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• (1630)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC)): Welcome to meeting 34 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. This meeting is taking place in a hybrid format.

I have a few comments before we begin.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking.

For those of you on Zoom, typical Zoom etiquette applies. Click on your microphone to activate it and mute yourself when you're not speaking. Make sure that you have the translation channel that you need prepared right now, before we begin.

Colleagues, all comments should be addressed through the chair.

For our witnesses, you will each have five minutes for your opening remarks. Please keep it to five minutes. I will try to signal you when you have about a minute left.

Colleagues, today we are continuing our study on the provincial distribution of asylum seekers in Canada.

Welcome to our witnesses for today's meeting: Professor Christina Clark-Kazak, from the University of Ottawa, as an individual; Randy Donauer, city councillor, from the city of Saskatoon; and Kailee Brennan, from Matthew House, Ottawa.

Let's start with Professor Clark-Kazak.

You may begin with a statement of five minutes.

Thank you.

Dr. Christina Clark-Kazak (Professor, University of Ottawa, As an Individual): Thank you, Madam Chair, for this opportunity to address this committee.

This is an especially difficult time for Canadians facing rising living costs and unemployment. History shows that, in times of economic downturn, it is easy to scapegoat newcomers.

As you consider how best to serve people seeking refugee protection in Canada, I urge you to ground your recommendations in rights and evidence. Any provincial distribution policy must take a rights-based approach. The right to seek asylum is protected by Canadian and international law. Freedom of movement is also a basic human right. Any dispersal policy must comply with the charter, which applies to anyone physically present in Canada. The charter

guarantees socio-economic rights, like the right to housing and education, as well as civil rights, like the right to religion.

When identifying appropriate locations for asylum seekers, we need to consider which communities have the capacity to facilitate access to these charter-guaranteed rights. We also need to acknowledge the interconnectedness of rights. Our research on housing for refugee claimants, for example, shows how a stable address facilitates access to education, employment, health care and other rights.

We also need to draw lessons learned from previous attempts at provincial distribution in asylum and refugee resettlement. In 2024 and 2025, the Government of Canada relocated over 13,000 refugee claimants to smaller municipalities in Ontario and Quebec and to some other provinces. While this relocation relieved pressures on housing and services in Montreal and Toronto, prolonged hotel stays were both costly and ineffective in connecting asylum seekers with legal and settlement services.

There's also research available from analogous contexts of refugee resettlement to smaller communities across Canada. For example, in 1999, Canada launched Operation Parasol to evacuate over 7,000 Kosovars. Through a joint assistance program, Kosovars were matched to small and medium-sized communities across Canada.

Research indicates that most Kosovars remained in these smaller host communities three years after arrival in Canada. However, some faced limited job opportunities, lack of culturally specific settlement supports, and insufficient legal services. This then led to onward migration to larger urban centres in the longer term.

Similarly, there's research on refugee resettlement to rural areas across Canada through private sponsorship. While refugees in these contexts benefit from stronger social networks, they may face challenges related to limited public transportation, health care, post-secondary education and immigration support.

When considering where to relocate asylum seekers, we need to look at both sides of the ledger—not just costs but also contributions. Refugee claimants pay taxes and provide essential labour, contributing to economic growth.

Canada can also learn from long-standing asylum dispersal programs in other countries. For example, the United Kingdom has had a regional dispersal policy since 2000, following their 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act. This policy has had uneven success, with some research indicating that dispersal did not facilitate integration.

These are some of the key lessons learned from the U.K. policy:

One, we need to identify areas with good-quality housing.

Two, there's a need to ensure adequate legal aid.

Three, there's a need to fund and support non-governmental organizations providing social support.

Four, there's a need for coordination with local authorities and communities.

In conclusion, I would like to offer the following recommendations for this committee's consideration.

First, an asylum dispersal policy would require increased coordination of services, including through the expansion of federally funded local immigration partnerships and legal assistance.

Second, it would require buy-in from provinces and municipalities. This is not solely a federal government decision. As you heard in the case of the Peel transitional housing strategy, from the testimony on Monday, refugee claimants' needs are well served when all levels of government work together.

Third, asylum seekers need to be given some agency in decision-making, including matching skills and experiences to host communities.

Finally, any policy must be rights- and evidence-based. Asylum seekers are human beings with human rights. They cannot simply be moved around the country like political pawns on a chessboard. There needs to be a well-thought-out and well-resourced plan that sets them up for successful resettlement outcomes.

• (1635)

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

I will be happy to answer your questions.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you. You're right on time.

We will now move to City Councillor Donauer, who is appearing on video.

Randy Donauer (City Councillor, City of Saskatoon, As an Individual): Madam Chair and committee members, thank you for allowing me to present to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration today.

My name is Randy Donauer. I'm a city councillor in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, but today I'm speaking to you as an individual. However, I would like to note that I did discuss my presentation with the mayor of Saskatoon, Mayor Cynthia Block, and she's in full support.

It's my understanding that you are debating whether to redistribute potentially large numbers of asylum seekers across Canada, and I would urge caution.

Saskatoon welcomes newcomers to Canada, and we support Canada's long-standing tradition of supporting and protecting refugees. Clearly, Canada's asylum system is under pressure. There is a large backlog, and communities are left managing the consequences. The solution is not in moving people around; it is to improve the system and the processing of legitimate refugee claims faster and in a more efficient manner.

Saskatoon is facing a serious housing and homelessness crisis, and we thank the federal and provincial governments for partnering with us to find housing solutions. My city has grown by almost 80,000 people in the past decade—a 30% growth in 10 years. That may not sound like a lot for Montreal and Toronto, but it is overwhelming for us. Despite our best efforts, we have not built enough homes to keep up with the growth in our region. This causes housing prices to rise artificially, increasing the cost of living and putting more people on the street.

The Saskatoon 2025 point-in-time count identified 1,931 unhoused people in Saskatoon, and we know this figure is growing every week. Statistics show that many of these unhoused come from the north in the hope of finding a better life in the city. Saskatoon is also a common destination for those evacuated from northern communities due to forest fires and flood. Last year we accepted over 8,000 evacuees and provided safety and shelter for them. We did not ship them all over Canada.

To be clear, we are overwhelmed, and our systems are beyond maximum capacity. We need help caring for those we have, and we do not have the capacity to take on a large influx of newcomers in need of a safe place to live. The citizenship and immigration system has a problem. There is a large backlog, and it's growing. The solution is not to move that problem around the country; it is to solve the problem. Instead of using resources to move large numbers of people across the country, I recommend that we use these resources to simply process their cases more efficiently and bring them to an expeditious conclusion.

Canada would benefit from the use of tools to minimize false claims or to restrict access to our borders. This can be done by imposing visa requirements and/or a safe third country policy. A robust screening and processing system for asylum seekers would be more fair to genuine refugees and more accountable to taxpayers. Accelerating removals would eliminate the cost of supporting false claimants for years on end, and a fast decision is best for everyone. Genuine refugees should not wait years to know their future.

Saskatoon is a beautiful city, full of compassionate and welcoming people. We are becoming more diverse every day, and we are proud of it. It is our honour to welcome newcomers to Canada, including refugees. However, as there is a shortage of skilled labour, we would encourage the continuation of qualification-based selection criteria, which would attract immigrants who are able to stand on their own two feet and support our tax base rather than adding pressure to our housing situation and our social support network. If there's a problem with Citizenship and Immigration's ability to process asylum seekers, we recommend you fix the problem.

Thank you for your time.

● (1640)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you, Councillor Donauer.

Now we'll proceed to Ms. Brennan, from Matthew House Ottawa.

Kailee Brennan (Executive Director, Matthew House Ottawa): Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee.

My name is Kailee Brennan, and I'm the executive director of Matthew House Ottawa, a local NGO providing transitional reception housing and settlement support to refugee claimants. Less than two years ago, I was also working as a policy strategist for the Province of Nova Scotia in the department of immigration when Nova Scotia relocated asylum seekers from Roxham Road, and I later co-chaired the FPT asylum working group examining the potential of a national relocation model. Therefore, I come to this from both a policy and an operational perspective.

From my perspective, the pressures facing Ontario and Quebec are real, but the solution is not as complicated as we want to make it seem. Canada does not have a capacity problem; it has a coordination problem. Across Canada, experienced NGOs already operate reception homes, transitional housing and integration supports for refugee claimants. Much of the infrastructure for a national reception model already exists in pieces across this country. What has been missing is the mandate of coordination and strategic investment.

Having been a part of these discussions since 2023, right now I believe there's a real risk that this conversation is simply becoming an academic exercise about provincial distribution rather than a serious discussion about how to actually build a system that works, one that can endure beyond jurisdictional debates and shifting political priorities. The reality is that building a coordinated national reception system does not need to be particularly complicated.

At Matthew House, we scaled from one reception home to 27 homes in the last few years, and we now operate approximately 230 beds across Ottawa at a cost of less than \$3 million per year, because we already possess the operational expertise and partnerships required to grow effectively. If you break down our expenses, our housing program operates at approximately \$37 per bed, per day, with an average length of stay of roughly three months. It's an incredibly effective model. We aren't unique. There are dozens of reception homes just like ours across Canada.

It is not a capacity problem; it is a coordination problem. If done properly, a national reception model could be stood up at a fraction of the cost of prolonged emergency hotel responses, while also creating a more organized, accountable and trusted system. That system could include coordinated referral pathways to provinces and municipalities with capacity, supported by trusted NGO reception hubs already operating across the country. Successful relocation also depends on ensuring claimants are aware of opportunities outside of major urban centres, including lower housing costs and employment opportunities in regions facing labour shortages.

The role of the government should be to establish outcomes, provide strategic resourcing and support coordination infrastructure. That will allow the sector to do what it already does best, which is to collaborate, scale and deliver effective community-based models. Provinces and municipalities should absolutely be partners in this work, but building effective systems and networks first is likely the best path forward towards eventually reducing long-term federal involvement in emergency housing responses altogether.

With the renewal of IHAP, Canada could strategically support a backbone organization responsible for mapping existing beds and coordinating referral pathways, operational standards and regional collaboration amongst existing providers.

We're already seeing promising examples of this type of approach. In British Columbia, the provincially funded BC Charms has created a shared housing referral and coordination system amongst organizations serving refugee claimants. In Newfoundland and Labrador, IHAP-supported relocation initiatives have shown encouraging early outcomes related to housing and integration. Matthew House continues to have discussions with partners there about acting as a referral hub for future voluntary movement initiatives.

Canada also has a blueprint for this type of collaboration. During the response to the Ukrainian displacement, Operation Ukrainian Safe Haven brought together different orders of government and NGOs to support reception and integration efforts across our country. Canada has already taken significant steps to tighten and manage the asylum system, but regardless of policy changes, individuals with legitimate protection needs will continue to arrive in Canada. The question is whether we respond through coordinated planning or continued crisis management. One approach has a significantly lower price tag and delivers better long-term outcomes.

My recommendation to this committee is straightforward. Do not treat equitable distribution as a transportation problem. Treat it as a reception infrastructure problem. Invest in a national coordination body among existing refugee reception providers. Invest in shared referral and data systems, standardized claimant support training and dedicated IHAP funding for coordinated community-based reception models, not emergency hotel beds.

Canada already has much of the expertise required to do this. What's missing is the coordination infrastructure and strategic investment needed to bring those pieces to life. If we get this right, Canada can create a more equitable, efficient and humane asylum reception system that supports both claimants and the communities welcoming them.

Thank you.

• (1645)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you very much.

We'll now proceed to our rounds of questions. This is our six-minute round.

We will start with Mr. Redekopp.

Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses for being here today. I appreciate you for spending the time.

Mr. Donauer, you're from my city. I'm going to start with you. You ended, I think, with saying that redistribution of asylum seekers is not the solution, and perhaps solving the core problem of why we have so many asylum seekers is a better use of time and money. Can you just elaborate on that a bit? Am I quoting you correctly, and can you elaborate?

Randy Donauer: Yes, you are. Obviously there's a problem. This is a problem decades in the making. I actually worked for the Department of Citizenship and Immigration a number of decades ago. The problem existed then and it still exists now. An awful lot of money can be spent moving people around, providing for them and taking care of them.

My solution, instead of accommodating the problem...and I'm not saying people are the problem. We have a systems problem with Citizenship and Immigration. I don't think moving that problem around is necessarily the best solution.

My recommendation would be to actually use those resources to fix the problem. Process these people's applications more quickly, so that those who are legitimate refugee claimants know their future more quickly. With those who aren't—who have not gone through the proper refugee screening process but have shown up here—removing them more quickly would save resources years into the future.

If we use those resources to actually process these claimants more effectively, I think we'd be better off, and we wouldn't have to sort out where we're going to put all these people for a lengthy period of time.

Brad Redekopp: Let's just imagine there was an influx of asylum claimants into Saskatoon. What sorts of burdens would that place on the city?

Randy Donauer: I can speak in the present tense. In the present tense, we have a housing crisis in Saskatoon. We have an unprecedented number of people living unhoused. That number's doubled within the past year or two. That would exacerbate the problem. I'm not saying all these people would be unhoused, but all these people would need accommodation.

All our accommodation right now is full to capacity, and there are lineups outside all of them. This is something Saskatoon has never dealt with before.

Taking a large influx of newcomers who would probably need some settlement assistance and a roof over their heads would be extremely problematic for the city of Saskatoon. As I indicated in my remarks, we're just moving back into evacuation season. We've already had flooding in the north that has brought hundreds of people into the city of Saskatoon, and if we experience the same with forest fires.... Last year we saw 8,000 people in Saskatoon.

I know one of the speakers said it's not a capacity issue. I'm just asking that the regional and municipal interests and abilities be taken into account when you consider these things.

• (1650)

Brad Redekopp: You talked about the 1,900 or so unhoused people at the last count. What sort of an impact does that have on services and demands for services in the city?

Randy Donauer: Not only do we have 1,900 people, but our city is growing by about 13,000 to 15,000 people a year. We're not keeping up, despite all of our best efforts. We can't build houses that fast in Saskatoon, we haven't built extra hospitals and we haven't built extra schools to accommodate them all. Everything is overflowing.

Thank you, sir. You're from my city. You can see, and I suppose your colleagues can't, the impact in Saskatoon. We have people wandering the streets looking for a place to stay, and it's not because Saskatoon's not a compassionate city. We're doing everything we can to accommodate the needs of these people, but, frankly, there are just too many who have these needs for the size of our city.

To think about adding a significant influx, population-wise, to that specific demographic would be very troublesome for us.

Brad Redekopp: I'm assuming you speak with councillors from other cities. Is what you're describing unique to Saskatoon? I know you can't speak for other cities officially, but in the conversations you've had, would you say this would apply to many other cities that you're aware of?

Randy Donauer: Yes, it does. As a matter of fact, a year and a half ago I was speaking at a conference in Calgary of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. We were on a tour of downtown Calgary's east side, which is where a lot of the problems they're experiencing are. There's homelessness there, and a lot of their shelters are located there, and the City of Calgary was explaining what their attempts have been to accommodate these people, to get them into safe shelter and make the downtown feel safer.

While we were walking, I was walking with the mayor of a small community in B.C., out on the island actually, and he asked how things were going in Saskatoon. I explained the problems with homelessness, people living on the street and crime. He stopped me, and he said, "Everything you've said for the past five minutes you could drop right into a city council meeting in my community. Everybody in my community thinks we're the only ones dealing with it and that it's all my fault."

That's pretty much how my residents feel. The more I talk to people across Canada, my colleagues, the more I learn that we're all dealing with this.

I do think Saskatoon is perhaps in a bit more of a stressed situation than others, because, as I indicated, we are typically the destination of an exodus from the north. Quite frankly, as long as—

Brad Redekopp: I'm going to interrupt you for a moment, because I have only a few seconds left.

Randy Donauer: Sure. I'm sorry.

Brad Redekopp: You talked about a lack of skilled labour. Does bringing more asylum claimants hurt or help that situation in Saskatoon?

Randy Donauer: It will hurt. It's a kind of chicken and egg situation. We need houses, and we need places to accommodate people, but we don't have the skilled labour to build them.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): That is time. Thank you.

We're going to Mr. Chang.

Wade Chang (Burnaby Central, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My first round of questions is for Professor Clark-Kazak.

Thank you for joining us today.

Professor, your research highlights the importance of coordination among governments, service providers and researchers in refugee policy. What progress have you seen in recent years, and how can the federal government further strengthen collaboration to support a more stable and sustainable asylum system?

Prof. Christina Clark-Kazak: Thank you for the question.

You heard on Monday the evidence from Peel Region. I think that's a really good example of different levels of government working together.

Also, as Ms. Brennan has said in the Matthew House example, we did research with 20 non-governmental organizations across Canada that have been providing housing and wraparound support for refugee claimants for decades. This is not a new phenomenon. Canada has had asylum seekers for decades.

It's often the non-governmental organizations that have stepped up, and there is coordination among them. I think that could also be built upon in terms of thinking about next steps.

Wade Chang: Given the scale of global displacement and ongoing humanitarian crises, how important is it for Canada to maintain

an orderly and rules-based asylum system that balances compassion, operational sustainability and public confidence?

Prof. Christina Clark-Kazak: I think it is really important to acknowledge that we're in a global context where there is massive displacement, for a lot of different reasons, and also that it's very difficult to get to Canada. In a previous career, I worked for the Canadian government as a diplomat. I was in Uganda when we had tens of thousands of Congolese crossing the border every day. We don't see that scale of displacement in Canada because we have systems in place, including the safe third country agreement, carrier sanctions, etc.

I think it's important to put it in perspective. I acknowledge the city councillor's remarks about the capacity issues, but we're a rich country, and we do have the capacity. I think it's more around coordination.

• (1655)

Wade Chang: Thank you, Professor.

Canada has continued to welcome refugees while maintaining one of the strongest immigration systems in the world. In your view, why is it important to recognize both the challenges and the success of the current system?

Prof. Christina Clark-Kazak: I think it is important to acknowledge that Canada is well regarded in the world. People actually come here to study the Immigration and Refugee Board. We have a rules-based system. We give people an opportunity, and we hear their case. Where the capacity is lagging is that we don't have enough decision-makers to process these claims quickly, and then we get a backlog. When people are in limbo, they don't have the possibility of regularizing their status.

I would also say that people have the right to work, which is not the case in many other contexts, including in the U.K., where asylum seekers don't have the right to work, and that puts a huge pressure on the public purse. The fact that asylum seekers can work.... Some of them are skilled labour, if I could just correct that point, because people are fleeing to Canada not because of poverty. They're fleeing because of political persecution. I work with colleagues at the University of Ottawa who are displaced scholars, who are researchers like me, who happened to come here and make an asylum claim.

Wade Chang: Some people have described our asylum system as being in chaos. From your research and experience, is it more accurate to describe the issue as one of capacity pressure that requires better coordination and long-term planning?

Prof. Christina Clark-Kazak: I work in a public policy school. I think the fundamental issue with an asylum system is the unpredictability of it, because it's about global events. We can't actually predict how many people are coming, unlike refugee resettlement, where we have numbers and we know how many people are coming.

I think the policy challenge is the unpredictability and making sure that there are services available for people without knowing how many people are actually going to end up coming, because it's a right. It's a right to claim asylum. We can't just turn people away. When they come here, we need to have a system for assessing those claims.

Wade Chang: Thank you so much. I will now turn to Ms. Brennan.

Ms. Brennan, through your work at Matthew House, what contributions have you seen refugees and asylum seekers make to Canada once they are given the opportunity to settle successfully?

Kailee Brennan: I could tell you 100,000 stories of success that come out of Matthew House.

Last year we did a survey of our past residents, and 100 respondents replied. Of those respondents, 94% never returned to a homeless shelter after leaving Matthew House. We had 89% who were employed full-time or part-time. We feel very confident about the contributions that former clients of these models are making in our communities.

Wade Chang: From your organization's experience, what federal policies or operational practices are most important for helping refugees settle quickly and successfully into Canadian society?

Kailee Brennan: It's a good question. I agree with what everybody has said. Having a system that is organized, fast and predictable is one of the number one ways to get people to stabilize quickly. I think housing goes right alongside that.

Again, we're very transitional housing. We only house people for about 90 days, but folks are most often able to land on their feet after that point. They move out together. They've met folks in the reception home who are in a similar situation to them, and they're able to share accommodations.

I think it's keeping the asylum system as efficient as we can and then ensuring that there are wraparound supports that go alongside that.

[Translation]

Wade Chang: Thank you.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Now we have six minutes for Mr. Deschênes.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes (Gaspésie—Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine—Lis-tuguj, BQ): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Good morning, everyone. I thank the witnesses for being here.

Mr. Donauer, as a city councillor in Saskatoon, what problem do you see with the proposal that each province in Canada accept a number of asylum seekers proportional to its population?

• (1700)

[English]

Randy Donauer: Thank you for the question.

I think a lot of effort is being put into what could be considered a lot of good work. My first question would be, is this the work that should be done? We can do something—

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Mr. Donauer, my question is very specific: Do you see a problem with the idea that each province should accept a number of asylum seekers proportional to its demographic weight within the Canadian federation?

[English]

Randy Donauer: Yes, I think it's a more complex issue than that.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Do you see a problem with this principle? In what way is this principle problematic?

Don't you think this is just a matter of fair distribution? Isn't it just a matter of fairness?

[English]

Randy Donauer: I think it's more complex than that. I think you need to consider other factors.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: I'm having trouble understanding you.

The proposal states that within Canada, each province would accept a number of asylum seekers proportional to its population. You mentioned homelessness and the housing crisis plaguing Saskatoon. You should know that these issues are also rampant in Montreal, so I don't understand your argument against equitable distribution. Aside from saying that it's more complex than that, what is your argument against an equitable distribution of asylum seekers across the country?

[English]

Randy Donauer: Is there a question?

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Yes. The question is: What is your argument against a fair distribution of asylum seekers across the country?

[English]

Randy Donauer: Thank you. That's where I was going to begin.

I think the consideration needs to be that there's a lot more complexity to the issue than just picking numbers and putting them across the map of Canada. Different funding levels go to different provinces and different cities. I think larger cities have a better ability to adapt to these sorts of large influxes than smaller ones.

I also think you need to look at what I spoke to today, which was the immediate ability for a municipality to accept numbers of these based on what they're going through. In another season, this might not be an issue in Saskatoon, but in this season, it is.

We could do a lot of good work here. I just question whether this is the work we should do, or if we should actually fix the problem. We can spend years and millions of dollars throwing money at how to accommodate people who are here for years waiting for a decision. Why don't we just not leave them here for years awaiting a decision? Take all those resources and actually fix the problem, rather than finding ways to accommodate this problem and move it around.

Your demographic...and wanting to spread it around is absolutely a factor that needs to be considered, sir. I just don't think it's the only factor.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Ms. Clark-Kazak, you mentioned the need for coordination to ensure successful integration if asylum seekers were distributed equitably. Currently, do you believe there is coordination between the Government of Canada, the province of Ontario and the province of Quebec regarding asylum seekers?

Prof. Christina Clark-Kazak: I think there is coordination, but it is imperfect. We do have the foundations for coordination, given that we have experience in Ontario and Quebec. I think there is less coordination with the other provinces because we have less experience in these cases.

Alexis Deschênes: You also said that the consent of the other provinces would be required, because it is necessary for the system to function. We see that other places, particularly in Europe, have been able to move toward an agreement to find a way to ensure equitable distribution.

Furthermore, when we listen to the testimony from the Saskatoon City Council, we see that there is resistance. In fact, this is somewhat similar to what has happened in recent years. How do you explain this resistance?

Prof. Christina Clark-Kazak: I think there is resistance because everyone thinks it's the federal government's responsibility. In fact, social services and education fall under the provincial government's jurisdiction. As for housing, that falls under municipal authority. That's where the problem lies. Everyone thinks it's someone else's responsibility, and there's a lack of coordination between these different levels of government. Other places, as you say, for example in England and the United Kingdom, have been able to negotiate because there's more coordination. There is less independent authority like that of our provinces.

• (1705)

Alexis Deschênes: One of our concerns is ensuring that we properly integrate asylum seekers. In Quebec, when I visit services—

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): You have 10 seconds for a brief response.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Okay.

Ms. Clark-Kazak, during my visits, I see that services are sometimes lacking, and there is also a perception. Don't you think that a fair distribution would ensure better integration and greater acceptance?

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): We are out of time, so just give a very brief response.

[*Translation*]

Prof. Christina Clark-Kazak: Yes, if there are services in place. We also need lawyers in the provinces, such as New Brunswick, where there are fewer—

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you.

We are now proceeding to our second round of questions for five minutes, and we'll start with Mr. Menegakis.

Costas Menegakis (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for appearing before us.

Ms. Brennan, I'd like to start with you. You spoke of the national coordination strategy and potentially a national body with dedicated funding. Is this just an idea you have, or are you aware of more serious discussions taking place to implement this?

Kailee Brennan: I think there's a lot of interest in the NGO community to see something like this stood up. As I said, the sector is already doing this work. We exist in almost every province across Canada that is providing reception housing, but what we lack is that coordination infrastructure. I think it's becoming a pretty serious conversation among the NGO partners as to how we could do this in the absence of this type of model existing right now.

Costas Menegakis: That's something. Are you aware of any discussions that have taken place with the federal government, with you or others, about this?

Kailee Brennan: No. When I worked for the Province of Nova Scotia, we had the FPT asylum working group, whose goal was to come up with some recommendations for a national model. That working group was dissolved, because there was political interference.

Costas Menegakis: Mr. Donauer, I'd like to go over to you, sir. You mentioned some of the hardships that the municipality has had in dealing with a big number of perhaps immigrants or asylum claimants in the municipality. Would you agree that a large swell of immigrants or asylum seekers or refugees into Saskatoon would create a problem for the municipality? Do you think that would create a need to raise taxes in the municipality?

Randy Donauer: Yes and yes.

As I said, in lots of our systems right now, including housing, health and social welfare, some of those asylum seekers, I agree, may not access them, or they may. They're at max capacity now, and we're having difficulties caring for the people who exist now. That is absolutely having an impact on our taxes in Saskatoon, and a large influx of people utilizing those services, or needing that, would absolutely impact the city disproportionately.

Costas Menegakis: Would you agree that, at a minimum, a contributing factor to municipal budgets being constrained across the country is the high number of immigrants that the Liberal government has let in over the last 10 years?

Randy Donauer: Our problem isn't just immigrants as a whole. Our problem is a cross-section of people.

The question originally was this: What would happen if a large influx of asylum seekers was brought to the city of Saskatoon? Yes, that would create a problem for us, for sure. It would exacerbate the problems that we're dealing with right now.

Costas Menegakis: Has your municipality...or are you aware of any other municipalities that have had to raise property taxes to raise funds to provide supportive services for asylum claimants?

Randy Donauer: Well, I can't draw a straight line for asylum.... We wouldn't have a line in our budget for that. However, certainly we're having to delve into.... I'm speaking to the other speakers' comments. Everybody disputes whose responsibility these things are. A lot of the time, we're the bottom of the barrel, though, so the responsibility falls to us to care for the people who are in our community.

If the federal and provincial governments aren't there providing that care, it does fall to the city. That would be one of the factors, yes, sir.

Costas Menegakis: Have you had to repurpose municipal shelters into long-term transitional housing so that you can house asylum seekers?

Randy Donauer: It's not specifically to house asylum seekers, as far as I'm aware. It's been to house those who are in need, yes, sir.

Costas Menegakis: Has your municipality, Saskatoon, effectively been forced somewhat to choose between serving the local chronically homeless population in your municipality and meeting Canada's international humanitarian obligations?

Randy Donauer: I would say that we're doing it all together. We're probably not doing any of it overly well, at the end of the day, as far as what's left on our streets.

• (1710)

Costas Menegakis: Would you agree that it is irresponsible to have bogus asylum claimants taking up municipal funds when there are homeless people on our streets?

Randy Donauer: Well, if you're referring to false claimants—you referred to bogus claimants—then that would be troublesome. My preference, as I indicated, would be to deal with these claims. If they're not found to be genuine refugees, then remove them so that they're not competing with the need for our services.

Costas Menegakis: That would be in line with what the Parliamentary Budget Officer found this week: 74,000 failed asylum

claimants getting full luxury health benefits across the country, benefits that Canadians don't get.

My last question for you is on how the federal government says it stopped supplying hotel rooms for asylum claimants. When we ask where people went, it has no answer for that.

Do you have any idea where they may be going?

Randy Donauer: I would anticipate that if people can't get a hotel in Saskatoon, they're on the street or on somebody's couch.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you.

We now have Mr. Fragiskatos for five minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses.

Ms. Brennan, I'll begin with you.

Matthew House does very important work. I've been there in the past. Thank you to you and your colleagues, first of all, for carrying out that very important service for this community where we are.

If I understood you correctly in your testimony, you said that it's not a capacity problem that we have but a coordination problem. Is that right? Okay.

One impression that the committee could be left with is that we have a coordination issue, and I want you to clarify this. Both you and Professor Clark-Kazak made the point that NGOs have traditionally played a very important response in terms of integrating those who are seeking asylum. One impression that the committee could be left with is that your recommendation is that we basically ensure or recommend to the government that massive amounts of funding go to NGOs to continue to carry out this work—funding that's over and above what's been provided in the past.

Is that your argument, in essence?

Kailee Brennan: No, I don't think so.

I think there has been significant investment in providing emergency accommodation for asylum seekers across the country over the last several years. I don't think that's always been done effectively or efficiently. Providing temporary housing is going to cost money. It could cost less money if we work with the existing partners that are executing, relatively cost-effectively, the same models they always have.

I think the investment needs to continue, but I don't think hotels are the answer. We're operating at \$37 per day. There was a time when massive blocks of hotel rooms were rented out at, essentially, regular market costs. You're looking at \$200 or \$300 per night per room. The cost comparison is astronomical.

I'm not saying that we should completely remove resourcing from these communities that need it and from the non-profits and the municipalities that are providing the service, but I think we should get really smart about how we're going to spend our public dollars.

Peter Fragiskatos: Boil it down for me. You talked about housing and putting money into temporary housing rather than.... I'm sorry. It's not temporary. You're talking about housing instead of hotels.

What is at the core of a coordination response or solution that would solve this coordination problem? There's housing. What else is there?

Kailee Brennan: Right now, there needs to be a forum for non-profit partners across the country to speak to each other about that.

When I was a part of the asylum working group, we had the federal, territorial and provincial governments working on it. The reason it didn't work is that it got very partisan, and then it fell apart—

Peter Fragiskatos: I apologize for interrupting you, but I have limited time.

In your view—I know you don't speak for the entire sector—what are the key things that go along with or are at the centre of fixing the coordination problem? There's housing. What else do we need to see?

Kailee Brennan: Of course, it's your other services, like your legal aid or your settlement services. Again, a lot of those exist already. If you want to distribute people more equitably across the country, you need to understand where your beds are across the country. Who's operating in British Columbia? What is available in Alberta?

Right now, there is not a coordinated map of existing resources. We've turned to this quick-fix, “band-aid on a bullet wound” situation of renting out big hotel blocks when we could instead look at the resources that already exist on the ground and fund them in a way that would be much more efficient and have better outcomes.

Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

Professor Clark-Kazak, we heard on Monday that the German example is a very interesting one as far as the settlement of asylum seekers is concerned. You mentioned the U.K. here today.

Would you point to examples? Do those stand out in your mind? You said there are problems with the U.K. model. What other democracies can Canada learn from? What other democracies should Canada look to when we're thinking about what kind of response is sustainable, meaningful and just for everyone?

• (1715)

Prof. Christina Clark-Kazak: The EU countries and the U.K. are good examples, because they get many more asylum seekers than we do. They have the volume. Germany is also a federated state, so that's a good model to look at, because it's similar in the ways that there are different levels of government.

What we need to think about is how there's a different political and cultural context there. These models are based on sending them to economically deprived areas, and that doesn't always work, because you have a situation where, in fact, you're bringing in people who are just trying to get back up on their feet and are in a situation where there aren't a lot of opportunities. That actually—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): That's the time. Thank you.

Mr. Deschênes, you have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Clark-Kazak, let's continue the discussion a bit.

I fully understand your concerns regarding integration and legal services. We also need to ensure there are employment opportunities; that goes without saying.

Generally speaking, do you see any benefits to having an equitable distribution of asylum seekers across the country?

Prof. Christina Clark-Kazak: Yes, I see advantages in that, because they are human resources. We need people to work, to support the economy. I think there are advantages to that.

In fact, we see this to some extent in the case of refugee resettlement. That is another planned system. Across Canada, small or rural communities are welcoming resettled refugees, and it's working. If we can use the same model for asylum seekers, I think it could work.

Alexis Deschênes: This would be an advantage for the communities that would welcome workers in this way.

In terms of integration, do you also see an advantage there? I'm thinking a lot about Quebec. What about the ability to properly integrate asylum seekers if the number decreases?

Prof. Christina Clark-Kazak: We see this in small communities. In these settings, there are sometimes more support networks. Because neighbours know each other, they can help people. This is another aspect of integration into society in general.

Alexis Deschênes: I have another concern. In recent years, polls have shown that Canadians' perception of immigration has become increasingly unfavourable.

Do you think that a fair distribution of asylum seekers among the provinces could improve public perception of immigration?

Prof. Christina Clark-Kazak: Yes. I think the public needs to recognize people as human beings. That is one of the reasons why we advocate for resettlement through private sponsorship, which is truly effective because the contact is person-to-person. People are then seen as human beings, not as strangers.

Alexis Deschênes: So it's about having a personal experience with asylum seekers and building connections.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you, Mr. Deschênes.

We will now go to Mr. Ho for five minutes.

Vincent Ho (Richmond Hill South, CPC): My questions are for Councillor Donauer.

Councillor, you're a Saskatoon city councillor. You previously worked for the federal immigration department in Canada, including working at the Saskatoon office.

You understand the federal immigration system and the impact it has on municipalities. Is that correct?

Randy Donauer: Yes, sir.

Vincent Ho: Immigration targets, asylum intakes, processing of refugees and removal of bogus claimants are all federal responsibilities. Is that correct?

• (1720)

Randy Donauer: Yes, sir.

Vincent Ho: Saskatoon does not decide how many people enter Canada, how many asylum claims are accepted for processing or how quickly rejected claimants are removed. Is that correct?

Randy Donauer: That's correct. If the federal government is asking, we would like to have a voice in that.

Vincent Ho: Yes. According to the reports, the province of Saskatchewan has seen a surge of 98% in asylum claimants year over year, but Saskatoon has to deal with the consequences of federal Liberal decisions, with the increased pressure, housing shelters, transit, health care and local services.

Is that correct?

Randy Donauer: Yes. We tend to be the lowest common denominator when it comes to government responsibility.

Vincent Ho: Essentially, it's not the people who feel the brunt of it—it's not the Liberal MPs making decisions in Ottawa. It's the local communities in Saskatoon.

Would you agree that when the federal Liberal government fails to plan properly, the burden gets downloaded onto local councils like yours, local taxpayers, local shelters, charities and service providers?

Randy Donauer: That's our concern. We don't want that to happen.

Vincent Ho: You mentioned this earlier. Are municipalities like Saskatoon given enough advance warning, consultation or funding before federal Liberal immigration or asylum decisions increase pressure on local services?

Randy Donauer: I don't know that I'm able to speak to what notice we get. I'm sorry, sir.

Vincent Ho: Do you feel heard by the federal government? Does the city feel heard by the federal government?

Randy Donauer: I would say that on some issues, we are. I'm hoping we'll be heard on this one as well.

Vincent Ho: It's not so much on immigration.

Has council had any consultations with the immigration department federally?

Randy Donauer: Council has not, that I can recall. I don't know whether our administration has talked to the federal administration.

Vincent Ho: There are 13,000 immigration bureaucrats in Ottawa. It's unfortunate that none of them has reached out to consult the City of Saskatoon.

Is it wrong for local residents to ask whether their city has enough homes, health care, classrooms, shelter beds and other public services before the Liberal government adds more pressure?

Randy Donauer: No. My residents ask me those questions every day.

Vincent Ho: Are there residents of Saskatoon today who are facing homelessness or housing insecurity?

Randy Donauer: Absolutely. There are almost 2,000 residents, probably more now, who are homeless, and many more who are facing housing insecurity.

Vincent Ho: It's more than 2,000. Wow.

Saskatoon has also had to support residents who were displaced by the wildfires elsewhere in the province of Saskatchewan. Is that correct?

Randy Donauer: Yes, sir. Every year we take thousands. Last year, we took over 8,000, which maxed out all of our hotels and several soccer centres and rec centres.

Vincent Ho: Wow.

Do you think it is fair to local citizens in Saskatchewan, including local Canadians facing homelessness or displacement from the wildfires, when the Liberal government increases pressure on local housing and shelter systems without first ensuring capacity or even consulting the City of Saskatoon?

Randy Donauer: I think it's a complex issue, and we absolutely want our voice and our needs to be heard.

Vincent Ho: Would faster processing and removal of false or rejected asylum claimants reduce pressure on municipalities like Saskatoon?

Randy Donauer: Yes. There's a lot of good work that can be done to take care of asylum seekers in Saskatoon. I applaud the efforts of those who do that work.

My question is, can we avoid some of that, or should we be building on that?

Vincent Ho: Right.

This is my last question. We see the Liberals bringing in political activists, ideological advocates with no skin in the game and NGOs whose taxpayer funding is contingent on the number of refugees we take in. The Liberals appear to be taking advice from these groups.

As a municipality, does Saskatoon feel heard, and do the residents of Saskatoon feel heard, by this federal government?

Randy Donauer: I can't speak to who they listen to and who they don't listen to. I just want to make sure that our voice is there and that Saskatoon and other municipalities and regions across the country are heard as well.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you. We are out of time.

We will close this round with Ms. Sodhi.

You have five minutes.

Amandeep Sodhi (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all our witnesses for being here today.

Ms. Clark-Kazak, you've often described housing for refugee claimants as a complex intergovernmental problem. In your research, have you seen examples of where federal, provincial and municipal governments have successfully coordinated housing for asylum seekers? What made those particular models work? Could you give us just a few examples?

Prof. Christina Clark-Kazak: Yes. One example is in Peel, which was mentioned before. The other example is a sort of half example here in Ottawa. There was a plan in place to provide transitional housing through the City of Ottawa and the province and the federal government. That was then put aside. That's an example of where they could have been working together.

The Quebec case is very interesting. In Quebec it's different from all the other provinces. You actually have a provincial government that coordinates everything. I think that's a really good model. If we're thinking about distribution across the country, we could draw on that successful model in Quebec.

• (1725)

Amandeep Sodhi: Perfect.

The federal government has also introduced the interim housing assistance program, which is helping quite a bit in Peel too, as we know. It's also to fund emergency accommodation for refugee claimants and support cost-sharing with provinces and municipalities. From your research on intergovernmental coordination, does a program like that represent a step in the right direction? What would you suggest to increase its effectiveness?

Prof. Christina Clark-Kazak: I think it was partially successful. Again, the Peel example is a good one. The City of Toronto also got resources through that program. It did go to some places where it was needed. I think the problem was that a lot of the money was wasted on hotels. They were very costly, as Ms. Brennan has already said, and they were also not effective. They're temporary. You cannot register your kids for school if you're living in a hotel. You need some kind of more permanent address. As well, social workers couldn't get in there. Hotel staff are not trained to work with asylum seekers. This was not a good model. It was a very inefficient model.

We already had these non-governmental organizations working across the country. Again, we did research with all of them. Many of them were willing and able to increase their capacity, but they

were never asked. That money did not trickle down to the non-governmental sector. It was concentrated mostly within provinces and the municipalities. We didn't think about the other actors that were involved in that space.

Amandeep Sodhi: How do you think Canada can maintain that humanitarian leadership while also ensuring that our immigration and settlement systems are sustainable for the communities that are receiving newcomers? Being from Brampton, I would say that one of the biggest examples is Peel Region. In the Peel area we see a lot of newcomers to our cities.

Prof. Christina Clark-Kazak: Again, I think there is a perception that asylum seekers are somehow impoverished. Yes, they're coming here for humanitarian reasons, but many of them are skilled workers. We saw this with the Ukrainians. They weren't asylum seekers. They were brought here under temporary visas, but many of them got jobs very quickly in other sectors. They didn't have to become asylum seekers, because they were given a pathway here.

We need to think more carefully about how we're constructing asylum seekers as being only a burden on the system, when they're also contributing to the economy. Providing the services to asylum seekers also contributes to the economy. A lot of work comes with providing services to asylum seekers.

Amandeep Sodhi: In the last minute I have, I'd like to give you the opportunity to give the committee any recommendations you might have. Is there anything you'd like to say?

Prof. Christina Clark-Kazak: To reiterate what I said before, I do think there needs to be more coordination across all levels of government. This is a federal committee, but you can't do this alone. You need to coordinate with the provinces and the municipalities.

The other thing I would say is this: Think very carefully about what services are available in what areas of the country. Don't just drop people into an area where there are no refugee lawyers, for example. That's what happened in 2024-25. We had people going into other areas where there was no legal support for them. There was no way for them to make their claim effectively. They were sitting in the system for a long period of time.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you.

That takes us to the end of this panel. I want to thank the witnesses very much for their time and their testimony.

We are suspended for five minutes to set up the next panel.

• (1725) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1735)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Welcome back, colleagues.

I'd like to make a few comments for the benefit of our new witnesses.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. If you are appearing by Zoom, at the bottom of the screen you can select the appropriate channel for your interpretation, and it's similar for witnesses in the room. I would advise you to set up your interpretation, if you have not already done so, as committee members can ask questions to you in either of our official languages.

I will attempt to let you know when you have about a minute left in your remarks, and you have five minutes to make your remarks. All comments should be addressed through the chair.

I'd like to proceed with welcoming our witnesses for the second panel.

We have Dr. Lisa Kaida, associate professor with McMaster University. We have Karen Kobussen, chief executive officer of the Saskatoon West Business Association. Then, appearing on Zoom, we have Alina Murad, director of federal government relations with The Refugee Centre. Welcome to you all.

We will begin our round of opening remarks with Dr. Kaida.

Lisa Kaida (Associate Professor, McMaster University, As an Individual): Madam Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

My name is Lisa Kaida. I'm an associate professor of sociology at McMaster University. As a sociologist and social demographer who has been studying the integration of immigrants and refugees for over 20 years, I'm honoured to be here.

In this opening statement, I will make three points based on my research on the secondary migration of refugees, in which I analyzed Statistics Canada's data on permanent residents.

First, it will be helpful to carefully distinguish between resettled refugees and asylum seekers. Resettled refugees are approved for admission before arriving in Canada, and they are granted permanent resident status upon arrival. In contrast, asylum seekers are initially temporary residents. If their asylum claims are accepted, they are approved as refugees and therefore become permanent residents. This process may take a few years. My past research focused on the integration of resettled refugees.

I will now turn to my three points.

First, the main take-away from my research is that resettled refugees are more likely to leave their initial destinations than economic immigrants, mostly because resettled refugees are more likely to settle in smaller communities first, but more than 50% of resettled refugees do stay in their initial destinations even if they are small, remote communities.

Second, will this apply to asylum seekers? I cannot directly answer this question, because asylum seekers' experience in smaller communities may be different from that of resettled refugees. Resettled refugees are mostly government-assisted refugees or privately sponsored refugees. Government-assisted refugees are assigned to designated communities upon arrival. Through the resettlement assistance program, they receive income support for up to 12 months, as well as immediate resettlement services. Privately sponsored refugees are sponsored by groups of individuals or religious or ethnic organizations. Their sponsors are spread across Canada. They provide financial support, accommodation and social support to privately sponsored refugees during their first year in Canada. Asylum seekers are not entitled to such social and economic support from the government or sponsors.

Third, my research does not provide statistics on the secondary migration of asylum seekers. I defined the initial destinations of resettled refugees and other categories of immigrants as the places where they landed as permanent residents. If they move out of the initial destination later, that movement is treated as secondary migration. In my research, if asylum seekers are successful in their applications and given permanent resident status, then their statistics are recorded as "other refugees", along with other categories of refugees, such as those admitted on humanitarian and compassionate grounds.

My research shows that more than 70% of other refugees initially settled in either Toronto or Montreal, but it is possible that asylum seekers arrived elsewhere first. When they became permanent residents, they might have moved to Toronto or Montreal. To precisely identify where asylum seekers initially settled, we would have to look at where they filed asylum claims or where their intended destinations were, as recorded in Statistics Canada's data on non-permanent residents.

Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee. I look forward to your questions.

• (1740)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you so much for your comments.

We'll now move to Karen Kobussen, from the Saskatoon West Business Association.

You have the floor.

Karen Kobussen (Chief Executive Officer, Saskatoon West Business Association): Thank you, Madam Chair and committee members.

My name is Karen Kobussen. I'm the chief executive officer of the Saskatoon West Business Association. We represent and advocate for businesses on the west side of Saskatoon. We work to address issues that affect business owners, their customers, their employees and those who live and work in the neighbourhoods that surround them. These issues include business attraction and retention, community safety, housing, public services and the overall health and vitality of the area.

I'm not here today as an immigration lawyer or a constitutional expert but as someone who works closely with local businesses and our community partners, including NGOs and CBOs. I see the consequences of these federal policy decisions on the ground.

The motion before this committee is focused on efforts to relocate asylum seekers to other provinces. From the perspective of Saskatoon, I would urge the committee not to mistake redistribution for a solution. Moving asylum seekers from central Canada to Saskatoon does not fix the broken system. It simply moves the pressure from one place to the other. We heard earlier that Saskatoon is overwhelmed, and that is true. I am here today to support that. The real issue is that our asylum system is overwhelmed, backlogged and no longer functioning in a timely or credible way.

When claims take years to resolve, people remain in limbo. That is unfair, and it creates uncertainty. During that time, they need housing, health care, schooling, income support, legal services and other community resources, and these pressures are not carried by Ottawa or the federal government in any real, day-to-day sense. They are carried by citizens, provinces, schools, hospitals, shelters, local organizations, serving agencies, businesses and neighbourhoods.

Saskatoon is a generous city. We have welcomed newcomers for generations—including my family. Our businesses understand the importance of immigration. Many newcomers have started businesses, filled jobs, paid taxes, raised families and made our community stronger. However, there is a vast difference between orderly immigration and an uncontrolled asylum backlog, and there is a major difference between welcoming people successfully and transferring this federal system onto communities that are already stretched thin.

Saskatoon currently faces a serious housing crisis. We have residents who are struggling to find affordable places to live. We have less than a 2% market rental vacancy rate, and that's just in Saskatoon. We have extraordinary homelessness encampments. You heard earlier that we welcomed the displaced persons from the northern wildfire season, and we have shelters and community organizations dealing with the growing demand. We have employers who are concerned that their workers cannot find housing they can afford. Simply adding more people into that pressure cooker without first fixing the system will not help these asylum seekers, and it will not help Saskatoon.

We know health care and education are under strain. People cannot find family doctors. Exploding school classroom sizes, complex-needs students, language barriers.... You name it. Saskatchewan and Saskatoon are not in a position to increase this capacity right now. This matters.

For this reason, I believe this committee should focus on the root problem, which is that the system needs to be fixed. The solution is not to spread the consequences of failure across the country. The solution is to stop the failure.

Canada should continue to protect refugees who are genuinely seeking asylum for legitimate reasons—that is a very important responsibility—but we need to restore the basic principle that our immigration and asylum systems must be effectively and efficiently managed, not through backlogs, loopholes and unmanaged pressure. Relocating asylum seekers to Saskatoon is not compassion. It's downloading, because it asks communities to absorb the consequences of a federal policy failure.

Thank you very much.

• (1745)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you so much for your remarks as well.

I will now turn the floor over to Ms. Murad from The Refugee Centre.

You have five minutes.

Alina Murad (Director, Federal Government Relations, The Refugee Centre): Thank you very much.

Thank you, members of the committee, for the opportunity to appear today.

My name is Alina Murad, and I'm here on behalf of The Refugee Centre, a non-profit organization that supports refugee claimants through wraparound services, including legal support, employment assistance, language programs and community integration services.

Thank you to the committee for undertaking this study, as refugee claimants, who contribute significantly to Canadian society and communities across Canada, should be able to benefit from these contributions.

The redistribution of asylum seekers in Canada is an inherently intersectional issue that requires an equally intersectional response. Any discussion surrounding redistribution must take into consideration not only where claimants are relocated but whether those regions have the infrastructure, services and opportunities necessary to support long-term retention, dignified work and successful integration.

The reality is that people naturally gravitate toward areas that have received sustained investment, where opportunities exist for them and their families and where they can realistically build stable lives. If certain regions remain underpopulated, we must ask why that is the case and address those underlying conditions directly. It is crucial that any redistribution policies or programs remain voluntary and based on the informed consent of the claimant.

Data from Statistics Canada demonstrate that interprovincial migration trends are heavily influenced by employment opportunities and affordability. Historically, people move toward regions where they are more likely to find stable work, better services and stronger economic prospects. Refugee claimants are no different. Like anyone else, they are making decisions based on where they can support their families and establish long-term stability. This is why the central issue is not relocation itself but retention.

In 2022, The Refugee Centre launched a pilot program to respond to post-COVID labour shortages, which helped facilitate refugee claimant relocation to less populated areas in Canada. This pilot program operated until 2024 and has since been put on hold due to funding constraints. From our experience, in many smaller cities and regions outside major urban centres, the limited availability of education, employment opportunities, public transportation and settlement services poses a significant barrier to successful integration. Without robust job opportunities, self-sufficiency becomes far more difficult, increasing reliance on already overstretched social and community services. This is not the goal of redistribution, nor is it beneficial for claimants, municipalities or provinces. “No job” means “no retention”.

At The Refugee Centre, we see every day how access to employment support, language training, legal assistance and community connection dramatically improves integration outcomes. However, I must highlight a major policy gap. Many non-governmental organizations that receive government settlement funding are currently unable to provide services to refugee claimants, because funding eligibility is often restricted to permanent residents, accepted refugees or government-assisted refugees. This places community organizations in an extremely difficult position, as you've heard today. Organizations are forced to scramble for precarious funding sources while continuing to respond to urgent needs on the ground.

If Canada is interested in redistribution efforts, opening government funding streams to organizations serving refugee claimants should be one of the very first policy changes implemented. Doing so would strengthen the organizations already operating outside major cities and better equip them to support increasing numbers of claimants settling in those regions. It would also improve retention by ensuring that claimants have access to the services necessary to successfully integrate into local communities.

For this reason, we recommend increased investment in employment preparation programs, credential recognition support and targeted labour market-matching initiatives for refugee claimants. We also recommend the creation or expansion of a program modelled after the EMPP, which would allow refugee claimants already in Canada to voluntarily participate in labour-matching opportunities connected to regional economic needs. Such a program would assess a claimant's professional background, language capacity, family situation and employment background and connect them with communities that are experiencing labour shortages and are prepared to support long-term integration. Claimants could then relocate with the assurance of stable and dignified employment.

A program like this cannot operate in isolation. It would require federal coordinated calls for proposals engaging organizations across Canada and Quebec, with implementation anchored under Economic and Social Development Canada. This would help en-

sure that redistribution is not simply about moving claimants across the country but about creating more meaningful pathways to employment and long-term integration. It would require coordination between the federal government, provinces, municipalities, employers and community organizations, as well as investments in social infrastructure.

Risk assessments could be collaborative with local stakeholders to ensure that communities actually have the capacity to support newcomers sustainably and humanely.

● (1750)

If redistribution is approached through investment and partnership, it can become a meaningful strategy in—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): We are out of time. I apologize. Thank you for your comments. I'm sure you can respond with further thoughts during questions.

With that, we will move to our first round of questions.

I believe we are starting with Mr. Redekopp again.

Brad Redekopp: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for appearing before us today.

I'm going to start with Ms. Kobussen, my fellow Saskatonian.

You spoke about how this study is about redistributing asylum claimants across the country versus dealing with the root of the problem. Could you speak a bit more about that? What is the root of the problem, and how should that be fixed?

Karen Kobussen: Thank you for the question.

The root of the problem is that we're not effectively measuring where these people already are or what their needs are. I get the sense that simply redistributing people without taking into consideration.... Let's do an overlay of a municipality, for example, Saskatoon's capacity. What is your shelter capacity? How many people do you have there? How many people are you currently serving? How many refugees are there? When we don't measure, we can't manage. What we don't measure becomes invisible, and they just fall off the system.

That coordination we heard a little about earlier and that measurement piece really need to be a coordinated effort, especially among the municipalities, because they're the ones taking the brunt of it.

Brad Redekopp: You represent businesses. If there was an influx of asylum seekers into Saskatoon, what sort of impacts would that have on the businesses that you represent?

Karen Kobussen: Mr. Redekopp, as you know, Saskatoon West is probably a bit of a lower socio-demographic area in the city. We have many immigrants, and a lot of them are business owners. They came through the Saskatchewan immigrant nominee program and the entrepreneur stream. They're looking for workers. They're looking for stable housing for the people they need, so we have less than a 2% vacancy rate in Saskatoon.

I wouldn't want to see that sacrificed. These people are taxpayers. They're business owners. Some of them are homeowners, but their employees need to be housed. They need to have doctors. They need to have schools. Let's allow them to have the means and to have access to these without overburdening a system that's already overburdened.

Brad Redekopp: For Saskatoon services—you talked about housing and other services, like health care and things like that—is there a difference between orderly migration and bringing in a whole lot of asylum seekers in a short period of time?

Karen Kobussen: Yes, definitely. I don't have the numbers in front of me, but I think if we look back, the immigrant nominee program, or SINP, in Saskatchewan has been extremely successful. We had targets, and we would allow people to come in based on those targets. We knew that was going to happen, and we could project whether it would be health care, education or housing.

The other thing that I think is important about that is the labour market growth. We can also project who's coming in, who's opening businesses and how many employees they need. Saskatchewan has one of the lowest unemployment rates of any province across the country, so it's really hard to find workers. That needs to be orderly, managed, efficient and effective.

• (1755)

Brad Redekopp: You talked about processing claims faster than redistributing people around the country. Do you feel that's a better solution?

Karen Kobussen: I think it gives certainty. Again, downloading is not compassionate. I definitely think the faster we can process claims, the more certainty it gives to the individual, so that they understand their future. They know what they're going to be doing in three or 12 months, or whenever. I think we owe it to these people to ensure that they have that certainty. Who wants to live like that? That's not very fair or compassionate.

Brad Redekopp: You would agree, then, if we have an asylum claimant who has failed, that we need to process them, and if they need to leave the country, they should leave the country rather than be moved from wherever they are to a place like Saskatoon.

Karen Kobussen: Definitely. What's the point of having the rule if we're not going to enforce it?

If the decision has been made to deny that claim for a reason, then yes, that individual, or whoever we're speaking about, for whatever reason, needs to be returned. I think the due process is very important, but I also think that following the decision of that due process is equally important.

Brad Redekopp: Again, in the scenario where we bring more asylum seekers to Saskatoon, what are the different pressures? You talk about housing. Are there other things, like homelessness or health care? What are the pressures that would come to bear on the city?

Karen Kobussen: Certainly, we can look at cultural supports, depending on the asylum seekers' countries of origin. We're not Toronto, Montreal or Vancouver. We do have a diverse culture there, but it's maybe not diverse enough. Cultural supports, language supports, other public services, transportation.... Saskatoon is a car city. You know this. You need to have a vehicle. Can they get that? Can they figure out how to get around?

Housing is just the tip of the iceberg. Legal supports would be another one. Labour market, cultural and legal supports, language....

Brad Redekopp: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fragiskatos, I understand that you are sharing your speaking time with Mr. Deschênes. Is that correct?

Peter Fragiskatos: Certainly, I'll give my colleague three minutes, because that's the study Mr. Deschênes proposed. With all due respect, I'll start my questions with that.

[*English*]

Thank you to all the witnesses.

Professor Kaida, you spent your career studying international migration and the immigration system in Canada, as I understand it. I have a very simple question, but I think it's core to what we're looking at here.

What does the general evidence that you've looked at suggest with respect to what makes for a successful asylum policy and successfully responding to those seeking asylum in a democracy like Canada? What allows for a country's response to be successful as opposed to the opposite?

Lisa Kaida: My research never looked at asylum seekers specifically. I focused on resettled refugees, including government-assisted refugees and privately sponsored refugees. Therefore, based on my research, I cannot directly answer your question on what makes Canada's asylum seeker policy successful.

Peter Fragiskatos: Your area of focus is migration. What would be your point of view? You have put it on record now in your testimony, but can you share with us what you think are some of the key points?

For example, Ms. Kobussen touched on this in her testimony, and we heard this earlier today: ensuring that communities have resources. If we're going to have individuals resettled in communities, they should go to communities with adequate resources—housing, legal services, settlement services, medical services—that are of a type that would be more than adequate to ensure successful integration. Is this your view as well?

• (1800)

Lisa Kaida: Yes.

Based on my research on resettled refugees' economic integration, government-assisted refugees are assigned to a select number of cities—not only Toronto and Montreal but also mid-sized cities like Hamilton, St. John's, Moncton and so forth. For up to 12 months, they receive financial support, employment support, language support, and very institutionalized social and cultural support.

If we shift our eyes to privately sponsored refugees, we see that such support is given by local groups of individuals as well as national communities or cultural and religious communities.

Whether it's government support or more individual support, those resettled refugees do receive systematic support.

Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

I'll turn it over to my colleague, Mr. Deschênes, now.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): I'm just going to pause the clock here at two minutes and 30 seconds.

What I'll do, Mr. Deschênes, is just let you run into your next round. With the will of the room, that will be eight and a half minutes.

Is that good? Okay.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank my colleague for the time he has given me.

Ms. Kobussen, is there currently a labour shortage in Saskatchewan and Saskatoon?

[English]

Karen Kobussen: We have a low unemployment rate in our province, yes.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: The members of your Chamber of Commerce have job postings, positions to fill. Is that correct?

[English]

Karen Kobussen: Yes. I think there are job openings, and many of them would be under skilled labour. I know we heard earlier that some of the asylum claimants would be under skilled labour. Some of them would be under entry level service jobs and things like that.

Specific to the market, I couldn't tell you what sector, but yes, we have a low unemployment rate. There are more jobs than people.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: So, there are job opportunities in Saskatchewan. You represent companies that are looking for employees. So I was surprised to hear what you said.

Wouldn't you and your members see the arrival of asylum seekers as an opportunity to identify potential workers—people who could help businesses in Saskatchewan?

[English]

Karen Kobussen: I represent a number of immigrant-owned businesses. As I mentioned earlier, our area of Saskatoon is a different socio-economic demographic in that it is very immigrant-heavy. Culturally, lots of those businesses bring their own people in.

I'll give you an example. Through the SINP program, the immigrant nominee program, they will bring in members of their own communities. When we look to asylum seekers who might be coming from persecuted regions or other places in the world, I don't know. What I'm saying is that we need to do an overlay of what services we need for whom, and what supports. I don't know that those cultures would necessarily be supported in Saskatoon, because I don't know where they come from.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: If I understand you correctly, your members need employees. There is a labour shortage, and the unemployment rate is low. However, your members want to hire people from a specific country, and not from other countries. Ultimately, they want to choose the ethnic origin of their workers. Is that correct?

[English]

Karen Kobussen: No, I'm not saying that. I know what the unemployment rate is, but I don't know what the labour market ask is. We have skilled labour positions that would be available in our resource sector—I do know that. I don't know about service. Most of the people who are in our organization are in service businesses like restaurants and things like that.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: That doesn't quite answer my question. I'll give you my example.

In Gaspésie, in eastern Quebec, there is an area with several thriving factories. It is becoming increasingly difficult to access temporary foreign workers. So I recommended that business owners in that region—the Matane region—reach out to asylum seekers who have open work permits and offer them jobs.

We have worked on this type of partnership and have therefore had opportunities to attract workers to the region. As we have heard, asylum seekers include all kinds of people, people who fear persecution. However, you in Saskatoon do not see employment opportunities among asylum seekers.

• (1805)

[English]

Karen Kobussen: Definitely. I think that asylum seekers, given due process and given their right to work and be mobile, would absolutely be welcome.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Wouldn't it be a great opportunity, if there were more asylum seekers, to fill labour needs in Saskatoon?

[English]

Karen Kobussen: I personally wouldn't limit it so narrowly to that. Again, we're going to overlay all of the services—legal, technical, language barriers, skill sets, etc. If that works, all the stars align and everything triangulates, then absolutely asylum seekers would be welcome to come to Saskatoon to have work, support, legal assistance and everything.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Right.

If we were to distribute asylum seekers equitably, that would mean there would be more asylum seekers who could work in Saskatchewan. I understand that, from your perspective, there is some openness to this.

[English]

Karen Kobussen: As of April 1, 2026, my understanding is that we currently have 1,113 asylum seekers in Saskatchewan. I hope I'm right on that. That information was given to me. Of those, I don't know how many are working. I don't know how many are there because they were relocated. I don't know how many will stay afterwards, once their cases are heard, etc. I think we need more information. It's not just about getting a job. It's finding a place to live. It's enrolling their children in school, if they have them. Do you know what I mean?

I truly believe that we need to make sure we have all of the information available before we can offer that type of support.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you, Ms. Kobussen.

Ms. Kaida, I understand that you have studied the issue of refugee integration, not asylum seekers. You mentioned in your opening remarks that you observed that, in small communities, they were able to attract and retain refugees.

Can you elaborate on the exact figures, and how can this phenomenon be explained?

[English]

Lisa Kaida: There are government-assisted refugees and privately sponsored refugees. Just to focus on government-assisted refugees, once they arrive in Canada, they are assigned to a select number of destinations, including places outside of Quebec or Ontario, where the resettlement agencies have been contracted by the federal government to provide employment support, language training and cultural training. That's for the government-assisted refugees.

To shift our eyes to privately sponsored refugees, that kind of support has been provided by groups—five ordinary Canadians, religious communities, religious associations or cultural and ethnic associations—that may be spread all over Canada, not just in Quebec and Montreal. Some of them might be in very rural areas, including northern Ontario towns or northern Quebec towns. There, those sponsors are required to provide financial support, accommodation and social and cultural support to privately sponsored refugees for up to 12 months.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: What is the observed success rate?

[English]

Lisa Kaida: As a measurement of success, I use employment rates and earnings. That's other research that I didn't mention in my opening statement. Compared with government-assisted refugees, privately sponsored refugees have higher success in finding employment and have higher earnings.

• (1810)

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you.

We'll now move to our second round of questions, for five minutes each.

We'll go to Mr. Ho.

Vincent Ho: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Dr. Kaida, your research has studied the short-term and long-term economic integration of refugees in Canada. Your work has compared privately sponsored refugees with government-assisted refugees. Is that correct? Okay.

Can you tell me a bit more about how the privately sponsored refugee program works?

Lisa Kaida: Privately sponsored refugees are given permanent resident status upon arrival in Canada. They are still approved as refugees by international organizations like UNHCR or other international organizations. As well, privately sponsored refugees could be family members or relatives of refugees who are already in Canada. When they arrive in Canada, they are sponsored. They are taken care of by the sponsors, such as a group of individuals or ethnic or cultural organizations, for up to 12 months.

Vincent Ho: Has your research found that privately sponsored refugees show stronger employment, earnings outcomes and economic contributions to Canada than government-assisted refugees?

Lisa Kaida: Yes. That is correct.

Vincent Ho: When you hear Liberal politicians and political advocacy groups speak broadly about “refugees succeeding”, do you think they may be conflating the two different groups and two different outcomes across these programs?

Lisa Kaida: I don't think so. Even though the purpose—

Vincent Ho: But the privately sponsored refugees do have higher short-term and long-term economic contributions, which last for well over a decade, according to your research, than the government-assisted refugee stream. Is that correct?

Lisa Kaida: That is correct. There is a reason for that. Government-assisted refugees are more likely to be vulnerable in terms of family structure. That has something to do with the introduction of IRPA in early 2000, when the government was emphasizing the acceptance of vulnerable refugees—

Vincent Ho: Does it have anything at all to do with things like initial selection factors, such as language ability, education, age or labour market conditions?

Lisa Kaida: For the period that we studied, the refugees who arrived between 2000 and 2014, those socio-demographic and human characteristics were not taken into account. That is my understanding—unlike with economic migrants.

Vincent Ho: In your view, are asylum seekers more like government-assisted refugees or more like privately sponsored refugees?

Lisa Kaida: The characteristics of asylum seekers are unknown in the sense that, unlike the economic immigrants and those in the refugee resettlement program, asylum seekers are not vetted by the government. Some asylum seekers may be very highly educated. Other asylum seekers may not be fluent in English or French at all. It is an unknown factor.

Vincent Ho: Would you agree that integration of refugees is not something that just happens automatically? It requires housing, language training, employment supports, health care, schools and transportation, all things that put pressure on local communities.

Lisa Kaida: The socio-economic profiles of government-assisted refugees and privately sponsored refugees are indeed weaker than those of economic refugees admitted into Canada based on their education and language skills, as well as their pre-arranged employment. Therefore, it is not surprising that refugees' economic outcomes are less favourable than economic immigrants'.

• (1815)

Vincent Ho: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Joseph, you have the floor for five minutes.

Natilien Joseph (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

To begin with, through you, I would like to congratulate my colleague Mr. Alexis Deschênes, who is passionately defending the businesses in his region that are facing a labour shortage. I am happy to help him find asylum seekers with open work permits for businesses in his region.

I have noticed recently that we are talking about immigration in a different way, but we are not talking about the benefits of immigration. We are focusing solely on the first generation. I find that a bit dangerous. I have some good news, especially for Quebec. Thanks to the work of our Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, since she took the helm of the department, there has been a 72% decrease in asylum claims in Quebec.

I'll start with you, Ms. Kaida. Earlier, a witness said that asylum seekers are not people who leave their countries because of poverty. These asylum seekers are talented, skilled individuals. Two-thirds of them are francophone. Furthermore, one-third also request to become naturalized as French speakers.

In your opinion, don't you think there will be a dispute between the provinces? Let's say Quebec says it doesn't want asylum seekers and sends them to Alberta or Ontario, but those two provinces say they don't want them either—what are we going to do, and what means will we use?

[*English*]

Lisa Kaida: Thank you, Madam Chair.

What are we going to do? There is a reason many asylum seekers try to reach Quebec, especially Montreal, as well as Toronto. There is a history of immigration in those so-called traditional destinations where there are established co-ethnic, co-national communities.

Also, there are not only institutionalized resettlement agencies but also NGOs. Some NGOs specifically cater to asylum seekers, as one of the witnesses was commenting on earlier.

[*Translation*]

Natilien Joseph: Earlier today, I was sitting in a McDonald's and spoke with an athlete whose parents arrived in Canada 24 years ago as asylum seekers. A little while ago, in the House, I could see in the eyes of the members applauding the athletes that some were even on the verge of tears. All this is to say that we're going to talk about immigration differently in this committee because immigration is also an invaluable contribution to Canada and to Quebec.

Let's look at the legislative side. I understand that we can get bogged down in the legislative details and forget that what we're discussing can affect lives, because we're talking about displacement. I won't go into detail, but when we talk about displacement, sometimes it can be forced displacement.

Not long ago, in my riding, I spoke with a family of asylum seekers who have an open work permit, who are working and who own a home. These asylum seekers don't need anyone's help because they're already settled. I asked them why they chose Quebec. They told me it wasn't their fault that Quebecers are kind, that French is spoken in Quebec, and that it's the most beautiful province in Canada. That's why they chose Quebec. I told them that was a good idea.

They told me something else about the members of Parliament, since they follow what's happening here in Ottawa. Do you think there's also a tendency to lump things together when we talk about immigration?

• (1820)

[*English*]

Lisa Kaida: I'm sorry. Did you say confusion about immigration...?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): That is the time. I apologize.

We now move to Mr. Deschênes for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I have some questions for you Ms. Murad, in Montreal. I'm glad to see you again. I had the opportunity to visit your facilities.

Let's discuss the issue of funding for assistance to asylum seekers, which you briefly mentioned. I know you are fortunate to be able to rely on private donors, but other centres I have visited are funded by the government of Quebec, primarily to assist permanent residents.

So, what about asylum seekers? How are services funded for those who need them here in Quebec?

[*English*]

Alina Murad: Thank you very much for the question.

It is a very interesting question, which I think speaks to the need for the adoption of a system that would open up funding applicable to organizations that serve refugee claimants.

This is a huge funding constraint, unfortunately, and as you mentioned, there are organizations that are not able to commit manpower or hours to look for different funding alternatives. Therefore, collaboration between organizations happens. Referrals to organizations such as ours, that are able to provide services for asylum seekers, do happen. The constraint does contribute to the stress that's put onto organizations that are able to serve refugee claimants.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: For the benefit of the committee, please tell us what services must be provided to an asylum seeker upon arrival in the country.

[*English*]

Alina Murad: Absolutely.

Here in Quebec, depending on where the asylum seeker is coming from, language supports and services are definitely necessary, as well as things like health and wellness supports, for example. Psychosocial support can be given to asylum seekers through community organizations, as can integration and employment services. These are all services that we provide at The Refugee Centre.

When it comes to our employment services, we support refugee claimant clients with preparing for interviews and assessing what their labour history has been, looking to alternative options here in Montreal.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Do you agree with this perception, which I have heard quite often while walking around Montreal, that we do not have the necessary funding to provide these services to all asylum seekers?

[*English*]

Alina Murad: I think adopting a program that would allow organizations to better coordinate among ourselves as well as having funding for organizations that serve asylum seekers would definitely address this.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you.

I was looking at the clock, colleagues, and I talked to the clerk. We have time for turns of five and five minutes to finish this round off.

I will turn the floor to Mr. Menegakis, and then Ms. Sodhi is on deck.

Costas Menegakis: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here with us today.

I have some questions for you, Ms. Kobussen, if I may.

Has the government ever reached out to your organization to discuss immigration concerns and how that would impact the businesses and your membership?

Karen Kobussen: No, they have not.

Costas Menegakis: They have not.

Would you say that the rapid unplanned increase in asylum claimants and all immigrants has put a strain on local business and services that your association members simply weren't prepared for?

Karen Kobussen: I would say that immigration has definitely put a strain on many of the local services and on the local infrastructure that we need to support them. Most significantly, I think it would be housing.

Costas Menegakis: It's housing. We heard that from a Saskatoon city councillor who testified in the first segment of today's meeting.

He also indicated that there's some strain in having to increase taxes in order to deal with some of the immigration issues that the municipality has had to deal with. What are you hearing from your members regarding escalating taxes at all levels of government?

Karen Kobussen: Well, taxes are never a good thing.

It's interesting. We had some conversation earlier, and we heard earlier that provinces, municipalities and the federal government need to work together, but there's only one taxpayer. Regardless of where the money comes from, it's coming out of our business owners' pockets and our residents' pockets. We need to be mindful of that.

• (1825)

Costas Menegakis: Well, as a business person, I'd say that immigration is an economic driver.

I'm sure you would agree with that, but right now there are federal backlogs. It really feels like IRCC's capacity—Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada—in dealing with these open door policies that the Liberal government had taken priority over economic immigration. They're focusing on dealing with backlogs instead of focusing on economic immigration, which I would imagine would be supplying a resource that is very valuable to your membership.

Could you comment on that?

Karen Kobussen: Yes. Thank you.

Again, in Saskatchewan, with the Saskatchewan immigrant nominee program, SINP, we saw great success in managed, efficient and effective immigration levels. We were bringing in entrepreneurs, and that was a complement to the federal system at the time. I want to say that it was probably around 2012 to 2018, somewhere in there.

When the federal limits increased, Saskatchewan wasn't quite prepared for it. Essentially what happened, though, was that the federal limits increased, but they put a cap on that program, so what we saw was that immigrants were coming in, but not in a managed and orderly way. I think that the longer we have backlogs and the longer we have bottlenecks in the system, the more we're going to see challenges in our community and see those pressures on the required services from immigrants who aren't processed thoroughly.

Yes, I think the federal government has created, exacerbated and increased our problems in Saskatoon specifically.

Costas Menegakis: Would you say that public confidence in Canada's immigration system among your members—and, I guess, the broader community in the city of Saskatoon—has eroded because of how the government has handled asylum claims and the immigration system in a bigger way?

Karen Kobussen: Well, again, in our community and among the members I represent, there is a good portion of immigrant business owners and immigrant businesses in Saskatoon West. I think they're probably grateful for where they have landed, but I know that there are people who are waiting and who maybe aren't so fortunate and don't have answers yet.

We rely on a healthy, fulsome and robust immigration system, but certainty is what is needed for these people, so that they can be assured of who they're going to sponsor to come over or who they're going to hire. I'm not necessarily talking about just the immigrant business owners. I'm also talking about the service organizations that bring workers over—not temporary workers, but permanent—which requires labour market opinions and labour market

programs. I think that certainty and efficiency equal effectiveness, and then we have a smart program, but that's not happening right now.

Costas Menegakis: Thank you very much.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you.

To bring it home, we have Ms. Sodhi for five minutes.

Amandeep Sodhi: Thank you again, Madam Chair, and a warm welcome to all of our witnesses.

Ms. Murad, welcome back to committee. I know you were here with us earlier on, in February, as well.

The last time you appeared at this committee, you discussed the acceptance rate of refugees in Canada, and the low fraud rate in the system. Can you further expand on why Canada's programs specifically may have a higher approval rate than other countries, given program context and geography, and how organizations such as The Refugee Centre work with claimants to integrate successfully into their new communities?

Alina Murad: Thank you very much for that question.

The integration process is key here. The services that we provide are wraparound, as I mentioned. It's very important to have a holistic approach in order to set refugee claimants up for success in their integration process.

As for the high approval rate, I of course don't have knowledge of the back-end system or what goes on behind closed doors. However, I do think that the standard of our refugee claimants or immigrants is very high in general, as compared to other countries, for example.

The individuals who are seeking to come to Canada are aware of the calibre the government is after, and it really is a matter of ensuring that we can harness that potential and use it to the benefit of Canadian society. This would require some collaboration between all levels of government, as well as with community organizations, because, as I mentioned, the settlement services and the wraparound support are key for success at all levels.

• (1830)

Amandeep Sodhi: Thank you for your answer.

Can you also provide this committee with any examples of success stories that you have seen at The Refugee Centre in terms of vulnerable individuals seeking refuge in Canada being able to settle, integrate and contribute to our communities when supported by organizations such as yours?

Alina Murad: Absolutely. Thank you very much for that question.

With our pilot program of relocation, which I'll bring up here because we are talking about redistribution, we have a few success stories. I can share two with you.

We had an individual who originally arrived in Vancouver. He had to go through a credential recognition process as a teacher. We were able to resettle him in an indigenous reserve in Quebec, and now he teaches English to children on that reserve. I think that's a really important story to highlight here, because it shows collaboration between indigenous communities and newcomers, which is definitely something that should be focused on.

We've also had a number of individuals who have laid down their roots here in Montreal, who have been able to find affordable housing for themselves and to secure work for themselves as well. These individuals don't just take a job and call it a day. They actually do give back to their society and their community as well. We see a lot of the individuals we have helped serve coming back to our centre, volunteering and paying it forward.

Amandeep Sodhi: Last but not least—we have about a minute and a half left—I just want to give you some time to give the committee any recommendations you might have in terms of how the federal government can support the successful integration of refugees through efficient processing methods. I know you mentioned a trilateral collaboration between the provinces, the federal government and the municipalities. If you would like to elaborate on that, the floor is yours.

Alina Murad: Thank you very much.

This program I'm suggesting for the federal government would be collaborative in nature, as was mentioned, not only with municipal governments and community organizations but with labour recruitment agencies as well.

What I'm imagining here is a program similar to the EMPP, with a back end that allows refugee claimants to fill out a profile, so to speak. This would allow them to include their education and work experience, their skills and training, the location of their family in Canada if they have one, as well as their province of preference, with justification.

On the other side, it would allow the same thing from employers who have open work opportunities, a willingness to provide training if necessary, a willingness to provide housing opportunities if necessary and a willingness to provide or assist with transportation options. Here, we would have an agent who can compare these different profiles and matches and provide a ranked system in which the claimant can select what is best for them and relocate, and here it's really important—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): Thank you. That is time. I would like to thank all of the witnesses for their time, for their testimony and for answering questions. Thanks to colleagues as well.

Our next meeting is on Monday, June 1, and the notice of that meeting has been published. Is it the will of the committee to adjourn the meeting for the day?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner): The meeting is adjourned.

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