



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

45th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 035

Monday, June 1, 2026

Chair: Julie Dzerowicz



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• (1105)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes (Gaspésie—Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine—Listuguj, BQ)): I call this meeting to order.

Good morning, everyone.

Welcome to meeting number 35 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. To begin, please allow me to make a few comments.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. I would like to make a few comments for the benefits of the witnesses and members.

First, as always, kindly wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those on Zoom, click the microphone icon to activate your mike, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking.

Next, on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen, you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation, either floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

I would like to remind witnesses that committee members may ask questions in either French or English. If you will need interpretation, please take a moment now to prepare your earpiece and select the listening channel you need in advance in order to take full advantage of the time allotted for questions and answers.

Of course, please ensure all your comments are addressed through the chair. Members, please raise your hand if you wish to speak. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can. I will remind everyone to kindly not speak over each other, as it will be hard for our interpreters to interpret, and it makes their job difficult. I will let you know once you have only one minute left.

Thank you for your co-operation.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on April 27, 2026, the committee is resuming its study of provincial distribution of asylum seekers in Canada. Here is the text of the motion:

That, whereas Quebec and Ontario receive a disproportionate share of asylum seekers in Canada, while efforts to relocate them to other provinces remain minimal, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee undertake a study specifically on:

- a. the impacts of this inequitable distribution on the provinces' public services and public finances;
- b. ways to make the system more equitable;

c. on practices in other countries and groups of countries, such as the European Union, for distributing asylum seekers;

that the committee invite experts, lawyers specializing in immigration and constitutional law, representatives of organizations working with asylum seekers, and any other witnesses deemed relevant to appear before it; that the committee formulate recommendations aimed at making the asylum seeker system more equitable; that the committee devote a minimum of three meetings to this study; and that, pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee requests that the government table a full response to its report.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses for today's meeting.

First, we have Landon Johnston, councillor in the City of Calgary, who is joining us today by video conference.

Next, we have Adam Bercovitch Sandinsky, vice-president of the Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers.

Last, we have Gauri Sreenivasan, co-executive director of the Canadian Council for Refugees.

Good morning, and welcome to the committee.

You will each have five minutes for your opening remarks. Then we will proceed with questions from members.

To begin, I invite Mr. Johnston to make his opening statement.

[*English*]

Landon Johnston (Councillor, City of Calgary, As an Individual): Thank you for having me.

Good morning, Chair and honourable members of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. My name is Landon Johnston. I'm the elected city councillor for Ward 14 in Calgary.

I appear today not as a representative of the City of Calgary but as a Canadian citizen, as an Albertan and as someone who has seen first-hand the pressure our communities face.

I'm here to speak to the budgetary and service impacts on municipalities and provinces of any forced redistribution of asylum seekers going from Quebec to Alberta and Calgary. I will also offer a brief comparison of supports for low-income residents and newcomers between our jurisdictions.

Calgary's fair entry program is a low-income subsidy that helps residents access essential services. Since 2018, applications have grown by 52%, while Calgary's population has grown by roughly 23%. Indications show that an increasing number of immigrants are using these services. Expanding the program to absorb significantly more users without additional revenue will strain transit operations and other services where subsidized costs already exceed revenues.

Provincially, Alberta's public schools are under severe pressure. Rapid population growth contributed to a damaging teacher strike in October 2025. The government invoked the notwithstanding clause to restore services and announced major new funding for complexity support teams in affected schools. A classroom audit revealed that 91,000 students in Alberta's public systems do not speak English at a level that supports reasonable expectations of academic success.

To address this, the province has raised its share of residential property taxes and borrowed to build and renovate schools. Forcibly adding more students who require intensive language and integration supports will inflame existing tensions and slow the integration of those already here.

Quebec, by contrast, has taken a different approach. In its 2025 budget process, the province implemented education cuts, including an initial \$200-million reduction affecting the language and support programs, while school construction lagged. If Quebec's systems are truly at a breaking point and are requiring redistribution, why has there been so little domestic pressure on Quebec governments to expand capacity first?

My question for proponents of redistribution is straightforward: How can it be reasonable to ask Alberta and Calgary to absorb a greater share of asylum seekers when Quebec, at both provincial and municipal levels, has not matched the levels of investment and support that we provide to our own residents and newcomers?

Alberta has done and will continue to do its fair share for those already in our communities. Our clear ask is that other provinces meet the same standard. Build the schools, fund the transit subsidies, invest in language training and support integration at home. Do not expect Alberta to absorb the consequences of choices made elsewhere.

Thank you. I welcome your questions.

● (1110)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Thank you, Mr. Johnston.

Mr. Bercovitch Sadinsky, you have the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

Adam Bercovitch Sadinsky (Vice-President, Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers): Mr. Chair and members of the committee, I'm grateful for the opportunity to appear before the committee this morning on behalf of the Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers, a national voice for refugees and migrants across Canada.

I'd like to acknowledge that we meet here on the historic unceded territory of the Anishinabe people, something we must hold in mind

as we discuss the distribution of asylum seekers throughout this country.

At the outset, I want to emphasize that we have no opposition to equitably redistributing refugee claimants across Canada. However, as many speakers have already pointed out over the course of the study, this must be done first with consent and in a way that ensures that claimants remain supported and have access to the pillars of support that help them settle and thrive in their new communities.

One of those pillars is access to legal services in terms of availability of lawyers and legal aid funding for refugee law services. Despite refugee determination taking place in a federal tribunal and being a constitutionally federal responsibility, access to refugee legal aid services is a patchwork across the country. Two provinces, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, have no funding for legal aid for refugees at all. Others do not fund key aspects of the refugee process, while others have such limited funding that many lawyers cannot afford to take on legal aid files.

The foundational document in every refugee claim is the basis of claim form. This is a claimant's first opportunity to tell their story and set out the persecution they would face back home. For context, a basis of claim form generally takes me about nine hours of work with the client. Alberta does not provide legal aid funding for the completion of this critical form. In Quebec, lawyers are paid a total of \$300. In New Brunswick, there is currently a single articling student to represent refugee claimants who cannot otherwise afford a lawyer.

In 2023, the federal government transferred hundreds of refugee claimants from Roxham Road to New Brunswick with very little notice, sending service providers and the IRB scrambling. In New Brunswick, there were nearly no refugee lawyers and there was no legal aid funding, aside from that very small clinic. Legal service providers across the Maritimes struggled to accommodate the demand, and many claimants had to file their claims without counsel. Many eventually left for urban centres.

Access to legal services is a right. It also raises all boats. Claimants with counsel submit proper claims within required time periods, moving through the system smoothly and integrating more easily. A dollar amount can even be put on this. A Canadian Bar Association report cites studies from the U.K., Australia and the United States, saying that for every dollar spent on legal aid, the average social return on investment is six dollars. On the other hand, insufficient funding or insufficient access to services leads to higher numbers of appeals, creating backlogs and delay and ultimately costing taxpayers more money.

This is even more important now that Bill C-12 has become law, rendering tens of thousands of claimants ineligible to be referred to the IRB and shifting them to the PRRA, the pre-removal risk assessment process. PRRA's are decided almost entirely on paper. Imagine being a traumatized, newly ineligible refugee claimant speaking no English or French and being asked to put forward your entire claim for refugee protection and evidence within 30 days without the assistance of a professional who understands the process and the complex legal questions you're expected to address. If an officer makes a mistake—and they're human, after all, and they do—and you have to challenge that decision in court, having a lawyer for that is essential.

What's needed is a coordinated national legal aid strategy that makes it not matter where you live in the determination of the kinds of services you receive. Whether that's increased per capita funding from the federal government tied to national standards or coordination agreements allowing lawyers from one province to represent clients in another, such a strategy must be front and centre in a discussion of where to distribute claimants, and how.

Thank you for your questions.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Thank you very much.

We are continuing with Ms. Sreenivasan of the Canadian Council for Refugees.

You have the floor for five minutes.

[English]

Gauri Sreenivasan (Co-Executive Director, Canadian Council for Refugees): Good morning.

[Translation]

The Canadian Council for Refugees, or CCR, is the national voice of over 200 member organizations who work with and for refugee and immigrant communities across Canada.

[English]

Thank you for the opportunity to talk about Canada's asylum system. It's an issue that needs a renewed national conversation, one that moves us from a place of blaming refugees and finger-pointing across all levels of government to a conversation about solutions.

• (1115)

[Translation]

People in Canada are increasingly being told that refugee claimants are causing a crisis, a situation Canada is unable to han-

dle. This is simply not the case. Our country has the infrastructure, the know-how and the resources.

[English]

The good news is that across Canada, we have the skills, the experience and the solid foundation of infrastructure needed to greatly improve outcomes for refugee claimants and Canada. Remember, Canada is a global leader in resettling UN-designated refugees. We have an extensive national welcome system that, while not perfect, sets such refugees up for success by providing information, services and logistical support so they can find housing, work and community.

Sadly, no similar system exists for refugee claimants seeking protection at or within our borders. The right to claim asylum is a fundamental international right, and the vast majority of those making a claim in Canada are ultimately determined to be refugees fleeing persecution. The lack of a national plan to ensure a coordinated response from all three levels of government to such claimants fails those who have a right to asylum, puts local governments and community groups in expensive, short-term reaction mode and leaves people in Canada shocked and upset that so many claimants end up homeless in a country that prides itself on its openness to refugees.

We need not look to Europe for suggestions. We need only to scale up successful models in Canada and work in a more systematic, coordinated way across the country, building on what we already know and drawing on the significant experience of Canadian civil society groups that have been stepping up to fill the void for decades. CCR's proposal for a national system for asylum with dignity was launched with members three years ago, and it is still relevant today.

A national coordinated plan should ensure action in five key pillars.

First, we need to establish reception centres in cities with large numbers of claimants to provide orientation and referral services and to facilitate the movement of claimants within a city or to regions where capacity exists. We have a good precedent set in Peel, but these reception centres should be established in other centres and then connected in a national framework of information sharing with local governments and civil society to enable informed choice by claimants.

Second, we need sustained federal funding for transitional housing, scaling up the successful experiences of NGOs and diaspora community groups. This housing should not be in expensive hotels where claimants are isolated. There should be options for housing with wraparound services where refugees are integrated as part of the community and retain mobility rights.

As a step in the right direction, the federal government has renewed funding for the interim housing assistance program. There is an incredibly positive story we could all be telling Canadians together now about building solutions for refugees and the country. The previous round of IHAP funding was entirely oversubscribed. That means there are provinces, communities and groups across the country that are ready and willing to build dedicated housing with support services for refugee claimants, so IHAP funding needs to be scaled up. It needs to be locked in long-term so that it is predictable, and crucially, it needs to be open to civil society organizations directly. There are dozens of groups across the country that can move quickly and are ready to create housing solutions that will ease the pressure on homeless shelters and provide refugees with the support they need.

Third, we need to end the restrictions that prevent refugee claimants from accessing the settlement support services that are offered to other newcomers and that we know will improve short- and long-term outcomes.

Fourth, as we've just heard, we must ensure that adequate legal aid coverage is available for refugee claimants in all parts of the country, supported by multi-year funding.

Fifth, we need to continue to do work to ensure a fair, streamlined and effective claims process. Recent reforms under Bill C-12 have made the system a lot less fair and have created new inefficiencies and backlogs. I'm happy to answer questions about some immediate steps that can be taken to improve outcomes, including in the regulations.

In conclusion, this committee should recommend the development and funding of a national coordinated plan for asylum with dignity that will meet the public's expectations for a fair refugee claim system that upholds human rights and the strong tradition of refugee welcome that Canadians are rightly proud of. It is entirely doable and is long past time, and CCR members are ready to help.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Thank you, Ms. Sreenivasan.

We will begin with the first round of questions.

Mr. Davies, you have the floor for six minutes.

[*English*]

Fred Davies (Niagara South, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Johnston, I wonder if I can start with you, please.

This is the first time I've seen the committee take the opportunity to look at cities out west on this issue. I want to ask if you could list the top three changes in the federal government system that would benefit the city of Calgary. What would help the municipality most to support genuine refugees, while reducing the strain on local taxpayers? Can you give me those three top priorities?

• (1120)

Landon Johnston: A priority would be the reduction in the number of refugees. Net migration to Alberta would be the first

thing. The second thing would obviously be funding, and then the third thing would probably be language support.

Fred Davies: You indicated that there's a gap in funding to deal with the pressures that are being placed on the city of Calgary. Is the city absorbing the net impact of the cost overruns for the financial requirements for these claimants now?

Landon Johnston: It's the same taxpayer, whether funding comes from the federal government or the municipal government, but yes, we are subsidizing.

Beyond the subsidization that the city offers, a lot of these claimants are receiving multiple levels of funding from multiple levels of government. There's no real determination of whether they can receive all of them or just one of them, but the city is subsidizing quite a bit of.... I mean, to get the total number, we've been working on a notice of motion within the city to see exactly how much is being divvied out from Calgary taxpayers to these claimants.

Fred Davies: You're not aware of the actual numbers for the gap between what you're receiving from the federal and provincial governments and what you need to ante up to level the field.

Landon Johnston: Exactly. We don't track it from a municipal standpoint, but we're going to start tracking it. There are lots of indications of who's using it and how much, but at some point it's going to be unsustainable.

Fred Davies: Has the City of Calgary used IHAP either for the acquisition of real estate or for significant capital investments to house asylum claimants?

Landon Johnston: I'm sorry. I'm not sure. I know that government grants have to go through our province, so that might be a better question for them.

Fred Davies: Okay.

I have a question for Ms. Sreenivasan.

Lately I've been hearing that some municipalities have purchased real estate to house asylum claimants. Last week, the minister rebranded it into "reception centres". Can you tell me the difference between a reception centre and a hotel purchased for the purpose of housing refugee claimants?

Gauri Sreenivasan: I can, absolutely. Thank you for the question.

When we identify the five key pillars that we think are needed, we distinguish between reception centres and interim housing—

Fred Davies: I'm sorry. What is a reception centre?

Gauri Sreenivasan: A reception centre would be the first stop for a refugee claimant, a stop where they would be oriented to what services are available and where the vacancies are for housing, for example. Some refugee claimants already have an identified home. Some don't. A reception centre could provide immediate, very short-term shelter, if needed, for a short period of time, but usually claimants then need to move to interim housing before they find long-term housing.

A reception centre has a triage function. It could identify where there's capacity and connect refugee claimants with service providers, whereas interim housing usually means homes with wraparound services where refugee claimants may stay three months. You heard someone from Matthew House testify earlier that claimants are often there for about three months. In B.C., it could be longer, up to six months.

They are housed in community and receive support on how to connect with a refugee aid lawyer, what their employment opportunities are and how they get a work permit. It's more of an interim stage.

Fred Davies: I'm sorry. I have limited time. I understand that.

In your presentation, you mentioned the need to increase the level of services on a wraparound basis to make the system work better, but being that I'm fixated on the appropriate use of tax dollars, I have a philosophical problem with the federal government providing funding to purchase real estate.

In the city of Ottawa, two facilities have been purchased through IHAP funds. In Pickering, a motel was purchased for asylum claimants.

What is your view on this? Is purchasing real estate a good use of taxpayers' money?

• (1125)

Gauri Sreenivasan: It is absolutely essential that we set up permanent reception centres where refugee claimants—

Fred Davies: Wait a minute. I'm not talking—

Gauri Sreenivasan: Oh, you're talking about housing.

In both cases, it seems to me that the need for interim housing is key. Either we can decide that we live in a world where we don't have refugee claimants, which is not the real world, or we can recognize that we have a system—

Fred Davies: With great respect, that's not what I asked. I'm asking if you think it's a good idea for federal taxpayers' dollars to be used by municipalities to purchase real estate for the purpose of housing asylum claimants.

Gauri Sreenivasan: I think it's an excellent and reasonable use of public dollars—

Fred Davies: Why?

Gauri Sreenivasan: It's because we have housing needs.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Time is up, unfortunately. You will be able to continue the discussion later.

I'll now give the floor to Mr. Zuberi, from the Liberal Party, for six minutes.

Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

I'd like to give a moment more to Ms. Sreenivasan to complete the thought she had.

Gauri Sreenivasan: Thank you. I appreciate that.

We know that we have refugee claimants. Their volumes go up and down, but we do have them, and there's an essential obligation on Canada. We have communities ready to receive them, and they have interim housing needs.

In the same way that we have shelters and homes built for other kinds of populations, having dedicated housing in key urban centres in Canada to provide transitional housing for claimants is a super smart and efficient use of resources. It is much more efficient than the emergency short-term housing that was done through hotels, for example. We're looking at about a third to a fifth of the cost to house people daily in an interim housing situation, so having those structures set up permanently so that cities can manage the flows is really wise.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you. I appreciate that you fleshed out that it's actually economically more efficient to use that method over the other method.

In your opening remarks, you hinted that you have some suggestions for regulations as they relate to existing legislation. I'd like to give you some time to flesh that out.

Gauri Sreenivasan: As I think the committee is aware, there was a lot of concern from refugee expert organizations and refugee lawyers about the changes in Bill C-12. That legislation has now passed, but we have some important opportunities to address the ways in which we could reduce the inefficiencies and the backlogs that will be created by Bill C-12.

For example, we are concerned about the fairness of hearings under the PRRA system. That could result in backlogs of reviews at the Federal Court later. We are also concerned about families because of the nature of the complex ineligibilities in the bill. These will be split, with parents being sent to the PRRA process and children being sent to the IRB, or a number of individuals will be stuck in limbo for extended periods without status, unable to move on with their lives and in a much worse situation for moving on to contribute to Canada.

The regulations provide an opportunity for the government, and the government has committed to looking at certain kinds of key exemptions that could be introduced for certain kinds of refugee claimants who would not be banned from accessing the IRB. CCR believes strongly that in addition to the exemption for unaccompanied minors, the minister should be looking at exemptions in a few key areas.

They include, for example, the need to have an exemption from the new ineligibilities in the context of a rapid change in a country's condition. That has nothing to do with how long a person has been in the country, but it would enable a more effective process for a person to act as a claimant at the IRB and result in fewer reviews at the Federal Court later.

We think it would be really important to have exemptions for people who are from moratorium countries, meaning countries where Canada cannot return people, which means they would not have access to the PRRA.

We also think it would be important to look at the principle of family reunification and the best interests of the child, so that when a family member already has access to the IRB, they would not be separated from their family, who would be shunted to a separate process in the PRRA.

Those three scenarios could result in revisions of the case, because they could be found to be cases where basically principles of justice were not found.

I think a number of exemptions under Bill C-12 would make for a more effective and expeditious process for Bill C-12 and would be an important part of the national system.

- (1130)

Sameer Zuberi: I'd like to invite you to put these things to paper as written suggestions for regulations. I'm sure that officials have taken note of your testimony and will look at it as a result, but to enhance what you're saying, I would invite you to submit written suggestions around these regulations.

Now I'd like to go to Mr. Sadinsky.

Earlier you mentioned legal aid and the unevenness of legal aid availability to claimants. On these very consequential decisions and applications that people are putting forth with respect to their futures and where they'll be living, what happens when somebody doesn't have legal aid services? What do you end up seeing? You did hint at how it leads to a challenging and uneven process that leads to several appeals later on, but can you elaborate on and dive a bit deeper into what you actually see with those who don't have legal representation?

Adam Bercovitch Sadinsky: Absolutely. I can speak from my experience as a lawyer. I often end up fixing cases that come to me from people who prepared them on their own, often because they couldn't find counsel or they didn't even know that they could access legal aid. That's another issue.

The reality is that refugee determination in Canada is not straightforward. There seems to be a sense that when it comes to refugees, we know one when we see one. If it were that simple,

there wouldn't be a backlog at the board, because there wouldn't be the complex suite of legal questions that have to be addressed.

When a person prepares the initial claim, they're not just telling their story. They have to be telling that story within the matrix of legal questions that a determination under the refugee convention requires.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Your time is up.

I will take the next turn, as I am the only representative of the Bloc Québécois here.

I'll start with you, Ms. Sreenivasan. Thank you for being here and for your testimony.

You rightly mentioned the conditions necessary for proper distribution to take place. Before we discuss that, let's start at the beginning.

If I understand correctly, the Canadian Council for Refugees is open to working with us to ensure a more equitable distribution of asylum seekers among the provinces. Is that correct?

Gauri Sreenivasan: Our position is that the current system is putting pressure on many cities and communities. However, the real problem is that there isn't enough investment in infrastructure or services. In some places, language classes are being cut, there is no support for child care, or there isn't enough investment in temporary housing. So there are gaps across the country in terms of infrastructure and services.

If we rebuild this infrastructure and create successful models, asylum seekers will have far more choice when it comes to finding a community where they can find employment and support, including legal aid, to move forward with their lives.

In my view, if services and infrastructure are improved, distribution will be better. We don't start by asking how to ensure better distribution. It's not that we oppose it; we're just saying that there are many more options if services are more comprehensive.

I hope that's clear.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): If asylum seekers were distributed equitably among Canada's various provinces, do you see any benefits to that, particularly in terms of the capacity of public services to properly accommodate people?

Gauri Sreenivasan: It's actually the other way around. If the services were adequately funded to become well established, then there would be a much more sustainable distribution.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): The fact remains, however, that there is a cost issue when it comes to providing integration services.

I'm trying to understand this idea of distributing asylum seekers equitably. If we move in this direction, I understand that services will need to be accessible throughout Canada's provinces. There is a particular issue regarding legal aid, but we must also ensure that these people are treated with dignity, and that housing is available for them. The formula needs to be discussed.

How do you view this idea of distributing asylum seekers equitably among the provinces? Are you open to this idea?

• (1135)

Gauri Sreenivasan: The difference is that, when people talk about equitable distribution, I hear something quantitative. For us, though, it's really something qualitative. It's about determining which communities are ready and have the capacity.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): However, that takes time to build.

Gauri Sreenivasan: There are many provinces, for example, that want to welcome even more immigrants, such as Manitoba and the Atlantic provinces. To help immigrants access services, much more federal funding would be needed. That way, we could help these provinces welcome more immigrants and refugees, and everyone would benefit.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Okay.

Last week, in the House of Commons, the minister told us that she was working on attaining equitable distribution.

If we were able to move forward—or, at the very least, demonstrate the political will to ensure equitable distribution—what would be necessary for this to work?

Gauri Sreenivasan: We need a round table, a space for dialogue, or a forum in which provinces, municipalities and members of civil society can participate. It doesn't seem to exist. Perhaps a working group or something a bit special should be established to begin this dialogue. This is a key element.

The other absolutely key element concerns the federal government's commitment to funding temporary housing.

[*English*]

The interim housing assistance program was recently renewed. It's very positive, but it was renewed at a much lower level than what is needed. Again, it's only for three years.

[*Translation*]

This timeline isn't long enough to allow Manitoba or the Atlantic provinces to plan, so it's also a matter of funding.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): So what's needed is a round table and funding.

From 2021 to 2023, the federal government provided \$750 million to the Quebec government to offset the costs associated with public services. A person might therefore think that this gesture is an admission on the part of the government that, when there are asylum seekers, it obviously entails costs.

Do you feel that there is currently political leadership moving toward an equitable distribution of asylum seekers?

Gauri Sreenivasan: No, I don't really see any political leadership right now when it comes to finding a national solution. That's what we need. A recommendation from the committee on this would be very welcome.

For example, we need a national dialogue, an effective system of coordination and collaboration among levels of government, and a clear commitment to civil society. That would be a demonstration of leadership. Your study is therefore very welcome.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Thank you very much, Ms. Sreenivasan.

We'll now move on to the second round.

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

[*English*]

Costas Menegakis (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for appearing before us.

I'm going to start my questions with you, Mr. Johnston. Can you tell us what areas of Calgary city services are seeing the most direct financial strain from the large number of asylum seekers, refugees and newcomers to the city?

Landon Johnston: We don't necessarily have the exact numbers because we don't track them, but those areas are housing and obviously social support—so subsidized transit passes, rec passes. It's basically any subsidized form of service the city offers, all aspects.

Costas Menegakis: Is it likely that many asylum claimants would be homeless because social services in your city are at capacity?

Landon Johnston: Yes.

Costas Menegakis: We've seen asylum claimants filling up shelters, hotels and other accommodations across the country due to the Liberal mismanagement of the file. Can you please elaborate on what the consequences of tens of thousands of additional asylum claimants coming to Calgary would be?

• (1140)

Landon Johnston: We'll have more of our Canadian citizens being pushed to the back of the line or having to compete with the additional asylum seekers—or any immigrants, to that point—who require the same services. It's just more competition for the people who already live here.

Costas Menegakis: The interim housing program, IHAP, which the ministry of immigration is managing, has divvied out about \$1.5 billion to municipalities to move people from hotels into permanent locations for a period of time. Do you know if Calgary has applied for any of that money?

Landon Johnston: I wouldn't be able to speak to that. I'm not sure.

Costas Menegakis: Okay. I know you have not received any. I just wanted to know if you had applied for any of it.

Do you agree that municipal taxpayers are funding, at least in part, the Liberal immigration disaster?

Landon Johnston: I'd say that we're funding the brunt of it, yes.

Costas Menegakis: You're feeling it. Do you think it's fair that taxpayers are left holding the cost of Liberal immigration failures?

Landon Johnston: No.

Costas Menegakis: You do not.

Do you know if your municipality has communicated this or has met with the Minister of Immigration or her department officials to discuss these important issues and the impact they're having on the municipality?

Landon Johnston: If they did, those talks didn't go very well.

Costas Menegakis: Do you think that moving asylum claimants to Calgary when services are already strained is a good idea at this time?

Landon Johnston: No.

Costas Menegakis: Residents in Calgary and across the country are facing high property taxes. If a swell of asylum claimants were to arrive in Calgary, would the municipality be forced to raise municipal property taxes?

Landon Johnston: We already have, and we'll have to do it again. Yes.

Costas Menegakis: Have you communicated that to any department in the federal government?

Landon Johnston: No, but I plan on doing it.

Costas Menegakis: You plan on doing it. Okay.

Well, we've seen a lot of movement from the government to try to divert—I don't want to say “hide”—attention from renting, or at least leasing, hotel rooms to house refugees and asylum claimants by creating IHAP. Of course, it's questionable, as you know, because a lot of municipalities either don't know about it or have not availed themselves of it.

Do you think it's a good thing for the government to be focusing on that when we have homeless Canadians living on the streets in Calgary and other municipalities across the country?

Landon Johnston: No. It's a simple economics problem. Right now we are struggling.

Costas Menegakis: Can you give us a bit of a breakdown on Calgary? Do you have asylum claimants today, for example, living in shelters or living on the streets? Are they homeless? Are you aware of this?

Landon Johnston: I am aware of this, yes, in a lot of areas. Some of them have found some sort of shelter, but then again, last year I was fixing a furnace in a basement where nine people were living on four—

Costas Menegakis: Wow.

Landon Johnston: That's not a one-off. That's happened in a lot of different instances across the city.

Part of this is abuse of the system, but it's also abuse of the actual claimants who are coming into Calgary.

Costas Menegakis: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Thank you, Mr. Johnston.

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

[*English*]

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

Mr. Sadinsky, I'll begin with you. Thank you for being here today.

You've talked about the challenges created with respect to the lack of legal aid services. What would be a good framework to look at? What kind of recommendations would you put forward to this committee that would alleviate the situation?

Adam Bercovitch Sadinsky: Ideally, you'd want the same level of services on offer in all jurisdictions in the country. I've mentioned some of the more difficult places for claimants to settle. These would be places where there's no legal aid or where it's so little that claimants may not be able to find counsel.

There are other provinces that do it well. In Ontario, there is a robust legal aid system. Now, I will say that in 2018, the Government of Ontario ceased funding refugee legal aid services entirely. The federal government stepped in and now provides 100% of that funding. This was critical, considering that the largest proportion of refugee claimants in the country goes to Ontario. The federal government stepped in, provided federal funding and allowed Legal Aid Ontario to continue funding those services where their provincial government decided they wouldn't.

In Ontario, we would say there is adequate funding for counsel. The number of hours that counsel are able to work on claims is sufficient. There's also funding for the translation of documents. In British Columbia, for example, legal aid will fund only 400 dollars' worth of translation of documents. These documents are critical for a refugee claim and for a person to corroborate what they're saying. If we're talking about who's a genuine refugee, the best way for a person to establish what they've faced, in addition to their own testimony, is third party evidence. When those documents are in other languages and need to be translated, the cost can sometimes be prohibitive for clients. They have to decide among the critical documents they have—which ones they can afford to translate and which ones they can't.

In terms of a national framework, you want it to be the same across the country.

● (1145)

Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Mr. Sadinsky. Maybe we can speak afterwards, because my time is limited.

I want to ask Ms. Sreenivasan a question with the remaining time.

What do you make of this competition discourse, for lack of a better phrase? On the face of it, I take the point that was just raised a few minutes ago. If you see an increased number of refugee claimants going to communities that are already under strain for a variety of reasons, relating to the economy or any number of factors, you end up seeing a competition develop between claimants and local residents. What do you make of that point of view?

Gauri Sreenivasan: The framing is not where we start. I think most people in Canada want everyone to have a safe roof over their heads. The critical point about how we relieve pressure on the shelter system is to create dedicated housing for refugee claimants.

In fact, refugee claimants experience the same homelessness crisis that many people in Canada are experiencing. The evidence and data show that it is far more efficient in dollars—as well as in terms of lives and compassion—to ensure that there are transitional shelters available for claimants, with wraparound support services built with people who know what these populations need. We've just heard that these populations need fairly specific services.

I have felt in my heart, and have been very moved by, people speaking who run homeless shelters in Canadian cities. They want to provide help to refugee claimants. They don't feel adequately equipped to do it. They're used to dealing with other kinds of unhoused populations. We know that the same dollars spent on dedicated refugee claimant housing can essentially help solve the homelessness crisis by easing the pressure on city shelters. We're spending money far more efficiently there than on emergency hotels.

I actually think it's a false competition. What we need is a smart use of resources so that the needs of populations are met where they're at. That will require dedicated transitional housing for refugee claimants as well as key supports for our city shelters.

Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Now it's my turn to take the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Johnston, I understood from your testimony that public services in Calgary are under significant strain and that, if there were more asylum seekers, you would be concerned that this would require additional effort. As you know, there is a homelessness crisis in Montreal, as well as a housing crisis.

I'd like to know if you agree with the principle that each province, in keeping with its duty of solidarity, should receive an equitable share of asylum seekers, for example, in proportion to its share of the population in the Canadian federation. Do you have any arguments against this principle?

• (1150)

[English]

Landon Johnston: You're talking about fair share. I feel that Alberta as a whole has taken on the brunt of migration within Canada, twice as much as Quebec. To us, it's a volume issue. We cannot keep up with the level of migration coming in and with the use of our social services. We are already doing our fair share. We have raised taxes to accommodate these new people. To be honest, I

don't think Quebec has kept up with its fair share of taking care of those who already live there.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): My colleagues in the Conservative Party have been provided with figures regarding the number of asylum seekers currently awaiting processing. As of April 1, there were 129,000 in Quebec, which corresponds to 38.78% of all asylum seekers currently awaiting processing in Canada, yet Quebec accounts for 22% of the Canadian population.

Don't you agree that these figures show there is currently an inequitable distribution of asylum seekers?

[English]

Landon Johnston: I'm aware that a lot of asylum seekers make their way to western provinces, where we have a better economic stance than Quebec and Ontario right now. We are receiving them through migration within Canada and not through ports of entry.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Mr. Johnston, do you dispute the figures I have provided? They are as of April 1. What we are being told is that nearly 39% of all asylum seekers in Canada are in Quebec, while Quebec accounts for 22% of the Canadian population.

Do you not believe these figures?

[English]

Landon Johnston: No, I'm not denying the figures. I'm saying that you are receiving the asylum claimants, but we are receiving them once they settle. They are moving west, where they can actually afford things.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Thank you, Mr. Johnston.

Mr. Redekopp now has the floor for five minutes.

[English]

Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

I'll start with you, Mr. Bercovitch Sadinsky.

What's the core problem? Is it where asylum claimants end up after they arrive, or is it the fact that Canada's asylum system has become overwhelmed with the backlog?

Adam Bercovitch Sadinsky: The primary target should be reducing the backlog of claimants in the system. That benefits the claimants. That benefits the system. That benefits the communities they live in.

The faster a person gets a decision on their claim, the faster they're able to move on with their life in Canada or, in the negative situation, to leave this country.

Brad Redekopp: Do you think the federal government has failed asylum claimants due to the fact that it hasn't been able to get the system working efficiently?

Adam Bercovitch Sadinsky: To a certain extent, Canada is part of a global migration system where there has been an increased amount of human movement over the past decade. I will say, though, that the attempt by the government to address the backlog through Bill C-12 is purely going to shift the backlog from the Immigration and Refugee Board to IRCC. There are other ways the government could reduce the backlog.

Brad Redekopp: The government allowed the refugee backlog to increase massively. That's clear from the numbers. Part of that is because people use the asylum system as a last resort to stay in Canada. There are a lot of stories. There was one case recently in the GTA where 17 alleged criminals all of a sudden all claimed asylum at the same time.

Do you believe the asylum system was abused by some people?

Adam Bercovitch Sadinsky: To address the specific concern you've raised in terms of criminals resorting to the asylum system, individuals who have been convicted of crimes are ineligible for refugee protection in Canada, so they would not proceed.

Brad Redekopp: The example I gave was people who were charged and who all of a sudden decided they were going to be asylum claimants. That was part of the story.

Do you think there's been abuse of the asylum system in general in Canada?

Adam Bercovitch Sadinsky: I think the number of claims that are accepted in Canada would suggest that concerns about abuse of the system are overstated.

Brad Redekopp: Is that right?

Do you think that abuse hurts legitimate refugees, or do you think that has no impact?

Adam Bercovitch Sadinsky: In every system where we have to determine whether a claim is genuine or not, there is always a question about whether... I mean, that's the purpose of a refugee determination. It's to determine whether a person meets the definition of a refugee.

However, I want to make a distinction between abusive claims and claims that are rejected. Currently, on their merits, about 80% of claims are accepted. We can leave that 80% out from those that are abusive, because they've gone through the process and have been vetted and accepted. Among that 20%.... The numbers came out recently, and 354 claims in 2025 were found by the board to be manifestly unfounded. That's a power that the board has: to determine if a claim really is abusive. That's about—

• (1155)

Brad Redekopp: Let me stop you there.

You think that out of 300,000 cases, about 300 were abuse cases, or were illegitimate refugees. Let's say that.

Adam Bercovitch Sadinsky: What any of us know in terms of cases that are abusive is that 354 were found to be. As for the rest of them, neither I nor any member of the committee knows if a claim was abusive and why it was rejected.

Brad Redekopp: I have another question.

You're an immigration lawyer. There are immigration consultants. Most immigration consultants are legitimate, hard-working people, but I would say there's also been pretty damning evidence that some of them are abusing...whether they provide bad advice or actually cheat the system. There have been a lot of examples of that.

Do you agree with that? Have you heard similar things in your circles?

Adam Bercovitch Sadinsky: Yes, absolutely. There are concerns.

Brad Redekopp: Do you think it would make sense for immigration consultants to be required to work underneath immigration lawyers?

Adam Bercovitch Sadinsky: I know that's a position the Canadian Bar Association has taken. Our organization doesn't have a policy one way or another, but that certainly would be a way to ensure some supervision.

That said, there are immigration consultants who do good work. I think that's an important consideration for further discussion.

Brad Redekopp: I have 15 seconds left, so I am going to use every last second of my 15 seconds to say that I have no more questions.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): I'll now give the floor to Ms. Lapointe for five minutes.

Linda Lapointe (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being with us today.

I'd like to thank the committee for allowing me to ask some questions. This isn't the committee I'm usually on, but I'm pleased to be here with you today.

In a constituency office, the work involved in handling immigration cases and asylum claims is quite demanding.

Ms. Sreenivasan, my first question is for you. You seem to have a very good understanding of community organizations.

For resettlement to be sustainable, it's not enough to simply move people from one province to another. They also need to have access, as you mentioned earlier, to services, housing, employment opportunities and community networks. You mentioned funding. I'd like to hear your thoughts on that.

You also mentioned predictability. You said there was an agreement lasting only three years. I'd like you to explain that in a bit more detail.

What factors do you think should be taken into account to promote the successful integration of asylum seekers in different regions of the country?

You also mentioned housing. Please note that I'm from Quebec, where asylum seekers have been a major issue for the past 10 years. I would also like you to discuss this further.

Gauri Sreenivasan: Thank you very much for your questions.

There are several factors.

When it comes to the funding structure, it is important that it last longer than three years to ensure greater predictability, as you mentioned. That is very important. It is true that the volume of asylum claims sometimes rises and falls. We've seen that it has decreased in recent years, but we need a system in place to be ready to handle the volume of applications we receive.

[*English*]

As we say in English, failure to plan is planning to fail.

[*Translation*]

In 2024, for example, significant investments were made in housing, which raised hopes and encouraged planning for new projects. Provinces, organizations and municipalities all submitted proposals to secure funding for housing construction, and many of them didn't receive it. This means that the interest is there, that we have the necessary space and even the capacity to build housing, but that funding is lacking.

At the last minute, in the 2026 budget, we saw that funding was renewed, but at an even lower level. I think it's about \$188 million a year for three years. But this requires much longer-term planning. We can't plan funding for just three years and then renew it for another three years at the last minute.

These are the frustrations I hear from mayors in Edmonton, cities in Quebec and even cities in Ontario. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities has passed resolutions calling for longer-term and significantly higher funding. This is important so that we can establish temporary housing structures and reduce the pressure on them.

What was your other question?

• (1200)

Linda Lapointe: We talked about funding and predictability. How can we ensure that asylum seekers are successfully integrated into the regions?

Gauri Sreenivasan: In terms of eligibility for services, we have an excellent national resettlement service system for overseas refugees, but now asylum seekers are being told that they will not be eligible until they are declared protected persons. There are no services to help them in the two years when they need them most. However, we see that 80% of asylum seekers are refugees and that they will have access to these services in a few years. Therefore, it really makes no sense to set up this type of barrier to receiving services in the year following their arrival. It's not worth it. Changing the eligibility rules will also contribute enormously to their integration across the country.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): That's all the time we have.

I want to thank the witnesses for their outstanding contribution, which will be useful to us as we write our report and continue our examination.

We will now suspend the meeting for five to ten minutes as we welcome the next witnesses.

• (1200)

(Pause)

• (1205)

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): I call the meeting back to order.

I want to thank and welcome the witnesses who are with us.

First of all, from the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, we have Catherine Scott, assistant deputy minister, settlement, integration and francophone affairs; and Jason Hollmann, director general, asylum policy.

We will begin with opening remarks. You will each have five minutes for your opening remarks, after which we will begin the round of questions.

Ms. Scott, I invite you to make an opening statement of up to—

[*English*]

Brad Redekopp: On a point of order, normally with the department, we have one round of five minutes for them. Is that not what we're doing today? They don't both get to speak; it's just one of them.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Yes, if both want to speak, they will have two and a half minutes each.

It looks like it's just going to be one of you.

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

• (1210)

Catherine Scott (Assistant Deputy Minister, Social Programs, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you.

Good afternoon.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the provincial distribution of asylum claimants in Canada.

[English]

With the recent passing into law of the Strengthening Canada's Immigration System and Borders Act, Bill C-12, the government is introducing targeted reforms to strengthen how we protect people in need, manage migration responsibly and maintain Canadians' trust in a system that works for everyone. This means a system that protects the vulnerable, attracts needed talent and prevents misuse.

Asylum claimants are already in Canada and seek our protection. We know that the higher numbers of claimants arriving since 2021 have created pressures for our partners, provinces, municipalities and civil society organizations.

[Translation]

We are now seeing decreases in the number of asylum claims thanks to our efforts to strengthen integrity and fairness in our asylum system. As of March 31, 2026, asylum claims have dropped 35% compared to the same period last year and 59% since 2024.

We know that claims continue to be made disproportionately in Ontario and Quebec. Since 2021, high volumes of asylum claimants have placed additional strain on those provinces' emergency shelters and support services, leading to calls for federal support. We take this situation very seriously.

[English]

Through the interim housing assistance program, the government has invested about \$1.9 billion since 2019. This has resulted in more sustainable, cost-effective housing solutions for asylum claimants. By funding spaces like reception centres and transitional housing, this program has reduced reliance on emergency shelters and hotels while helping claimants find stable housing faster.

[Translation]

We are taking a collaborative approach that encourages relocation of claimants and ensures that provinces that receive the asylum claimants have the capacity to welcome them.

[English]

In 2024, The Forum of Ministers Responsible for Immigration established a working group to look at practical ways to manage the flow of asylum claimants across Canada. IRCC carried that work forward, holding direct conversations with provinces and territories interested in voluntary relocation.

[Translation]

These conversations led to agreements with New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador to assist with the voluntary relocation of asylum claimants. Over the next two years, these provinces committed to welcoming 290 and 400 claimants respectively. These relocation efforts aim to help support the housing independence of claimants and fill labour market gaps. As of March 31, 2026, over 290 claimants have voluntarily relocated there.

IRCC continues to engage with provinces and territories to encourage additional voluntary relocation agreements.

[English]

I want to emphasize that these agreements do not amount to mandatory distribution or federal imposition. Any relocation depends entirely on the willingness of claimants and the receiving jurisdictions, based on local capacity, available support and labour market needs.

The Government of Canada appreciates the significant role that provincial and municipal partners, along with civil society organizations, play in providing temporary shelter and support services to asylum claimants. We strive for a sustainable approach that works across all orders of government and with all partners.

[Translation]

Thank you. We look forward to your questions.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Thank you, Ms. Scott.

We will now move on to the question period.

Mr. Redekopp, you have the floor for six minutes.

[English]

Brad Redekopp: Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

Last week, we heard from Kailee Brennan of Matthew House, who told the committee that when she was with the Nova Scotia provincial government, she participated in a working group within IRCC to plan for moving asylum seekers. I assume that's what you were talking about on the voluntary thing.

Are specific contingency plans that are not voluntary currently in place to move asylum seekers from Quebec and Ontario to other provinces?

Catherine Scott: The approach we've taken is a collaborative one. I mentioned the two jurisdictions with which we have an agreement: New Brunswick and Newfoundland. Through those agreements, they have worked very closely with IRCC, initially to move asylum claimants who were in federal hotels, but have also worked with some of the municipalities to voluntarily remove—

Brad Redekopp: I'm sorry to interrupt, but I have very limited time.

Those are voluntary, then. Have there been discussions with other provinces, or are there any plans to talk within the department, about the involuntary movement of people?

• (1215)

Catherine Scott: From the department's perspective, any movement of asylum claimants needs to be voluntary and is focused on ensuring that there's an ability to receive asylum claimants in the receiving jurisdiction as well.

Brad Redekopp: Mr. Hollmann, in March, you confirmed to this committee that this type of thing was going on. What direction has the minister given you on this?

Jason Hollmann (Director General, Asylum Policy, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): I'm sorry, but could you just clarify that you mean with regard to the movement of claimants?

Brad Redekopp: Yes.

Jason Hollmann: As my colleague just said, the department's position is that the movement of claimants is required to be voluntary. It has been the focus of our efforts to work with jurisdictions that are interested in receiving additional claimants to support their movement.

Brad Redekopp: What happens in jurisdictions that aren't interested in voluntarily taking asylum claimants?

Jason Hollmann: Claimants are free to move across the country as they wish once they're here. We try to provide work permits to claimants as quickly as possible to ensure that they can support themselves while their claims are pending. This means that they are also able to seek out employment opportunities that match their skills and experience.

Brad Redekopp: That brings up a question about mobility rights, because there is some confusion, I think. Some witnesses have told us that asylum seekers don't have mobility rights, and others have told us that they're guaranteed the rights. Has the department sought a legal opinion from Justice Canada on mobility rights for asylum claimants?

Jason Hollmann: The department has looked at the mobility rights issue. We understand some of the comments around section 6 of the charter specifically governing mobility rights, and it's true that that section applies only to citizens and permanent residents. The issue becomes that any movement of individuals that is non-voluntary brings up other aspects of the charter, including in relation to the right to liberty, which is covered under section 7, and, depending on other circumstances, potentially the implication of section 9 around detention.

Brad Redekopp: I guess you're implying that the decision to focus only on the voluntary redistribution of people is partly driven by charter considerations.

Jason Hollmann: Yes.

Brad Redekopp: In other words, if there were an attempt to redistribute people involuntarily, that would be a violation of the charter, in the department's opinion.

Jason Hollmann: I'm not an attorney, so I wouldn't want to go too far in specifying that, but the current—

Brad Redekopp: Tell me what you understand.

Jason Hollmann: From what I understand, the current legal framework also does not allow for that.

Brad Redekopp: Okay.

Instead of shuffling people around, the government could actually remove people as it has committed to. Minister Diab confirmed at committee of the whole last week that the assumption in the planning is that two million temporary residents need to leave Canada this calendar year, and the math makes that about 160,000 people a month.

Can you confirm that this is the magnitude of number that the department is working with?

Jason Hollmann: I don't have numbers with me in relation to the volume of temporary residents whose permits are ending.

Brad Redekopp: Do you have any idea? Is it 10, 100, 1,000 or 100,000? Is there a magnitude that you can convey?

Jason Hollmann: If those are the numbers the minister used, then those would be the numbers I would comment back as well.

Brad Redekopp: I think that number came from the desire to remove two million people from the country, which works out to about 160,000 a month.

Do you see any evidence in the department that those volumes of people are actually leaving Canada?

Jason Hollmann: People leave Canada all the time. What we want to encourage is that people follow the conditions of whatever permits they came into Canada on. When their authorized stay ends, we expect them to leave.

Brad Redekopp: Does the department have a way of tracking when people leave?

Jason Hollmann: I believe this committee has heard from CBSA before in relation to some of the entry and exit mechanisms.

Brad Redekopp: Does IRCC know when people leave?

Jason Hollmann: We rely on some of the information that's shared in the electronic system with CBSA.

Brad Redekopp: Does IRCC have any idea whether people who are supposed to leave have left?

• (1220)

Jason Hollmann: I believe the process today is a bit more manual in terms of the availability of that type of information.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Mr. Chang, you have the floor.

[English]

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

Thank you to the officials for being here today.

There have been growing concerns about individuals with criminal records or those charged with serious offences in Canada using the asylum system to delay a removal or avoid consequences. Can the officials explain what happens when an individual facing criminal charges applies for the asylum system, and what safeguards are in place to protect the integrity of the system?

Jason Hollmann: The asylum system is not a way to avoid criminal proceedings. When claimants are charged with an offence, they have their claims put on hold. If convicted of serious criminality, they are found inadmissible and are unable to proceed with their claim.

Wade Chang: There has been some confusion regarding IRCC's use of hotels for temporary asylum accommodations. Can the department clarify whether IRCC is still directly funding hotel stays for asylum seekers and what the current report is for emergency housing support?

Catherine Scott: I can answer the question.

Between about 2019 and 2025, IRCC used hotels to support both Ontario and Quebec, given the large volume of asylum seekers arriving, as well as during the pandemic when there were quarantine measures in place. Those hotels have all been closed as of September 30, 2025, so the department is no longer directly funding hotel stays for asylum seekers.

Wade Chang: Has the department examined policies or incentives to encourage a more balanced distribution of asylum claimants across Canada, particularly to support settlements in regions facing labour shortages and housing pressures outside the largest urban centres, like Toronto and Vancouver?

Catherine Scott: Asylum seekers are drawn to settle in the larger cities across the country as they look for employment opportunities. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, IRCC has signed two agreements with Newfoundland and New Brunswick. Both jurisdictions are looking at an employment-first model. They're looking at the types of skills that asylum seekers bring and helping them connect with employers in both of their jurisdictions to find employment. They're also ensuring that they have both temporary housing and a transition to permanent housing once they arrive in their provinces.

Wade Chang: Many Canadians support a compassionate asylum system, but they also expect a system that is orderly and sustainable. What specific steps is the department taking to restore public confidence in the management of the system or of asylum claims?

Jason Hollmann: The measures that were recently approved in the strengthening borders act were designed to help address some of the challenges currently facing the system.

There were two parts to those measures. One was to look at how to deter potential misuse and manage surges in relation to ineligibility measures...for claims to be referred to the Immigration and Refugee Board. A second package of measures under that bill was specifically designed to address some of the bottlenecks and challenges in the system so that claims could reach a decision faster.

Wade Chang: How closely is IRCC coordinating with provinces, municipalities and service providers before relocating asylum claimants to ensure that communities have the capacity to support them properly?

Catherine Scott: We've been working quite closely with both New Brunswick and Newfoundland. As I mentioned initially, when those agreements were signed, the two jurisdictions took asylum claimants from IRCC hotels and are now working more closely with some of the municipalities that are funded under IHAP.

In terms of some of the investments we've made in IHAP, we have really focused on building capacity to have reception centres and transitional housing in the greater Toronto and Hamilton areas, where we've seen a very large volume of asylum claimants. Among those municipalities, there is collaboration to ensure that they are supporting each other. When one municipality feels some pressure,

another municipality that may have a lower volume of individuals in its system is able to relieve that pressure and provide support. I think you heard from the regional municipality of Peel about some of the work they've been doing in collaboration with some of the surrounding municipalities.

• (1225)

Wade Chang: Some communities have stepped up to welcome newcomers while others are already struggling with housing shortages and strained public services. How is IRCC ensuring that the asylum system remains fair both to the claimants and to the receiving communities?

Catherine Scott: Certainly, asylum claimants deserve our support, and a number of measures are in place to support them as they move through the asylum process. The previous witnesses talked about legal aid support and the IFHP, as well as an open work permit to support them in finding work opportunities and to support their families throughout the asylum process. There are a number of measures to support them.

Wade Chang: Thank you very much.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): I have been allotted six minutes.

Ms. Scott, you talked about a working group. Who is part of the group?

Catherine Scott: Thank you for the question.

The group I mentioned was set up in 2024. The discussion took place with all the provinces and territories. The group's work ended, but the department—

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): When did it end?

Catherine Scott: It was at the end of 2024.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): It's been disbanded, then.

Catherine Scott: Yes, but the conversations are ongoing.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): What is the nature of the ongoing conversations?

Catherine Scott: For example, we are in the process of renewing the interim housing assistance program, so we have started a conversation with the provinces about the direction the program should take in the future.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): However, in terms of equitable distribution, are there still conversations between the federal government and the provinces that have not agreed, so far, to participate?

Catherine Scott: There's always constructive dialogue. The first provinces to sign an agreement were New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Earlier, you said that the provinces and territories worked with you on a voluntary basis and that you had reached an agreement with New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador. I gather, then, that since 2024, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Manitoba have declined to take part.

Catherine Scott: For the time being, there are only two agreements, the ones signed with Newfoundland and Labrador and New Brunswick.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Have all the provinces I just mentioned to you declined to take part?

Catherine Scott: In 2024, they decided not to pursue an agreement with the federal government.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): So when you say that the conversations are ongoing, I understand that they are not. A large number of provinces have declined to take part and there's no discussion about that.

Catherine Scott: There is always constructive dialogue with the provinces and territories. As I mentioned, we've had conversations about renewing the interim housing assistance program, and provinces can still receive funding for relocation.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): You briefly mentioned the results achieved with Newfoundland and Labrador and New Brunswick. If my notes are correct, Newfoundland and Labrador will accept 290 asylum seekers and New Brunswick will accept 400. To give people an idea, across the country, on April 1, 2026, there were 334,965 asylum seekers.

How do you measure the success achieved since 2024 in terms of a fair distribution of asylum seekers?

• (1230)

Catherine Scott: Look, this is a first pilot project with the provinces, so the number is necessarily low. The agreement was signed only a year ago. We are looking at the results and we look forward to continuing discussions with the provinces and territories.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): I'm going to come back to a question that was asked earlier.

Last Friday in the House of Commons, the minister said that that her objective was to move towards a fair distribution of asylum seekers.

What instructions have you received from the minister to get things moving with the reluctant provinces?

Catherine Scott: As I mentioned, we have received additional funding for the interim housing assistance program in the amount of \$564 million over the next three years. I think this opens the door to an ongoing discussion with the provinces and territories.

Obviously, as the minister mentioned, we recognize the considerable burden that Quebec and Ontario are bearing. This is a discussion that the minister wants to continue with the other provinces and territories.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Thank you, Ms. Scott.

Mr. Hollmann, you mentioned that there might be an issue related to article 7 the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, as well as article 9.

Was a legal opinion provided by the Department of Justice's legal team on this matter?

Jason Hollmann: When we look at the issues related to this matter, we always consult our legal services, yes.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Can you confirm, then, that a legal opinion was sought?

Jason Hollmann: Legal opinions have been sought on various issues related to the asylum system.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): I'm going to ask you to produce that legal opinion for the committee.

What questions did you ask the lawyers? What approach have you tested?

As you know, Germany's proposal, for example, to distribute asylum seekers is to explain to them that services will be offered in certain states. It's up to them to choose, but there is an incentive.

Is that the formula you tested, or is it the European Union's formula?

Jason Hollmann: It is hard to make comparisons between the European and Canadian systems. Most of the European systems that distribute asylum seekers in the way you mentioned are based on reception centres set up across the country. They're not offering the right to work, so—

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): I'll repeat my question, Mr. Hollmann: What did you ask the lawyers? There are different distribution formulas for asylum seekers that could be tested.

Jason Hollmann: I can't give you an exact answer today.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Did you have a mandate to check the other methods used by the European Union and other European countries regarding the distribution of asylum seekers?

Jason Hollmann: We always look at examples of practices in foreign systems to compare them to those in Canada and see if there are things we can do to improve the Canadian system. As I mentioned, when it comes to housing, the systems are very different.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Thank you, Mr. Hollmann.

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

[English]

Vincent Ho (Richmond Hill South, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

It's great to have folks here from the immigration department's social programs and asylum policy branches.

I want to talk about the interim federal health program, which provides gold-plated health care coverage that Canadians themselves don't even receive.

The IFHP was designed as a limited and temporary health program for vulnerable foreign nationals not eligible for provincial health coverage. The latest PBO report came out last month, and it projects the program costs will rise to over \$1.5 billion by 2029-30.

Would officials agree that this is no longer a small, short-term emergency program but a major permanent cost centre for taxpayers?

Catherine Scott: As you indicated, the interim federal health program provides basic and targeted supplementary health benefits to both resettled refugees and asylum claimants. The most recent PBO report looked at the impact of the new copay model that the federal government introduced on May 1, with four dollars per prescription and 30% for supplementary benefits—

Vincent Ho: You're not really answering the question.

The PBO found that supplementary benefits, which you talked about and are different from basic benefits.... Supplementary benefits include dental care, prescription medication, counselling, vision care and assistive devices, and, by the way, include things that Canadians don't even receive from the government. These supplementary benefits now account for roughly 54% of the entire program—the majority of the program. Does the department still consider this program to be primarily about urgent, temporary health coverage?

• (1235)

Catherine Scott: The PBO report demonstrated that the measures the department is taking are bringing down costs. Certainly, those costs are driven by the backlog of asylum claimants, but the program is aligned with the supplementary benefits programs that provinces and territories offer to those who are on social assistance and to disability support recipients. If we were to not provide that access, it would create—

Vincent Ho: We're not talking about someone getting hit by a car, bleeding out on the street and needing to be taken to an emergency room. We're talking about 54% of the entire cost of the IFHP covering these supplementary benefits. These are things that Canadians don't even receive without paying out of pocket or going through their private insurer.

I'm going to move on.

Between 2020 and 2024, the PBO says the IFHP's costs grew from \$211 million to \$896 million. What specifically failed in our immigration system? Maybe it's an issue with Liberal policy design that allowed the program to more than quadruple in cost in just five years.

Catherine Scott: The significant increase in the number of asylum claimants has driven up the cost of the IFHP. The federal government, however, has worked to bring down costs by introducing the copay model and—

Vincent Ho: You talked about the influx of asylum claimants. The PBO estimates that—

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Mr. Ho, I'm going to have to cut you off there. I've stopped the clock.

The bells are ringing in the House. We're being asked to vote in the next 30 minutes.

Is everyone in agreement that we continue the meeting for 15 minutes, which would leave us 15 minutes to go and vote?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Then we will keep working until 12:50.

Mr. Ho, you may continue.

[English]

Vincent Ho: You talked about the influx of asylum claimants. The PBO estimates that just one additional month of asylum processing time could add up to \$72 million in annual costs to the federal IFHP gold-plated health care benefits for asylum claimants in 2026.

Can you folks tell us why the processing delay is so bad and what's causing the influx of asylum claimants?

Catherine Scott: There have been significant measures to bring down the number of asylum claimants in Canada. We've spoken about the impact of Bill C-12. We've seen a reduction of 59% in the number of asylum claims in Canada since 2024. There are significant efforts to—

Vincent Ho: I have one last question.

The latest PBO report found that 74,000 failed asylum claimants are still receiving generous IFHP gold-plated health care coverage. For asylum claimants whose claims have already been rejected, instead of being deported.... What is the department's policy rationale for continuing health care coverage for a person even when they have already been found to not be a genuine refugee?

Catherine Scott: The IFHP covers asylum claimants until the end of their process, up until removal. This ensures that those individuals are able to access health care services. Without creating—

Vincent Ho: You talked about removal. I have one last question. What are the benefits—

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

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Mr. Fragiskatos, you have the floor.

[English]

Peter Fragiskatos: This is the second time Mr. Ho has cut the witness off while she was answering a question. I know Conservatives have many questions on this, but there are answers.

Vincent Ho: It's my time.

Peter Fragiskatos: If the member will allow for actual, genuine interaction, he'll get good answers, I think.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Mr. Ho has five seconds left, so I will let Ms. Scott answer in five seconds.

[English]

Catherine Scott: As I was mentioning, asylum claimants are eligible for the program until the end of the—

Vincent Ho: Why are their benefits not automatically terminated?

Peter Fragiskatos: Chair, is he serious?

Vincent Ho: I have one last question to ask. That's it.

Why are the benefits not terminated?

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Mr. Ho, your time is up. I'm sorry.

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

Natilien Joseph (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm honoured to participate in this meeting under your chairmanship.

I'm going to turn to Ms. Scott on a very interesting issue.

Your department recently made changes to its funding model for temporary housing for asylum seekers. Given the ongoing confusion about the use of hotels, can you explain to the committee the current role of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada in accommodation?

Can you confirm that the department is still funding the use of hotels to house asylum seekers?

• (1240)

Catherine Scott: Thank you for the question.

For a while, the department used hotels to house asylum seekers—

[English]

Vincent Ho: I have a point of order.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Mr. Ho, the floor is yours.

[English]

Vincent Ho: My interpretation is not working. Can we double-check it?

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Yes, absolutely.

[English]

Vincent Ho: It's really quiet. I'm on max volume right now. Could we do a sound check?

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Mr. Joseph, you won't lose your speaking time. We're just going to do a test.

Mr. Ho, can you hear the interpretation?

[English]

Vincent Ho: It's really quiet, but it's all right. We can resume.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Mr. Joseph, you have the floor. I'm sorry about that.

Natilien Joseph: That's fine.

I will let Ms. Scott continue.

Catherine Scott: For a while, the department used hotels to house asylum seekers when there was a very high volume of claims and increased pressure on shelters in municipalities and in the province of Quebec. However, that program ended on October 1, 2025. As a result, the department no longer has hotels to house asylum seekers. The funding is provided to municipalities through the interim housing assistance program.

Natilien Joseph: Thank you.

Now, I'd like you to tell me about regionalization.

Does your department see this approach as a potential solution to better meet intake needs and, beyond that, integration needs?

Catherine Scott: Thank you for the question.

Yes, increasing the regionalization of asylum seekers is a very intriguing avenue. First of all, communities must have the capacity to take in asylum seekers. As I mentioned, we signed agreements with New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador, precisely to see if this model could work well. What matters is that asylum seekers, when they arrive in a host community, can find a job. The models we have put in place facilitate—

[English]

Vincent Ho: I have a point of order. The English interpretation is not catching up with the French.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): You're having trouble following the debate, is that right?

[English]

Vincent Ho: Maybe the witness could speak a little more slowly.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Would you like the interpreter to speak more slowly or the witness to speak more slowly?

[English]

Vincent Ho: With respect, Chair, I can't even hear you because the interpretation is a little slow right now.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Then, we will ask the interpreters to raise their voices and try to follow the debate, so that we can continue.

I remind you that we have about six minutes left in the meeting and that each point of order prevents us from hearing from the witnesses.

Ms. Scott, the floor is yours.

Catherine Scott: As I mentioned, what matters is that asylum seekers can be supported in their search for employment and housing. It's an intriguing model that we want to explore.

Natilien Joseph: In Quebec and the regions, we are experiencing an unprecedented labour shortage. There are asylum seekers who congregate in major cities, such as Montreal, with an open work permit.

Do you think that regionalization within the provinces, for example in Quebec, would be just as effective? Based on what I heard earlier, there may already be a dispute among the provinces that say they don't want it.

Catherine Scott: I would like a clarification: Are you talking about regionalization within Quebec?

Natilien Joseph: Yes. I could have talked about New Brunswick, but I'm a Quebecker.

Catherine Scott: There has certainly been enormous pressure on the greater Montreal area in recent years with the arrival of asylum seekers. I think that's exactly why the department has issued open work permits: It allows asylum seekers to seek employment not only in the city where they're being welcomed, but also across the country, if they so choose.

We know that asylum seekers are incredibly talented. We've seen asylum seekers integrating into health services, manufacturing and the service sector, for example. I think that shows the importance of the open work permit, which allows—

• (1245)

Natilien Joseph: Since I only have a few seconds left, I'd like to ask you one last question.

If I understand correctly, asylum seekers can make an invaluable contribution to the vitality of our economy, can't they?

Catherine Scott: Yes, that's correct. The Parliamentary Budget Officer's report actually showed that asylum seekers do their part and pay federal and provincial taxes.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Thank you very much, Ms. Scott. Unfortunately, that's all the time the member had left.

I now have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Hollmann, I'm interested in the legality of the current agreements you have signed with Newfoundland and Labrador and New Brunswick. Through these agreements, as I understand it, these provinces have voluntarily agreed to open their doors. It's a small thing, but it's a start.

Do asylum seekers who are relocated have to consent and volunteer?

Jason Hollmann: Yes, exactly. Under this model, asylum seekers volunteer to move to another location.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): So far, how does it work when this option is presented to asylum seekers?

Jason Hollmann: I think many of them were housed in hotels. That was organized by the department. We spoke with them and presented them with this offer, and they wanted to seize the opportunity to move to those provinces.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Ms. Scott, you mentioned the results, but I wrote down the figures wrong.

How many asylum seekers have agreed to move to the Maritimes?

Catherine Scott: Thank you for the question.

So far, 290 people have done so.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Was it easy to communicate with those 290 people?

Catherine Scott: Both provinces have used a job fair model with employer participation. This approach enabled asylum seekers to see the employment and housing opportunities available in those two provinces. I think it was a fairly easy approach.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): It's understood, then, that if the other provinces also agreed to sign an agreement with the federal government, the department could apply the same formula and achieve the minister's objective, which is to distribute asylum seekers equitably among the provinces.

Catherine Scott: As I mentioned earlier, these two agreements have been in place for barely a year. It's a model that we obviously want to try to replicate elsewhere. For the time being, I think it's an interesting model that seems to be working quite well.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Thank you, Ms. Scott.

I'll give the rest of my time to Mr. Menegakis.

[*English*]

Costas Menegakis: Thank you very much.

I would like a simple number on the question of the 74,000 failed asylum claimants getting luxury benefits. What is the total cost to taxpayers for health coverage for the failed 74,000? Do you have a number?

Catherine Scott: I do not have that number. What I can say is that the Parliamentary Budget Officer—

[*Translation*]

Natilien Joseph: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Go ahead, Mr. Joseph.

Natilien Joseph: My colleague may have been right. I'm also having trouble hearing the interpretation.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): I'm going to ask you to turn up the volume on your earpiece, Mr. Joseph, and pay close attention.

Natilien Joseph: I am.

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): You have two minutes left, Mr. Menegakis.

[English]

Costas Menegakis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

You don't have a number for me. We wouldn't, for example, be able to determine what the cost per person is for the luxury benefits these people are getting. These are 74,000 people who don't have a right to be in Canada. They don't have asylum seeker status, but they're getting benefits.

You indicated earlier that they will continue to get benefits until they leave the country. Why?

Catherine Scott: Failed asylum claimants are eligible for IFHP coverage until their claims have been fully and finally assessed and they're found not to be in need of Canada's protection.

• (1250)

Costas Menegakis: Why would that be? A Canadian citizen who leaves the country for more than six months and comes back loses their benefits. In Ontario, they have to wait to get their OHIP card. It can take up to three months to get it and to get services.

These people don't have a right to be here. It's a failed asylum claim, yet they will get luxury benefits that Canadians don't get. Do you think that's fair for Canadians?

Catherine Scott: The IFHP is aligned closely with provincial and territorial health programs that are provided, for example—

Costas Menegakis: It's not aligned with logic. I'm talking logic.

Catherine Scott: —to social assistance recipients or disability program recipients.

Costas Menegakis: I think you would be hard pressed to find a Canadian who would agree with you on that point. It's not aligned with any kind of logic that someone who does not have a right to be in the country gets luxury benefits that Canadians don't get.

Is that it for my time?

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): You have five seconds left.

[English]

Costas Menegakis: Thank you very much for being here.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): I want to give a heartfelt thank you to Mr. Hollman and Ms. Scott for being here today.

I also want to thank all the other witnesses who have taken part in this important study on the distribution of asylum seekers among the provinces.

That concludes this study. I'd like to wish you a great day.

For committee members, we will be meeting on Wednesday, June 3, to start a new study.

The meeting is adjourned.

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