



HOUSE OF COMMONS
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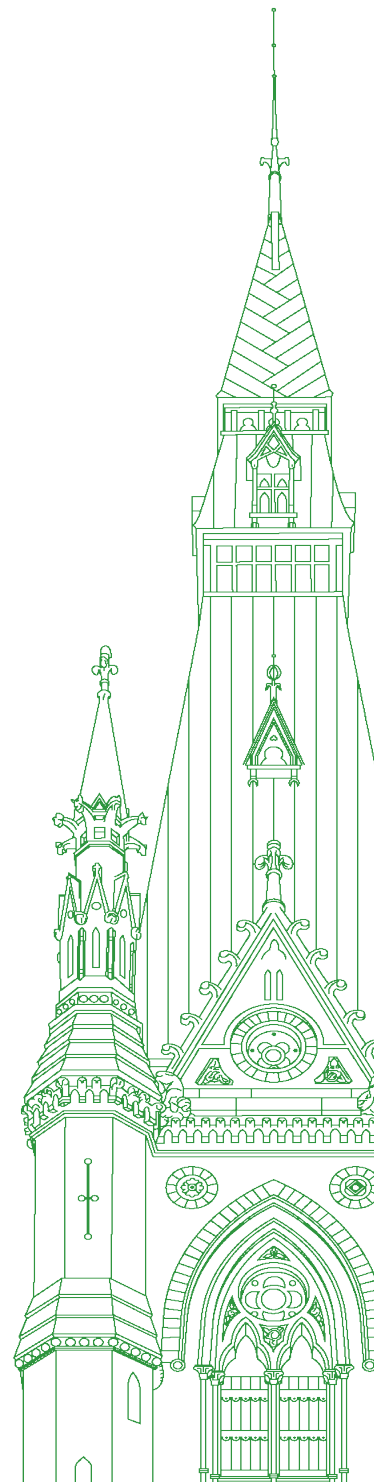
44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

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

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 139

Tuesday, December 3, 2024



Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey

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

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• (1110)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)): Committee members, the clerk has advised me that we have a quorum and I am prepared to call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 139 of the 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.

I would like to remind participants of the following.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. As I indicated, this meeting is taking place in hybrid format, which means that some members are participating virtually. To those in the room, raise your hand if you want to get my attention. To those who are here virtually, please use the "raise hand" icon to get my attention.

You have the option of participating in the official language of your choice. For those in the room, make sure you're on the proper channel. That gives you the language you wish to participate in. For those here virtually, click on the globe icon on the bottom of your screen and choose the language of your choice. If there's a breakdown in interpretation, please get my attention and we'll suspend while it's corrected.

I would like to remind all those in the room who have devices to please turn any alarms or buzzers off on those devices before we begin because they can cause issues for the interpreters. Also, please refrain from tapping on the boom of the microphone because it creates popping and causes issues for the interpreters.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on October 8, 2024, the committee is resuming its study of workers in the seasonal industry and the employment insurance program.

We had two witnesses, but the sound quality for Mr. Jeff Loder was inadequate for professional interpretation, so we have one witness this morning, Madam Julie Brassard, chief executive officer of Mouvement Action-Chômage de Charlevoix, who is here by video conference. We'll go to her opening statement of up to five minutes and then we'll go to questions.

[Translation]

Ms. Brassard, you have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Julie Brassard (Chief Executive Officer, Mouvement Action-Chômage de Charlevoix): Good morning. My name is Julie Brassard, and I am the executive director of Mouvement Action-Chômage de Charlevoix.

The Mouvement Action-Chômage de Charlevoix was founded in 1977 by members of the community. Every year, our team responds to approximately 2,500 requests for information and support related to the employment insurance program.

Charlevoix is a tourism region where one in three jobs is related to seasonal industry. All our businesses, small and large, in all fields of activity, add seasonal workers to their regular teams to meet the increase in peak season needs.

In January 2008, 3,075 seasonal workers in Charlevoix received employment insurance benefits. As of January 2024, only 2,079 remained. As of February 2024, a third of them had exhausted their benefits before returning to work. Since September, we have received 27 calls from workers who didn't have the required number of hours to be eligible for benefits. However, every spring, employers contact us because they are looking for workers. Since 2008, we've lost 996 seasonal workers, and those who remain are all working. I can confirm that the labour shortage is real and that it will continue to worsen, since most of our seasonal workers are people over 60 years of age and will be leaving for retirement in the near future.

This situation has been going on since July 2000, when a redistribution of the employment insurance administrative regions led to considerable changes in eligibility criteria and the duration of benefit periods. Since then, the unemployment rate has steadily declined in Charlevoix and now stands at 4.7%, with serious consequences. Indeed, since the unemployment rate changes the conditions of access, the number of weeks of benefits payable and the amount the worker can expect, this is a major factor contributing to the increase in poverty among our seasonal workers, who are mostly women. The unemployment rate is recalculated every month, making it unstable and unpredictable. If you have a high unemployment rate, you need fewer hours to qualify and you get more weeks of benefits. If the unemployment rate is lower, they will have to accumulate up to 700 hours to be eligible and will receive only 14 weeks of benefits.

The amount of the benefit will also be influenced by the divisor, which is also based on the unemployment rate. Since our workers don't accumulate enough weeks to meet the criterion of the 22 weeks of work needed for calculations, they are doubly penalized. These are low-wage workers. They don't work full time, as they often work part time at the beginning and end of the season. While they have an average salary of \$18 an hour and a number of weeks worked vary between 15 and 20 for the majority, the benefit rate of 55% will still be calculated based on a divisor of 22.

We also have to consider climate change, which disrupts the way the seasons run. The May 1, 2023, flood in Baie-Saint-Paul delayed the start of the season, which resulted in consequences for many workers who were unable to accumulate the 700 hours required to be eligible.

We need to review this system, because it no longer meets the needs of our population and our work reality. When one in three jobs is seasonal, an entire economy suffers. Our reality is incompatible with an unpredictable system whose rules and conditions change depending on changes in an unemployment rate.

Since I took up this position in 2014, I have witnessed several attempts to address the EI black hole. In 2018, Services Québec created the Charlevoix regional round table, of which we were a member. There was a two-pronged project put in place. It was a support measure for seasonal workers and seasonal businesses that made it possible to extend the season through training that provided access to insurable hours. The first year, 26 participants affected by the EI black hole participated, and the following year, only 10 participants. This initiative did not make it possible to avoid the EI black hole.

There have been other attempts. This year, Tourisme Charlevoix launched a project that has been tried by many others before it: sharing employees between two businesses covering two seasons. Few companies have signed up. Only five matches were attempted, and only one was successful. The fact that many workers already have other part-time jobs in the winter or are already on call for their employer in the off-season makes it very difficult to do this kind of matching. For Charlevoix, it is impossible for these workers to live without employment insurance. So there has to be a change.

• (1115)

Thank you for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Brassard.

[English]

We'll now begin with Mrs. Falk for six minutes.

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

I'd like to thank our witness for being here today.

Throughout the duration of this study, we have heard that it's difficult to retain workers in seasonal industries. Can you provide one or two of the main reasons seasonal workers seem to be leaving work in seasonal industries and going elsewhere?

[Translation]

Ms. Julie Brassard: The lack of hours is precisely why. The workers don't work enough hours to cover the entire season and can't qualify for employment insurance, or EI. When they try out a seasonal job, they can't stay in it because they can't make it through the winter. They are forced to find other jobs. Usually, it is people who move to the region and leave after one or two seasons, because they realize that they can't survive all winter.

[English]

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Do you happen to track what other types of industries some of these seasonal people may go to?

[Translation]

Ms. Julie Brassard: As I said in my presentation, one in three jobs in Charlevoix is seasonal. When seasonal jobs end, the tourism sector becomes slack. The regular jobs are already filled. The jobs that are available are often skilled, full-time jobs. They cannot be filled by seasonal workers, because they don't have the required skills or education.

When the tourist season starts up again, there are plenty of full-time jobs for seasonal workers. However, they all have jobs already. That's why there's a big labour shortage in the summer.

[English]

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: The reason I asked that question is that in my neck of the woods—I'm from western Saskatchewan, bordering Alberta—we have a lot of people coming from Atlantic Canada, for example, to work in our energy sector. Our energy sector employs a lot of people specifically from Atlantic Canada. They'll actually relocate and move their whole family, or they will come temporarily and go back home on their off-days.

You brought up low-wage workers. Given the landscape we have today in Canada, I'm wondering how economic pressures, such as inflation, impact seasonal workers in particular. Are there examples other than the hours and salaries that you mentioned?

• (1120)

[Translation]

Ms. Julie Brassard: Seasonal workers earn between \$15.75, which is the minimum wage, and \$18 an hour. When the jobs end, they receive only 55% of their pay in EI benefits. Given the rising cost of living, they obviously have to use food banks.

In addition, the EI benefits usually run out around February. Workers find themselves without EI before their jobs resume. Those are the people we're seeing at food banks. We're talking about seasonal workers who are mostly over 60, because our population is aging. Young people will not take seasonal jobs, especially if they have a family. They take other types of jobs instead.

Based on our research, three out of four seasonal workers are over the age of 60 and are part of a couple. The woman works as a chambermaid or dishwasher or does some other tourism job. The man is more likely to work in the bush or in landscaping, the type of job that is either less available or non-existent in the winter. There are a lot of jobs like that in the Charlevoix region. Many small businesses hire seasonal workers when the tourist season starts up again, because they don't have enough staff to meet the increased demand when the tourism industry reopens. All other kinds of businesses, like garages—

[*English*]

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: I apologize for interrupting you. I have a quick question. I don't have much time left. I just want to follow up on this.

You mentioned that EI for most seasonal workers runs out in February. How long are some of these workers going until they receive a paycheque again or are working again? When would the season start again?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Julie Brassard: Tourism season usually starts up again in May. At the start of the tourist season, however, the work is part-time rather than full-time. It's mostly chambermaids who are going back to work. Otherwise, there is weekend work when the tourists arrive. That's what happens in May.

[*English*]

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Falk.

We have Mr. Fragiskatos for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Brassard, thank you for your presentation today.

You talked a lot about the challenges. Do you have a key recommendation for our committee? Of all the things you've talked about, is there one that is especially important to you and your organization?

Ms. Julie Brassard: Two aspects of the EI system need to change for our workers, most of whom are seasonal.

First, the criteria to qualify for EI need to be reviewed. Workers have to have 700 hours of insurable employment to be eligible for EI benefits, but the majority of them can't get that many.

Second, we need to rethink the number of weeks of benefits so that the workers can make it to May at least.

Those are the two things that are the most challenging right now.

The issue of the variable unemployment rate needs to be reviewed. It's currently at 4.5% in Charlevoix. Based on that criterion, for the past two years, people have to have worked 700 hours to qualify.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you again, Ms. Brassard.

Mr. Chair, I'm going to give the rest of my time to Ms. Chabot.

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Thank you very much for giving me the rest of your time, Mr. Fragiskatos.

Ms. Brassard, thank you for being here today. I'm happy to say I'm familiar with the work you've been doing for years to defend the rights and interests of the unemployed. Your organization really helps people.

I wanted our committee to conduct this study on seasonal workers because their harsh reality is sometimes overlooked. For years, we have been calling for comprehensive EI reform for many reasons. The system has not been reviewed in 15 years. Seasonal workers have special needs.

You said that, in your beautiful region, one third of jobs were held by workers in the seasonal industry. I was listening to the questions from my colleagues about how seasonal workers could find another job. The big question is how these workers can be retained given that they contribute significantly to the economic vitality of a region.

Can you give us an example of how the loss of these workers is negatively affecting vitality?

• (1125)

Ms. Julie Brassard: As I was saying, every spring, employers call us. Since we are the Mouvement Action-Chômage de Charlevoix and we have access to workers who are receiving EI benefits, employers call us to get the names of workers. Each time, I tell them that seasonal workers who receive EI benefits are all going back to work. Since they already have jobs, I don't have any names to give those employers.

People often don't understand that seasonal workers who receive EI benefits aren't people who have just lost a full-time job and are available to start working wherever the next day. They already have a job and are already attached to a business. Often, they have been working for the same employer for 20 or 30 years. Employers want to keep them.

However, as our population ages, the workers are gradually retiring. A number of the workers I've met with every year since 2014 no longer receive EI benefits because they have retired. We've lost them.

It is extremely hard to find new people to fill the jobs, because EI benefits are not enough to live on during the winter. They can't just wait for the tourist season to start again. Young people who want to qualify for EI can't. In addition, they don't have access to the five additional weeks of benefits currently available to extend coverage during the winter period. To be eligible, you have to have applied for EI at the same time of the year at least three times in the past so many years. After people have worked for one tourist season, they are entitled to only 14 weeks of EI benefits. In December or January, they no longer receive anything. They are forced to change careers or communities, and businesses can't retain them.

Every November and every spring, there is the Salon Emploi Charlevoix, a job fair where workers can meet employers. Employers are definitely looking for workers for the summer season, but there are fewer and fewer of them, because we're losing them.

Ms. Louise Chabot: I think the current study has made it clear to everyone that the period between the end of benefits and the return to the same job is called the spring gap. On average, how many weeks does the spring gap last? Workers have no income and no job for how long?

Ms. Julie Brassard: It's not the same for all workers. Last year, the government added four weeks to the five additional weeks of EI benefits, for a total of nine additional weeks. One in three workers managed to get through the spring gap. For the others, the spring gap lasted eight to 12 weeks.

It varies greatly from one person to another, depending on the type of job they have.

• (1130)

Ms. Louise Chabot: In our previous meetings, some witnesses called for the duration of additional benefits paid under the pilot project to be increased from five to 15 weeks, until the eligibility criteria and unemployment rates are reformed. I will come back to that later.

As you know, changes to the pilot project can be made through regulations. Could that be a solution?

Ms. Julie Brassard: Obviously, going from five to 15 weeks could be a solution, since some workers are without benefits for up to 15 weeks. Yes, increasing the number of additional weeks of benefits could be a solution, except that it would be short-term. That's what's a bit sad. The problem is going to recur.

Ms. Louise Chabot: You talked a lot about changing unemployment rates. Pierre Laliberté, the commissioner for workers at the Canada Employment Insurance Commission, told the committee that, given the fluctuating unemployment rates, 60% of workers now have to have 700 hours of work in order to qualify and receive benefits for a mere 14 weeks.

Earlier, in response to a question, you said it was important to make changes to the eligibility criteria for EI. Do you think the solution is to establish a single eligibility criterion of 420 hours, with-

out taking into account regional unemployment rates, which may no longer be relevant in 2024?

Ms. Julie Brassard: Obviously, a set criterion of 420 hours would be the best solution, since people would be able to qualify. Some chambermaids who have been working at the same business for 20 years have to work weekends in the winter or they can't get the 700 hours required. They have been working at the same place for a long time, but if they did not work part time during the winter, they would not be eligible for EI. Whenever they can work, they do, because that way, they are eligible for EI the following year.

A fixed unemployment rate would also reduce all that insecurity. Every October, people call us to find out what the unemployment rate is. It causes them stress all summer long. Some women work so much that they don't even have time off. They work seven days a week to get as many hours as possible. That makes it very hard to have a good quality of life.

Ms. Louise Chabot: In your opening remarks, you also talked about the infamous divisor of 22 weeks, the 22-week criterion. We've heard about that from other witnesses as well. One of them, from a group in Nova Scotia similar to yours, said that it was very harmful, especially since the benefit rate is only 55%.

Could you tell us about the consequences of the 22-week criterion and, mainly, what the solution would be?

Ms. Julie Brassard: Our seasonal workers obviously don't get 22 weeks of work. In most cases, they get 15. The divisor used to calculate their best weeks benefit rate includes all their weeks. If they worked for 15 weeks, all their earnings are added up and the total is divided by 22. Then it is multiplied by 55%. As a result, a lot of people receive EI benefits of \$150 or \$200 a week. I don't know how people live on so little money.

The 22-week criterion causes people a lot of trouble. Very few people who turn to our organization for help accumulate 22 weeks of work.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Mr. Chair, do I have any time left?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Could basing it on the 12 best weeks worked be a solution?

• (1135)

Ms. Julie Brassard: If the 12 best weeks worked were taken into account, the majority would have the number of weeks needed to make the calculation fairer. The unemployment rate would be more realistic for calculation purposes and would better reflect the best weeks worked during the summer. If we include in the calculation the weeks at the start and end of the tourist season, when people work part time, the average income drops. However, if we take into account the 10 or 15 best weeks worked, the calculation will at least include the weeks when people worked full time and earned the best incomes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Ms. Zarrillo, you have six minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you so much.

Witness Brassard, I have to say that your testimony has been incredibly informative today. I want to thank you so much for that.

I'm going to be asking you specifically about formulas, how women are disproportionately affected and two of the external factors you raised—aging population and climate change.

First, have you ever been part of or been invited to participate in a government round table on employment insurance?

[Translation]

Ms. Julie Brassard: No, I have never been invited to those kinds of round tables.

[English]

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I certainly wish you had been, because you have very important information to share.

I'm going to start my time by reiterating, to let the analysts of the report know, that economists have always agreed that some unemployment is necessary to avoid inflation and allow workers to move between jobs, pursue education or even improve their skills.

We know that that number has been 5% for decades and decades. It's been widely accepted by economists that any unemployment rate lower than 5% is considered full employment. In the U.S., many economists consider a 6% unemployment rate to be full employment.

I was really worried and concerned when I heard you mention that it's 4.7% in your region right now and that the government has cruelly and callously decided to use this unemployment rate as a factor in their formulas of who will get payment.

I wonder if you wouldn't mind clarifying if there is a minimum for the employment rate that the formula puts in place. If unemployment was at 3%, would the government still use 3% in their formula for EI, or is there a minimum at which they say that, once it gets to this number, they're not going to use it as a factor? Would they say the lowest factor they could ever use is 5% or 6%? I'm hoping that makes sense.

I just want to find out about the formulas and what chaos using the unemployment rate might be creating.

[Translation]

Ms. Julie Brassard: The unemployment rate in Charlevoix is currently 5.4%. The unemployment rate has to be at least 6.1% for the criteria to change in terms of the number of hours of work people have to have and the number of weeks of benefits they get. When the unemployment rate is below 6%, as it has been for the past two years here, the criteria don't change. Whether it is 6%, 5%, 4% or 3%, even if the unemployment rate continues to drop, the same basic criteria apply. You have to accumulate at least 700 hours of work to be entitled to 14 weeks of benefits. That's the minimum.

[English]

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: That seems like a big miss considering, as you mentioned, that there is an aging population that we've been forecasting for decades. Statistics Canada has turned their pyramid into a pineapple just because of the aging population.

I wonder if you could share with this group what the impacts of the aging population are on the seasonal workers industry. How are the demographics in the seasonal workers industry changing to make up for the aging population, which deserves to retire with dignity?

• (1140)

[Translation]

Ms. Julie Brassard: Obviously, the biggest problem is the labour shortage. Currently, tourism businesses, especially the larger ones, have to recruit workers from outside Canada to be part of their work teams. Workers from here are replaced with people from other countries. However, their situation is no better, since the same effects also apply to them. They receive EI benefits, but the unemployment rate that is taken into account in the calculation of benefits for seasonal workers also makes them come up short, since they hold the same type of job. That's what's happening.

[English]

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I'm likely to only get in one more question this round. I wonder if you could expand more on how these EI formulas and the way EI is currently running for seasonal workers are disproportionately affecting women. We know that EI wasn't really created when women were considered to be in the workforce.

[Translation]

Ms. Julie Brassard: Women are more affected because they have lower-paying jobs.

The employment situation is easier for men, since a lot of them are in construction, where there's a set of rules that already make them better paid. There's a lot more work available for them.

As for women, they most often work as maids or in kitchens. Those jobs pay less, and that's why women are more affected.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zarrillo.

[*English*]

We have Mrs. Gray for five minutes.

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I didn't want to interrupt my colleague at the outset and raise a point of order, but I want to mention that, once again, during the first line of questioning on the Conservative side—and even now—the camera wasn't on us. I just want to point out that this seems to be a trend. In particular during the first question, my colleague spoke for a good 20 seconds before the camera went to her. Maybe you can bring up to the House administration that one of four seats will always be the first question, so it shouldn't be a surprise who goes up first.

To the witness, thank you very much for your testimony today. You covered a variety of topics.

You brought up food banks in your opening statement. Are you finding food bank usage up in your region?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Julie Brassard: Food banks are useful, even indispensable. If we didn't have food banks, a lot of people would struggle to feed themselves.

[*English*]

Mrs. Tracy Gray: We're seeing that right across the country. We know that many people are facing a cost of living crisis and that many small businesses are not at pre-pandemic sales yet. Their costs keep increasing with increasing taxes such as the carbon tax. Many small businesses hire seasonal workers, but if people don't have disposable income to spend at businesses and if small business sales are not increasing, that fewer jobs are available and less part-time and seasonal work as well.

I'm wondering if this is something you're hearing in your region and whether you can speak to that.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Julie Brassard: Concerning small businesses, as they are unable to find seasonal workers to fill the labour shortage during peak season, the employees in place are the ones who pay the price and have to do more work and work more hours. As a result, these employees are much more stressed.

The labour shortage during the summer is considerable.

[*English*]

Mrs. Tracy Gray: We know that small business owners work very hard, and it's a 24-7 job. We need to recognize that.

You briefly referenced in your opening statement the forestry industry. I'm from British Columbia, and I know that you're from Quebec. In British Columbia, we have seen a lot of job losses in the forestry industry. I'm wondering if you have seen something similar in your region.

• (1145)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Julie Brassard: Obviously, we are losing workers, since they are retiring. A number of seasonal workers we knew well came to see us every year to apply for employment insurance, but we no longer see them. They worked as brush cutters. It's an extremely physically difficult job. When those workers get to around the age of 70, they have no choice but to retire.

We help a lot of workers between the ages of 70 and 75. Just yesterday, a 75-year-old woman called us because she needed help applying for employment insurance. It's wonderful that people can work that long. However, working in the forest is much more physical and difficult. Given the seasons and climate change, it's not always easy. Sometimes the work starts later or has to be stopped because of the rain in cases where it's impossible to work when it rains. Things like that disrupt the seasons.

[*English*]

Mrs. Tracy Gray: The government talks quite a bit about transitioning and shutting down a lot of resource-sector jobs yet can't really explain what people would transition to.

Do you find, in your region, that there are jobs for people to transition to—that have the same pay and benefits—if the job they have has to shut down for some reason?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Julie Brassard: Those people will obviously have to move on to other seasonal jobs, which are still seasonal jobs. They will still have to accumulate the necessary number of hours to qualify for employment insurance benefits, and they will have to receive the benefits for enough weeks to survive until the next season.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gray.

[*English*]

Mr. Long, you have five minutes.

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

Good morning to my colleagues and thank you to our witness.

I want to talk to you about the additional weeks of employment insurance for seasonal workers in targeted regions. The 13 regions are Newfoundland and Labrador, eastern Nova Scotia, western Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown, Madawaska-Charlotte, Restigouche-Albert, Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine, lower Saint Lawrence and north shore, central Quebec, Chicoutimi-Jonquière, northwestern Quebec, and Yukon. Obviously, if you're a seasonal worker, you can claim five weeks and up to nine weeks, depending on the conditions.

Do you think a lower number of hours to qualify for EI should be implemented? What would that number be?

[Translation]

The Chair: There seems to be a problem with the interpretation. Can you repeat your question, please?

[English]

Mr. Wayne Long: Did I read that too quickly?

I want to talk to you about the additional weeks of employment insurance—the five weeks and four weeks—that are available for seasonal workers who work in the 13 EI economic regions. They go from Newfoundland and Labrador right down to Yukon. Obviously, you can get five or nine additional weeks of regular benefits.

Do you think there should be a lower number of hours to qualify for EI, and if so, what would that number be?

• (1150)

[Translation]

Ms. Julie Brassard: Is the question for me?

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. Julie Brassard: Okay, I'm sorry.

The four additional weeks of benefits no longer exist. That measure ended in September. So the people who are eligible this year will not benefit from those four additional weeks, but only from the five additional weeks provided at the base.

As for the number of hours of work required, it should be reduced to 420 hours to meet the needs. That would enable everyone to qualify for employment insurance and receive a sufficient number of weeks of benefits.

[English]

Mr. Wayne Long: Do you think the divisor is a problem, if the divisor is 18 compared to 14?

[Translation]

Ms. Julie Brassard: Yes, the divisor is a problem. For the past two years, it has been set at 22 weeks for our region. The divisor is the number of best weeks by which the total insurable earnings are divided to determine the benefit rate. When people work only 15 weeks, but you still divide their total compensation for those 15 weeks by 22, you don't get a fair average.

[English]

Mr. Wayne Long: I have a scenario for you, and I'm just going to read it slowly.

Let's say that somebody's working in the the tourism sector from May to October. After the season is over, she wants to continue to work and goes to work at, say, a grocery store. Then when the next May comes, if she leaves the grocery store job to return to the tourism sector because they need her back, she gets penalized with a voluntary departure. She then loses all the hours she made at the grocery store; thus, it's harder to qualify.

Do you feel that this rule should be changed so that they're not—

[Translation]

Ms. Julie Brassard: Of course, that rule is very strict.

Many people work two or three jobs precisely because they want to accumulate more hours of work, but one of those jobs may end up causing them a problem. People often try to take a new job to get more hours of work. However, when they leave the new job to return to their previous job, Service Canada considers it a voluntary departure. Unless Service Canada accepts otherwise, those people automatically lose all hours of work that could qualify them for employment insurance. If someone has three jobs and leaves one, they lose the accumulated hours for the other two jobs. The person loses all the hours of work from all the jobs they have held. That's a very strict rule.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Brassard.

[English]

Thank you, Mr. Long.

Madame Chabot, you have two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

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

Good questions are being asked. I want to say that I take some exception to the fact that, even though the employment insurance program is supposed to protect workers in the event of job loss, they are struggling to accumulate enough hours to be eligible.

We're talking about seasonal workers here. Ms. Brassard, you are very familiar with their situation. As you said, it's not the workers who are seasonal; it's the industry and the jobs it provides that are seasonal. We rely on this industry to provide quality jobs to the people who live in the area.

We have to report this study back to the House, Ms. Brassard. In order for the situation to change and for the importance of the seasonal industry and its workers to be recognized once and for all, I'd like you to tell us what changes can and must be made to employment insurance, in the short term, so that situations like the ones workers are currently experiencing don't happen again.

• (1155)

Ms. Julie Brassard: Obviously, every hour of work for which a worker earns an income is important to enable them to qualify for employment insurance. It's the number of hours of work that enables a person to qualify. Lowering the required number of hours to 420 would make it easier for workers to qualify and receive benefits during the winter period while they wait to return to work. So 420 hours is the minimum.

Ms. Louise Chabot: In terms of the number of weeks of benefits, what should the minimum be?

Ms. Julie Brassard: It should be at least 15 weeks.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Okay.

I still have a little time left. Do you want to take this opportunity to add something, Ms. Brassard?

Ms. Julie Brassard: We've been working on this issue for a number of years and we've been asking the government to make changes to the employment insurance system. We were under the impression that the government would move forward this year so that this system could once again become adequate and enable workers to live comfortably. However, that is not the case, and it's unfortunate.

I think of the seasonal workers who have started receiving EI benefits again. I wonder what will happen to them again this winter. I find their situation to be very difficult. When they call us to try to get news, we tell them all the time that we are working hard for them.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Zarrillo, you can run the clock out until 12.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I appreciate it. Thank you very much.

Witness Brassard, I really appreciate that you're looking at the systems and that you're sharing today how the systems are broken. This is not personal. It is a fact that the systems are broken and that there are external factors that require the modernization of many things the government does, but definitely EI.

I want to go back to climate change, because you did raise it. I think climate change is an important factor for seasonal workers. We heard from many witnesses that the way businesses used to be run and the way employment used to be done have been affected by climate change.

Could you share what the government needs to do in relation to EI to consider climate change and seasonal workers?

[Translation]

Ms. Julie Brassard: Climate change is unpredictable. One year, everything may be fine; the next year, they may have major consequences. We saw this with the flooding in Baie-Saint-Paul, where a number of homes were flooded. That's a good example. Many of the people affected no longer had a home and could, therefore, no longer go to work. However, they were not entitled to employment insurance because their employer had not been affected. How can you go to work when your house is flooded and uninhabitable and you have to reorganize and find a new place to live?

Workers' situation is made worse when they are prevented from accessing employment insurance because their employer was not affected by the floods. These are situations we experienced this year. People called us because their homes were flooded and they were in no condition to go to work. They were left with no resources, as EI did not help them.

[English]

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I'll just close out with a question. You have a campaign called "Employment insurance must protect us". I thank you for that work. I know there are letters going to the Prime Minister. I wonder if you could tell this committee about your campaign and share why you decided to bring the campaign forward and why it's so important to unemployed workers.

• (1200)

[Translation]

Ms. Julie Brassard: The campaign called for seasonal workers to be eligible for employment insurance and to receive enough weeks of benefits to be able to wait until they return to work. The campaign is being conducted with a number of unions and businesses that have signed letters. We hope that the government will listen to us this time. The campaign is almost over. We're hoping that will make a difference. It is important to put an end to this problem for seasonal workers. We've been asking the government to make changes to the program and fix this problem for too long.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Zarrillo.

[Translation]

Ms. Brassard, thank you very much for your testimony.

[English]

The committee will suspend while we transition to the second hour.

• (1200)

(Pause)

• (1200)

The Chair: Committee members, we are ready to begin the second hour of today's meeting.

I would like to now welcome the Honourable Jenna Sudds, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development. The minister is joined by the following officials from the Department of Employment and Social Development: Mr. Wojo Zielonka, chief financial officer; Ms. Karen Hall, associate assistant deputy minister, income security and social development branch; and Ms. Catherine Adam, senior assistant deputy minister of the department.

Welcome, Madam Minister. You can begin with a five-minute opening statement. The floor is yours.

• (1205)

Hon. Jenna Sudds (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development): Thank you very much, Chair.

It's really great to be here, and obviously accompanied by the incredible team here with me.

[Translation]

Since 2015, the Government of Canada has been focused on making life affordable.

[English]

The national school food program, the Canada-wide early learning and child care plan and the Canada child benefit are three incredible examples of programs designed to support Canadians.

[Translation]

Many Canadians identify food costs as a significant challenge.

Food insecurity in Canada is high, especially among indigenous, Black and other racialized children, as well as those living in immigrant, lone-parent and low-income households.

[English]

The Government of Canada is committed to ensuring that children and youth receive the best possible start in life. School food programs can boost our children's health and can help them reach their full potential. So far, four provinces have signed on to the national school food program, and more are expected soon. It helps families with two children in school save up to \$800 in groceries annually.

[Translation]

In regard to child care, eight provinces and territories are delivering for \$10-a-day or less regulated child care. All other jurisdictions have reduced parent fees by at least 50%. For some families, this means savings of up to \$14,000 per child, per year.

[English]

Provinces and territories have announced measures to create over 125,000 new child care spaces, representing half of the 250,000 regulated spaces that we aim to have created by March 2026. This milestone means that we are well on our way to reaching that goal, ensuring that families across the country have access to affordable, high-quality child care.

The child care expansion loan program from budget 2024 will enable more spaces to be built in the not-for-profit and public sectors. Additionally, the early learning and child care infrastructure agreements will support provinces and territories to build more inclusive child care spaces across the country.

[Translation]

Budget 2024 also proposed \$10 million to train more early childhood educators and student loan forgiveness for those working in rural and remote communities.

[English]

We're also helping families afford essentials with the Canada child benefit, which recently marked its eighth anniversary. This

tax-free benefit is given to 3.5 million low- to middle-income families. It gives them more money to help pay for food, clothing and whatever their family requires. Most families receiving the maximum Canada child benefit amounts are single-parent families, with approximately 80% being single moms. This is making a real difference. There are approximately 380,000 fewer children living in poverty than in 2015, a 39% decrease.

In closing, we've made some great progress, some important progress, but we remain committed to future investments that support families, which are truly the foundation of Canada's future.

I look forward to your questions here today. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Minister.

We'll now begin with Madam Ferreri for six minutes.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri (Peterborough—Kawartha, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here today.

Minister, on October 24, a plethora of child care operators came to Ottawa from British Columbia, Ontario and Alberta, on their own dime, simply to be heard, but you did not meet with them. Why?

• (1210)

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I meet regularly with child care operators across this country. On that particular day, I can't tell you exactly what I was doing. I believe my staff met with them the day before.

I'm always open to meeting with child care operators, whenever and wherever I can.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: That's just false. The organizer of that group wrote to you saying that your staff absolutely did go outside, but it was to take photos. She said that it happened "within minutes of [the] meeting start time, for the apparent purpose of further mocking, discrediting, and shaming those present on social media by questioning the group size."

She has written to you multiple times, including yesterday, December 2. They represent 150,000 licensed child care spaces, or more than 15% of all licensed child care spaces.

You say that you will meet with everyone. Will you commit today to meeting with this group?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Respectfully, nothing that I said in my previous statement was false. My team did meet with the organizer of that particular group. I am always open to meeting with anyone who operates a child care facility.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: For confirmation, you will commit today to meeting with the ACE National Coalition of Childcare Operators.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Absolutely.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: That's perfect.

Moving on, Minister, Sergeant Lisa Harris of the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary testified at the status of women committee last week, and she stated, "The Public Health Agency of Canada recognizes that children who witness family violence suffer the same emotional and psychological consequences as those who are directly abused."

Will you commit today to protecting victims and their children by advocating for stricter bail policies?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: As the minister of families and children, obviously everything I do day in and day out is about ensuring that parents and kids across this country are set up for success. I will always look for opportunities to do that. As you of course know, there are other ministers fully engaged in that file, and I support the work they do.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Have you directly asked those ministers to enforce stricter bail conditions? As you've said, you are the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development. In your opening statement, you said that children deserve to receive the "best possible start in life", yet we've had the highest increase in child poverty in history under your ministry. Toronto's homeless shelters now have almost triple the number of kids they did eight years ago, with more than 1,400 in hotel rooms paid for by city hall.

I'll ask this again: Will you advocate for stricter bail policies? As we know, many women are being murdered in broad daylight because of bail conditions that allow repeat violent offenders to be out on bail.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I'm happy to correct the record. When the Conservatives were last in government, the poverty rate for children was 16.3%. The most recent level of poverty for children, which is still too much, absolutely, is 11%. We've put in place a number of measures that have been influential in lifting hundreds of thousands of children out of poverty.

I will put out frankly that you and your colleagues in the Conservative Party have voted against every one of those measures.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Minister, it is quite remarkable for you to sit there and tell that to Canadians, who are using food banks at record-high numbers. This is the highest increase in child poverty in history, with children living in homeless shelters. For you to be so smug and say that everything is great is quite insulting to families.

Moving on, Terri-Lynne McClintic, who abducted and then assisted her boyfriend in the sexually motivated killing of eight-year-old Tori Stafford, has been allowed to be in the presence of children through a mother-child program at a women's federal penitentiary. Also, Tara Desousa, once Adam Laboucan, who sexually assaulted a baby in 1997 and became the youngest dangerous offender in history, now lives with mothers and children in a B.C. jail.

Are you bringing this up to your ministers? Are you advocating that sex offenders and child killers not have access to children in federal prisons?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I find this line of questioning and these innuendoes completely disrespectful, frankly. Let me answer—

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Tori Stafford's dad finds you completely disrespectful. Just answer the question.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Can I answer the question?

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Yes, please do.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: As the minister of families and children, who wakes up every day with the responsibility of ensuring that we look out for the kids across this country, I take absolutely every opportunity to do that. I live and breathe it, frankly.

As a cabinet, we have conversations. We work collaboratively together when there is cross-touching on various portfolios. Of course, I will always advocate for children's safety. Frankly—

• (1215)

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Then will you commit to following up, visiting a federal penitentiary and seeing where these child killers and convicted sex offenders are sharing space with mothers and children?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I appreciate the question. I appreciate what you are trying to do here, respectfully—

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: What I'm trying to do?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Respectfully, yes—trying to do.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: What am I trying to do, Minister? Tell me, please. What is it?

The Chair: Thank you. Your time is up.

Mr. Long, you have six minutes.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Chair.

Good afternoon to my colleagues.

Minister, thanks for coming.

I have just a couple of comments before I ask you some questions.

When I went door to door back in 2015, 2019 and 2021, I saw that people in my riding of Saint John—Rothesay needed support. One thing I'm most proud of is that, as Liberals, we believe that government can do good things for people. We can come forth with national and, I would say, transformational programs that help people most in need. I think as a government we can be and should be judged by how we try to support the most vulnerable and the people who need support most.

You mentioned the Canada child benefit and the changes we made to it in 2016. We targeted it to people in need and increased it with inflation, and so many families, single mothers and so on have benefited and used it as a lifeline.

Further to that, whether it's the child care program or the school meal program, we want to help families, help single mothers and help single parents. I think, as you said, we still have a lot of work to do. There are a lot of challenges we have, but we are doing a lot for Canadians, and I want to thank you for that.

I want to talk about my new premier in New Brunswick, Premier Susan Holt, who is a breath of fresh air after Conservative Premier Blaine Higgs, who fought us every step of the way with respect to programs. We had to drag him kicking and screaming over the early learning and child care line, and he didn't want to participate in the school food program. We saw what happened to Premier Higgs. He lost his own seat. New Brunswickers clearly rejected that form of politics.

To go back to the throne speech that was read two weeks back, building a Canada-wide early learning and child care system relies on dedication and the hard work of early childhood educators, making it essential to attract, reattract and retain skilled professionals. I was really pleased to hear Premier Holt recognize, in the speech from the throne, the critical role the ECEs play in this effort.

How can we best support these educators? I think it's by improving working conditions, increasing wages and offering greater financial support to students entering the field.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Thank you very much for the question.

I was likewise very encouraged by Premier Holt's remarks and, frankly, the number of times that she mentioned a number of the programs we've been working on together, namely the \$10-a-day early learning and child care program, as well as her ambition around joining our national school food program. These are two great examples of programs that provide tremendous financial relief for parents. Of course, we all know how expensive it is to raise a family.

On the specifics in New Brunswick, I would suggest there's still a lot of work to be done when it comes to supporting the workforce. We are now just over halfway through our five-year agreement with New Brunswick on child care. We've seen them get to a 50% reduction in fees. This means that on average, parents are saving \$3,600 a year. The average fee in New Brunswick is now down to, I believe, \$12.82, so just under \$13. They've made some great progress.

Having said that, they have implemented a wage grid for the ECE workforce, which is a positive step to ensuring that ECEs are well compensated and well respected. I will say there are other provinces accelerating their wage grids at a quicker pace and that some provinces have moved forward with benefits and pensions for their workforces. These are important steps forward as we continue to build out this national system. There's still much more to be done, but we're excited to work with the new government there.

• (1220)

Mr. Wayne Long: Thanks for that.

The premier also mentioned a few other shared priorities, as you said: eliminating child care wait-lists, making \$10-a-day child care more accessible and moving ahead with a universal school meal program.

Could you share more about the status of these shared priorities? Are you having constructive conversations with the new government, and what should we expect to see in the next months?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Specifically on the wait-list piece, I was actually in Charlottetown last week. We had our federal-provincial-territorial ministers "most responsible" table. Although the new minister was not there, some great work was shared by officials on what they are doing to create a central data portal that is the envy, honestly, of every other province and territory that was at the table. That will go a long way towards making it easier for parents to find spots and having clear reporting for operators. Lastly, on school food, we're certainly at the table. It's great to have a willing partner there, and I hope we'll be able to share more soon.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Chabot, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

Thank you, Minister. Congratulations on your French.

In your opening remarks, you talked about your main mandates, learning services and Canada's national school food program, among other things. However, one of your mandates is also to advance the implementation of the community services recovery fund to help charities and non-profit organizations adapt and modernize.

We have met with charitable groups, such as Imagine Canada, which is a group of charities and non-profit organizations. They shared a number of concerns with us, which may even warrant a study by our committee. I'd like to hear your opinion on one of the main concerns.

We rely on these organizations a lot, but there's a big problem, which is that these organizations receive funding mainly on a project-by-project basis, rather than receive funding based on their core mission or autonomous mission.

How far along are you in your mandate to advance the implementation of the community services recovery fund? What does that mean for those groups? Is any work under way?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Thank you very much for the question.

You're absolutely right that these organizations across the country are working to meet people's needs.

[English]

These individuals are being supported by the incredible work of not-for-profit organizations. It's incredibly important that we as a government continue to do what we can to support them.

Throughout these last few years, we've seen the impact of the community services recovery fund, which specifically helped not-for-profit organizations increase their capacity and do quite a bit of internal work to grow their impact.

The other program I would point to, which even in my own riding is really impactful for our not-for-profit sector, is the Canada summer jobs program. In my community, I see hundreds of young people gaining meaningful employment, and most often, not-for-profit organizations benefit from their employment.

One last piece I will point to that might be—

• (1225)

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Minister, with all due respect, you're giving me examples of jobs that can be held by young people in those organizations.

Those organizations are numerous in Canada. They are numerous in Quebec, as well, but that's another system. In Canada, charities and non-profit organizations need sustainable funding to ensure their survival and to fulfill their mission to young people and all the people you are talking about. Therefore, they are asking for funding that would be granted not on a project-by-project basis, but based on their fundamental mission, their core mission.

Have you started thinking about that? Do you have any funds to satisfy those requests?

[English]

Hon. Jenna Sudds: There are a few initiatives I will mention that are currently under way, one of which is a home within government for the not-for-profit sector. When I am meeting with not-for-profits across the country, one thing they talk to me about is how to better engage with government to ensure they're able to access the resources that are available to them. We're undertaking that work with the input of not-for-profits across the country to get that piece right and to help facilitate better information sharing and relationships.

The other piece they've asked for help with, which we did include in the last budget, is moving forward with a volunteer strategy. Not-for-profits have shared that, since COVID, it is very difficult to find volunteers to help maintain their operations. Often, many of them are predominantly run by volunteers. We're doing work collaboratively with them on developing a volunteer strategy for the not-for-profit sector.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I'd like to know what kind of work is under way. The groups we talk to meet with a lot of ministers or MPs on Parliament Hill and would like to know what data is being collected and what strategies are being put in place to address their concerns. If you have any other data to share with the committee about this fund, among other things, I would appreciate it.

[English]

The Chair: Give a quick answer, Minister.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Sure.

I would reiterate that the work under way on the home within government for the sector addresses the questions you just asked, and the opportunity to feed into that work exists.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Madam Zarrillo, you have six minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much.

Thank you, Minister, for being here.

I'm going to start with my questions on Jordan's principle.

Minister, you're responsible for children. My colleague Lori Idlout raised in the House just last week that the Liberals are actively fighting against the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal's orders and allowing first nations children to die. In fact, three first nations children have died in care since January of this year.

The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs said that the Jordan's principle process is too slow. Just recently in Steinbach, Manitoba, the Hanover School Division had to share with families and kids that 93 of their valued educational assistants had to be laid off. This difficult decision, they said, arose from circumstances beyond their control, specifically the unexpected loss of federal funding for Jordan's principle's programming in 2024-25.

Minister, I know that the Liberal government has decided to very much silo indigenous issues outside of other ministries. I asked an indigenous housing question last week, and the housing minister didn't feel that it was worth responding to, so I am going to pose it to you. What is happening with the funding for Jordan's principle? Why is the Liberal government refusing to uphold the human rights of indigenous children? Lastly, can Hanover School District please get their money?

• (1230)

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I'll have to follow up on that last piece, but I appreciate the question you've raised. Obviously, it's incredibly important.

I'll share that, predominantly, the work that I have been doing with indigenous communities has been with respect to the early learning and child care program. Having said that, additional ministers are specifically working with communities and have responsibility for Jordan's principle.

I will, if you'll entertain it, perhaps ask our ADM, Catherine Adam, if she can speak to the current status.

Ms. Catherine Adam (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister and Chief Results and Delivery Officer, Strategic and Service Policy Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): I am very cognizant of what you said on siloing issues, but the reality is that Jordan's principle is an important funding base to ensure that indigenous children are receiving the same kinds of services, commensurate with what we're seeing provinces and territories provide. It's about not having these children and their development, in a sense, set back, as jurisdictions may argue back and forth over who has accountability on the issue. Jordan's principle really does run through Indigenous Services Canada and through Crown-Indigenous Relations—

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I know you know that I don't have much time, so I'm going to go back to the minister.

Are you telling me, Minister, that you do not have any influence or jurisdiction over indigenous children as it relates to Jordan's principle, even though you are the Minister of Children and Social Development?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I would suggest there's a team effort. It is not solely me who has any decision-making capacity there. There's a tremendous amount of collaboration among me and my colleagues to ensure that, as the ADM quite rightly said, indigenous children have the same rights and opportunities as all children across the country.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Minister, are you aware that there are 40,000 Jordan's principle requests in the backlog?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: That would be the purview of another ministry that has that visibility, but—

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I'm going to go on with the silo topic. Recently—this week, actually—the AG released a report on seniors, saying that the Liberal government was not analyzing or even tracking the data on their programs for seniors and that there needed to be in their recommendations some interministry communications.

I'm interested in knowing exactly what the interministry communications are for Jordan's principle and indigenous children. If you can't share that today, I'd like to have it brought to this committee so I can understand what the links are between the Ministry of Families, Children and Social Development and Indigenous Services Canada. I think that's where you said Jordan's principle is sitting. I'll give you the opportunity to answer, but I would also like a follow-up answer.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I'll ask ADM Adam to address that.

Ms. Catherine Adam: We'd be happy to provide in writing, working with our colleagues in other departments, information about the backlog situation, if we can, and information to address your other issues about how we're going to work together as ministries.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: That's great.

Minister, you mentioned that your work is also about looking at child care spaces for indigenous children. There were 3,300

promised. I'm wondering about the workforce strategy to get us there.

There is a sectoral round table. Can you update us on the status of that sectoral round table and any workforce strategy you have for early learning and child care?

• (1235)

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I'm sorry, but is that specifically for indigenous educators or in general?

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: No, it's just in general.

The Chair: Give a short answer, please, Minister.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: The short answer is that, at the federal-provincial-territorial meeting last week with all of my counterparts, we moved forward additional work that's been happening on creating a multi-jurisdictional workforce strategy. That work is still ongoing. It's not complete, but it is a priority among all provinces and territories.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zarrillo.

Madam Gray, you have five minutes.

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

In British Columbia, illicit drug overdoses are now the leading cause of death among youth aged 10 to 18, according to figures by the B.C. coroners service. As the minister for children and families, you must surely be concerned about these numbers.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I am a mother and I am the minister for families and children. Of course I'm concerned about these numbers.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Minister, do you agree that illicit drug decriminalization and taxpayer-funded drugs should never have been allowed?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Respectfully, I think this is off-topic from the topic of this committee and what I have jurisdiction—

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Respectfully, Minister, I will interrupt you there, because, actually, you're here today to talk about your mandate letter. Your mandate letter says that you are to work with the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions to “ensure mental health supports are accessible to children and youth”.

Do you agree with the Canadian centre on substance abuse that mental health problems and substance abuse issues are linked?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Yes, I do.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: As minister for children, shouldn't you be seeking to address the increasing youth overdoses, especially when your government-funded hard drugs are so often being diverted?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: As I was saying earlier, another minister is the lead on this. Of course I have conversations with her, but she is leading this work.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Minister, it's right in your mandate letter.

I'll also bring up that the parents of 13-year-old Brianna MacDonald, who tragically overdosed, were very clear on this link. Her mother said, "I think a lot of the reasons she was doing the drugs was the mental health problems she was having".

Your ministerial mandate is to ensure that mental health supports are accessible to children and youth. Are you taking any actions at all?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: As I mentioned earlier, I work closely with my colleague, who has the lead on this file. She leads, and I provide support as needed.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Working closely, what actions have you taken, Minister?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I have conversations on a regular basis with my colleague who leads this file.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: What specific actions have you taken on this, Minister?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: As I just mentioned, another colleague leads this. I provide input. She is ultimately the minister who is responsible.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: You're obviously not willing to answer the question on any actions you've taken. It's right in your mandate letter.

I will bring up as well that Brianna MacDonald's parents told the HESA committee that they were unable to access mental health care for their daughter, but she was able to acquire "zip-lock bags full of needles, cooking kits and pamphlets on how to cook the drugs and safely use them."

As minister for children, do you think children as young as 12 should be provided needles, cook kits and instruction manuals for drug use instead of mental health care?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Again, as a mother and as the minister for families, of course I don't think drugs belong in our children's hands. I think everyone in this room and across the country can agree with that sentiment.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: I'll go back to you again, Minister, and ask what specific actions you have taken on this issue. It's right in your mandate letter.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: As you read out earlier, my mandate letter indicates working with the minister who is responsible for and has the lead on this file.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: What actions have you taken? What actions have you recommended?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I believe I've already answered this question.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: No, you haven't, so I'll move on.

Police associations are warning about the dangers of the diversion of government-funded drugs, particularly the diversion to children. A drug bust in Campbell River, British Columbia, found taxpayer-funded fentanyl moulded into gummy bear and dinosaur shapes.

You're the minister for children and families. Again, your mandate letter clearly states that you should be working with the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions. Have you taken any actions to protect children from diverted taxpayer-funded drugs?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I appreciate the question. Again, there is a minister who's leading this work. I provide input as she is requiring it.

• (1240)

Mrs. Tracy Gray: What specific input have you provided on this, Minister?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I would point to a number of programs we've put in place to help lift children out of situations like this and to lift children out of poverty, whether that be the Canada child benefit—

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Minister, I'm referring to diverted drugs. You're not answering the question. What specific recommendations have you made to the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions to protect children from diverted drugs?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I've already answered this question.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: You haven't answered it, so I'll move on.

You and the Liberal government, in collaboration with the NDP, supported taxpayer-funded drugs flooding our streets and the parks and playgrounds where children play in British Columbia. This was occurring on your watch as the minister of children and families and you did nothing. It was only because of immense public pressure in British Columbia that B.C. decided to amend their policy and approach the federal government to remove the approval.

Based on the failed drug policy experiment in B.C. and based on the fact that you're the minister for children and families, would you advocate for stopping any expansion by your government to allow decriminalization in other jurisdictions, in particular in your province of Ontario?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Once again, respectfully, there is a minister who leads on this file. It is not me.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: You've advocated for this in the past, Minister, when you were on city council in Ottawa, so it's surprising that you're not willing to answer that question.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gray.

Mr. Van Bynen, you have five minutes.

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

Minister, I'd like to get back to the portfolio you're directly influencing. I'm reminded of a phrase my father had: No deed should go unpunished. I do apologize for the smear tactics you've been exposed to.

I want to talk about the good things that are happening. Our plan for a national school food program is moving forward quickly. We know that access to healthy meals can make an immediate and impactful difference in a child's day. My wife is a retired teacher and my daughter is currently a teacher. I've seen first-hand how proper nutrition can positively affect a student's focus, energy and overall well-being. Every child deserves to be well fed at school. The benefits to families are clear, not to mention the savings for parents.

On Friday we had some great news. Can you tell us what we're doing in P.E.I.?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Indeed, Friday was an exciting day. I was in Charlottetown, where we announced that a fourth province has signed on to our national school food program. P.E.I., which currently has a version of a lunch program, will now be able to serve lunch, with our investments, to an additional 1,500 kids. It will be able to serve breakfast and snacks to just over an additional 800 kids. In total, that's almost half a million additional meals this school year.

I would point out that this is the fourth province that we have signed on. Just over 184,000 kids this school year so far will be able to focus on learning and will have access to healthy food at school.

I would point out that the Conservatives and their leader have taken every opportunity to oppose getting food into schools for children who need it. He's quoted as referring to this as "bureaucracy", but I will point to the 184,000 kids so far who are getting fed at school today because of this early work.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: We also heard news from Ontario a few weeks ago. What are we doing to feed kids in Ontario? What results will we expect to see and what does this mean for families in Ontario, particularly in my riding?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I'm really excited. Ontario was our third province to sign on, just a few weeks ago. We made a commitment: \$108.5 million over the next three years to see more kids in Ontario have access to healthy food at school. This school year, we will see an additional 160,000 children in this province access just over 9.8 million meals.

I would also point out that in Ontario, we have 13 student nutrition partners. These are organizations like the Toronto Foundation for Student Success. Here in Ottawa, it's the Ottawa Network for Education's school breakfast program. These key partners, which have worked with the provincial government in the past, will be recipients and will now be able to expand their impact and their work.

Frankly, it's really about getting more food into kids' bellies so they can focus on being kids.

• (1245)

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: We heard earlier that these discussions are about your mandate letter. Can you share some of the key priorities you've set for your mandate?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Absolutely. Thank you for the question.

First, just finishing off on school food, in this year's budget, we committed a billion dollars to see an additional 400,000 kids across this country access food at school. In just a few short months, we've already been able to reach agreements with four provinces. It is my ambition to get all 13 provinces and territories signed on as quickly as possible.

We're continuing to accelerate and focus on that work. At the end of the day, this is about making sure kids can learn and focus on being kids by having access to food and about ensuring they have full bellies at school.

This is also impactful, of course, for parents. It's estimated that a family of four will save \$800 in groceries this school year because of this program. It's very impactful as well in helping to address some of the affordability challenges that we recognize are out there.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Van Bynen.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

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

Minister, you are also responsible for Service Canada.

Yesterday, the Auditor General tabled reports on a number of issues, including assistance programs for seniors. When we learned that the government had not taken certain data into account to see whether the old age security pension really met seniors' needs, we pinched ourselves to make sure that was really happening. However, that's another issue.

The Auditor General also tabled a report on the issue of digital identity validation to access services. It's a very important government program. When services are provided, it must be ensured that they are secure and delivered on time. However, the Auditor General said that, according to the audit results, a digital identity validation system had not been successfully implemented. In addition, among G7 countries, Canada has fallen from second to sixth on the online administration development index. Yet, a lot of money has been invested in that.

Could you give us an update on that?

[*English*]

Hon. Jenna Sudds: There are, I believe, six ministers within ESDC. I don't have responsibility for Service Canada. It's Minister Beech who oversees that particular function, as well as the particular issue you raised around digitization.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: That said, Canadians expect to be able to turn to certain outlets to find out about the programs you deploy within your department. However, I understand that you have no responsibility in this regard. I assume that this has been removed from your mandate letter and that you are no longer responsible for Service Canada.

Concerning child care, I won't ask about the situation in Quebec. It is actually thanks to our model that you are investing in a similar program in the other provinces. What concerns me is the situation of young indigenous children. You have a specific mandate to work with indigenous partners to ensure that young children have the right to a culturally appropriate learning system.

What is your assessment of that so far?

• (1250)

The Chair: Please give a short answer.

[*English*]

Hon. Jenna Sudds: As I travel the country on occasion, I get the opportunity to visit some of the indigenous-focused early learning and child care centres. I see first-hand the impact of culturally appropriate care that incorporates traditions and incorporates early learning educators who are able to support indigenous children and ensure care is culturally inclusive and appropriate. There's a myriad of projects across the country, and I'm happy to share those with you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

Ms. Zarrillo, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much.

Minister, I note that today you mentioned there are a lot of ministries. I just want to point out that this committee sees at minimum seven ministries and a number of Crown corporations, including the CMHC, which are some of the largest, but we are still able to ask questions, get answers to questions and have a full understanding of those files. I'm a bit concerned today about the number of responses that have come back that say it's somebody else's ministry.

I'm asking, Minister, if you would share with your cabinet that it's important they modernize the way they're thinking about these issues. Even Canadian Tire sells food, and grocery stores sell toys. Every single type of business has had to modernize, cross over and intersect. I'm really disappointed today that we've seen the antiquated way the Liberal government has set up their department. That's a message from the NDP. It's a message from me that they really need to modernize.

I'm going to go back to the AG report on seniors, which said ES-DC was not analyzing the data on the programs the government was offering for seniors to see if they were sufficient. What work is your department doing to ensure the programs you're responsible for are sufficient? I'll add on to that a secondary question, if you can answer it: How are you making sure indigenous children are getting the supports they need?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: First of all, I thank the AG and her team for the report. It's certainly not an easy job, but I think it's helpful. It helps to provide us guidance as we reflect on the report. There are always ways we can improve and, for this report in particular, improve the ways we can better support seniors.

I might pass it over to ADM Catherine Adam for the interdepartmental stuff.

Ms. Catherine Adam: In terms of the recent Auditor General's report, we take those findings very seriously as a department. We'll be working to see what we can do going forward to ensure the adequacy of the retirement income system we have in Canada and to make sure we can really dig into disaggregating data to get a fuller picture. It's going to be important, and it is important to the department and to officials that we're doing that regularly with almost all of our programs and services.

The Chair: Thank you. We will close with five and five.

Mrs. Gray, you have five minutes.

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

Minister, illicit drug overdose is now the leading cause of death in B.C. among youth aged 10 to 18. You're the minister for children and families. We've seen the failed drug experiment in British Columbia.

It appears that during your time as an Ottawa city councillor, you supported a motion by the council asking the federal government to include a plan for, as it stated, "the decriminalization of people who use controlled substances for personal use". You were in favour of that.

Based on the failed drug policy experiment in B.C., do you still agree that the decriminalization of people who use controlled substances for personal use should be expanded in Ontario and across Canada?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I'm glad to see that you've dug into my time in city council, where I chaired the social committee.

I will point to some of the work under way that I'm part of through the poverty reduction council that keeps us—

• (1255)

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Minister, can you answer the question, please?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: —informed about some of these more pressing issues.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Minister, are you not prepared to answer that question today? You're the minister for children and families, and you've seen the statistics on how drugs are being diverted to children. You've seen the statistics on children dying from overdoses.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: As I said earlier—

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Are you standing by your previous stance?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: —there is no circumstance in which I or our government would like to see children have access to illicit drugs anywhere in this country. I know the minister for that is focused on ensuring—

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Minister, do you agree with decriminalization?

Mr. Wayne Long: I have a point of order.

The Chair: There's a point of order.

Mr. Wayne Long: I think the minister should be allowed to answer the questions.

The Chair: I give a good bit of latitude. The questioner asks the question, and the minister can answer as she chooses.

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

The Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police put out a statement just last week that said, based on the experience of B.C., their board “no longer supports the decriminalization of...illicit drugs”.

As the minister for families and children, do you stand with families and the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police against drug decriminalization anywhere in Canada?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I will always stand with families. I will always meet them where they're at. I will always hear their stories and work to ensure we do right by them.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: The minister is obviously not prepared to answer the question.

I'll cede my time to my colleague Ms. Ferreri.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you.

Minister, earlier in our exchange, you said you met with associations of child care operators. They represent over 156,000 licensed spaces.

They have been watching this committee. They want to set the record straight: This is not true. You said it was true, so I just wanted to say that.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I did not say that I met with them.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: No, you said your staff did, and they didn't.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: My staff did the day prior.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: No, they did not. It was October 7, so you might want to get your facts straight, Minister. If you're going to go toe-to-toe here, have your facts ready. They met on October 7, not the day before.

They just want the record clear that you were—

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Okay, they met.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Oh, okay. I'm sorry. What do details matter?

I'll go back to what I said earlier. Sergeant Lisa Harris of the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary testified at status of women committee, saying, “The Public Health Agency of Canada recognizes that children who witness family violence suffer the same emotional and psychological consequences as those who are directly abused.” However, per Stats Canada, “Police-reported violence against children and youth...has increased considerably over time. The rate of family violence against children and youth reached 362 victims per 100,000 population...the highest rate since comparable data became available in 2009.”

I have article after article about women being murdered in broad daylight by offenders who are out on bail. Today we heard you skirt a lot of responsibility, which is the culture of the Liberal caucus because of your Prime Minister. You can smirk all you want. I think it's insulting to people. Have some humility is what I would ask people.

I hope the camera pans to the minister right now to show the smugness on her face.

Will you advocate for stricter bail reform so that violent repeat offenders are not murdering women in broad daylight and so children are not exposed to family violence?

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. What's the relevance?

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Relevance? Are you serious?

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Yes.

The Chair: Members do not have the floor. The minister has the floor.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Are you for real, man?

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: I am, yes.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Maybe you'd better read the mandate letter

The Chair: Ms. Ferreri, come to order.

Ms. Sudds, you have time for a short answer.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: As I stated earlier, of course we do not, under any circumstances, want to see children exposed to any sort of violence anywhere in this country.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Your words and your actions don't match.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: As I have already said, there is a colleague leading this work. I contribute, of course, through our tables and our discussions, but—

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Are you happy with your colleague's work on this file?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: Ms. Ferreri, the minister did not interrupt your questions or anybody else's questions. Please show the same respect to the minister.

I'll now move to Mr. Collins to conclude.

• (1300)

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

Minister, welcome to the committee.

Minister, when I go back to my community and speak to my constituents, some of them raise concerns about the future of the programs that you've talked about and that our committee members have highlighted today, such as the school nutrition program and \$10-a-day day care. We could even extend that to other things this committee has dealt with, like the Canada disability benefit. The housing accelerator fund was in front of us too.

The Leader of the Opposition has bragged that as part of his "make Canada great again" agenda, he's going to cut social programs. I don't have a crystal ball that tells me what those programs would be, but some of those I just referenced will likely be on the chopping block. He's been very evasive when pressed in the House about how he's going to cut the budget and balance the books, as he's bragged about for the last year. I think part of his "make Canada great again" agenda is to cut social programs.

Can you highlight, maybe in a very general way, what your constituents are saying about those programs, how they've helped from an affordability perspective and how they've helped lift people out of poverty? I think you tried to answer some of those questions when pressed by the opposition, but you weren't given the opportunity, so I'll give you that opportunity now.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Thank you very much.

As you very eloquently said, we've put forward a number of measures since we came in in 2015 that have been instrumental in supporting families. I'm sure you hear this in your riding. I get to hear on a daily basis from people in my riding and people across the country about the impacts of them.

We saw when we came in in 2015 that the poverty rate was 14.5%. We have since been able to decrease the poverty rate to 10.6%. We've lifted over 600,000 Canadians out of poverty. How did we do that? It was a multi-faceted approach.

I look to things like \$10-a-day child care in this province, which is saving families \$8,500 for each kid each year. I look at things like the Canada child benefit, which we introduced in 2016. It's providing families, at the maximum, \$7,787 each and every year. I look at things like the national school food program in Ontario, which I just mentioned. It saves families of four about \$800.

Incrementally, each one of these policies has met the moment. I would fast-forward to the most recently introduced tax holiday for all Canadians. Moving forward with that over these next two

months, through the holidays, the expensive winter and the holiday season, is real relief. It's meeting families where they are.

At every opportunity, each one of those programs.... As we have witnessed and heard, not only did the Conservatives not support them, but they would actively deconstruct them if given the opportunity.

The Chair: You have one minute.

Mr. Chad Collins: I'll take the last minute, Minister, to talk about a couple of people in my riding.

Judith Bishop and Don Jaffray have been champions for \$10-a-day day care. They've sent me some information that highlights that the province of Ontario has been pretty slow. Conservative governments, federal and provincial, drag their feet on most social issues, as I just referenced. If they were sitting here today, they'd ask if there is something more the government can do to create some healthy tension with the province of Ontario to move metrics, get the families the savings they deserve, build wage capacity within the sector and help people who are struggling to provide those programs in municipalities across the province and across the country.

Can you comment on that briefly in the time I have left?

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Absolutely. It is fair to say that a lot of work still has to happen in Ontario.

I am encouraged. We are seeing some positive signs with respect to the province, which is now pivoting to a more sustainable way of funding child care operators starting in the new year, with a cap on fees at an average of \$22.

There has been some progress, but what has been slow is the space creation. I encourage parents like those in your riding and the advocates I get to speak to on a regular basis to continue to use their voices to share the impact, which is oftentimes quite profound for families in Ontario and across the country. We want to ensure that, frankly, all levels of government, particularly in Ontario, continue to do the work to make sure that families can benefit.

• (1305)

Mr. Chad Collins: Thank you.

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

Is it the will of the committee to adjourn?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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