wearing a blue blouse, a black jacket and a silver necklace.

It's a pleasure to be here today, and I'd like to thank MP Falk for the motion to conduct this study.

Achieving full inclusion and accessibility is, to be sure, a great challenge, and we must be successful. We're just three months away from when Ontario, according to the AODA, is required to be a fully accessible and inclusive jurisdiction. There was a 20-year runway, and as Thea just noted, Ontario is far from achieving that goal. Canada cannot make the same mistakes and has to learn from the Ontario experience of making few improvements while waiting years for standards.

Today, I'll discuss two priorities in the road map to 2040: the built environment from a homes perspective, and the design and delivery of accessible programs and services.

MODC's central concern with the built environment is regarding accessible homes. We have successfully administered Ontario's provincially funded home and vehicle modification program for over 20 years, and we recently began administering Manitoba's new safe and healthy home for seniors program. They're incredibly successful programs because they provide direct grants, not tax credits, to people with disabilities with lower incomes to modify their homes, ensuring accessibility and independence in their own communities.

The federal government has a substantial role to play in increasing the supply of accessible homes through standards and policy, such as ensuring that all homes in the upcoming housing design catalogue are universally designed. It can also provide direct and targeted grants for home modifications to help people with disabilities remain in their homes, reducing pressures in other housing categories ahead of national standards being finalized, which could be years away.

The second priority I want to speak to is the design and delivery of accessible programs and services.

The best example of how government ensures that programs and services are inaccessible for those they're meant to serve is the use of the disability tax credit for people with disabilities to access financial security programs like the RDSP, the disability supplement for the Canada workers benefit and the incoming Canada disability benefit. Simply put, the goals of these programs are not going to be reached if they're not accessible for the people they're designed for.

With the CDB, the Canada disability benefit, we have a tremendous opportunity to build in fully accessible program design and delivery from the start, and we don't have to guess how to do it. The CRA's disability advisory committee, MODC and Prosper Canada's "A Benefit without Barriers" report, and the experience of other jurisdictions and people with disabilities have provided advice and guidance, yet here we are again.

National standards are important and can guide decision-making about future program and service design and delivery. While the national standard now in development may present an improvement down the road, it doesn't mean we stop the car and turn it off until that road appears. We know enough now—and people with disabilities have been teaching government for years—about how to make public programs accessible. It's time the government really listens and begins co-designing accessible programs and services with people with disabilities—now.

The final lesson to learn is that in order to be compliant with the Accessible Canada Act, companies and federally regulated industries are really coming to organizations like mine to review their accessibility plans and progress reports for free. We no longer live in a world where people with disabilities and organizations like mine are grateful just to be included and consulted. At MODC, we're asked at least once a week, but we don't have the capacity to do this without compensation. People with disabilities and their organizations must be compensated for review of accessibility plans and progress reports. This is one way to make “nothing about us without us” real for federally regulated sectors. Ideally, the ACA will be amended to require compensation, placing the responsibility on the companies to pay, as it's their job to become accessible and inclusive as participants in our economy.

Finally, I want to thank Canada's chief accessibility officer, Stephanie Cadieux; MP Chabot; and MP Zarrillo for opening the conversation in this study last week about the continuing culture shift and the end to ableism that are truly needed in order to be an inclusive and accessible society.

The questions we should be asking ourselves here—and everywhere—are about “How can we?”. How can we reach and teach people who don't have an experience of disability? How can we be allies in our personal and professional lives? Lastly, how can government act as a true ally, using all levers at its disposal to make progress on this shift?

• (1120)

I'll leave you with those questions and I'm happy to answer yours.

Thank you.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. MacKenzie.

We will now go to the first round of questioning, beginning with Mrs. Falk for six minutes.

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

First of all, my name is Rosemarie Falk. I am from Saskatchewan. I am female. I'm in my thirties. I am wearing a black blazer and green blouse today. I want to thank each of you for taking the time to not only share some of your experiences but also your testimony as a whole today.

Ms. MacKenzie, I would like to start with you, if possible.

When this committee was considering the Accessible Canada Act, the March of Dimes provided a written submission that raised

concerns about the bill's lack of timelines and deadlines for implementing key requirements. This was a concern that was echoed by many of the witnesses, and unfortunately, amendments to the bill were in large part rejected by the Liberal government.

Does the March of Dimes still have concerns around the lack of dates and deadlines in the act?

Ms. Amanda MacKenzie: Thank you for the question.

I think from my remarks you can tell that this is a theme. We don't have the deadlines. To be frank, even if we did, if we look at the Ontario experience, we see we have a deadline in Ontario that's not being met.

What are the consequences of not meeting those deadlines? There don't really seem to be many, other than possibly public opinion about the lack of compliance with the government's own legislation. I think amendments to this legislation to put in some actual deadlines and requirements for meeting them would be certainly well received by us.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: To follow up on that, from your perspective, how has the absence of those deadlines and timelines prevented our progression to a barrier-free Canada for those with disabilities?

Ms. Amanda MacKenzie: I think a lack of timelines gives those who are developing standards—and I'm not going to say Accessibility Standards Canada isn't doing a good job, because they are—some time to take time, and I find that a bit challenging.

What it also does, as I said in my remarks, is leave open the space for not making improvements and not taking current knowledge and guidance that have been provided to government on accessibility and inclusion and implementing them now, instead of waiting for standards to be developed.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: For sure, it somewhat takes away the accountability of those who are getting the work done.

The March of Dimes also flagged concerns with the responsibility for enforcement being divided among the three agencies—the CRTC, the CTA and the accessibility commissioner.

Would you still recommend that the enforcement responsibilities be under one agency as opposed to several silos?

Ms. Amanda MacKenzie: Yes, I think it should be. Silos are never a good idea. I see that in my day-to-day work, and I'm sure everybody is familiar with the impact of siloed work, which just creates delays and confusion. The idea is certainly to have one place where we're doing compliance.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Would you say that having these separate silos and the shared responsibility has created confusion or hindered the complaint process when someone comes across a barrier?

Ms. Amanda MacKenzie: On this question, I'm going to say I don't know the answer. I'm not sure. I haven't dug into compliance and what the complaints are. We have done a little bit of work on the CRTC side with some of our communications companies out there, and they are confused about compliance. Having it under one roof would be a much better idea, and if that could be an amendment, I'd be delighted with that.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Sutton, when the Accessible Canada Act was being considered in this committee, you were representing a different organization, but you did testify that the bill needed timelines and deadlines. Is this still an area of concern for you?

Mr. Christopher T. Sutton: Yes, I do think, as Amanda just said, that timelines are critical. At the same time, when we think of timelines, in the example of Ontario, this world is rapidly changing. We are living with phenomenal advances in technology, etc., and really being able to focus on those and make sure they're accessible in design from the outset is very critical. I think the aspiration of putting a timeline out there is great, but at the same time, we need to be looking at accessibility across the board and how to make it consistent.

When we look at the development of standards with Accessibility Standards Canada and so forth, we really have to commend them, because they are taking an approach that no other organization has really done. They've taken these standards and are using the community, by bringing the community together with other stakeholders, to develop these. As a result, they're taking much longer to be developed because we want to make sure it's being done with the community and getting the feedback that's needed there.

I do think that while timelines are critical, they might not always be able to be met because it's such an inclusive process.

• (1130)

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: That's for sure. Thank you.

At our last meeting, I had the opportunity to ask some questions regarding mandatory accessibility training. When we had the CEO from Air Canada here, we saw that this is something that seems to be absent at its executive level.

Do you think that accessibility training is something that should be mandated in order to be changing that culture that was suggested earlier, the culture in society?

Mr. Christopher T. Sutton: Yes. Mandated training is very critical. When we think of how to make changes in society, the changes need to be driven throughout the whole organization—top down, bottom up, etc. We want to make sure that this is not just a check mark, an initiative driven by human resources or something. It needs to create a culture. We need to live in a society where inclusivity and accessibility are embedded.

Training is one aspect, and something that's very critical. This is something we need to focus on and do better.

The Chair: Thank you.

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

I would ask committee members to identify to whom they are directing their questions.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Good morning, colleagues, and thank you to our witnesses.

My name is Wayne Long. I have been a member of Parliament since 2015 for the beautiful riding of Saint John—Rothesay. That's in southern New Brunswick. I'm wearing a blue blazer, blue shirt with white polka dots, and I have brownish-grey messy hair again this morning, unfortunately.

Before I start, I do want to apologize on behalf of the committee to Mr. Sutton for the problem that happened last week. That was unacceptable. We all know that, and we need to do better, so I apologize.

I just have a few comments. My riding of Saint John—Rothesay, obviously, is in an old city. It's an old historic city with many old beautiful buildings. Many of the businesses are in those buildings. I've become keenly aware that a large percentage of those buildings are just not accessible. I mentioned last meeting that we have a friend who's in a wheelchair. Everybody means well, but you just don't give it the thought. We were going to go to a restaurant with him, but we really struggled to find one in uptown Saint John that he could go to with us, because the restaurants simply weren't accessible.

I'm a proud member of HUMA. I've been with HUMA since 2015. In 2019, MP Falk, MP Chabot and I were part of that group that brought in Bill C-81 with Minister Qualtrough at the time. We're very proud of that legislation, the Accessible Canada Act. To all of your points on being barrier free by 2040, we're almost in 2025. We've got a better part of 15 years to get this right, and you've all touched on it, but I want to start with you, Mrs. Kurdi.

Everybody on this committee wants to get there. We know we need to get there. Mr. Lepofsky said at the last meeting that we've got a lot of groundwork to cover to get there.

Mrs. Kurdi, I wouldn't say we need to correct our course, but what can we do immediately to make sure that we hit our goal of 2040? Give me three things that you think we need to do right away.

• (1135)

Mrs. Thea Kurdi: Three things that we can do right away are these: One, we've got to get accessibility—and we have to stop waiting to try to be perfect—fixed in our building codes. This is critical to not only pre-planning, when we do our space planning, but to all of the rest of our budgeting. It has to be in the legislation.

Having additional accessibility standards is useful for the things that fall outside of the jurisdiction for the building codes, but the building codes themselves have to be rewritten. We've spent too much time tinkering with a small section that has been designated to accessibility. It has to be rewritten from top to bottom, because disability is a part of the human experience in everybody's lives. You're either born with a disability or you get a disability through illness, accident or aging. Fixing the building codes is priority one.

Two, you must use enforcement, and use the penalties, if necessary, that are written into the act. Nobody is taking this act seriously—

The Chair: Madame Kurdi, we have lost interpretation services.

There's an echo coming from the sound in your room, so we'll suspend for two minutes while it's being checked.

• (1135)

(Pause)

• (1135)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mrs. Kurdi.

Mrs. Thea Kurdi: It's about getting back to fixing the building code. "Guidelines" is not the right word. People don't understand standards or parts of legislation.

Enforcement is critical. Without enforcement, people are not scared. When the act was first passed, everybody was on their toes, ready to act. Unfortunately, as they started to become comfortable—and we saw this over the last 20 years in Ontario—they got settled into thinking that maybe this wasn't urgent. They didn't take it seriously.

As a long-time educator, I agree with Amanda and everybody else who said in their testimony that it's about breaking this down into smaller, achievable deadlines that people can hit, knowing they're going to be accountable through the accessibility commissioner. This is an arm's-length position that is already in the act. We need to be using the commissioner in the same effective way we've been using Stephanie Cadieux, the chief accessibility officer.

Lastly, in terms of education, we live in a systemically ableist society, unfortunately, with a great deal of bias about what disabled people can or should do. This is getting in the way a great deal. I would like to see investment in training the next generation of designers and clients in order to make sure they understand that accessibility is better for their business and an integral part of what it is to be Canadian.

Mr. Wayne Long: That's great. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Long.

[Translation]

Ms. Bérubé, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here. I think their presentations were necessary.

As we know, there are non-visible disabilities. Personally, I've been representing the riding of Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou since 2019. I wear a black and grey jacket, and I sometimes wear glasses. That's my look, and it belongs to me.

My question is for all three witnesses. What barriers do your clients face when dealing with the federal government?

• (1140)

[English]

Mrs. Thea Kurdi: I'm sorry. Is that question for me?

The Chair: Mrs. Kurdi, you can begin.

Mrs. Thea Kurdi: Oh, thank you.

It's lack of specificity. There are too many loopholes. There's too much missing and out-of-date information.

If you follow the building code as it's written right now, you will not create an accessible building. That's surprising for a lot of people to hear, as we've been working on it. The building code's lack of alignment with the Canadian charter and the human rights code means there's a significant liability gap between the minimum requirements in the building code and the human rights code, so fixing legislation would be the number one issue for our clients.

I'll pass it off to Amanda.

Ms. Amanda MacKenzie: Thank you for the question. It's something the March of Dimes has as a priority—identifying those barriers and working to dismantle them with the federal government over the last several years.

I think the biggest one we hear about all the time is access to government programs and services. The disability tax credit is the gateway to many very helpful financial security programs. That tax filing is also a barrier we've found. A lot of barriers have to do with trust in government to empower, enable and facilitate organizations like mine and many others you've heard from over the last several meetings, and I think we'll hear from them again, later in the hour. It's such a challenge to take up the benefits and the programs and services that are available to people.

We know this because accessible services are being worked on. We see it at the CRA. We see it at Service Canada. They've identified this need and this barrier, but progress is very slow. In Ontario, if you are a single person with a disability who is receiving provincial disability income support and you file a DTC, it's worth over \$1,850 to you to do that in federal- and provincial-level benefits. That's about a month and a half of ODSP in Ontario.

Breaking down and dismantling the barriers people have—we enumerated these in our “A Benefit without Barriers” report—are very important parts of enabling accessibility to public programs and services.

The Chair: Next is Mr. Sutton.

Mr. Christopher T. Sutton: For my communities, I think it's just being able to access and use the language of their choice, whether it's a sign language or being able to have assistance through closed captioning, etc. For a deaf individual, calling Service Canada is very limited.

Also, I shouldn't say just Service Canada: Calling any department within the government can be quite challenging. In going to visit a Service Canada location, there are a lot of barriers to audio accessibility or to being able to access a sign language interpreter. Just being able to interact with the government in the language of choice or in an environment where you can communicate continues and will continue to be a struggle.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: This question is for all three witnesses.

You said earlier—and we know this quite well—that it's not easy for a person with a disability when it comes to available services and accessibility. I know some people. I represent the riding of Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, which is one of the regions of Quebec and the second in Canada where people with disabilities experience the most significant impacts in terms of service delivery and accessibility. The impact is quite clear. We also know that there is a problem with inclusion.

I wanted to know what priorities you would suggest to the federal government in this matter.

• (1145)

[*English*]

Ms. Amanda MacKenzie: I'll take that first.

Our priorities are to speed up the accessibility of our federal programs and services. I'm sure that every MP in this room has had the experience of people with disabilities coming into your constituency offices and having issues with accessing federal programs and services that are important to day-to-day life, whether it's getting a CRA account, tax filing, getting a Service Canada account or accessing the disability tax credit.

We already know what the barriers are and we know what to do to dismantle them. This is a question of will. It's not a question of “Oh, my god, we need more information” or “We don't know how to do it.” We absolutely know how to do it, and it takes will on the part of the government, ahead of standards being introduced. We can't wait for standards for that. We know what to do now, and frankly, it's a matter of will.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bérubé.

[*English*]

Madam Zarrillo, you have six minutes.

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

I'll start by saying that I am a middle-aged woman who has reading glasses that I will put on and off throughout my intervention today.

I have to thank witness MacKenzie for those comments about already knowing the barriers and also the question of will. We've had these discussions over and over again, and I really hope that the witness testimony today and what comes out of this report are truly acted on.

There was a lot of talk about housing. My first question is going to be for witness Kurdi around housing.

I appreciate all of your work and the comments. You've come to committee before. I wonder if you could debunk this myth that it's more expensive for housing to be accessible for all.

Mrs. Thea Kurdi: Thank you very much for the question.

It's a pleasure to be back here today.

I think, to be fair, that there are some concrete costs. I don't want to try to shy away from that, but because we think about inaccessible design as just a choice rather than discrimination, we're erroneously failing to have the right kinds of conversations about right-sizing spaces and right-sizing costing.

We're not looking at the life-cycle cost. It might be less expensive and take less space to build in a discriminatory housing manner, but in the long term for our society and for individuals, the costs are enormous in health care costs and renovation costs. We cannot continue to pretend that we don't have an accessible housing crisis.

To Amanda's point, we know exactly what needs to be done. It has been in our standards, in the wings. We have great accessibility built environment requirements, many of which, when our designers and contractors are trained how to do them, will not add excessive costs or any costs. Many of the things we can do right now, today. Remember that accessibility is not just about manual wheelchair users. There are lots of other types of disabilities that we're not addressing. We're doing a very poor job for hearing loss, for vision loss and for people with environmental sensitivities, autism or dementia.

We know what to do, so it's not necessarily a matter of cost. There might be a 1% difference, but the better trained our professionals are and the more experienced they are, the more we see those costs drop away. It's a better investment and a better sustainability plan if you don't have to build something and then tear it apart to fix it again.

Thank you.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much. Again, that addresses the culture change and that ableist idea.

How can something like the bills that the federal government brings forward better address the cultural shift that needs to happen around ableism in this country?

Mrs. Thea Kurdi: I think anti-ableist training or at least ableism awareness training and bias training are obviously a great idea across the board. They challenge the mistakes and the misunderstandings that people have. They give voice to people with lived experience for certain, but I wouldn't want to be spending a lot of time or a lot of resources. I want to make sure that anything we do does not delay changes.

The recommendations David Lepofsky gave you earlier this week are bang on target. We can enact those and, I would add, invest with our colleges and universities. They have no money right now to retrain the faculty who are creating the programs that are training the next generation of barrier busters or the people who are going to get us to 2040. Year after year, we're getting graduates who don't know any better, who are making all the same mistakes and have all the same biases and, unfortunately, ableist standard practice drilled into them from day one. We could make a huge difference in that kind of education, but I'm not saying that other types of education are not useful.

• (1150)

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: That's such an important point. Thank you so much.

I'm going to move on to Ms. MacKenzie.

You talked about this basically free labour that organizations like yours offer society. I wonder if you could share how that really impacts the work that you do and what kind of culture change needs to happen there.

Ms. Amanda MacKenzie: It's really interesting, and I appreciate the question.

First of all, the companies in the private sector that are doing accessibility plans and progress reports have this expectation that an organization or a person is just going to consult for them for free. We are all very familiar with the requirement to pay for consulting services. It's not rocket science for companies to think that maybe they have to pay the people they're asking to review their accessibility plans.

It astonishes me, frankly, every single time, and I know it shouldn't; I should be used to it by now. This is a real cultural problem when we're expecting people with disabilities in organizations like mine, like Thea's and like Chris's to just give free advice on accessibility plans and their progress reports.

I think the solution to that problem is an amendment to the legislation or a regulation that requires those who are doing those plans and reports to pay for consulting services. My understanding is that the Canadian Human Rights Commission has developed a schedule of what those payments could be, and I think we could start to use that as a guideline and probably update it for 2025. It should be a requirement.

We all pay for consulting, and I'm not sure why this would be any different. It really is demoralizing to think, from a cultural perspective, that anyone would think that a person with a disability should not be compensated for their expertise, because that's what it is.

The Chair: Given that everybody went well over their timeline, I want to be fair to all.

I'll conclude a round by giving two and a half minutes to each of the parties. If nobody objects strenuously to that, we'll begin.

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Mr. Chair, I think we should stay with the normal protocol, and it's also based on how many members are at the table. I think that both we and the other parties should have more time.

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

Mr. Scott Aitchison (Parry Sound—Muskoka, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to say thank you to the witnesses for being here. My name is Scott Aitchison. I'm the member of Parliament for Parry Sound—Muskoka in Ontario. I'm wearing a light-grey suit with a light-blue shirt and a dark navy tie. I have very greying hair.

I have a question specifically about housing. This is for Amanda MacKenzie.

I'm sure you're familiar with OASIS, Ontario Agencies Supporting Individuals with Special Needs. They have reported that people with developmental disabilities across Ontario face wait times for affordable housing that are 10 times longer than the average for people in Ontario.

You spoke a little bit about the program that March of Dimes operates in renovating space. I wonder if you could speak to that issue more broadly, and not just for persons with developmental disabilities. Could you speak specifically about the wait times and about how long it takes for people to find attainable and accessible housing?

• (1155)

Ms. Amanda MacKenzie: I'll speak from some personal experience here. I had a little brother, Graham, who passed away a couple of years ago. He had both intellectual and physical disabilities. When he was a teenager, my parents started to worry about what his housing situation would be, not wanting to require either my older brother or me to provide housing and care for our sibling. Of course, I would have been happy to do so, but it was a situation that we ran into.

We were connected to Community Living Toronto. The wait times were outrageously long. He would have been a senior before he had the housing and the supports he needed. Instead, my mom was an incredible advocate. She got him an apartment through a special program called Lights, connected to Community Living, and put together basically an independent situation outside of the wait times we had.

There are those options available, but they can be expensive. They can be difficult to put together with the funding situation. I saw that first-hand. I think a huge part of the issue is around the supports that are needed for people with intellectual and other types of disabilities in housing. In their housing, we provide our clients, our service users, with many, many different types of supports. The wait times are lengthy. It's because we don't have the housing stock—either the accessible housing stock or the affordable housing stock—to deliver reasonable housing in a reasonable time.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Thank you very much.

I'll pass the rest of my time over to MP Gray.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you very much.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here.

I'm Tracy Gray. I have shoulder-length blond hair. I have a black blouse and a light-blue blazer.

Amanda, I'm very sorry to hear of your loss, and Mr. Sutton, it's good to have you here today.

I have just a little bit of time here, and I'd like to ask Easter Seals Canada a couple of questions.

Easter Seals Canada is well known nationwide for camps that provide an accessible summer experience to many young Canadians who otherwise wouldn't have the chance. Given the cost of living crisis that Canada has faced with regard to the cost of fuel, transportation and food, how have increasing costs impacted Easter Seals' ability to operate summer camps?

The Chair: That's the next panel, Ms. Gray.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Oh. I apologize.

The Chair: We do not have them on this particular panel.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: I'm sorry about that.

The Chair: I was wondering what I had missed.

We have March of Dimes Canada.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Okay. I'll go to March of Dimes.

I have a similar question, actually, regarding the people you serve and also the services you offer. Could you perhaps speak to how the cost of living crisis has been affecting those you serve and the operation of your budgets?

Ms. Amanda MacKenzie: Yes. The cost of living is impacting everyone. I'm sure everybody in this meeting is experiencing the impact of that.

Speaking to the needs of our clients, our service users—we've switched from "clients" to "service users", so I'm making that shift in my head too—they're talking a lot about the cost of living. In the context of the Canada disability benefit, we did four focus groups over the summer as part of our regulations development submission. We heard a lot about the cost of living and about how the Canada disability benefit is just so disappointingly low.

You know, with only an additional maximum of \$200 a month and bringing—

The Chair: Mrs. Gray, your time has concluded. You can follow up with them.

To conclude, I have Mr. Collins for five minutes.

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

Welcome to the witnesses. It's MP Chad Collins from Hamilton East—Stoney Creek. I have brown hair. I'm wearing a blue suit and a blue tie today.

Ms. Kurdi, I'll start with you.

Ms. Cadieux, the chief accessibility officer, appeared as a witness at the committee and provided testimony. She said something that struck me as very important, so I copied her statement here. She said, "I have noted that, while there is a lot of willingness and good intentions, many still aren't sure what accessibility really means and why it matters." Then she went on to say that there needs to be more proactive communication and education around the importance of accessibility.

Can I get your comments on that statement? What role can the federal government play in dealing with that whole issue of communicating and educating both the corporate sector—and I know you have extensive experience, from what you relayed to us in your opening statement—and what can we do for other levels of government, including our own, on that issue?

• (1200)

Mrs. Thea Kurdi: Well, I think, as David Lepofsky said earlier this week, that there are many levers that you have. There are some things that are under the jurisdiction of this act that you could be doing and there are other ways that you could be working with other parts of the federal government and other programs you have.

The lack of alignment between the building code and the Canadian charter and the human rights code is one of the biggest problems we see for built environment and design. Why is it a human right? The Canadian charter says disabled people are equal citizens, and the human rights code says buildings and spaces shall not discriminate against them, so why are we as accessibility consultants warning people that following the building code is not getting them to that level and that there's a liability gap?

If it's required in those higher pieces of legislation, the building code should say that too, and it's part of the reason we hear so much push-back or concern, such as "Where does it say in the building code that we have to do that? Why is it in the human rights code but not in the building code?"

Again, as I said, one thing the government could do.... They provide funding to our educational institutions for post-secondary training. Of course, training the designers is a key part of understanding what accessibility looks like. People often mistakenly say, "Accessibility is ugly, and it's hard, and it's expensive," but that's because they're doing it too late and they haven't spent time, especially during their developmental years, thinking about how amazing accessibility can be. We're not accessing their skills.

Also, one point David Lepofsky made was about attaching requirements so that no federal money is spent on creating new barriers. Whether that's putting requirements in our procurement policies while we wait for the building code to finally get up to speed, how we use accessibility consultants or making sure accessibility requirements are done further upstream, it has to be there right from the start, which is what you say in the legislation: "accessibility from the start". If we don't do those things, we're missing major parts of the answers that, unfortunately, will feed back into the training and rethinking.

Mr. Chad Collins: Thanks. I like the fact that you mentioned Mr. Lepofsky's answer to that question: Although he wasn't asked that question, he offered that answer up on his own. He talked about attaching some strong strings to provincial funding when we have provincial partners.

Someone on the panel here today talked about the deplorable rates that people with disabilities face in the province of Ontario. ODSP rates haven't changed in many years, if at all. Mr. Lepofsky talked about how, if the province wants subway dollars and it's going to build a subway with all kinds of barriers, then you need to start attaching some strong strings to that funding and some requirements to increase accessibility.

Can I get your thoughts on his suggestion in that regard?

Mrs. Thea Kurdi: Thank you. Yes, absolutely—I agree 100%. I worked on a lot of those projects and saw how....

It's like when I say, "How hard is it to shift from inaccessible design to accessible design? Well, it depends on when you start." If you start at the beginning—with attachments to funding, for example—then you're aiming in the right direction and the amount of change you have to make is of a very small degree. However, if you already let loose the arrow and have done all your planning, budgeting and space planning, and then say, "Now we want to make it

accessible," how hard is it going to be to change the trajectory of that arrow? How much money are you going to have to throw at it?

The accessible housing crisis is one part, but our urban environments, including transit, are getting a lot of money as well. Without those strings attached and, again, if it's not in the building code, we get push-back—"Where does it say we have to do it?" We don't see the consequences for people who are not doing it, so those are the loopholes we need to address.

The Chair: Thank you.

That concludes this round. We'll suspend for two minutes while we set up for the next panel.

Again, thank you, witnesses, for taking the time to appear before the committee and giving your comments and testimony on this very important study. You can leave.

We'll suspend for four minutes while we transition to the next panel.

- (1205) _____ (Pause) _____
- (1210)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Committee members, we will resume the second and final hour of this particular study by welcoming our new witnesses.

From DeafBlind Ontario Services, we have Karen Madho, who is appearing by video conference. We also have Karen Moores from Easter Seals Canada, who is also appearing by video conference.

I have to advise the committee, according to the rules of the chamber, that one witness who was provided late, Diane Bergeron with CNIB, did not clear the sound test for translation, so we'll just have two witnesses.

We will begin with Ms. Madho for five minutes, please.

Ms. Karen Madho (Manager of Public Relations, DeafBlind Ontario Services): Thank you.

My name is Karen Madho. I'm with DeafBlind Ontario Services. I want to express my thanks to you for inviting me here today to share our perspective.

I want to start by mentioning that the 2022 Canadian survey on disability data from Statistics Canada confirms that just over 2% of Canadians 15 years of age and older are deaf-blind. That's just over 600,000 people.

Of those who are deaf-blind, 52%, or just over 300,000 people, are 65 years and older. This part of the population that experiences both vision and hearing loss—dual sensory loss—are seniors who are experiencing this hearing and vision loss as part of the aging process.

Of the estimated 1.5%—or 120,000—of Canadians who live with developmental disabilities, as per the Canadian survey on disability data, approximately 0.2%, or 240, are deaf, hard of hearing or use non-traditional forms of communication.

DeafBlind Ontario Services supports people who are deaf-blind, as well as those living with a developmental disability who are deaf or hard of hearing or who use non-traditional forms of communication. Our specialized services are customized to each person's unique needs, methods of communication and goals to live their best life. Our reach extends into remote communities and urban centres across the province of Ontario, with supported living homes and community services. We draw on our 35 years of experience, as well as evidence-based practices, to offer the highest quality of services to the people we support.

Deaf-blindness is a combination of both hearing and vision loss that is unique to each person. It impacts their ability to access information, their communication and their mobility. For someone to be considered legally blind, their visual acuity would be 20 over 200 in both eyes. For someone who is legally deaf, they may have little or no functioning hearing.

Our team of professionals whom we employ on the front lines assists with communication. Among them are intervenors, who are specially trained professionals that provide visual and auditory information to people who are deaf-blind to help them have more of a sense of social connectedness in their lives.

People that we support who live with developmental disabilities and are deaf, hard of hearing or use non-traditional forms of communication receive supports from direct support professionals. They support and empower that person to learn concepts and skills, gather information, and develop communication and language.

For the people we support, living their best life can mean many different things. With an intervenor or a direct support professional, it's about receiving information about the environment. It's about receiving the contextual information and understanding what's around them. If someone is walking down the street with their communication support, is it a busy street? What are those sounds that they're picking up from some residual hearing? Maybe it's music from a nearby restaurant. There are kids running down the street laughing as they pass by.

All of those contextual pieces are what an intervenor, for example, would be sharing with a person who's deaf-blind.

For example, to one person we support, it's all about independence. It means developing the skills she needs to travel on a bus in her community. This is something she's identified as a goal. That

would mean getting a bus pass, working together with her intervenor to get that together. It's planning trips, taking new practice rides to learn the routes and searching up local attractions with her intervenor so that she can be a bit more independent.

With varying degrees of sensory loss, each person would use their own unique and individual way to communicate. They may use one or more methods of communication.

We have some recommendations we want to share on how to promote inclusion. For us, it really means recognizing deaf-blindness as a distinct disability, legally and in policies.

Include deaf-blindness in Statistics Canada surveys, so that data could be collected and could be used for policies and funding decisions.

Offer intervenor services across Canada. No matter where you live, you shouldn't be restricted in having these really valuable services.

Include people with lived experience in all aspects of society, including planning, policies and funding. That's critical, and it would mean that you are also accommodating their communication needs. That's very important,

Include seniors with dual sensory loss in any pan-Canadian policy framework so that they can participate in their communities as fully as possible.

- (1215)

Ensure that all accessible formats are available for the people we support. That would mean ensuring that the person can access information in any method of communication that they require, of course with the support of a specially trained intervenor or direct support professional.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Madho, have you concluded your comments?

Ms. Karen Madho: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you; you're ahead of time.

Ms. Moores, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Karen Moores (Consultant, Easter Seals Canada): Thank you.

Good morning to the chair and to all committee members.

My name is Karen Moores. I'm a blonde woman. I'm 42. I'm appearing virtually. There's a bookcase with some family photos, books and magazines behind me.

Today I represent my colleagues at Easter Seals Canada. Our community includes 150,000 Canadians living with a disability in all parts of Canada.

I would just like to note that we're a truly national family as a charity. I work remotely and live in St. John's in Newfoundland and Labrador, and many of my colleagues in different parts of the organization are around the country, which is one of the beautiful parts of Easter Seals.

We are a charity that turned 100 two years ago. The centennial for Easter Seals was in 2022. For 102 years, Easter Seals Canada has very proudly provided programs and services that improve accessibility and inclusion and improve the quality of life for people with disabilities. Our organization provides programs and services for all disabilities for all ages, with many programs anywhere in Canada, an example being the Access 2 card program. Anyone in Canada can get an Access 2 card.

For the record, I would like to note that Easter Sales Canada is a federated model. While I represent our national organization today before your committee, we have nationwide in various Canadian communities an incredible network of provincial, and one territorial, Easter Seals organizations that do their own exceptional work as their own independent entities but are still part of the Easter Seals family.

Our provincial members—and a shout-out to them today—are the leaders of the exceptional camp program that you might hear about in your home constituencies. This camp program is just one example of a barrier-free Canada in action. It's accessible camping and recreation where memories are made, leadership skills are gained, and sports, healthy living and leisure join together. I encourage everyone here today to take the time to learn about the success story that is the Easter Seals Canada camp program. If there's an Easter Seals camp near you, I suggest that you visit.

As your committee explores what a barrier-free Canada may look like by 2040, I want to share today that we at Easter Seals believe that a barrier-free country involves short-term changes. We're very much of the mindset of what we can do right now and what we can change today. To echo another witness, there never will be perfection; we can strive for it, but let's make some incremental change today. Alongside those intergenerational investments for the longer term, what can we all look back at in 20, 30 or 40 years that we've put in motion today to change?

We would like to echo my colleague Amanda at March of Dimes. We agree with her comments on the Canada disability benefit and echo them. I won't touch on that. I think it's been well said by other witnesses; however, Easter Seals Canada of course supports that position.

I will today touch on employment. We talk a lot about employment at Easter Seals Canada. In a world of changing job markets, skill development needs and technology, and as artificial intelligence really changes our world, we need to ensure that we as a nation are world leaders and innovators in how we make our job market truly inclusive. That's for every person and for every disability.

Employment accessibility also means equalizing opportunities for persons in rural and remote parts of Canada just as much as in urban Canada.

As I said, I'm from St. John's. I'm particularly passionate in making sure that every part of our country has equal access to a truly inclusive country. While we've made progress, I think that in our changing world, we all need to do more to ensure that our economy is truly inclusive for workforces in every industry and community Canada-wide, at boardroom tables, in our skilled trades, in our tech sector and in our emerging and traditional economies. The 6.2 million Canadians living with a disability are under-represented in our economy, and we all need to change this.

• (1220)

The second point I'll touch on is transportation.

When we imagine a barrier-free Canada, particularly for employment and jobs, we know that enhanced, accessible and affordable transportation must be a part of this. The ability to travel for work safely and with dignity must be a part of the push to achieve a barrier-free country and a truly inclusive economy.

We want to be a part of those innovative policy solutions, and I believe we already are, but we want safe, accessible, affordable transportation and transit for persons with disabilities and their families, and again, in rural and remote areas, on airlines, on ferries and on rail.

The Chair: Ms. Moores, your time has concluded.

Ms. Karen Moores: Thank you to the committee. I welcome your questions.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll begin with Mr. Aitchison for six minutes, including the answers.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to start with Ms. Madho. I want you to talk to us a bit about some of the barriers that persons with disabilities face, particularly relating to housing and access to housing.

We understand that we're in a crisis in this country. Do persons with disabilities face greater challenges than the general population at accessing housing?

Ms. Karen Madho: Thank you for your question.

I think they definitely do. I don't have any numbers to support that. I know that in a previous session, we talked about OASIS numbers, and certainly they're very distressing.

At DeafBlind Ontario Services, we offer supported living opportunities, and I would say it is quite expensive to make sure that each of those locations that we operate is accessible in the sense that they are safe. They are places where someone, who may have more than one disability in addition to being deaf-blind, would be able to move around, be independent, and be able to engage safely in daily living tasks that you or I may take for granted, and usually, of course, with the support of either an intervenor or a direct support professional.

You may be someone living in one of our locations. You look at adding in those accessibility pieces when you're renovating a home or purchasing it, even if they're not needed at that point in time. Certainly, they can be expensive. While you don't need railings on the side of the walls to help guide you down the hallway, maybe in about five years' time, as part of the aging process, you really will need those to help you, so why would you look at adding in that navigation tool later rather than ahead of time?

Definitely, I think it's really important to look at that planning piece and make sure that any housing is a safe place where someone can live as independently and as safely as possible and look forward to aging in place so that they are not forced to live in other alternative housing that maybe doesn't have the accessibility pieces in place that they need to be safe and to live a good quality of life, but also where they have the supports they need, which in the case of our organization means the support of an intervenor or a direct support professional.

• (1225)

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Thank you for that.

I'd like to move to Ms. Moores now and ask you a similar question, not specifically about housing, but more generally about the cost of living.

For example, the cost of food has gone up dramatically. Are persons with disabilities more significantly impacted by the cost of living crisis in this country, like the cost of food, for example?

Ms. Karen Moores: Absolutely. At Easter Seals, we've said that it's almost an unfortunate perfect storm. The cost of medication is rising. The cost of food is rising. Housing is just not sufficiently available for all persons with disabilities in most markets, but it's tremendously expensive. That's coupled with the added cost of transportation—if your local city bus is or isn't available or accessible, maybe you're paying for quite an expensive accessible taxi.

Absolutely, this has been a tough time for many, and particularly for persons with disabilities.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Further to that, there are a number of federally regulated industries in Canada. I'm thinking of banking and airline travel, for example.

Ms. Moores, could you comment on these industries and what barriers exist in these federally regulated industries for persons with disabilities?

Ms. Karen Moores: Absolutely, and I'll start with the example of Canada's airlines.

Back in the spring, many of the witnesses here, including me, attended the first airline accessibility summit and had a chance to

share our perspectives with Canada's airlines and different leaders from within government about accessibility within the air sector.

We were quite fortunate. Airlines were willing to listen. We all have a way to go, but that is just one example.

As we reimagine Canada's airports, as airports are renovated and rebuilt over the next generation, that is a consideration. There are also things that we can do today, such as airside services. There is work in all those sectors. I could probably take up all your time in talking about it.

I will say—I didn't get to this point in my notes—that I really think, no matter the sector, that it's about collaboration and communication. I'm on Zoom today, but there's nothing like being in person. I hope that the next time I'm before your committee, we're in person. Canadians are collaborative, and yes, it's about having the chance for all parties to work together—federally regulated industries, our sector, leaders like you—to make changes, absolutely.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Thank you.

The Chair: You had two seconds. You were very kind.

Next is Mr. Coteau for six minutes in total.

Mr. Michael Coteau (Don Valley East, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank both witnesses today. I appreciate the work you do, and I congratulate Easter Seals for its 100 years of advocacy and providing support for folks and continuing to build a family.

There are a lot of technological changes that are taking place around the world, technology that can be used to help people better navigate building codes that can be enhanced through technology to assist people as they move between buildings and access services. Have you seen any technology within Canada, within our jurisdiction, but also around the world, that has made major advancements into accessibility? If so, can you talk a bit about that and how Canada could benefit from some of that technology?

That's for any one of the two: Karen Moores and Karen Madho. Either one would be great.

• (1230)

Ms. Karen Madho: I will defer to my colleague.

Ms. Karen Moores: Thank you.

There are many great technologies. The second part of my notes was on Canada's innovators.

We are a country of great innovation and ingenuity. I will not do diligence only to some and not to others by using names, but I'm happy to provide the committee a list of technologies from among our members, keeping in mind that we represent all disabilities and all ages across the country and that there are different technologies that help different aspects and different disabilities. I'm happy to provide that to you.

Around the world, certainly we work to be the best when it comes to global standards, and I'm happy to provide some follow-up notes to the committee as well on some technologies emerging around the world that are particularly advantageous for the inclusion and disability sector.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Okay. One of the challenges that I would assume would take place around standards and the standardization of standards would be the different levels of government and different jurisdictions outside of Canada putting in different types of standards. We have a responsibility federally for anything under federal jurisdiction and we also have provincial and municipal jurisdictions. Have you seen an attempt across the country to build a more standardized approach to something like building codes?

Ms. Karen Moores: I'm happy to jump in there, Karen. I'm sorry for the little delay in my mic.

A great example of working across the country is accessible MLS. Nova Scotia now has a fully accessible MLS. It is something we would encourage all provinces to do. Getting our provincial MLS systems to be fully accessible is something that positively impacts our cities, our towns, our provinces and our nation. That is a piece.

When it comes to building codes and acknowledging the cross-jurisdiction there, I think we need to have more persons with disabilities at the table. I think all of this comes back to being at the table.

I'd also like to touch on procurement. This was in my notes. More persons with disabilities need to be at the table when it comes to procurement. Whether it's leases for buildings federally, provincially or municipally, or whether it's purchasing equipment for offices or trying out new technologies, persons with disabilities need to be at the table.

I'd also add that we need to ensure that we're buying in greater numbers from entrepreneurs who are Canadians with disabilities. Inclusive procurement is the smartest procurement, and that's something we hope to talk a lot more about in 2025 as an organization.

Mr. Michael Coteau: I'm glad you brought up the economic piece. Obviously there's a moral imperative. We have to do the right thing, and that's making sure we increase accessibility. However, I remember reading a report a few years ago stating that there was a loss of almost \$400 billion to Canada by not being fully accessible in all jurisdictions, so there is an economic imperative that's at play as well.

In Ontario, when we were building towards the Pan Am Games, we learned that all of our buildings had to be accessible and that the codes had to be up to standard. We knew that spaces that created more of an invitation through accessibility became more of an economic driver for tourism, for people going out shopping.

There is an economic imperative. The more accessible we are, the more we unlock our economy and the more we build. That's something I think we need to continuously remind folks about. There is a cost to building accessibility, but the benefits exceed the cost at the end of the day.

Are there any comments on that?

• (1235)

Ms. Karen Moores: Is that directed to Easter Seals or to my colleague from Ontario?

Mr. Michael Coteau: I think I've run out of time, but Ms. Moores, if you want to just give a brief comment, that would be great.

Ms. Karen Moores: We fully agree. A fully inclusive economy is the most inclusive economy. It is a tremendous goal of ours at Easter Seals to make sure that in every conversation, whether it's on employment, transportation or housing, we are always building towards an economy that is fully inclusive.

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Chabot, you have six minutes.

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

Thank you for your testimony and for the work done by your organizations. I'm certain you're making a difference in the lives of people with disabilities.

I would also like to take this opportunity to point out that there's an association in the region I represent called APPAL, the Association des personnes avec problèmes auditifs des Laurentides. This association, which does represent 127,000 people after all, provides services and support to deaf, deafened, hard-of-hearing and deaf-blind people in the Laurentians. It reminds us, and rightly so, that more than 20% of Quebec's population lives with deafness and that these problems increase with age and aging.

Ms. Madho, in your testimony, you said that the recommendations should recognize deaf-blindness. Am I to understand that this type of disability is not currently recognized in the legislation?

[English]

Ms. Karen Madho: Thank you for your question.

With regard to the Accessible Canada Act, DeafBlind Ontario Services was quite proud to be able to work with a number of different disability groups across Canada to provide input when that legislation was being put together. We were very firm about the fact that just because it may seem like there's a small number of Canadians who are deaf-blind, certainly that number increases, as we know and as I mentioned, as the population ages. As people become seniors, as a natural part of aging, they tend to lose their hearing or vision, and sometimes both, so the idea that Statistics Canada does not capture numbers in their surveys every four years of people who are deaf-blind is a bit of a limit. They capture numbers of people who have vision loss. They capture numbers of people who have hearing loss. Not capturing that combined disability—again, as I mentioned at the top of my comments, I want to state clearly that deaf-blindness is a distinct disability—is really leaving out this part of the population. It's leaving them out in the sense that they're not included.

I mean, even in the legislation there are stipulations that say you should have interpreters, but they don't say you should have intervenor services. Intervenor services are different from interpreters. As I mentioned, it's about context. The idea that you would leave out this part of your population is a problem.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Ms. Madho.

I think that's very clear. It seems very important to me to bring this information to our attention. You're right that it adds a level of complexity, especially when it comes to sign language. In any case, there is a particular reality that must be taken into account.

What are the main challenges for your members when dealing with the federal government in terms of services and so forth? Do they face any specific barriers?

• (1240)

[*English*]

Ms. Karen Madho: Thank you for your question.

I think what's important to understand is that for people who are deaf-blind, or even for the other part of the population we support—people who have developmental disabilities and are deaf, hard of hearing or who use non-traditional forms of communication—it's about communication. For someone to contact the federal government, a service provider or anything, the really key part is communication. As I mentioned, the people we support may use one or more forms of communication, but sometimes there are limits to the communication that's available through the federal government, for example.

Definitely, many of the submissions we've made over the years to government are to open up that idea that you don't just send it out in Braille and you don't just send it out in large font. Not everyone uses those. They need to be consulted: What form of communication works for you? What specifically is your preferred method of communication?

Sometimes people use more than one. It's about making sure there are opportunities for an intervenor to be available in the case of a person who is deaf, or a direct support professional to be avail-

able in the case of someone who lives with a developmental disability and who is deaf or hard of hearing or uses non-traditional forms of communication.

I just want to reiterate that it's really important to be communicating in the format or the method of communication they prefer. Otherwise, they're left out. They're left out of policies. They're left out of funding decisions. They're left out of considerations even in circumstances where their input is really valuable, like stakeholder consultations.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Chabot.

Madam Zarrillo, you have six minutes, please.

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

I'm a middle-aged woman who wears reading glasses that I'll be putting on and taking off throughout the day.

Mr. Chair, I wonder if you could just clarify the reason that the CNIB is not here today. To my understanding, it's because they did not have enough time to receive a headset. I'm concerned about that, because we do often have very short windows of being able to get witnesses.

Could you just clarify?

The Chair: Madame Zarrillo, each member of the committee has received a copy of a letter that I received from the House administration addressing this issue.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Can you share it with those who might be listening online today, please?

The Chair: Yes, but it addresses this particular issue—I haven't started the time—which is the importance of getting your witness list in early enough to give time to the House administration.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I'm wondering if you could just clarify, because it was stated at the beginning of this meeting that the reason the person isn't here is... What was the reason you gave at the beginning?

Mr. Chair, you mentioned that CNIB is not here because....

The Chair: The representative did not pass the sound test.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Right, and I understand it's because they did not receive the headset in time from the House of Commons.

I just want to clarify that it's correct that they did not receive the headset in time.

The Chair: You are correct.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you. I just wanted to clarify that it's not because of the quality of the sound. It's because the House of Commons did not provide them their headset in time.

I'm going to start with a very quick question for Witness Moores, and then I want to turn to Witness Madho.

Witness Moores, you mentioned entrepreneurship. A couple of meetings ago, I asked a witness about whether there are federal entrepreneurial grants or loans specifically for persons with disabilities who are entrepreneurs. Can you say anything about that?

Ms. Karen Moores: That's a great question. I believe there were. I will check to confirm that there still are, as well as their status.

My response would also be that whatever we do, we need to do more of. I think we all know that we need more entrepreneurs in our country, and if there are ways that governments at all levels can help fund persons with disabilities to move through the entrepreneurship process, we gladly welcome them—

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I'm sorry. I have to cut you off. I don't have much time. If you could supply us with what those grants are that you're aware of, that would be super.

I'll go back to Witness Madho to talk about communication, sign language and tactile signing certifications. It's my understanding there are only five schools across Canada. One is in Coquitlam, at Douglas College, and it did not receive adequate funding in 2022.

Could you share where the schools are, and if there needs to be more education and funding across Canada?

• (1245)

Ms. Karen Madho: Thank you for your question.

I can't speak to sign language schools, but I can speak to intervenor schools that provide training and education for intervenors.

In Ontario, there's one college that offers a very limited program in terms of the spots for students. There are maybe 15 a year, and that certainly doesn't support the number of intervenors we require across the intervenor services sector. There are a number of organizations that provide intervenor supports and receive funding to provide intervenor supports. Through our provincial funding, we need to do the training ourselves, using any existing funding we have.

Because an intervenor is such an important person and a support to a person who's deaf-blind, there needs to be a bond of trust. They need to be able to work with that person, establish that bond of trust and assess what their preferences are and what method or methods of communication they prefer.

Let's face it. Because there's a possibility of working with and using more than one method of communication, you're in that person's personal space, so that speaks to the bond of trust as well. That leaves that person very vulnerable, so you need someone who's highly trained and specialized to be able to work with someone who's deaf-blind and serve as a communication facilitator for them.

Again, we don't have a number of programs available. I can certainly speak to Ontario. My understanding is it's limited across Canada as well. An intervenor is a very specialized, specially trained professional, and it's up to the service providers to provide that training in-house.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Witness Madho, can you share how much it would cost and whether you believe there's a space here for the federal government to be supporting that kind of training?

Ms. Karen Madho: I can't speak to how much it costs, but considering that my recommendation was that there should be intervenor services across Canada.... We understand that the provinces pay for those services, but not every province provides them. There should be a national framework to ensure that there are intervenor services available. It doesn't matter where you live, or it shouldn't matter where you live—you should have access to them. That's really important.

Having the support of the federal government, maybe more on a policy or framework side of it, and establishing that this is something that's important and respects the human rights of people who are living with deaf-blindness.... They really should have the right to be able to communicate, express themselves and interact with their communities, and they're being held back because they live with a communication barrier.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you.

Witness Madho, you introduced remote and urban differences. I'm very interested in hearing more about what the differences might be between remote and urban, in terms of accessible services.

Also, could you speak a bit about indigenous peoples and whether there are barriers you're seeing for indigenous communities?

Ms. Karen Madho: DeafBlind Ontario Services, as I mentioned off the top, provides supports and services through supported living locations. These tend to be in more urban settings.

We also work in partnership with other organizations to provide services to people living with another disability and receiving supports from another service provider. However, because they're also deaf-blind, it's looking at the person as a whole person to establish how all of their needs can be met holistically. We work in partnerships. Sometimes we have a few across Ontario. Many of them are in rural or more remote areas. We basically work to train their employees, who are not intervenors, so that they can communicate with the people they support, with the understanding that—

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I'm going to run out of time.

Can I ask you how you're funded?

Ms. Karen Madho: We are funded through the Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.

The Chair: Is that it?

Okay. Thank you, Madame Zarrillo.

We will now go to Mrs. Gray for five minutes.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for being here today.

My first questions are for Easter Seals Canada.

Thank you very much for your testimony a bit earlier today on the cost of living crisis affecting the individuals you serve and their families.

I want to ask you specifically how this affects your organization with respect to the cost of fuel, transportation and food. How have increasing costs affected your ability to operate, especially your summer camps?

• (1250)

Ms. Karen Moores: That's a great question.

I'd just like to state for the record that Easter Seals Canada, a national body, does not receive any government funding. Our provincial members, which are their own legal entities, may receive some, but not all. The Canada summer student job grant or other funding varies province by province. However, federally, we do not receive funding, but we do from the provinces do. Sometimes the provinces' grants or Canada summer student job grants, of course, help with camp.

Yes, our constituents and community have been deeply impacted by the cost of living crisis in the cost of medical equipment, transportation and housing.

Cost of living also impacts our camps. Our provincial members provide meals. They've worked through a post-COVID labour crisis. Our camp teams work very hard to provide that experience. While our camps are still doing well, it is increasingly hard work for our provincial members. You fund infrastructure and you hire the best people to be part of your camp community. It is a challenge.

We are fortunate to have great donors. However, at the same time, we also, in this economy, need all the support we can get, since the need for our services has never been greater.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you very much for that.

Actually, that leads into my next question.

We conducted a study here recently called intergenerational volunteerism. We had a number of not-for-profits expressing how it is becoming more difficult for them to receive the donations they normally do. They've lost volunteers because seniors have had to go back to work.

From a volunteer or donation perspective, has that become more difficult for you during this cost of living crisis over the last few years?

Ms. Karen Moores: That is a great question.

I like to speak about numbers, but only if I have numbers in front of us. I know that recruiting staff for camps in a labour shortage has been a particular challenge. I will produce for you, from our national office, some feedback on year-over-year volunteer numbers and some perspective on giving.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: We would appreciate it very much if you could provide that to the committee.

We're at the end of this study that we've been doing over the last couple of weeks. I wanted to bring up that as part of this study, when this was first moved back in February of this year and when we all agreed to the schedule in June, we did call on the Minister of Diversity, Inclusion and Persons with Disabilities to appear before this study. This is now the last day of the study, and the minister has not appeared. Because of that, I would like to move the following motion:

That the committee not consider its study on a Canada without Barriers by 2040 concluded until the Minister of Diversity, Inclusion and Persons with Disabilities appears as invited for one hour to address the committee's concern about the progress made towards the goal of a Canada without barriers by 2040 as agreed to on February 8, 2024, and that the committee allocate additional resources to fulfill this request.

I do have copies here to circulate, and we can also get it emailed. It is right on point for what the study is about, even though it was not put on notice earlier. It's specifically about the study. There is enough flexibility in the wording that we could have it scheduled. We don't want to take away time from other studies, so it's worded so that this will be an additional hour at some point within resources that are available.

Whether it's an additional hour somewhere or an hour that's tagged on to another meeting, there is lots of flexibility so that we can have the minister here.

Again, the minister has known about this for months, so this study is not a surprise. As part of fulfilling what was requested and agreed to within this study, we would like to have the minister here to speak to this study.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1255)

The Chair: I'm okay with allowing it to be discussed and dealt with.

On the motion, go ahead, Mrs. Falk.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I think this is great. We're not saying it has to be right now. We can still continue with our calendar as planned, and we are asking for additional resources if they are needed. We want to make this a priority and make sure that the minister can be here with regard to this specific study.

The Chair: Is there any further discussion?

Go ahead, Ms. Zarrillo, on this motion.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

I would have liked to have had the opportunity to do the same thing on the financing of housing, the study that we did about how terrible the Liberal and Conservative governments were in saving housing and keeping people in homes. Since that happened with overtime, this is an opportunity for the Conservatives to extend the study, as we just heard in conversations from witnesses that we need action.

I can tell you from sitting on this committee that the minister has nothing to add. The minister has let down the disability community over and over again. This work needs to be done. We have that minister coming to committee at some time. We've already said that we're going to have all the ministers come to talk about their mandate letters. It's really unfair to slow down action on accessibility and disability folks, so I won't be supporting this motion.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mrs. Falk.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: This is, once again, an example of the NDP propping up the Liberals, saying that the minister has nothing to add. To continue to support the Liberal government is baffling to me. It's absolutely baffling. We have stakeholders watching this, and when MP Zarrillo says that the minister has nothing to add, it tells me that she doesn't have confidence in this government.

It's just disgusting that the NDP keeps voting confidence in the Liberal government.

The Chair: Go ahead, Madame Chabot, on the motion.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I'll jump in quickly.

I support Ms. Gray's motion. As part of this study, it was originally planned, even by name, for the minister to appear before the committee. We have few opportunities, after all. This motion gives us an opportunity to invite the people represented by these groups to come and talk about the obstacles they are experiencing. The minister was scheduled to appear. I think it's important that we be able to add time to our meetings and complete the study with the minister's response. That strikes me as entirely appropriate.

In fact, today, we brought the report of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities back to the House of Commons. I thank the New Democratic Party for this report, which is a motion that we passed on the Canada disability benefit. In my opinion, all issues related to accessibility are important, so I am in favour of the motion.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Chabot.

Seeing no further discussion, we'll vote on the motion that's on the floor.

Quickly, Mrs. Stubbs, go ahead.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs (Lakeland, CPC): Chair, thank you for your indulgence, especially since I am not a permanent member of this committee. However, I am deeply concerned about removing barriers for Canadians with disabilities.

I have a long history of working, through another passion of mine, with therapeutic riding groups for adults and children with a whole variety of disabilities. This is a passion for me personally, which is why I do feel compelled to speak.

Clearly the minister has an extremely powerful role, and clearly what these witnesses are saying is that they need to see action, but they also need to see that action from the minister and from leaders, and all Canadians need to see that leadership from our federal government.

It seems very obvious to me that all the members of this committee should support this motion.

The Chair: Let's get to a vote, then, seeing no further discussion.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 10; nays 1)

Sorry, Mr. Van Bynen.

Before we adjourn, you will have received a circulated working calendar. It is not public, but it is a working calendar. If there is no dissent, it will become public. It's confidential until it's confirmed.

Mr. Long, go ahead.

• (1300)

Mr. Wayne Long: Chair, I know that MP Van Bynen put a lot of work into his questions to witnesses today, and I'm just wondering if we could ask for unanimous consent to go an extra five minutes for him to ask the witnesses some questions.

The Chair: Do we have unanimous consent? We have resources. We started three minutes late.

Mr. Van Bynen, we don't have unanimous consent from Madame Zarrillo.

Order, please.

Madame Chabot, did you have your hand up?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I wanted to talk about the schedule, Mr. Chair. I have no objection to Mr. Van Bynen asking more questions of the witnesses, if we still have time.

[*English*]

The Chair: We did not have unanimous consent to extend the meeting by five minutes to accommodate Mr. Van Bynen.

I will ask one more time. Do we have unanimous consent?

Some hon. members: No.

The Chair: We do not have unanimous consent.

The working calendar is in the draft that is out. It will be discussed at length at the next working meeting.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I just have one question, Mr. Chair. We barely had 15 minutes to deal with committee business. In our future meetings, do you plan to allocate additional time for committee business, at least 30 minutes?

[*English*]

With that, committee members, the meeting is adjourned.

The Chair: We'll have a full hour, and the first one is scheduled for Thursday. If you consult the draft calendar that I sent to you, that's where it's at.

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