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

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Chair: Robert Morrissey





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

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• (1530)

[English]

**The Chair (Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)):** Good afternoon, everyone.

[Translation]

I now declare the meeting open.

[English]

Welcome to meeting number 19 of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. The committee is meeting today on government mandates and key priorities for the first hour, and on the impacts of the temporary foreign worker program on the labour market for the second hour.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person and remotely using Zoom. For this hour, all participants will be in person in the room. The clerk has advised me that we do have quorum and that nobody is appearing virtually.

Before we begin, you have the option of choosing to participate in the official language of your choice. Please make sure you're on the right channel, if you're in the room, for the language you wish to participate in. I would also remind everyone who is appearing to silence their devices so that we do not interrupt the proceedings. Please refrain from tapping on the microphone boom for the protection of the translators. As well, please direct all questions through me as chair, and wait until I recognize you by name before you participate.

Appearing today is the Honourable Gregor Robertson, Minister of Housing and Infrastructure.

We also have Andre Charbonneau, deputy chief financial officer, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.

From the Department of Housing, Infrastructure and Communities, we have Paul Halucha, deputy minister; and Luc Robitaille, deputy chief financial officer.

From the Windsor-Detroit Bridge Authority, we have Joël Hupé, chief financial and administrative officer.

Minister Robertson, you have five minutes for your opening statement, please.

[Translation]

**Hon. Gregor Robertson (Minister of Housing and Infrastructure):** Mr. Chair, committee members, hello.

Thank you for inviting me to appear before you.

I'm pleased to be able to talk about my mandate, my priorities and the supplementary estimates.

I'm accompanied today by Paul Halucha, deputy minister of housing, infrastructure and communities Canada and others.

As the Minister of Housing and Infrastructure, my goals are clear: to make housing more affordable through public and private partnerships; to modernize the residential construction industry and make it more productive; to create new careers in skilled trades; and to invest in essential infrastructure.

[English]

The funding that we receive is to focus on what matters: housing and homelessness; public transit; major infrastructure projects; disaster mitigation; and green, rural and northern infrastructure across the country. Our government knows that every home depends on the infrastructure that keeps communities functional, such as water, sewer, storm water or management systems. That's why, alongside building more homes, we are committed to investing in housing-enabling infrastructure that supports the growth of both existing and new neighbourhoods.

I'll take a few minutes to explain how our investments, our policies and programs work together to achieve positive housing outcomes for Canadians.

Since 2017, the national housing strategy has created over 183,000 new homes and protected over 359,000 community housing units. Additionally, since its launch in 2019, Reaching Home, which is Canada's homelessness strategy, has connected over 200,000 people with homelessness prevention supports, such as emergency short-term rental assistance and mediation, and it has helped over 110,000 people attain stable housing.

Building on this important work, on September 14, the Prime Minister and I launched Build Canada Homes. Build Canada Homes is mandated to scale up the supply of affordable housing across Canada, backed by an initial capitalization of \$13 billion. This is just the beginning of that investment, through Build Canada Homes, to drive a more productive and innovative homebuilding sector by leveraging public lands, federally controlled land in particular; deploying flexible financial tools to finance more homebuilding; and acting as a catalyst for modern methods of construction.

As the construction ramps up, we will grow, train and support Canada's skilled workforce, and create good-paying jobs along the way. As Build Canada Homes focuses on investments in affordable housing, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, CMHC, will continue to contribute to the well-being of Canada's housing system through existing programs, such as the apartment construction loan program and mortgage loan insurance products, MLI Select being the best known.

In addition to this important work in the housing and homelessness space, I'm committed to supporting the key public infrastructure that Canadians need and use every day. Budget 2025 proposed the build communities strong fund, which will provide over \$51 billion over 10 years, starting in 2026-27, and \$3 billion a year, ongoing, in new and existing funding. The build communities strong fund will include new initiatives, such as the health infrastructure fund, to support communities where they need it the most.

The existing Canada community-building fund, or CCBF, will be rebranded as the dedicated community stream within the build communities strong fund. It will continue to support a broad range of infrastructure needs for Canada's communities. The build communities strong fund will also support housing-enabling infrastructure alongside programs such as the Canada housing infrastructure fund, CHIF, which has been in place for a number of years, as well as the Canada public transit fund, CPTF. Those investments in public transit, including active transportation—there's climate adaptation funding as well—will continue to be among my key priorities.

In addition, we're making important investments to increase community resilience to natural disasters and extreme weather events. This same commitment to resilience guides my approach across all of housing and infrastructure. I'm prioritizing federal investments to build complete, connected and resilient communities, where everyone has access to a home they can afford.

I look forward to answering your questions.

• (1535)

[Translation]

Thank you everyone.

[English]

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

We will begin by first welcoming back Mr. Aitchison to the committee.

Mr. Aitchison, you have six minutes.

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

Thank you, Minister, for coming.

I want to get right into it.

You indicated that removing the GST from all new homes under \$1.3 million was too sweeping a measure, yet the CMHC reports that we need to be building about 480,000 homes a year. Your government, in fact, during the campaign, promised to do 500,000 homes a year, and yet starts have stalled, basically.

Given the scale of the housing crisis, could you tell this committee what concrete benchmarks your government is using to decide if the incremental steps you've announced are going to work, if they are working and if you need to take bigger steps?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** The initial commitment to implement a first-time homebuyers' GST break is still not through the House, as members will know. We want to see that implemented as soon as possible, because it will create opportunity for first-time homebuyers, with up to \$50,000 for first-time homebuyers to access housing and save \$50,000 on a home—

• (1540)

**Scott Aitchison:** Minister, I'm going to interrupt you for a second. I don't need you to describe the programs to me. I'm reasonably familiar with them.

What I want to know is this: What benchmarks are you using to determine whether you need to do more than just the first-time homebuyers' rebate?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** The focus initially is to provide that support to first-time homebuyers, to young Canadians who can't access the market currently. That should be our first priority right now: to make sure we get an affordability measure to young Canadians during these times.

That's a significant investment, with about \$4 billion worth of tax revenue that is going—

**Scott Aitchison:** What kinds of numbers do you need to see for you to know that it's working?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** Of the numbers that we look at, CMHC is our top source of research and data. They have a significant team that provides that information for the industry and obviously for governments. CMHC data reflects the realities across the country, as well as market data that we see.

Obviously it's important to track all of it. The housing starts are different in different markets across the country. Obviously the GTA and Vancouver are very low in terms of housing starts right now, but other markets are doing very well, certainly in Quebec and Alberta—

**Scott Aitchison:** Thanks, Minister. It's clear that you don't actually have a number or any benchmark that you're going to share with us now.

Let's go back to that interview. In that same interview, you said, and I quote, "We can't roll the dice with some of these bigger moves. We'll try some incremental steps and see if they make a big difference. If they don't, then maybe we do have to make bigger moves."

Builders are telling us that pre-sales are collapsing right now, particularly in the GTA and the Lower Mainland. Projects are being shelved. Employees are being laid off. How does the government justify waiting for results when these delayed decisions mean thousands of job losses and fewer homes getting built?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** I think the most troubling aspect is the delay that the member's party has put on this first-time homebuyers' tax break. It has been before the House of Commons since June. It still is not through, due to the procedural delays that the opposition has put forward. Those delays have held back an opportunity to provide up to \$50,000 per first-time homebuyer to get the housing market going.

As I said, it's different in different markets. Providing a broad GST break in markets that are doing very well—for example, in Montreal or in some of the markets on the Prairies—would not make sense. We're talking about markets that are struggling. First-time homebuyers—

**Scott Aitchison:** Minister, I want to stop you for one second. You're trying to put the blame here on Conservatives, but the fact of the matter is that the situation is dire.

You would agree that we're in a housing crisis.

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** I agree that we're in a housing crisis. That's why we shouldn't be delaying the first-time homebuyers' tax—

**Scott Aitchison:** Then if it is in fact a crisis, what on earth makes you think that incremental steps and waiting to see what happens is a good approach?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** When I speak of "incremental", \$13 billion for Build Canada Homes is a massive, unprecedented investment in strictly non-market affordable housing, along with \$1 billion into transitional supportive housing, because homelessness is a crisis. With those direct interventions, we are focused on significant investment where we have a crisis.

As I outlined with the national housing strategy and with Reaching Home, these are the largest investments Canada has ever made in homelessness and affordable housing, and we're taking it to the next level. We need the rest of the House to support advancing the tax breaks—

**Scott Aitchison:** If we need 500,000 units a year for the next several years, which your government promised to do, which the Prime Minister promised during the campaign, we're talking about trillions of investment in housing.

The \$13 billion might seem big to you, but we know full well that one of the biggest impediments to getting homes started and getting homes built is the cost of local government and the delays at

the local level, particularly in the Lower Mainland and the GTA, which is where the epicentre of the housing crisis is. It's where the situation is, in fact, the worst.

Mike Moffatt, an economist who has advised your government on a number of occasions on housing, has warned that without decisive action, Canada risks a prolonged construction slowdown and an even deeper supply gap. If the government is so reluctant to make a big move—and I will challenge you that \$13 billion is not a big move—what's your plan to get the private sector moving again and building in some of these centres where housing is too expensive?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** Well, the private sector is delivering a lot of housing in most of the Canadian markets. It's Vancouver and Toronto that are challenged and that's where the first-time homebuyer's tax credit can make a real impact. That's where the apartment construction loan program is delivering record levels of rental housing, working with the private sector very directly through CMHC. We're seeing housing starts about 4.6% up year-to-date versus last year.

The industry is building right now. We have to be looking forward several years and that means investing significantly.

• (1545)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Joseph, you have six minutes.

**Natilien Joseph (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for joining us. I'd like to congratulate you on your work.

I won't give a long introduction.

As you know, I'm the member for Longueuil—Saint-Hubert. In my riding, we're experiencing an unprecedented homelessness crisis that has lasted for almost six years. I wasn't an MP at the beginning of this crisis. I've only been a member for six months. You've been in your position for six or seven months as well. Everyone can see our government's commitment.

Budget 2025 announced that \$1 billion would be invested in transitional and supportive housing construction. When we speak of support, we're referring to services. Before that, we had the reaching home program.

Organizations and communities working with this clientele are asking me a question that concerns them a lot: Does this \$1 billion investment represent a continuation of the reaching home program or its replacement?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** I thank the member for his question.

[English]

Reaching Home, has reached almost 10,000 projects across the country since 2019 to date and, as I mentioned before, about 200,000 people who have been assisted with services and 110,000 who have found stable housing through Reaching Home. We are looking at the future with that program, in addition to the \$1 billion that is part of Build Canada Homes. Build Canada Homes is focusing on transitional supportive housing using modular technology. We want to see these built as soon as possible with modern methods of construction. We have great models and examples of this, such as in Toronto with Dunn House in the Parkdale neighbourhood, which has those wraparound health services the member described.

We need the provinces to provide the funding for the wraparound services. Those are critical for supportive housing. We're looking at finding provinces to match our capital, as well as getting these built as quickly as possible with factory-built solutions. There are many examples across the country that we can pursue as well.

Many of the communities that you serve in and represent here, including Longueuil, have agreements under Reaching Home. Funding is being provided to address the challenges we have with homelessness. We need to continue to invest through programs like Reaching Home and related programs, such as the veteran homelessness program, which provides about \$73 million in funding support. We need to continue these programs and take the best of our learnings from them, as well as add this Build Canada Homes component of an additional billion dollars for supportive housing.

[Translation]

**Natilien Joseph:** That's good news. If I understand correctly then, the reaching home program will extend beyond 2028. Is that right?

[English]

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** That is my hope. Obviously, it's at the will of the members of the House of Commons, but certainly I see, if anything, this government scaling up our work to solve homelessness. The challenge continues to be very difficult to solve. We need to do that at all levels of government.

In my past, we tried to do everything we could at the city level, at the local level, which was very difficult without federal and provincial support. We need all levels of government to be investing to solve homelessness. Ultimately, the solutions are the appropriate housing, the supportive housing that ensures that the social and health services are there so that people can get into stable housing and turn their lives around. It's very difficult to do that from shelters and the street.

• (1550)

[Translation]

**Natilien Joseph:** Thank you, Minister.

I'm going to ask you some other questions.

Are these billions of dollars new funds or are they supplementary amounts for existing programs?

[English]

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** If the budget implementation act is passed, that is new funding that will be focused on investing in supportive housing for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness right now. That's in addition to Reaching Home, the veteran homelessness program, and the unsheltered homelessness and encampments initiative. There's continuing funding in those programs, and the \$1 billion is an additional investment in supportive, transitional housing.

[Translation]

**Natilien Joseph:** Okay.

How will this amount be distributed over the next few years?

[English]

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** Is the member referring to the \$1 billion in Build Canada Homes?

[Translation]

**Natilien Joseph:** Yes, I'm referring to funds from the Build Canada Homes program for transitional supportive housing construction.

[English]

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** My expectation is that we will move that investment as quickly as possible. As soon as we can find partners and proponents that are ready to build transitional, supportive housing, we will be investing.

We need to move fast on this. Winter is hitting across Canada. We need to be building, as soon as possible, the supportive housing that will help alleviate the homelessness challenge. A top priority for me will be to advance this as quickly as possible.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Mrs. Gill, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Marilène Gill (Côte-Nord—Kawawachikamach—Nitassinan, Bloc Québécois):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for appearing before our committee today.

You know that the housing issue is generating a lot of interest and hope among the entire population.

My question concerns the size of the projects.

Of course, the Build Canada Homes program is generating hope. However, a lot of stakeholders, including mayors, are asking us if smaller municipalities will benefit from it too. For example, we've sometimes seen massive housing construction projects get built in Longueuil or other places, while the construction of 20, 30, or 40 units in some communities goes nowhere.

Will these communities also gain benefit from it? Right now, they don't see how that's possible.

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

We want to be investing in communities of all shapes and sizes through Build Canada Homes.

Initially, I think what mayors and others saw in our “Market Sounding Guide” in August was that we were testing 300 homes and up for portfolios of projects at that scale or larger. We heard back from Canadians across the country that we need smaller projects. Smaller communities can build smaller projects that will have a very big impact in their community, so we have adjusted. There is no limit. There's no floor to the scale of projects.

What we are seeing from some of the proposals coming in are provinces.... In the case of New Brunswick, I met with the housing minister last week, and they're bundling a number of small projects with communities. Some of them are four homes in a building, and some are larger, obviously, but they are bundling and bringing a whole proposal forward as a portfolio, which will be easier to administer.

[*Translation*]

**Marilène Gill:** We hope this will be possible for smaller projects.

I didn't want to interrupt you, Minister, but I really must move on quickly. I have very little time, and I often have several questions to ask. I'll also be sending you other questions that you can answer in writing from your office.

I'll continue. I have concerns about construction costs as well. I don't know how you might provide a response on that.

Earlier, you mentioned construction timelines, saying that the seasons are not exactly the same across Canada, particularly in Quebec. I was wondering about prices because construction costs differ from place to place. For example, I'm from a riding where construction costs are 30% higher, which also concerns residents. They figure that they'll get fewer units for the same money.

What's your solution to this potential situation, to ensure fairness for all Quebeckers?

• (1555)

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

It is a bigger challenge for remote communities and in the north, where the transportation costs to build housing and the shortage of workers in many communities mean that we have to move a lot of materials and tradespeople into those communities to build, which is a much higher cost.

[*Translation*]

**Marilène Gill:** With respect, Minister, I'm obviously aware of the additional costs. However, what's your department's response to this situation?

[*English*]

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** We're looking at every proposal on its merits. What is very important for proposals is that there are strong partnerships between the local governments and indigenous communities, but also private sector builders—I think, in most cases, these will be built by the private sector—and non-profit operators. It's important that these partnerships are strong in making the case for a project, but Build Canada Homes will be recognizing that it will be more expensive per home in remote communities. That doesn't slow us down. We need to build in remote communities and make sure we see success.

[*Translation*]

**Marilène Gill:** Thank you.

I have one last question. I was only able to ask three in six minutes.

Gabriel Ste-Marie, the Bloc Québécois housing critic, had a question for you concerning a project in des Laurentides RCM. By the way, he sends his regards.

One social trust mounted an innovative project that won the 2025 municipal Merit Ovation award of the Union des municipalités du Québec, or UMQ. Des Laurentides RCM includes 20 cities and municipalities. The project is the first of its kind. The social trust in question addresses the needs of students and workers. It's ready to move the project forward, but it's been waiting to hear back from your department since October 5, I believe. The organization was wondering what's happening with this file.

Neither the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, or CMHC, Build Canada Homes or your team have contacted the organization. The request was submitted two months ago. The organization is wondering if it's eligible for this funding.

[*English*]

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** I would be happy to see the project details. The Build Canada Homes portal just opened earlier this week, so it's now taking projects and proposals through the website portal. Build Canada Homes is launched and the portal is now open.

I'd encourage them to put a proposal in to the portal there, but also, if you can send something to me directly, that would be fantastic, and we'll make sure—

[*Translation*]

**Marilène Gill:** Of course. We can follow up on the file. I think the organization already sent a request to inquire whether it met the program's criteria.

Thank you very much, Minister.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

[English]

We go now to the next five-minute round, and I have Mr. Ho.

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

Minister, your department, back in October, spent about \$97,000 on a getaway to get some inspiration on the homelessness crisis. We know the homelessness crisis is a crisis. You just admitted that in your testimony.

Were you aware of this conference?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** Yes, I did speak at that conference in Montreal. It was the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness's summit, which is the largest gathering of people working on homelessness.

**Vincent Ho:** Do you think that was a good use of money?

[Translation]

**Natilien Joseph:** Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. That's not the topic of this meeting. I don't see what....

[English]

**The Chair:** Mr. Ho, start again from the beginning.

**Vincent Ho:** Back in October, officials from your department spent \$97,000 on a getaway to a conference to get inspiration on the homelessness crisis. You just admitted in your earlier testimony that it's a crisis, and, of course, it's a crisis caused by this Liberal government. Were you aware of this \$97,000 being spent on this conference?

• (1600)

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** I attended the conference and spoke at the conference, and I met with a number of Government of Canada staff who were at the conference, which is the most significant homelessness conference.

**Vincent Ho:** [Inaudible—Editor] \$97,000. I'm going to read the purpose of it.

According to the documents we have, the purpose of this conference is to “[arm] policy makers, funders, researchers, advocates, community leaders and front line workers with the inspiration”. Do you think that's a good use of money?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** I think it's the most important homelessness conference in the country. That's consistent with the funding that's been allocated in previous years to make sure that the Government of Canada is present and represented, so that the programs that we provide can be communicated.

**Vincent Ho:** After that conference, do you feel inspired? The purpose was to get inspiration. Do you feel inspired?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** I think the purpose was education. It was also, for a number of our programs, to be able to meet with all of the local proponents and all the organizations that work on homelessness, so they're able to connect to our employees.

**Vincent Ho:** Have you gone to a homeless shelter in Ottawa or maybe back home in Vancouver? We know homelessness was up 38% while you were Vancouver's mayor. Maybe it would have been better just to visit a homeless shelter. It would have been better use of money or use of time.

**The Chair:** Excuse me. We do have translation as an issue again.

Continue, Mr. Ho.

**Vincent Ho:** Minister, are you going to answer the question?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** It's a very important conference for our government staff who administer the programs. When we're investing billions of dollars to do the work, we need to connect with the people who do the work.

**Vincent Ho:** You'd rather go on an inspiration retreat than maybe visit an actual shelter and see what the problems are with the folks who are experiencing homelessness.

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** Many of us who work on this homelessness initiative have visited shelters and understand on the ground.... This is the largest gathering...a conference of people working—

**Vincent Ho:** I'm not getting an answer from you, so I'm going to move to the next question.

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** I'm giving you an answer.

**Vincent Ho:** Do department officials admit that you faked a \$32,000 construction site on TV for cameras when the Prime Minister made a housing announcement a few months ago? Do you think that's a good use of money?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** Through the chair, that's incorrect as well. Those homes were constructed on the site. The whole purpose of modular housing is it can be put together and taken apart readily.

**Vincent Ho:** They were disassembled.

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** One of those homes was sent to Nunavut immediately thereafter. The other was taken apart and moved to another site where it was constructed.

**Vincent Ho:** You spent \$32,000 on it. You could have at least gone to an existing site and then maybe done the photo op there, but you chose to build one just to disassemble it and then it was \$32,000 down the drain. That could be used toward a down payment for a young family. Actually, after 10 years of this Liberal government, \$32,000 is no longer enough for a down payment.

Don't you think that you could have gone to an existing backdrop or used an existing construction site as a backdrop?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** I think it was important to demonstrate the effectiveness of modular housing—that it can be put together quickly on a site and moved off the site. That modular home went to Nunavut. We're doing 700 homes with the Government of Nunavut that are modular builds.

**Vincent Ho:** I want to go into the latest parliamentary budget watchdog report. It said, “the government has not yet laid out” any “plan to achieve” its housing goal.

Your election campaign promised to build 500,000 homes a year. You doubled it by adding an extra 250,000 homes per year. The latest report said it's just going to build 5,000 homes per year over the next five years.

Do you see that as progress? That's only, what, 2% of the target reached.

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** Through the chair, the PBO report does not take into account all of the housing programs that are currently operating. It strictly looked at the Build Canada Homes investment of \$13 billion. When you gross that up to the number of homes that will be built, it came up to about 87,000 homes from that \$13 billion. That's what their estimate is. It did not account for all of the housing investments that are being made.

**Vincent Ho:** [*Inaudible—Editor*] half a million per year, so over five years that will be 2.5 million homes. That's still a drop in the bucket. Do you agree?

• (1605)

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** No, I don't. I don't agree with the assumptions made in that report, which do not account for all of the housing programs that this government—

**Vincent Ho:** [*Inaudible—Editor*] it's not a Liberal mouthpiece that's giving the report.

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** No, the report does not account for all of the housing programs, such as the national housing strategy, which is our largest housing program. The numbers for that are not included going forward in that report. It disregards that this government is very committed to affordable housing. We're already in a renewal process with the national housing strategy, working with provincial and territorial ministers. We made a commitment about that with those ministers in September of this year.

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

Thank you, Mr. Ho.

I would remind members again that it's your time for questioning, but please give the person you direct the question to a reasonable amount of time to answer, just for the benefit of the interpreters, who have to interpret. It is your time, but the rules say to give a reasonable amount of time and not to interrupt.

[*Translation*]

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

**Caroline Desrochers (Trois-Rivières, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being with us this afternoon and for all the work you're doing on this extremely important issue.

[*English*]

We know that our forestry workers, our steelworkers and our industries are currently going through rough times. I'm wondering if you can talk about how the investment policy and the approach our government is taking with Build Canada Homes are going to support the industry and the workers, and catalyze some of the demand from those sectors.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

With the Build Canada Homes investments—the \$13 billion that is before us in budget 2025—we are looking at buy Canadian criteria. Proposals coming in will be considered by the investment committee based upon affordability and scale. Obviously, we want to see both—significant affordability and scale—with a positive impact on their communities, but we want a buy Canadian approach. We want materials from Canada, wherever possible, with Canadian wood ideally, given the challenges faced by the softwood industry. We have Canadian steel and Canadian aluminum that make great building products as well.

Overall, modern methods of construction are a priority for Build Canada Homes. Over 800 companies across Canada are manufacturing different components of housing. Sometimes, like in the Nunavut housing example, from the launch, those are volumetric, or they're entire modular homes. In other cases, they're panels, or they're kitchen and bath pods. There are different components of homes that are manufactured. We want those to be manufactured in Canada with Canadian jobs and with a Canadian supply chain.

Whenever the materials can be Canadian produced, that is going to be an advantage for our economy. Obviously, we'll make those proposals...better received—let me put it that way—versus those that don't have Canadian materials.

We're making sure that there is a very clear message in the investment policy on the Build Canada Homes portal, on the website. We're making sure all of the partners, the proponents bringing their projects forward, understand that we want a buy Canadian approach with our investments here.

**Caroline Desrochers:** Thank you very much, Minister.

My next question is for Deputy Minister Halucha.

There's been a lot of comment on how we're doing too much, investing too much or not doing enough. I would like to hear it from your perspective. Having spent over 20 years in the public service, I understand what it takes to put a program like Build Canada Homes together. I'd like you to comment on the sense of urgency and speed that you have felt over the last few months to launch all of this in the last few weeks.

**Paul Halucha (Deputy Minister, Department of Housing, Infrastructure and Communities):** I can certainly attest to the fact that we felt a lot of urgency in terms of getting the new agency up and running and operational.

Conventional wisdom is that it takes around 18 months to get an operating agency up. In roughly half of the same calendar year, we moved from an early design on what the agency could do to developing an investment policy and establishing a transition team. They're now in the situation where, as the minister noted, they're accepting projects through a portal. It's a pretty extraordinary turnaround time.

• (1610)

**Caroline Desrochers:** Thank you very much for that.

Minister, can you talk about another investment policy criteria around ensuring that sustainable material is used, ensuring sustainability and working hand in hand on our agenda with respect to fighting climate change?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** That is also a very important element of the investment policy. The criteria around sustainability and climate resilience are front and centre for us. We want to make sure, going forward, that everything funded in part by the Government of Canada is built for the climate challenges we face.

The siting is important. Where we build is very important, so we're not going to build in vulnerable areas. How we build is very important in that we want to see low-embodied carbon materials. Canadian steel is one of the lowest-carbon steel supplies in the world. Obviously, Canadian wood is very low-carbon material. Great building technologies have Canadian IP; we want to support those in addressing the climate challenge.

Energy efficiency is obviously critical across the board. We want to make sure we're on our net-zero trajectory. Housing and housing-related infrastructure need to contribute to that success. That's through a combination of reducing impact on climate and making sure we're more resilient with everything we build.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Mrs. Gill, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Marilène Gill:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I'd like to ask you two questions on homelessness considering the growing crisis.

First, why did you decide to stop funding the community encampment response plan at the end of the year?

According to studies on the ground, over 3,000 people in Quebec will directly lose the support they're receiving, and 69% of respondent organizations say that this is going to significantly affect their intake and support capabilities.

[English]

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** That was a two-year program. We're looking at what next steps we can take. The initial step here is to fund transitional supportive housing. We know people in tent encampments need to access housing. That is the solution, so we're pushing hard for those partnerships with the provinces.

This week, I met with the Quebec minister of housing, Minister Proulx. We have our shoulders to the wheel together to make sure we move fast on delivering support for supportive housing, for the

Reaching Home program and for other housing investments we want to make together.

[Translation]

**Marilène Gill:** Thank you.

I have one minute left to ask you my last question, so you can answer it in writing if necessary.

Are there any plans to increase federal housing funds considering that Quebec and large cities are once again experiencing a rise in homelessness? In fact, the same thing is happening everywhere. Elected officials are making it a priority of their own.

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** Absolutely.

[English]

We want to see investment scale up to solve homelessness, and the affordable housing crunch more broadly. We are working closely now with Quebec on next steps with Build Canada Homes, as well as on the existing programs we have together.

I will say, to your earlier question, that student housing is part of Build Canada Homes as well. We want to see student housing proposals come forward. We've had lots of interest. Utile has been one organization we've talked to a number of times now. We want to see that work scale up, because many students have to live in the community and obviously need access to affordable housing.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** You have 10 seconds left, Mrs. Gill.

**Marilène Gill:** That's excellent.

Is the CMHC planning to update the study on the amount of housing construction required to restore affordability by 2030, given the immigration plan update announced in the last budget?

[English]

**The Chair:** Minister, could you provide that answer in writing?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** Yes, we can come back in writing.

**The Chair:** We'll now go to Madame Cobena for five minutes.

You have the floor.

**Sandra Cobena (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My questions are for Minister Robertson.

Thank you for being here and for giving us your time.

I represent the riding of Newmarket—Aurora. In Newmarket, particularly, we have a homelessness problem. I have to ask you about this \$97,000 spend. I cannot find a way to justify this to the people in my riding who see our neighbours on the streets, struggling to find a home, shelter and food. I can't walk up to them and say, "I know you're homeless, but it's okay, because the minister spent \$97,000 to learn about it."

How do you suggest I justify that to the people in my riding?

• (1615)

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** In terms of the investment in government staff who are attending and in many cases making contact with many of the homeless providers and services, these are Government of Canada employees—

**Sandra Cobena:** May I clarify that? It's not an investment.

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** —who are there to help assist.

**Sandra Cobena:** It's not an investment. It's an expense.

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** They're making sure—

**Sandra Cobena:** It's not an investment. It's not going to create capital.

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** —that we are connected to the people on the ground—

**Sandra Cobena:** It's not capital formation.

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** —who are doing the work on homelessness.

**Sandra Cobena:** There's not going to be an asset. It's not an investment. It's an expense. We're not going to see a return on that money.

I have to justify it to the people in my riding: \$97,000 spent to learn about homelessness. How do I tell a constituent of mine who is homeless that your government spent \$97,000 learning about how he is homeless?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** The Government of Canada is investing billions of dollars in solutions to homelessness. We need the people who work for the Government of Canada to be connected, on the ground, to all the people who are doing the work, who are operating shelters and who are helping people into supportive housing. We want to make sure we're well informed and well connected to the large community of people who support people who are homeless.

**Sandra Cobena:** Minister, my question is quite simple.

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** That's why we had a large attendance there.

**Sandra Cobena:** My question is very simple, very narrow: How do I justify that expense to my constituent?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** We need to be sure we are connected to the people who serve the homeless population across Canada. We need to make sure we're effective in rolling out our new Build Canada Homes program with supportive housing. There were lots of meetings. A lot of information was shared. A lot of relationships were built with the people who are serving across Canada in com-

munities, like yours, that are challenged with homelessness. We want to make sure we're connected and doing the good work.

**Sandra Cobena:** Minister, a lavish conference, travel, and meetings upon meetings will not solve the problems of the gentleman I'm speaking about. Why not take that money—

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** It was not a lavish conference.

**Sandra Cobena:** —and instead of organizing meetings upon meetings—

**Caroline Desrochers:** I have a point of order.

**The Chair:** We have a point of order.

**Sandra Cobena:** —actually come into the riding and give it to the people?

**The Chair:** What's the point of order?

**Caroline Desrochers:** The witness has answered the question many times. It's irrelevant to the mandate.

**The Chair:** That is not a point of order.

Again, I would remind members to not speak over one another. We need interpretation to conduct the meeting.

You have the floor, Ms. Cobena.

**Sandra Cobena:** I just think it's very hard to justify that expense to somebody who is struggling from homelessness and who sees that your government spent \$97,000 learning about their homelessness. There is no justification.

Switching topics, the Missing Middle Initiative told Canadians, "The real crash is still ahead". New condo sales are down 89% and ground-oriented sales are down 65%, "guaranteeing an even deeper downturn in 2026 and beyond".

Do you agree with the industry experts that Canadians need to prepare for an even worse housing crisis?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** As I said earlier, we are in a housing crisis that has been decades in the making. It's not something we solve overnight, but we have to be relentless in investing in affordable housing. Build Canada Homes is focused on non-market housing. The Government of Canada has never had a laser focus on non-market housing. We now have a one-stop shop that is focused on delivering that affordable housing at scale. That's a huge part of the housing crunch we face.

The market is facing real challenges in Vancouver and Toronto. CMHC is helping with the apartment construction loan program to make sure that many of those developers can build rental housing on the projects that otherwise would not work as condos. The market goes through cycles. We've been very fortunate as a country to have decades of the market being stable and growing.

● (1620)

**Sandra Cobena:** Minister, if I may, I don't have a lot of time.

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** Unfortunately, that's created affordability challenges—

**Sandra Cobena:** If I may, I have a follow-up question.

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** —and right now the affordability is improving across the country in terms of markets.

**Sandra Cobena:** In the GTA specifically, housing starts are decreasing. We know that. My particular concern, and I do get calls from constituents of mine who work for different companies that manufacture the doors or the windows or the floors, is that their shifts are decreasing. They are having talks about shutting down. All that skilled labour is going to be lost. The capacity is going to be lost. We are not moving at the speeds you promised.

**The Chair:** Ms. Cobena, you are well over your time. Thank you.

Thank you, Minister.

Madam Koutrakis, you have five minutes.

**Annie Koutrakis (Vimy, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister and officials, for being here this afternoon.

I'm sure that many of us on the committee have worked in the private sector. When I hear my honourable colleagues from the Conservative Party talking about a \$97,000 investment for our very professional, very devoted public servants attending meetings that are going to make them even better because they're hearing from specialists.... I know that, you know, maybe in the question they say inspiration....

I was in the private sector for many years. I worked at CIBC Wood Gundy and at Raymond James. I was managing teams of 200, and any time there was an opportunity for my staff to become better informed, that was not an expense. It was an investment.

I commend you and the officials for taking that opportunity to do that. Homelessness is a big issue in our country, and we want to make sure that, with the amount of money that is going to be invested, we get it right. I think \$97,000 is a drop in.... It's a lot for homeless people, but we are talking about making sure that we get this right from the get-go.

Minister, this past Monday, I had the opportunity to announce on your behalf a \$20-million federal investment to create 101 affordable homes in my riding, in Vimy and Laval. All three levels of government were there—Minister Proulx, Mayor Stéphane Boyer and Minister Christopher Skeete—together with the developer, who said that he saved that project from not going forward because the previous developer ran into problems, so they had to save this project. I was very happy to be there to make that announcement.

Could you share with the committee how this project reflects the goals of the national housing strategy and how similar communities across the country can expect to benefit from this approach?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** Certainly. I couldn't agree more in terms of the importance of investing in our people and in their doing their work even better.

The affordable housing fund projects, like the one that you announced in your community, are really how we're delivering right now on affordable housing at scale.

Build Canada Homes is the next phase, but right now the affordable housing fund is delivering billions of dollars of investment in affordable homes. Many of those projects are a mix, so there are private sector builders that we're giving a lot of opportunities to. They include a mix of market and below-market housing.

Again, this has been a very successful and large-scale program as part of the national housing strategy. We want to see that kind of work basically scale up with Build Canada Homes through a different portal but with similar types of projects that have opportunities for a mix of housing and a mix of incomes. However, we have to achieve significantly more non-market housing. We need more co-op housing, student housing and seniors' housing.

About half of Canadians need some help with their housing costs. That's what we're trying to address here with Build Canada Homes and with building off the success of the affordable housing fund. Many of those projects are progressing right now through funding, through investment. That will continue for the next couple of years as Build Canada Homes scales up the work and really takes over the focus on affordable housing.

● (1625)

**Annie Koutrakis:** That's great.

We also hear often about the youth and how right now homes are so expensive that they cannot afford to buy their first home. Build Canada Homes not only helps increase the housing supply but also creates good Canadian jobs in the trades and opportunities that many young people can benefit from.

Could you speak to how the program is supporting both affordable housing and meaningful employment for the next generation?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** It's a really critical component. Housing is at the centre of Canada's economy, so I share the concerns of all members. When we have challenges on the market side right now in Vancouver and Toronto, we have to look at that and figure out how we turn that around.

We are investing first and foremost, though, in tackling the affordability crunch. That does take a lot of jobs and a lot of people contributing at all different levels, from the supply chain to the design and engineering of projects, the construction and, ultimately, the operations of the buildings. So, it's many jobs—a huge component.

If you add it all up, it's the largest industry in Canada. In these times, it's an industry that we have far more control over than our trade, particularly related to the United States. We are feeling some impacts from U.S. tariffs—obviously with softwood, steel and aluminum—and we need to be building our homebuilding industry stronger as a result of that.

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

Thank you, Madam Koutrakis.

Now I'm going to give one short question to each side to wrap it up, and we'll keep it under two minutes.

We'll begin with Mr. Ho.

**Vincent Ho:** Minister, you're spending \$219 million per year on a fourth housing bureaucracy, the so-called Build Canada Homes. What does it do that the last three Liberal housing bureaucracies couldn't do?

You're burning through the equivalent of \$4 million per week, and this isn't money for housing or for municipalities. This is money just to pay the salaries of bureaucrats and other overheads. I want to get an understanding of where that money is going.

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** Build Canada Homes is a new agency that is scaling up the investments in affordable housing across Canada and offering to our builders, our homebuilding partners, a one-stop shop for them to advance their affordable housing projects as fast as they can.

**Vincent Ho:** What has this new Liberal bureaucracy achieved in the last week, would you say?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** Well, we've already announced a whole set of projects: six locations across Canada on Canada Lands Company federal land.

**Vincent Ho:** What does it do that other bureaucracies that preceded it could not do?

**Caroline Desrochers:** He's calling the bureaucracy partisan.

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** Build Canada Homes is focused on affordable housing.

The Government of Canada has not had an agency for many decades that's entirely focused on affordable housing. It has been spread among a number of different agencies and departments. What we want to do is make sure that we have focus and that we have a nimble organization that can get affordable housing built at scale as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

**Vincent Ho:** The \$219 million doesn't seem very nimble to me or to the average Canadian taxpayer.

**The Chair:** Give a brief response, Minister.

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** I think it will be a very efficient use of taxpayer dollars when you stack it up against the volume of afford-

able housing that is going to be built in these years to come. I think it will be a great investment.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Fancy, you have two minutes.

**Jessica Fancy (South Shore—St. Margarets, Lib.):** Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Robertson, for being here today.

The thing I'm most excited about in Build Canada Homes for my families in South Shore—St. Margarets in Nova Scotia is the build communities strong fund. I'd like to give you the rest of my time today. This is what excites me. What excites you about this fund?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** The build communities strong fund is a \$51-billion fund that is in budget 2025 and really is focused on housing-enabling infrastructure that can accelerate the housing we build across the country: water, waste water and stormwater infrastructure. There's a community stream that is basically the Canada community-building fund, CCBF, evolving into this new stream. That is delivering a wide variety of infrastructure at a community level, giving a lot of flexibility to communities and going direct....

We also have a provincial-territorial stream. That stream is also addressing health and education needs at a provincial and territorial level, and again, in a lot of flexibility and partnerships with the provinces and territories. They will work with local governments through that stream as well as a direct delivery stream that, again, goes straight to communities for regionally significant infrastructure.

It's a very large, new infrastructure investment across government focused on those partnerships with other levels of government at a big scale, but also having flexibility and making sure that we're doing everything we can to tie it to getting more housing and complete communities built that support that housing.

• (1630)

**Jessica Fancy:** For me, as a former educator, I know that seeing us helping out with the schools is going to be huge for communities in my area.

Thank you, Minister.

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

[*Translation*]

Finally, I give the floor to Mrs. Gill for two minutes.

**Marilène Gill:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I have one last question to ask about the government's objectives with respect to Build Canada Homes and, more specifically, about the needs of the different clients. Earlier, you mentioned students but we could also include persons with disabilities looking for accessible or adaptable housing, or even seniors.

What does the government intend to do through this program to serve that population as well?

**Hon. Gregor Robertson:** Thank you for your question. That's very important to us.

[*English*]

We need to be sure that we're addressing accessibility. With proposals coming in, we are providing a lot of flexibility. Proposals come in and will be vetted against the investment policy, which has all of these criteria. Accessibility is an important criteria. We want to make sure that we meet accessibility standards for those Canadians—that's a critical part of what we build—as well as for seniors and youth.

There will be a constant review of the balance of projects and what they're delivering for Canadians to make sure that we are reaching everybody with the affordable housing and types of housing that are needed for those people.

[*Translation*]

**Marilène Gill:** Does this mean that the government has a specific objective with respect to this program, or will it fund projects based on the requests it receives through calls for proposals? Will funds be set aside for certain types of housing? There's a strong demand for accessible or adaptable housing, for example. I would also reiterate that an adaptable housing unit and an accessible housing unit are two different things. That's very important to the groups that reached out to us.

[*English*]

**Caroline Desrochers:** On a point of order, Mr. Chair, in addition to calling into question the integrity of the clerk last week, at the last meeting, they've just called into question the non-partisan, well-established nature of the public service.

This is absolutely unacceptable. This is a slippery slope, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madame Desrochers. That is not a point—

**An hon. member:** [*Inaudible—Editor*]

**Caroline Desrochers:** I told you not to call [*Inaudible—Editor*] be negative about the public servants—

**An hon. member:** I didn't say anything negative about the clerk.

**Caroline Desrochers:** —by calling them [*Inaudible—Editor*]. That's unacceptable.

**The Chair:** Members, order, please.

Madame Gill, did you conclude your question?

[*Translation*]

**Marilène Gill:** In fact, Mr. Chair, I thought I'd finished asking my question and that the minister was responding. I think he was the one who was interrupted.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Would you respond to the question in writing, Minister? Thank you.

With that, we conclude the first hour of today's meeting. I will suspend for four minutes while we transition.

We are suspended.

• (1630)

(Pause)

• (1640)

**The Chair:** Committee members, welcome back to the second hour of today's meeting. The second hour is on the impacts of the temporary foreign worker program on the labour market. Before resuming, I would like to take a few moments for the benefit of those appearing virtually.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those of you participating by video conference, you have the option to participate in the official language of your choice. Click on the globe icon at the bottom of your Surface. Choose the official language in which you wish to participate. If there is an interruption in translation, please get my attention by using the raised hand symbol, and I will suspend while we are getting it corrected. Please direct all questions through the chair. Wait until I recognize you by name before speaking.

We have three witnesses this afternoon: from the Association for the Rights of Household and Farm Workers, Bénédicté Zé, education and mobilization officer; from the Iron Workers Local 97, Doug Parton, business manager and financial secretary; and from MRC de Minganie, Meggie Richard, prefect.

You each have five minutes. We will begin with Ms. Zé for five minutes for her opening statements.

You have the floor.

[*Translation*]

**Bénédicté Zé (Education and Mobilization Officer, Association for the Rights of Household and Farm Workers):** Mr. Chair and committee members, thank you for inviting me to appear today.

I came to Canada on a two-year temporary work permit. The living conditions that came with this status detracted from the quality of my work, productivity and real job market opportunities. Later on, I obtained my permanent residency. I'd like to explain how permanent residency status changed my experience of Canada for the better.

Today, I'm speaking to you about two realities involving two programs. One is inhumane; it destroys workers and disregards human rights. The other is respectable; it fosters worker integration into the workforce while respecting their rights and strengthening the economy, without reducing them to slaves.

In 2016, I paid over \$10,000 in recruitment fees to my employer in my country of origin for a job offer that would allow me to obtain a work permit in the country of my dreams, Canada. I was attracted to Canada by its employment opportunities and the prospect of a better future for my children. In Cameroon, I signed a contract that specified my salary, rest periods, vacation time and decent housing. When I arrived in Canada, however, my employer told me that the contract was no longer valid. He confined me, forbade me from having a cellphone and forced me to work seven days a week, as he pleased, with no breaks, for 70 to 80 hours a week. In addition to the daily tasks specified in the contract that I'd signed, my employer demanded that I care for his home, garden, woodworking shop and his son's farm.

I'll spare you the details about the psychological, sexual and physical abuse I also endured. However, the committee can read my story in section 2.9 of the 2025 Amnesty International report, which I've submitted to the committee. After living in slave-like conditions for 18 months, my health deteriorated. My employer threatened to send me back to Cameroon if he found out I was sick. I had to keep working until I ended up in the hospital. Finally, a stranger removed me from the farm to save my life. My migration situation became irregular when my employer cancelled my contract to keep me quiet. Because of the power imbalance between my employer and me, resulting from my closed work permit and temporary status, none of my legal rights or protections were respected. Like many workers, this took a toll on my mental and physical health.

In 2021, during the pandemic, I obtained permanent residency thanks to the health care worker recognition program. This was unusual, however, since most workers with closed permits have little or no access to permanent resident status. Obtaining permanent resident status led to a positive change. It allowed me to continue my nursing studies and consider a future career in line with my skills and aspirations. Once I was freed from the limitations of a closed permit, I started working with human rights organizations while also volunteering to contribute to my community.

However, the greatest benefit of permanent status concerned my family. My children were able to join me in Canada, which brought stability and security to the whole family. It gave me the freedom to speak out about my traumatic closed permit experience. Before that, I was forced to stay silent for fear of being deported from Canada. Permanent resident status allowed me to take control of my life and access to health care without any fear of reprisal.

I'm not going to talk about how the temporary foreign worker program influences the labour market overall. I can only speak about my experience. It's often said that foreign workers accept jobs that Canadians and permanent residents turn down, as if we have an innate tolerance for exploitation and mistreatment, but that's not true. When I signed a contract to work in Canada, I expected to work hard, but I also expected that my rights would be upheld like anyone else's rights, but that was not the case.

So, when employers say that they can't find Canadians or permanent residents to work for them, I feel like asking them a few questions. Are there really no workers available, or are the employers' expectations too immoral for anyone with a choice to accept? Are they looking for human beings who work despite—

• (1645)

[English]

**The Chair:** Excuse me, there is a point of order.

[Translation]

**Marilène Gill:** I didn't want to interrupt you, Mr. Chair, but the sound is cutting in and out, and there are squelching sounds too, which is making the interpreters' work difficult.

**Bénédicte Zé:** May I continue?

**The Chair:** Yes, please continue.

**Bénédicte Zé:** When I agreed to work in Canada, I knew that I would be working hard, but I expected that my rights would be upheld fairly, like everyone else's rights. That was not the case.

Employers say they can't find citizens or permanent residents to work for them. This leads me to ask the following questions. Are they refusing because they're unavailable or because the employers' expectations are immoral? Would a person who has a choice agree to work for them willingly? Are they looking for human beings who will work despite being denied their freedom and rights or are they simply looking for slaves?

When human beings are divided into two classes, with one class denied their basic rights and exposed to the risk of systemic violence, the rights, working conditions and job quality of all workers suffer. For everyone to be able to work with dignity and safely, the basic rights of all workers must be respected.

Thank you for your time and for your attention to this issue.

• (1650)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Zé.

[English]

Next is Doug Parton for the ironworkers.

You have five minutes.

**Doug Parton (Business Manager and Financial Secretary, Ironworkers Local 97):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all members of the committee for this opportunity.

I want to begin by expressing my appreciation for the committee's commitment to examine the temporary foreign worker program and its impact on Canada's labour market. The committee's willingness to look closely at how the program is used and misused means a great deal to the workers and apprentices I represent in British Columbia. Thank you for taking this issue seriously.

My name is Doug Parton and I'm the business manager of Ironworkers Local 97 in British Columbia, which represents more than 2,400 members across B.C. Our members build bridges, towers, dams, LNG sites, public transit and industrial projects that keep our province and country powered and moving. Ironworkers take great pride in our craft. We invest heavily in apprenticeship, skills development and safety. Every person in our trade knows they are part of something bigger: building communities and building Canada.

I appreciate the committee's work on this study because the way the temporary foreign worker program's construction stream currently operates affects every part of our workforce, including safety, training and our ability to provide for our families. The construction stream was supposed to be a measure of last resort when no local labour was available. In British Columbia, and particularly in our trade, it has been used far too often and not as intended. Employers are using this program as a business model for cheaper, untrained labour. They're claiming shortages that do not exist and using TFWs to bypass Canadian workers who are ready, available and fully trained, and in whom we have invested.

The federal job bank data compounds this problem. Those posted wages are as much as \$10.44 per hour below what workers actually earn under collective agreements. That flawed benchmark allows employers to justify bringing in TFWs while avoiding the real prevailing wages that were freely negotiated and that truly reflect the market. These agreements would not exist if they did not reflect actual market conditions. This is not just about fairness. It's about our ability to make a living. When federal wage benchmarks undervalue construction work and ignore negotiated benefit packages, it drives down the market and leaves workers struggling to afford housing, food and transportation in the same communities they help build.

Meanwhile, the number of TFWs in the construction stream remains disproportionately high, despite a strong local workforce and record investments in training by the unionized construction sector. Every unnecessary LMIA approval weakens apprenticeship recruitment, undermines pathways for young Canadians and creates unsafe work sites, where workers may not be familiar with Canadian safety standards or expectations. Safety is not negotiable in our trade. Ironwork is dangerous and technical, and it demands rigorous training. When loopholes allow unverified labour onto work sites, everybody is at risk. Safety cannot be sacrificed for cost savings.

This is why I am grateful the committee has chosen to study this issue. Your attention gives us hope that meaningful reform is possible.

Our recommendations remain straightforward.

Require union and local building trade consultation before approving any trade-related LMIA so that accurate assessments of worker availability can be made. If Canadian workers are available, the employer should not be granted an LMIA.

Replace the job bank wage standard with accurate, collectively bargained prevailing wages that reflect a livable wage and the real cost of living in regions like British Columbia.

Restrict TFW access to employers that invest in training Canadians and have a clear apprenticeship plan to return to a domestic workforce.

Pause construction stream LMIA approvals while a proper review and new framework are put in place.

We support immigration done right. We respect every worker who contributes to building this country, but we must ensure the system reflects the Canadian values of fairness, safety and opportunity for all. Our message is simple: Invest in Canadian workers first. When given the tools and training, we will meet the needs of this country with a safe, skilled and homegrown workforce.

To that end, Local 97 continues to be the number one supplier of ironworkers in the province of B.C., with an estimated 26,811,399 hours in the last 10 years.

• (1655)

To date, we have three temporary foreign workers. Certainly, at a time when 350 pulp mill workers are laid off on Vancouver Island, there are skills transferred that we can apply and simply upskill these unemployed workers. This is where our focus should be and not on the TFW program.

I thank you and all parties represented here today for looking for a path forward. Thank you, again, for your time and for continuing to address this important issue.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Parton.

Next, we'll go to Madame Richard.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor.

**Meggie Richard (Prefect, MRC de Minganie):** Mr. Chair, honourable committee members, hello.

Thank you for having me here today.

Let me introduce myself: My name is Meggie Richard, and I'm prefect of the Minganie RCM, chair of the Côte-Nord RCM assembly, and member of the board of directors of the Fédération québécoise des municipalités.

The Côte-Nord is known for its vastness, its natural resources and, above all, its vibrant communities. However, it confronts challenges specific to its remoteness and its aging demographic. The region covers over 230,000 square kilometres, with 90,000 residents spread across 33 municipalities and a number of indigenous communities.

The Minganie RCM has eight municipalities, including Anticosti Island, and two Innu communities. Its economy is primarily based on natural resource development, mining, energy projects, fisheries as well as public services and a booming tourism industry.

The Côte-Nord, considered a resource region, makes a significant contribution to the GDP of Quebec and Canada. Yet despite our significant contribution to economic development in sectors of key importance to the current government, we feel that government decisions do not take account of our regional realities, often with serious consequences.

Today, I'd like to draw your attention to the impact of the temporary foreign worker program in remote areas like ours. This program, designed to address labour shortages, has become essential to the economic survival of our businesses. Recent measures to reduce and impose uniform caps on the program, however, pose a direct threat to the vitality of our communities.

In Minganie, an aging population and demographic decline make recruitment especially challenging for our SMEs. Most of our local service businesses wouldn't be able to continue operating without the support of temporary foreign workers. More specifically, our grocery stores, restaurants and several other types of businesses depend on these workers. Our rapidly growing tourism sector also relies on their contribution. Our region's fish processing industry has depended on them for a number of years. Changes to this program are undermining their operations and could result in major service cuts, if not closures. Temporary foreign workers, regardless of their status or origin, are vital to our economy, our development and, most of all, the vitality of our territory.

The program accounts for only a small percentage of non-permanent residents in Quebec, but it's essential to our SMEs and strategic sectors. On the Côte-Nord, immigrants represent a marginal segment of the population. In 2021, according to Statistics Canada, they amounted to 1.4% of the total population compared to 17% in Quebec as a whole. A survey of our chambers of commerce conducted in the spring revealed that 72% of businesses employed temporary foreign workers and, in 50% of these cases, the average recruitment period exceeded six months. Without this program, businesses will close, services will disappear and families will leave our villages. For us, it's not a luxury; it's a necessity for sustaining economic activity and social cohesion.

I'd now like to talk to you about our requests.

It's essential to adapt laws and regulations to regional realities and avoid a consistently standardized approach while paying special attention to remote areas. Current policies, like the 10% federal cap on low-wage positions, do not suit our region. In areas where the labour pool is small and unemployment is low, this cap is unrealistic. We're asking for flexible caps of 20% to 30% in remote areas like ours; sector-based exemptions for critical industries like fishing, tourism and hospitality; administrative fast-tracking; priority service counters for remote regions to ensure the operational continuity of our businesses; and grandfather clauses for workers already integrated into our communities.

The temporary foreign worker program shouldn't be a temporary solution with no future. We have to speed up the transition to per-

manent residency for workers who want to stay for the long term, extend the length of permits to reduce insecurity and involve regional authorities in setting targets and creating policies so that decisions truly align with existing needs on the ground.

In conclusion, changes made to the temporary foreign worker program are detrimental to the economy of our remote regions. They are hindering our economic development efforts, weakening and jeopardizing the services provided by our businesses, and threatening the vitality of our population base. While the program is useful, it has to fit within a comprehensive strategy that promotes the autonomy of our regions and protects worker rights.

We are therefore asking that you revise existing policies to support remote regions, adjust federal caps, and speed up and facilitate access to permanent residency. These adjustments are essential to the economic vitality of Quebec and the dynamic occupation of our territory.

Thank you for your attention. I'm ready to answer your questions.

• (1700)

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

[*English*]

We will now begin our six-minute round with Mr. Reynolds.

Mr. Reynolds, you have six minutes.

**Colin Reynolds (Elmwood—Transcona, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for coming.

Mr. Parton, in your jurisdiction, do you have any large companies that are using temporary foreign workers and competing with your signatory contractors?

**Doug Parton:** Absolutely, we do have one here. In the last 12 years, I think they brought in 1,000 ironworkers. They brought them all in under the guise that they were there to train Canadians. There were no skilled Canadians, so they had to bring in the TFWs, 1,000 of them in the last 12 years, to train Canadians.

If we bought that argument, they would have developed a trained workforce in a two-year or three-year period, but they simply wouldn't stay with them.

It's been a problem. One company in particular never supported an apprenticeship. They had one apprenticeship in the last 10 years, and it was a millwright, just to keep their rebar machines running.

**Colin Reynolds:** Do you think the temporary foreign worker program creates a race to the bottom with regard to wages and working conditions in labour markets across Canada?

**Doug Parton:** I do, absolutely. It's wage suppression. It's a business model, and it's about wages. I used to say it's a greased one-way pole.

**Colin Reynolds:** Do you find that workers are having to lower their value as workers to remain competitive in order to find work?

**Doug Parton:** I can certainly speak about our own situation in battling this issue on Vancouver Island. The cost of bread, milk, eggs and cheese hasn't gone down on Vancouver Island, but we've had to go over there and slash our collective agreement for those workers over there by almost \$10 an hour just to remain competitive.

**Colin Reynolds:** That's a pretty big impact.

Unionized labour is critical to Canada's growth. Would you agree with that?

**Doug Parton:** That's absolutely essential. I believe we've always been the number one trainer in B.C. and in Canada as well. We are training the next generation of ironworkers, electricians, carpenters and so on.

**Colin Reynolds:** Do you believe removing the TFW program would benefit Canadian workers? If so, how?

**Doug Parton:** I certainly think there needs to be a pause on it.

This crosses all party lines. I want to make that clear. This has been a problem for 15 years, and we've been at the forefront to try to make some changes there.

I am encouraged by recent events with the government and across parties, in that we're having a look at this. This not only undercuts my workers and everyday Canadians; it also does a disservice to the temporary foreign worker, as we heard from the young lady who spoke first. It's horrific. It is not unusual for me to hear some of those stories myself in my position. It needs to be revamped, with union labour at the table as well.

• (1705)

**Colin Reynolds:** You mentioned the contractor that has had over 1,000 temporary foreign workers. Have you ever reported that to any level of government, provincially or federally?

**Doug Parton:** Yes, we've reported that federally over the last 15 years, whether it was the Conservative government at the time we first started or Liberal governments, and it was a sticky.... It's not one-size-fits-all. I only speak about construction, because that's all I know. I'm not going to get into fish processing or stuff like that. That's akin to getting a carpenter to come over and wire your house. He just wouldn't do it.

**Colin Reynolds:** I'm an electrician, so no.

Does the TFW program undermine the work you do as a trade unionist to improve wages and improve working conditions for Canadian labourers?

**Doug Parton:** Yes, but I don't want to understate how it devalues the temporary foreign worker as well. These people are a captive workforce, as we heard, and I keep going back to the young lady

who spoke first. We hear this all the time: If they say something, they're on a plane. It shouldn't be like that in Canada.

That's not to mention what my job is, which is to get the best working conditions for my members and workers, and even people who aren't my members, people who may be in an open shop. A rising tide lifts all ships.

**Colin Reynolds:** Do you believe there is an overreliance on the TFW program to the point that it has changed the realities on the ground for Canadian labourers, who are forced to compete against weaker wages?

**Doug Parton:** At the risk of speaking on behalf of my contractors—in Local 97, we represent over 240 contractors as well as our members—we hold them to a higher standard with the apprenticeships, skills training and stuff that they have to pay into on an hourly basis so that we can continue to further the trade.

When we have companies taking advantage of the temporary foreign worker system, where they can come in and undercut some wages as much as 50%, it makes it pretty hard for that good Canadian company that's done everything right and paid taxes in Canada. How do they compete? It's a numbers game at that point.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Doug Parton:** We're living in the land. We're talking about condominiums and stuff. We're living in British Columbia. I'm sure you're well aware of the million-dollar condo—

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Parton and Mr. Reynolds.

We'll now move to Ms. Fancy for six minutes.

**Jessica Fancy:** Thank you very much.

Through you, Mr. Chair, I want to thank the witnesses for coming today.

I want to start by saying it's really good to be back here today. Last week, we and our witnesses found ourselves a little blindsided by the dilatory motion to adjourn. We're seeing the Conservative Party finally realize that it's weaponized immigration to the point that businesses and other witnesses are afraid to come forward to appear and discuss the need for the temporary foreign worker program.

I'd also like to mention, as some of you noted in the beginning, that this program makes up only 1% of our workforce, but for many rural regions, like my own in South Shore, Nova Scotia, this is a very important program. I've heard from a lot of my constituents and businesses, and they have positively discussed temporary foreign workers and some of the ways they want to further create efficiencies within this program, which is what we're doing with this study. This is why we voted for the Bloc study today.

I am the former chair of the Rural Communities Foundation of Nova Scotia, the vice-chair of our national rural caucus and a rural researcher of value-added systems. Rural Canada is speaking out. Mr. Osborne Burke, of Nova Scotia, went on CBC on September 25 to challenge Mr. Poilievre. I remember listening to this on my way to a constituency meeting. He asked Mr. Poilievre, “where are these workers that are unemployed that are looking for work...contrary to what Mr. Poilievre says, is there's nobody else left to employ... We do not have the labour pool. We do not have the workforce.”

Madame Richard, from your opening statement and having read your background, it seems like we're coming from very similar regions. What labour market challenges have rural communities been experiencing? How do they differ from some of those of the more urban areas?

• (1710)

[*Translation*]

**Meggie Richard:** As I explained, the Côte-Nord is the only region in Quebec that has gone through a demographic decline in recent years. Our circumstances are therefore quite different than those of large population centres, which often have to deal with a massive, uncontrolled influx of immigrants that sometimes requires adjustments.

We want to take in temporary foreign workers. We want to encourage them to settle here with us for the long term. In my opinion, we offer a better quality of life than anywhere else in Canada, along with wide-open spaces. Unlike what we see in urban areas, the contributions of each individual make a difference in our surroundings.

We want this type of program to be tailored by region and to take the specific realities of each region of Canada into consideration, because we're ready and we need newcomers. They can change a lot in our environment. Based on my discussions with many of them, and with entrepreneurs, we're seeing that already. We consider it a privilege to welcome them. It's an opportunity to have them to our area to play a part in the region's vitality.

[*English*]

**Jessica Fancy:** Thank you very much for that.

You also mentioned in your opening statement “vitality”. What are some of your recommendations for the continued vitality of rural areas in Canada while also mitigating any of the negative impacts that temporary foreign worker programs might have on broader labour markets?

[*Translation*]

**Meggie Richard:** The municipalities in our area are actively working to create housing projects specifically intended to attract more people of all backgrounds to our area. We want to create a hospitable environment, so we're working on adapting everything.

As I was saying, it's a matter of our region's survival. Our only goal is to counteract the demographic decline. To do that, we need everyone. Often, these are mining towns with large hydroelectric projects that pay high salaries. We go the distance when it comes to food security. I can give you examples of entrepreneurs and busi-

nesses that have to turn to retirees and young students for a hand. Right now, it's a matter of food security.

Also, since we provide a hospitable environment, we let people who move to our area get involved directly. Earlier, I heard someone mention volunteering, but we have a whole reception system waiting. We work very hard in each of our RCMs and regions to develop appropriate reception programs and ensure proper integration into the communities. When it comes to vitality, I believe that effective integration by newcomers into our area and their participation in French language training really make a difference. This is how newcomers start feeling at home and wanting to settle here for the long term.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mrs. Gill, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Marilène Gill:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also thank each of the witnesses who are with us today to talk about the temporary foreign worker program.

I'm happy to hear the testimony of various participants because it helps us move past the stereotypes associated with the program and improve it. Of course, Ms. Richard and I live in the same vast territory and share the same challenges back home, but we also share the many opportunities available to us.

I would have liked to hear your comments.

You offered several recommendations. I'm sure you have concrete examples of labour-related effects so that we can not only measure the benefits of the temporary foreign worker program here, especially in the fishery field, but also understand what would happen if people stopped coming to work here.

You said that you'd met with a number of people. I've also met with temporary foreign workers who talked about their experiences. These experiences are diverse and, as you said, they can be enriching and beneficial for us as well.

• (1715)

**Meggie Richard:** Naturally, I have a lot of examples to share. This issue is a concern to people in our region, not only immigrants but also entrepreneurs and the general public as well. Entrepreneurs call me. I can hear their despair. I can hear the bewilderment, fear, and above all, the distress of these immigrants, who have become our friends. Teams get formed. These people become part of the workplace and the community.

Over the decades, entrepreneurs have built up their family businesses and strived to come up with innovative solutions in response to the region's labour shortages. In recent years, their solution has been to take in immigrants through this program. Immigrants are the ones who make it possible to serve the population and offer it services.

Unless the program changes, these entrepreneurs will face difficult choices. They may cut services or hours of operation, or even shut down permanently.

I talked about the 10% federal ceiling on low-wage jobs, but we mustn't forget that 80% of the local population are also affected by these changes. If service hours are cut, the local population and customers of these businesses will also feel it. It really has a snow-ball effect.

Despite all the efforts that entrepreneurs are making to properly receive immigrants, the rug is being pulled out from under their feet. Entrepreneurs have no other solution. Where we live, there is none. We don't have a labour pool. It's our only solution. That's the really sad part.

Take the example of La Promenade restaurant. I hope the owners get a chance to speak with you. It's the only restaurant in Minganie that offers three meals a day and stays open seven days a week. It has served the local population, tourists and workers in our industries for 40 years. Today, we found out that if the announced change goes through, this restaurant will have to cut its hours of operation. That's a real tragedy and it affects real people. I want to make that point clear.

There's also the Chez Julie restaurant and our grocery store. All of these people have called me to voice their despair.

**Marilène Gill:** Thank you, Ms. Richard.

I'd like to put things in context. It may seem like we're talking about just another restaurant. When you live in a remote area, you sometimes have to travel 100 or 200 kilometres to get gas or something to eat.

You know it too, Ms. Richard. You mentioned safety. So far, so good.

Sometimes, a community has only one restaurant or one grocery store, and they're smaller than the ones in larger centres. The population of some villages is 200 or 300 people. So it's important to put things into perspective.

I also thought about the fishing industry and Longue-Pointe-de-Mingan. There's a processing industry, but if the industry has no more workers, we'll have a crisis on our hands. We saw that when the licences of Mexican workers were suspended. It was February 29. I will never forget it. No one was thinking about the fisheries, only about agriculture. We saw how that worked out back home.

Could all this mean that fishers might no longer show up at the docks and unload their catch, or that the industry might ultimately leave the region?

**Meggie Richard:** More than 80 people work in the seafood and food processing sector. They play an extremely important role in this seasonal industry. Four years ago, I had the opportunity to serve as a francization agent for these workers. Speaking with them was a truly rewarding experience.

Many of these workers came back year after year. I noticed that they ultimately hoped to settle here with their families, bring their

children and spouse. They wanted to contribute to our economy, our vitality and give their family a fantastic place to live.

What I remember is how they smiled and the way they enjoyed coming to work here in conditions that I would describe as outstanding. We acknowledged their contribution and they appreciated the home we offered them.

Measures like the proposed changes to the temporary foreign worker program put a number of our industries at risk. I'm deeply concerned about where we're headed and the impact it could have on businesses back home.

Our population will be directly affected. As mentioned, losing services in such a vast area is huge. My RCM spans 360 kilometres of coastline.

• (1720)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Richard and Mrs. Gill.

[*English*]

Mr. Genuis, you have five minutes.

**Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses.

I particularly appreciate that we have someone testifying who has actually been through the program and seen some of its impacts. My questions will start with Ms. Zé.

Maybe just by way of preamble, I think it's important to identify the fact that the temporary foreign worker program is one of a suite of different immigration programs. Nobody here is proposing the elimination of all categories of international recruitment, but we are talking about a particular program with particular problems. I think the testimony has identified those problems and the need for tools to recruit people from outside the region or elsewhere.

Ms. Zé, your testimony echoes what we've heard from some economists during previous work this committee's done on youth unemployment. That is to say, the particular structure of a temporary foreign worker program creates power imbalances. Normally there are a lot of complex power dynamics involving employers and employees, but one of the powers that an employee has is choice. They can leave their job and find another job. Of course, in an environment with high unemployment, that employee has less power. If there's low unemployment, that employee has relatively more power because it's easier for them to go to a different job.

However, the temporary foreign worker case that you're describing is unique because the worker has so little power because their immigration status is tied to their employment with a particular employer. There would be many alternatives in terms of programs that would still allow people to be recruited to fill genuine skill gaps, but you're talking, I think, about a serious social justice issue, which is an exaggerated power imbalance between workers and their employers that results from the architecture of this program.

I wonder, if you think I have that right, if you want to say more about that, about how in particular the structure of this program and the power imbalances create unique challenges and dynamics and about how there would be alternatives that allow workers to fill genuine skill gaps that don't involve that power imbalance.

[*Translation*]

**Bénédicté Zé:** Thank you for your question.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Ms. William in particular.

We want to come and work in Canada, but with rights. We want to be respected and treated the same as everyone else. However, this program creates a hierarchy where the employer has all the power. When we come up against an employer acting in bad faith, as I did, we endure all kinds of mistreatment, all kinds of injustice. As a woman, I was sexually assaulted, enslaved and confined. I didn't have the power to leave my job and go work somewhere else. Since I was in a remote area, I could have found work somewhere else considering the labour shortage. A lot of people would have been glad to have me work for them.

No one could say that I didn't do a good job. In fact, I worked so well that the employer added more work to my contract; what he wanted, however, was a slave. He sometimes forced me to work 70 or 80 hours a week—without pay, I should add. He therefore had nothing less than a slave who was afraid to go back home and who was willing to endure every injustice because she had already paid a lot of money, sold her business and left her children.

As we proposed to the Association for the Rights of Household and Farm Workers, or RHFHW, I would have kept working for my boss, because I loved my job, I love working, if only I'd been given access to a program, to an open work permit with a pathway to permanent residency. When I came to Canada, I came here to work. That would have made it easier for me to integrate, to bring my children over and to stay in that region. It would also have allowed me to do the same volunteer work in that region as I do now, in Montréal.

Workers want to come here to work as long as they're respected like everyone else, the way you are here in Canada, and treated like any other human being, on the same level—

• (1725)

[*English*]

**Garnett Genuis:** Can I jump in with a quick follow-up question? I think people watching this may say that most employers are good people with good intentions and they're not like the person you described. I think that's very true. However, the issue is the structure of the program creates a power imbalance, which means in cases where people are treated badly, they don't have recourse. If you used different channels, if you didn't use this deeply flawed structure, then people would be in a stronger position to address problems where those problems emerge. Would you agree?

[*Translation*]

**Bénédicté Zé:** I completely agree with you. A better-structured program that includes a pathway to permanent residency with an open work permit would encourage a lot of people to come work

here. It would make it easier for them to integrate and put down roots in the community where they're hired.

In my case, I left because I was mistreated. This type of problem occurs because of the employer's ability to dominate and exert absolute power over the employee. However, if they were recruited like a normal person—

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Zé.

[*English*]

Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

Madame Desrochers, you have the floor for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Caroline Desrochers:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for joining us this afternoon.

I think that what clearly emerges from everything we've heard is that the temporary foreign worker issue is extremely complex. Regional differences rule out the possibility of a one-size-fits-all answer.

I'll come back to you, Ms. Zé, and your experience. Of course, abuses of power exist.

The temporary foreign worker program is not an immigration program. Its purpose is more to meet needs in specific sectors. As we heard from Ms. Richard, whom I thank for her comments, and from other witnesses, it's that—

[*English*]

**Vincent Ho:** On a point of order, my interpretation is not working.

I just want to make sure it's working. Thanks.

[*Translation*]

**Caroline Desrochers:** In fact, the labour shortage is jeopardizing the survival of certain businesses and even some communities. That's why I find it absolutely important to use our time in committee to come up with solid recommendations. I hope that's what we're going to be able to do. I hope we can conduct a real study and set partisanship and political games aside, because this issue is too important.

Ms. Zé, what you experienced is absolutely unacceptable. I want to begin by stating unequivocally. We know that we need to do more to address the mistreatment you told us about. As my colleague Mr. Genuis mentioned, even though we know that most employers act in good faith, abuses nonetheless occur.

That's why we proposed the migrant workers support program. That's also why federal collaboration with the provinces, which have jurisdiction over housing, security and working conditions, is absolutely essential.

Thank you very much for sharing your experience with us. I think we need to do more. I think we can do more. I would really like to hear your opinion today. I know that you work closely with workers on the ground. Based on your experience, now that these abuses are publicly condemned more frequently, has the number of reported cases increased?

Have you noticed that people are more informed now about where to find the tools put in place by the federal government to report abuse?

• (1730)

**Bénédicté Zé:** I would say yes and no. For example, in Montréal, a person who speaks French like me can easily find out where to go for help. However, I was in a remote region, like many temporary workers. Eighty per cent of them don't speak French, which means that many won't know where to turn.

The solutions are theoretical, not realistic. I already spoke French very well on arriving here. Still, I didn't know where to turn for help because I was in a remote region. I only listened to my employer.

As it's currently structured, the program doesn't inform employees how to ask for help or report mistreatment. The program causes employees to keep quiet out of fear, because they feel threatened or traumatized by what they're going through.

**Caroline Desrochers:** Thank you, Ms. Zé.

If I understand correctly, more work needs to be done on raising awareness and sharing information in the regions to show workers how to use the helpline, for example, and where to find information.

Do you also think that workers in vulnerable sectors would be better protected if we took a different approach to evaluating the impact on the labour market and if we had stricter rules?

**Bénédicté Zé:** I think so, yes, if we study the impact on the workforce better.

Take the example that Ms. Richard mentioned to us in her region. They need workers, even a permanent pool of workers willing to settle there. We need to study the situation and bring in labour where it's truly needed, with more openness, for these employees, because some may want to integrate while others may simply want to come seasonally. I believe that all of this should be studied, so that people who come know why they are coming to work in a certain region, and that they have the option to integrate, stay or leave, without putting up with abuse.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Desrochers and Ms. Zé.

Mrs. Gill now has the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Marilène Gill:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to ask Ms. Richard another question. In fact, I'd like to ask her several questions.

Earlier, you mentioned that the departure of foreign workers and the current reduction in program caps were affecting everyone. You said it was affecting your colleagues and businesses.

I'd like you to tell us about the impact on the foreign workers themselves. Personally, I've seen families be separated, but sometimes a spouse joins the worker. I'd like to hear your thoughts on that.

**Meggie Richard:** It certainly does affect them. I'm not in their situation, but I get a sense that it's very stressful. There's a lot of uncertainty at the moment.

Some employees need to renew their agreement in the coming weeks, but they don't know if they'll be able to stay in the country, or if they'll get their renewal. So it's a very stressful time for them. They don't know what lies ahead for them. They want to stay in the region, to settle there for the long-term, and live their lives in the community.

Honestly, I think a lot about my business owners and the people in our area, but also about these workers, people who actively contribute to our economic development during times like these. Changing the frequency of permit renewals from three years to one year involves additional steps that cause stress every time and compound the administrative burden on businesses that hire temporary foreign workers. Some entrepreneurs have told me how hard it is to go through the process over and over again, when what they want is stability.

**Marilène Gill:** I don't want to interrupt you, but I'd like to ask you one last question. I have very little time left.

I applaud these entrepreneurs. I'm thinking of Ms. Petitpas from the restaurant La Promenade, for example, which you mentioned earlier. Obviously, the entire community would be affected if it closed. We really don't want that. We want to find solutions.

We heard that a standardized approach wasn't the right answer, but I'd like you to clear up the idea that young people can't get jobs because of temporary foreign workers, and that these workers are competing for jobs with young people.

• (1735)

**Meggie Richard:** No, that's not something we see in our region; it's completely different. There's work for everyone. All the businesses I mentioned earlier have vacant positions. Some companies are full, but most are always looking for workers. As we said, we need teens, young people and retirees to work and fill shifts to keep our businesses open. So, there's no competition.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

[English]

We conclude with a three-minute round. We go to Mr. Genuis for three minutes and, then, to Mr. Joseph for three.

Mr. Genuis, you have the floor.

**Garnett Genuis:** Thank you, Chair.

This has been a really interesting discussion.

I want to refocus on the purpose of this study, which is to evaluate the performance and the issues around the temporary foreign worker program. There are, of course, vast differences in this country. There are variations in terms of the employment rates. There are skill needs. Recognizing the high level of unemployment for young people, I think we need new, bold, creative policies to help young people have the skills and the ability to go to the regions where they can take these jobs.

Our proposals around the temporary foreign worker program have included extending existing permits in regions of low unemployment because we understand the need for those adaptations and the timelines required. We also can't go on with the present reality in which we have issues of skill gaps, geography gaps and extremely high youth unemployment. We need to have solutions that don't ignore that problem but seek to solve that problem.

In the time I have left, I want to go to Mr. Parton on the issue of the integrity of the existing program and then come back to this issue of whether the program is working the way it's currently structured.

You talked about wages being offered that are below the rates that have been negotiated, and that's not supposed to happen. You talked about Canadians being bypassed, and that's not supposed to happen. Maybe the government would come back and say that they were abuses of the program. Certainly they are abuses of the program, but the problem is that the structure of the program seems to allow these kinds of abuses.

When you have power imbalances and when you have situations where an employer puts a job on a job bank, they might get a lot of applications, but they ignore those applications from Canadians. Then they can proceed to say that they didn't find an appropriate application.

Do you think there are problems with the structure of the program around integrity, around facilitating enforcement of these rules? Is it salvageable, or does there need to be a broader rethink?

**Doug Parton:** I do think there are problems with it. I think you're absolutely correct there, but I also think that's why we're here today. This government, with the help of the opposition as well, I think has a newfound vigour, I guess, to fix the problems of the past. We need to look back to see where those mistakes occurred, but looking forward, I think we can fix this.

We talk about labour shortages, and I go back to the 1,000 TFWs with that one company I spoke about. Last year, I put through 132 young Canadians—young ladies and young men—and 102 are still with me. That's an 80% retention rate. Over 10 years, there are 1,000 people.

From my lens in the construction industry specifically, we haven't had a skill shortage. We can fix this problem. We still have the tools to make this work. There may be a time when there's a TFW need, but the building trades certainly need to be central to that.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Parton.

Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

We'll conclude with our next member.

● (1740)

[*Translation*]

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

**Natilien Joseph:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will speak briefly to Ms. Richard in reference to a response she gave to my honourable colleague. She talked about the survival of businesses in her region. I have an article in front of me that says Pierre Poilievre was going to end the foreign worker program. Although my honourable colleague is trying to rewrite history, the fact remains that Pierre Poilievre proposed ending the program entirely.

What impact would it have had on your region if the Conservatives' proposal to abolish the program has been implemented?

**Meggie Richard:** Ending the program would definitely have had a major impact. As I explained throughout my remarks, this program is vitally important to businesses in our area. The Côte-Nord actively contributes to Canada's development and economic growth through large-scale hydroelectric and energy development projects, mines and critical minerals throughout the region. If we want to attract these major projects and keep contributing to economic development, we need healthy SMEs. To achieve this, we have to counteract the demographic decline that we're experiencing in our region, and be prepared to receive people who want to come and actively participate in our growth as part of a great community.

As we see it, this program is unquestionably important, just like immigration.

**Natilien Joseph:** We all know that foreign workers make an invaluable contribution to the economy.

Thank you very much for your honesty.

**Meggie Richard:** I'd like to add something.

**Natilien Joseph:** Go ahead.

**Meggie Richard:** That contribution is also important at a social level. A lot of talk centres on the economy but, in my opinion, foreign workers also make a very important social contribution. That's why we put a lot of emphasis on good integration, to have these people contribute not only to our economy but also to our social fabric.

As we see it, that's extremely important, and I wanted to mention it.

**Natilien Joseph:** I'd like to extend my sincerest apologies to Ms. Zé for everything she's been through and assure her that our government is working very hard to stop it from ever happening to anyone else.

Thank you for being here.

**Bénédicte Zé:** Thank you.

I'd like to add a comment.

I don't believe that the program is the problem. After listening to the testimonies, the need for labour is clear. The problem, however, is that the government refuses to accept that people who come here to work are human beings and must be allowed to make choices. They must be given the right to choose whether to integrate, stay or leave. They must be given the opportunity to live a normal life and work in good conditions, without ending up with a malicious employer. That's why the program's conditions need to be reviewed, to get rid of closed permits and replace them with open permits that allow the possibility of integration.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Zé.

Thank you, Mr. Joseph.

[*English*]

That concludes our round.

I will advise the committee that our next meeting is December 9, when we will continue our study on the Canada Labour Code.

Is it the will of the committee to adjourn?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

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