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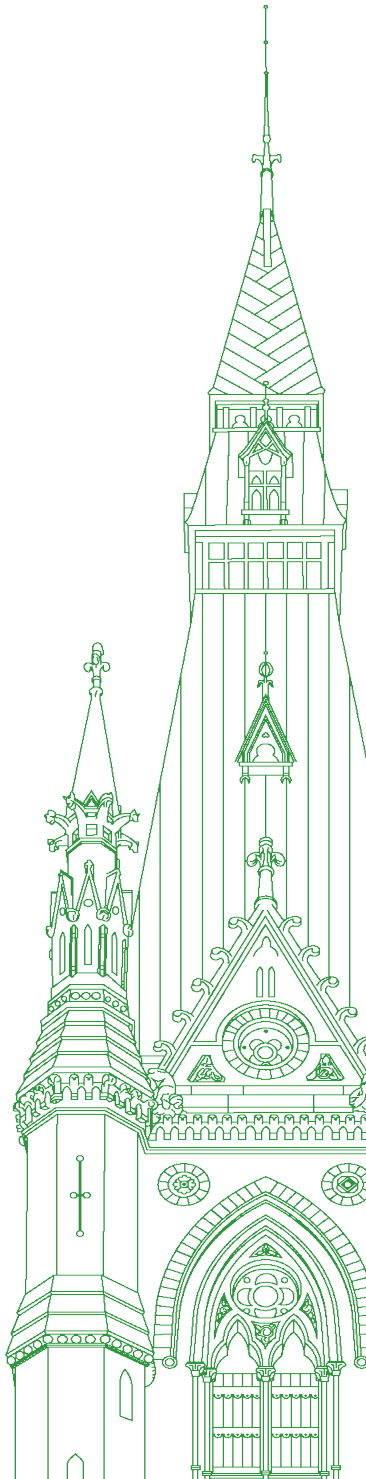
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Chair: Robert Morrissey

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

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● (1100)

[*Translation*]

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

I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 51 of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

[*English*]

Pursuant to the motion adopted on Monday, February 23, 2026, the committee is meeting on food price inflation and the national school food program.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the Standing Orders. Those appearing online have had their sound tested and have been approved.

Before we begin, I would like to remind all those participating that all members have the option to participate in today's meeting in either official language, French or English. I would remind all those in the room to choose the channel that will give you the language that you're comfortable participating in and allow you to fully participate in the meeting when people are speaking either official language. For those appearing virtually, please click on the globe icon at the bottom of your screen and choose the language that you wish to participate in. Again, please wear your headsets so that you can fully participate.

If there is an interruption in translation, please get my attention, and we'll suspend while it is being corrected.

I have a couple of other points. Please silence your devices. For the protection of the translators, please refrain from tapping on the microphone boom. As well, please wait until I recognize you by name and direct all questions through me, the chair.

In the first hour, I would like to welcome our witnesses from the Breakfast Club of Canada, Julie Desharnais, president and chief executive officer; and Judith Barry, co-founder and government relations director, appearing in person.

From the Centre d'action bénévole Marguerite-Dubois, we have Valérie Marin, executive director, appearing in person.

From Loaves and Fishes Community Food Bank Society, we have Melissa Lavoie, director of philanthropy and revenue generation, appearing by video conference.

Each witness has up to five minutes for their opening statement, and if you want to share that time, please advise the committee when you start.

We will begin with Madam Desharnais.

You have the floor for up to five minutes.

● (1105)

Julie Desharnais (President and Chief Executive Officer, Breakfast Club of Canada): Good morning, Mr. Chair and honourable members.

As CEO of Breakfast Club of Canada, a former social worker and the mother of five children, I am more concerned than ever for the well-being of Canadian children. Today, 2.4 million children in Canada live in a food insecure household. That is one in three. For more than 30 years, the club has been dedicated to fighting student food insecurity. With our community partners, we support more than 5,600 programs across the country, and demand keeps growing. In 2025-26, those very same programs reported spending close to 30% more than the year before for food.

[*Translation*]

Indigenous communities are even more vulnerable. Our mid-year survey shows that the cost of running these programs in schools in indigenous communities is about three times higher than in other schools and that it is more difficult to obtain affordable, high-quality food in indigenous communities. That is why the federal funding allocated to these communities, which currently accounts for about 23% of the total program budget, is so important and must be increased as soon as possible to address these circumstances.

[*English*]

As families continue to face economic pressures, international trade tensions and food supply chain challenges, investing in school food programs is more important than ever. These programs support children's health, learning and development while strengthening local agriculture, promoting Canadian-made food, enhancing food system resilience and advancing social equity. They are both an affordability measure for families and a strategic investment in Canada's future workforce.

[*Translation*]

According to the new Hunger Count 2026, children made over 700,000 visits to food banks. That represents one-third of all food bank clients and an increase of over 79% in five years.

As early as 2021, Hunger Count found that family visits to food banks increase when schools close and meal programs are not available. School meals are a real social safety net.

[*English*]

Judith Barry (Co-Founder and Governmental Relations Director, Breakfast Club of Canada): Mr. Chair, that safety net now has federal support. The $1-billion five-year commitment was first made in September 2021 and delivered in budget 2024 with the creation of the national school food program, but between the pledge and the first funded school, grocery prices rose by about 21%.

[*Translation*]

Those prices are continuing to rise. Since September 2021, the price of food purchased in stores has risen by about 28%.

[*English*]

In practical terms, the $1-billion pledge in 2021 now buys about 783 million dollars' worth of food—only 78¢ on the dollar. The commitment is unchanged, but its purchasing power has fallen.

[*Translation*]

Today, when divided among all the students in the country, the $200 million per year in federal funding amounts to $0.22 per child per day.

That said, funding for the national school food program helps the provinces and territories to expand access to their school food programs, but there is still work to be done. To build on this momentum, while responding to rising costs and implementation challenges, we propose four recommendations for budget 2027.

[*English*]

One, recognize the national school food program as a budget priority and match the $400 million invested by provinces, territories and municipalities.

Two, make the school food Infrastructure fund permanent and expand it. The 40 projects the club supported increased the number of students reached by 47%.

Three, invest in Canadian-grown food for school food programs.

Four, take a whole-of-government approach and provide the national vision, accountability and coordination needed to make school food a core pillar of children's health and well-being in Canada.

In conclusion, the AppEco cost-benefit analysis shows that every dollar invested returns nearly two dollars to society, starting with anticipated savings of over $1,000 per year for the average Canadian family—the very family now turning to food banks.

[*Translation*]

The national program has now been made permanent. The next phase will be crucial in enabling both the program and children to reach their full potential.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barry.

Ms. Marin, you have five minutes.

Valérie Marin (Executive Director, Centre d'action bénévole Marguerite-Dubois): Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to participate in this study on food inflation and the national school food program.

My name is Valérie Marin, and I am the executive director of the Centre d'action bénévole Marguerite-Dubois in Bromont, which is located in the Brome-Missisquoi RCM in Quebec. I am a trained social worker, and I recently completed a master's degree in food security at Laval University.

Today, I mainly want to share with you what we are seeing every day on the ground.

Requests for food assistance have been on the rise in our community for several years now. That is a serious concern, but what also worries me is the change in the profile of the people who are seeking our services. We are now helping two-parent families in which both parents work but whose incomes are no longer sufficient to cover all of their basic needs. We are also seeing an increase in demand from older people, particularly for food services that help them remain in their own homes.

Rising food prices are putting a lot of pressure on household budgets. Families have to choose between food, housing, heating and transportation. In a rural area like Brome-Missisquoi, long distances and transportation costs exacerbate these difficulties.

Today, having a job no longer necessarily guarantees a family's food security. As a community organization, we respond to those needs through food assistance, community meals, meals on wheels and various support services.

Despite our best efforts, we cannot offset the effects of the rising cost of living on our own. When families with two working parents have to ask for food assistance, it makes us think about the role that schools can play in ensuring access to nutritious food.

I am not an expert on the national school food program, and I cannot claim to know how well it is working. However, based on my experience, I can say that it does help to meet needs. Such a program provides additional support for families, as long as it is sustainable, accessible, free from stigma and tailored to the local context, particularly the supply and transportation-related challenges faced by rural areas.

That brings me to another important point. While some people are struggling to put food on the table, we are continuing to waste large quantities of perfectly good food.

In Brome-Missisquoi, we have worked with our partners to develop a collective approach to recover, process and redistribute unsold food. I compiled data on this initiative as part of my master's thesis. During the period under review, in 2025, nearly 80,000 kilograms of food were recovered and over 14,000 meals were prepared and redistributed.

We learned through this experience that it is possible to improve the use of available food resources to meet real needs, but it also taught us another valuable lesson: Food that is being given away for free is not always accessible food. It takes equipment, staff, infrastructure and effective coordination to collect, transport, store, process and redistribute that food. Volunteer work is an extraordinary asset, but it cannot replace stable and predictable funding.

Based on these findings, I would like to make three recommendations to the committee.

First, we need to strengthen measures that promote affordable access to healthy food, particularly for working families and seniors with limited incomes. Food assistance cannot be the only response to the rising cost of living. We also need to do something about the conditions that prevent households from meeting their basic needs.

Second, we need to ensure the sustainability of food programs, particularly in schools, while taking into account the actual program costs and the specific circumstances of rural communities. These programs must be able to operate long term without constantly relying on ad hoc funding. The implementation of these programs must also take into account the local context and the resources that are already available in the communities.

Third, I recommend that the federal government look into all of the ways that it could provide sustainable support for initiatives that recover and process food surpluses, whether legislative, regulatory or financial. For example, it could consider passing legislation aimed at reducing food waste.

In Brome-Missisquoi, we have demonstrated that it is possible to implement practical solutions. However, the development and sustainability of those solutions still too often depends on ad hoc funding and the ability of organizations to mobilize their resources, even though these initiatives help to reduce food waste, use existing resources and contribute to the food security of our communities. It would therefore be useful to better recognize their contribution and support the infrastructure, equipment and human resources necessary to run them.

I would like to close by reminding the committee that solutions already exist in our communities. We have shown that it is possible to implement practical, collective initiatives to improve food security. However, in order for these initiatives to really contribute to sustainable change, they must be recognized and supported in a way that is befitting of their contribution.

● (1110)

I hope that the recommendations made today will be given serious consideration and, more importantly, result in real action.

Thank you, everyone.

● (1115)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Marin.

[*English*]

Go ahead, Madam Lavoie, for five minutes.

Melissa Lavoie (Director of Philanthropy and Revenue Generation, Loaves and Fishes Community Food Bank Society): Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to share my professional experience with the impacts of food price inflation.

My name is Melissa Lavoie, director of philanthropy and revenue generation at the Loaves and Fishes Community Food Bank. I'm joining you from Nanaimo, British Columbia, on the traditional territory of the Snuneymuxw First Nation. For nearly 20 years, I worked in wealth management, most recently at a credit union that provided funding to non-profits in our community. About a year ago, I moved from banking to food banking.

What surprised me the most is that almost everyone I talk to has a Loaves and Fishes story as a donor, partner or client. My hairstylist and her husband moved from Ontario for a job on Vancouver Island. When they arrived, the job did not materialize. For several months, the Loaves and Fishes Community Food Bank was how they met their essential needs. This is what we're seeing. More and more people are doing fine, until one thing goes wrong.

Loaves and Fishes is much more than a community food bank. We are a regional food recovery and distribution organization. Seven days a week, our trucks collect surplus food from more than 40 grocery stores, wholesalers and retailers. We sort it for its highest use: good food for people first, animal feed for farmers second, compost third, then landfill as a last resort. We run 20 free food markets on mid and north Vancouver Island. We supply more than 100 non-profits from Victoria to Haida Gwaii with food free of charge. In 2025, we distributed 12.1 million dollars' worth of food. This year, we distributed 8.1 million dollars' worth by the end of September, with the months with the greatest needs still ahead of us.

Tomorrow, we will officially open the Tom Harris Regional Food Centre. It's a $16-million, 24,000-square-foot hub funded by all levels of government. It was built to ensure food security across coastal B.C. because the need is that large, with no sign of slowing.

This brings me to food prices. The national average treats Canada like one grocery store, and it is not. Almost everything on Vancouver Island arrives by ferry or marine freight. That cost shows up in every trip to the grocery store. Our island is long. We have a satellite warehouse in Port Hardy. That is a five-hour drive north of Nanaimo. The north island communities we serve have roughly 8,000 people. Last year, over 1,400 of them made over 17,000 visits to free food markets. That's about one in five people relying directly on us for food.

Who comes to us now? We are deliberately a low-barrier organization. We do not collect much demographic data, but our markets give people groceries to take home and cook, so most of our clients have a place to call home. What they don't have is enough left at the end of the month. We see people still in their workboots on their way home from construction sites, as well as families, students, seniors, people living with disabilities and many newcomers. Our market information is now produced in six languages. We don't meet all of anyone's needs. We are a supplement, but if a week of groceries means someone can pay their cellphone bill, they can then take the call that gets them the job. If it means they can make their rent or fix the car they drive to work, that's the win. Food banks are quietly holding up people's jobs and access to housing.

Inflation is squeezing our supply side too. Retailers are managing waste more tightly. There is less food to recover and it is often in worse shape. We work harder for every kilogram, but scale makes things possible. Last week, a large retailer called us after a fire. We used eight tractor-trailers for 208 pallets of food and essentials like laundry soap and toilet paper. We'll sanitize it and get it distributed to families instead of the landfill. A small food bank could not have taken that call. We can because of the public and private partners that have invested in us.

What I'd like you to take away is this: National inflation figures don't describe what a household on Vancouver Island can afford. The same food costs more, depending on where you live. When food banks have to be built at this scale, let me tell you that it says something about food inflation.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lavoie.

I want to welcome a number of new members to HUMA.

We'll now begin our first six-minute round.

We'll begin with Madam Kronis for six minutes.

Tamara Kronis (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, CPC): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to all of the witnesses who have come this morning. I appreciate the insights you've shared with us.

Ms. Lavoie, I want to go back to the very last thing that you said about how the national food inflation figures don't describe the reality of our lives on Vancouver Island. I'm wondering if you could elaborate on that a bit.

● (1120)

Melissa Lavoie: Vancouver Island is a very western region. It is very isolated. We have no bridges and no transportation. The island itself is very long and has a diverse environment, with people often not living anywhere close to grocery stores. We also supply food as far up as Haida Gwaii. To get there, you have to go to the north end of Vancouver Island, take a ferry for about seven hours and transfer to another ferry to arrive in Haida Gwaii. We send food there at great expense to ensure food security in the most remote regions of the B.C. coast.

Tamara Kronis: Thank you very much for that.

Congratulations on the opening of the Tom Harris Regional Food Centre. As a member of the community, I am very aware of how hard-won that project was and how much true community effort went into building it. It is going to help our communities help those who need help, and it's also going to help with food recovery, keeping as much waste as possible out of our limited landfill space.

I'm wondering if you could share a little more about how the low-barrier free food markets will work and the difference they make not just in our community of Nanaimo, but across Vancouver Island.

Melissa Lavoie: Certainly.

The regional hub in Nanaimo, the Tom Harris Regional Food Centre, is a centralized piece of community infrastructure. That allows us to send food out, the way we distribute, directly to clients as a free food market. Picture it like a pop-up. We require no infrastructure of our own in the free food market system. We partner with a local organization, sometimes a church and, most recently, Vancouver Island University.

For any community that wants a free food market, all they need is space, some tables, Internet and volunteers. Our driver shows up with the truck, with the food. It's one employee, and the rest are volunteers. They can deliver a free food market to any community across Vancouver Island and the B.C. coast that needs one. This is smart use of community dollars. It all comes from one centralized piece of infrastructure.

Tamara Kronis: Thanks for that.

Another thing I really admire about the work that Loaves and Fishes does is the way it supports other organizations, particularly organizations that feed seniors and people in community living situations.

Can you describe that program?

Melissa Lavoie: We currently supply over 100 community partners. These can be organizations, everything from Island Health to school boards to organizations like the Salvation Army, St. Vincent de Paul and many others.

We supply them with food free of charge to run their programs so that they can use their limited resources on that programming. It doesn't make sense, in our opinion, to have many organizations buying trucks, hiring staff and going around collecting food to be recovered. Rather, one centralized organization, Loaves and Fishes, can do this much more efficiently and cost-effectively and then provide that food to other organizations.

We recently launched a software program called FoodCopia that will enhance this even more. Further away, organizations will be able to look online in real time and see our inventory of recovered food, and we'll be able to ship that out to them directly, becoming a true food wholesaler of recovered food to community organizations free of charge.

Tamara Kronis: That's a really amazing accomplishment. I commend you for it.

The Loaves and Fishes network now encompasses more than 100 organizations and indigenous communities along the coast. I want to dig into your supply chain and give you the opportunity to talk about what makes it hardest to get food to smaller or more remote communities.

Melissa Lavoie: Transportation, hands down, is the most expensive aspect of our operation. We all need to talk about the rising price of fuel, keeping trucks on the road and hiring accredited, qualified truck drivers to move that food. We rely heavily on the BC Ferries network as well, which is a very expensive system. We partner with Helicopters Without Borders in some cases. When they are flying people into remote communities, we will add food to their load when they have space.

Without question, transportation costs are the biggest challenge to getting food to those locations.

● (1125)

Tamara Kronis: One of the biggest challenges we have mid-island in general is access to commercial kitchen space. Can you talk a little bit about the commercial kitchen space you're building at the Tom Harris Regional Food Centre, what distance we have to go toward that and how members of our community can help?

Melissa Lavoie: We have a roughed-in commercial kitchen space in the new facility that will allow us to improve our percentage of recovered food that can be delivered to humans rather than diverted to animal food. Just as in our home kitchens, food can be canned, frozen or turned into soups, stews and all sorts of things rather than go to animal feed. But it needs a processing kitchen to do that. The current cost of putting the equipment in the roughed-in space is $500,000. That will allow us to, as I said, distribute more good food to humans across Vancouver Island and coastal B.C.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kronis.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Villeneuve, you have six minutes.

Louis Villeneuve (Brome—Missisquoi, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here with us this morning.

Ms. Marin, thank you for joining us as the executive director of the Centre d'action bénévole Marguerite-Dubois. You have been working at the intersection of food security and community action for several years now. We obviously know each other quite well. I worked with you when I served as the mayor of Bromont. I want to take this opportunity to commend you for your leadership, which has brought the community together and helped to build a volunteer centre that serves as a model throughout the riding. Thank you for that, Ms. Marin.

I also want to recognize that you have put in place initiatives to prevent food waste, use food surpluses and help vulnerable people, including children. I therefore think that you are very well placed to tell us about the real impacts of food inflation and about the way government measures are helping to support our families. In 2024, we announced the implementation of the 2024-25 national school food program, to which we have allocated more than $1 billion over five years. I also heard other witnesses talking about it. We know that there is still work to be done.

Let's start with that, Ms. Marin. To your knowledge, how is the national school food program helping families?

Valérie Marin: My expertise lies more in the real impact on the families that I work with and that we help.

There is no doubt that the national school food program reduces the financial strain on families. This is not just about feeding children at school. It is also about relieving financial strain on families. I think it is important to mention that because this also helps parents who have non-standard schedules or who work full time with organizational issues and logistics. I also want to say that, when there is a program at school that is open to everyone, it helps to reduce stigma. Children are not singled out based on their parents' income. School food programs give families a sense of dignity and ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity.

Louis Villeneuve: Thank you, Ms. Marin.

As you mentioned earlier, you have worked on food surplus recovery and redistribution projects. Can you tell us a little about the results that you have seen on the ground?

Valérie Marin: We implemented an integrated food collection, processing and redistribution system.

Incidentally, I would like to thank Ms. Lavoie for what she shared with us. It was very interesting.

We have this system in the RCM. It is the Brome-Missisquoi RCM's anti-waste committee. All areas of the RCM participate in it.

Together, we recover all of the surplus food from our vegetable growers and grocery stores. When the food looks good as is and people can prepare it themselves, we redistribute it. Otherwise, we take all of the surplus that cannot be redistributed as is and process it in our kitchens. Thanks to a grant from the local food infrastructure fund, the RCM was able to set up three processing kitchens in the region, so any remaining surplus that needs to be processed is sent to our processing kitchens. The food is processed there and then redistributed.

I want to say that this is quite a logistical undertaking. It is a great project.

● (1130)

Louis Villeneuve: Let's move on quickly, because I have a few more questions for you.

First, you just described what you are doing as far as recovery initiatives are concerned. To what extent do these initiatives, when combined with the national school food program, help to alleviate income insecurity? What is the connection between these initiatives and the program?

Valérie Marin: What we are doing in terms of redistribution certainly provides some relief. We know that the food portion of families' budgets is the one where people are able to make the most adjustments. By providing food assistance, we are enabling people to properly clothe their children and pay school fees. Sometimes, they also request assistance for extracurricular activities. This takes some of the financial pressure off other areas of the household budget.

Louis Villeneuve: Thank you.

We have barely a minute left.

If you could make just one recommendation to the federal government today, what would it be?

Valérie Marin: As I said in my recommendations, I would strongly support exploring the various options. There are several countries around the world that have adopted food waste policies or laws. That is something that is gaining traction. My recommendation would be for the federal government to really examine all the options when it comes to implementing such a policy or legislation, and to provide support for the provinces in enacting this kind of law. I would therefore strongly recommend implementing a food waste policy.

Louis Villeneuve: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villeneuve.

Ms. Larouche, you have six minutes.

Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm taking plenty of notes. I would like to thank all of the witnesses for joining us today, especially Ms. Desharnais and Ms. Barry. We also heard a very insightful perspective on Vancouver from Ms. Lavoie. That said, my first questions will be for Ms. Marin.

We come from the same part of the country. In fact, your volunteer centre indirectly provides services in the village where I grew up, as well as at my elementary school, Saint-Vincent-Ferrier School. It's a region I know well.

We also got to know each other through community work. Hearing your testimony reminded me of the work I did in helping establish a food security working group in Brome–Missisquoi as part of my role.

Valérie Marin: Yes.

Andréanne Larouche: This is an issue that is particularly important to me.

I would first like to come back to the statistics you shared, particularly your observation that the profile of people seeking assistance is changing. That is something you highlighted in your testimony today. We've just seen the Hunger Count report. The SOS Dépannage food bank in Granby brought this to my attention. Shortly after the report was released, I received an email from them. We'll be speaking soon.

Of course, we continue to see seniors turning to food assistance. There's been a small but steady increase. However, demand from employed individuals is also increasing. It is striking to see that, in 2026, having a job is no longer enough to guarantee food security.

Of course, food prices are increasing. There's no denying that.

Given what you've said, what are the consequences of sustained increases in food prices, not only for organizations like yours, but especially for households, and particularly those living on fixed incomes? Many seniors, for example, rely on fixed sources of income such as their pensions and the guaranteed income supplement. To what extent are these two factors driving the increase in the number of requests for assistance that you are receiving?

Valérie Marin: It is certainly true that more and more seniors want to remain in their own homes. It's not just about being able to access food, but having access to nutritious food. Not all seniors can afford catering services or have the budget for it. Maintaining a healthy, varied diet and being able to prepare meals independently can become a real challenge. We have a meals-on-wheels organization, just like in Granby.

As for families, it's certainly true that the demographic is changing, but this is also changing the way our food banks are organized. Demand is constantly rising. In recent years, we have seen an average annual increase of 9% in the number of working individuals relying on our services. We now need to provide food assistance at different times of the day in order to support these individuals. We need to be available. So, we have adapted the way we operate to better meet their needs.

● (1135)

Andréanne Larouche: Should we not also consider, from the outset, those on fixed incomes who do not bring in enough money to cover basic needs such as housing and food?

Valérie Marin: Yes, absolutely. That is one of my recommendations. I'm sorry, I didn't fully understand the question. That's one of my recommendations. We need to ensure there is financial support for food. As far as family budgets are concerned, we certainly should be working on that.

Andréanne Larouche: Perfect, thank you.

Fortunately for you, you have a model in place. You are also making good use of your second-hand shop as a source of revenue. That said, I believe we should be looking at ways to provide you with additional support.

Valérie Marin: There's no doubt that securing funding remains a challenge for community organizations. Of course, generating our own revenue gives us a measure of stability and allows us to improve our services.

Andréanne Larouche: You also have to work really hard, and organizing all of this does put quite a bit of pressure on you.

Valérie Marin: Yes.

Andréanne Larouche: So, how else can we help you? We'll look into that as part of this study. Thank you.

You've understood correctly; I was simply asking for some further information.

Valérie Marin: Okay, great.

Andréanne Larouche: That's perfect, Ms. Marin.

Ms. Barry, I have had the opportunity to visit schools in the riding of Shefford that benefit from the Breakfast Club's services. You mentioned that you have observed changing needs and that more and more working families and children are relying on this support. In fact, there are some schools that would qualify for the program and benefit greatly from it, but they are currently on a waiting list. This demonstrates the need to continue working to ensure that more families and children can access your services.

Judith Barry: Absolutely. In the schools currently supported by the Breakfast Club, whether the 600 schools in Quebec or the 5,600 schools served across Canada, we are seeing a significant increase in the number of children joining those who already need this service. Following the pandemic, the increase was immediate. We saw the number of students using the program rise by 50% to 60%. We have also seen a shift in how breakfasts are delivered. Increasingly, programs are being integrated into the school day rather than offered only before classes, allowing more students to benefit from them. So, that is one aspect.

At the same time, the waiting list continues to grow. Because of limited funding, the Breakfast Club and its partners are unable to meet the demand. There are 1,000 schools across the country on the waiting list. More than 500 of those are eligible and are considered to be located in disadvantaged areas in Quebec, but are unable to receive these services.

So, the needs are truly significant.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[*English*]

For the five-minute round, we'll begin with Ms. Falk.

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

I'd like to thank all the witnesses for coming here today.

It is very alarming that food insecurity is rising at such a rate in a country such as Canada. I come from a part of the country that is known as the breadbasket of not only the nation but also the world. The farmers in Saskatchewan definitely take pride in the food they grow, the quality of that food and their ability to feed people.

I know we've heard a lot already this morning, and this is just the start of the study, but nearly one in five employed people access food banks. That is bananas. It's literally crazy.

I have young children, so I sometimes find myself in places where there are a lot of other children with their parents. It is a very common occurrence that I will be having conversations with parents, whether it's at a sporting event or at school, and they will confide in me that they aren't eating at home. They are sitting back and letting their children eat to ensure that their kids have enough, and they're going without.

We in this place have the privilege and opportunity to make laws that literally affect people's lives at this level. The fact that people cannot put food on the table must be considered with the utmost responsibility and seriousness.

We've heard about the rising costs of groceries and the rising costs of transport. Canada is not a small country, as we all know. I'm in a very rural area, and the closest city centre is about a three-hour drive away, as is the closest international airport. That means everything is coming in by truck, and our farmers are shipping out by rail.

Ms. Desharnais, I noticed when my colleague was asking questions about transport costs that you were nodding your head. I'm wondering if you could elaborate on how that is affecting prices and costs when it comes to feeding kids.

● (1140)

Julie Desharnais: Absolutely. Thank you for your question. I'll respond in French, if that's okay.

[*Translation*]

Indeed, we have seen in recent years that the transport costs for the Breakfast Club, in delivering breakfasts to all its various programs, have risen substantially. We are also constantly talking about the “last mile” of delivery, which is always particularly challenging in rural communities and remote villages. For us at the Breakfast Club, this is also a challenge, because we make deliveries to Nunavut and Nunavik. As a result, we must consider the full range of transportation methods, whether by freight, air, rail or marine transport. These are all factors we take into account.

Over the past few years, we have seen our costs increase by approximately 30%. Ms. Barry touched on this briefly. This applies not only to food procurement but also to transportation costs, which means that we—

[*English*]

Rosemarie Falk: Sorry, but how many years was that? You said “a few”.

Julie Desharnais: This is in the last two years.

[*Translation*]

Over the last two years, however, we have seen a dramatic increase. Because we handle such a large volume and are able to deliver anywhere, we are also in a position to seek out savings in various other ways. That allows us to continue providing our services and delivering nutritious breakfasts every day to more than one million children across Canada. It really is—

[*English*]

Rosemarie Falk: Thank you. I'm sorry. My time is limited. I want to get a question in for Ms. Lavoie.

I understand that your food recovery program collects surplus food from grocery stores, which you alluded to in your opening remarks, and then redistributes it. Even though the food is donated and you're not necessarily purchasing that out of pocket, what does it cost to collect, transport, store and distribute the food?

Melissa Lavoie: In 2025, we were almost entirely a food recovery organization. I believe we bought less than 100,000 dollars' worth of food for the 12.1 million dollars' worth of food that we distributed. In round numbers, it took us approximately a $3-million operating budget to deliver that 12.1 million dollars' worth of food.

What you'll see there is that we have an abundance of food in Canada. Some other speakers have alluded to this: We don't have a food shortage. We have a food waste problem, and we have a food distribution problem. I believe this is causing the increase in hunger across Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Falk.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Koutrakis, you have five minutes.

● (1145)

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

I would like to thank all the witnesses for joining us this morning.

It is truly concerning to hear about the situation facing many families and children across Canada today. That is why the government has repeatedly increased funding for a number of programs. I won't list them all, as I believe you are familiar with all the programs we are trying to put in place to help families.

Ms. Marin, at the end of your speech, you mentioned that solutions already exist. I'd like to give you the opportunity to go into a little more detail about the solutions that are already in place and how we could improve them.

Valérie Marin: There are already successful initiatives in place, including Ms. Lavoie's project in Vancouver, the one we have established in the Brome-Missisquoi RCM, and dozens of others across the country that recover and process surplus food. I'm using this example because it's my area of expertise, but it's clear that these initiatives work and that they are very much a reality. The challenge is to ensure that they can continue. We need to ensure that the initiatives that are already working are sustainable in the long term. That is essentially what I meant to say.

In our case, we have this initiative, but there are several others. I was just reading in Le Droit that in Gatineau, there's going to be an initiative involving community food banks to prevent food waste and repurpose food.

It's certainly essential to support the initiatives that already exist and are working, while also looking at how they can be replicated, because we can see that they work. That was the point I wanted to raise.

Annie Koutrakis: I believe you are currently continuing your master's degree in this subject.

Valérie Marin: I actually completed it last December. My study focused on the integrated system we established in Brome-Missisquoi. We continue to maintain, improve and transform it so we can provide services to as many people as possible. That's an ongoing challenge. We also need to improve our techniques.

Complying with provincial health and safety standards is definitely a challenge too. As people have mentioned a few times, transportation is another issue, specifically when it comes to maintaining the cold chain. There are logistical considerations that make it difficult to sustain these initiatives in the long-term.

Earlier, the witness pointed out that we get food for free, but, as I said, just because the food is free doesn't mean it's accessible. There's an entire system behind the scenes that enables us to get this food to families, and that's the work that needs support.

Annie Koutrakis: Over the course of your studies and your experience with partnerships, have you had opportunities to look at what other jurisdictions are doing? Are there any studies? Are there other countries with programs like this that are working and that we could look to as examples?

Valérie Marin: Several countries have anti-waste policies. For example, the Garot law in France prohibits retailers from throwing away food that is still fit for consumption.

That kind of approach has its issues. If we ever decide to adopt similar legislation here, I believe it should be designed to be more incentive-based than punitive. Organizations need the capacity to respond and recover the food so retailers aren't penalized. We really have to give it a lot of thought.

That said, there are a lot of very inspiring examples from around the world.

Annie Koutrakis: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Koutrakis.

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

● (1150)

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Once again, we are seeing the impact of food inflation on household incomes. We know new groups of people are feeling the pinch. Even working people can no longer make ends meet and have to seek assistance. Some schools have waiting lists for breakfast programs. Seniors on fixed incomes can no longer afford rent or food. In some cases, beyond having to turn to food assistance, they may even end up experiencing homelessness, whether hidden or visible. That's what happens when people don't have enough income to meet basic needs, such as adequate housing and food.

Let's talk more about how we can help you. Your breakfast club and your food bank are experiencing the impact of food inflation. Ms. Marin, you clearly demonstrated that in your master's research and in your call for an anti-food-waste policy. You touched on it with my colleague in the previous round. You've started seeing the impact. Is there anything else you'd like to add on that?

As you said, you've looked at what's happening elsewhere, in places like France. You talked about an approach that you think should be more incentive-based than punitive. Is there anything else you'd like to add on the subject of an anti-food-waste policy?

Valérie Marin: The policy certainly has to be well thought out because, ultimately, we want people to participate and we want them to do so willingly. There are good examples around the world that we can draw on to ensure that it's workable in Canada.

I know that there's also an issue associated with different provincial frameworks and different ministries in charge. For instance, Quebec has a ministry of agriculture, fisheries and food. I am aware of two anti-food-waste policy bills that have already been introduced in Quebec. They're relatively simple but comprehensive policies. I would recommend taking a look at them if you're interested. One of the bills was introduced by Mr. Arseneau, and the other came from Québec solidaire, but I don't remember who introduced it. They're straightforward, practical policies and excellent sources of inspiration. I would favour simple policies over highly complex ones.

Andréanne Larouche: Do the Viande solidaire project and gleaning fit into this kind of anti-food-waste policy?

Valérie Marin: Gleaning presents a human resources challenge. It's typically done by volunteers. We all understand that gleaning must happen right away, not next day, so it's tricky to organize.

The Viande solidaire project is currently being implemented in the Eastern Townships.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[*English*]

Mr. Reynolds, you have five minutes.

This will conclude the first hour of this round.

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

Thank you, witnesses, for coming here today, and thank you so much for all the important work you're doing in serving Canadians and helping Canadians eat. That's scary to say.

There have been a few startling statistics shared with the committee today. There are 2.4 million children experiencing food insecurity. Food prices have increased 28% since 2021. Families with two working parents are having to access food banks to get food security. This is scary to me. People going hungry today is part of the problem, a big part of the problem, but also, I think, in the short term, it's part of the solution.... In the long term, I think the real root of the problem is our food prices. Like I said, there has been a 28% increase since 2021, and it doesn't seem to be slowing down. I want to talk a bit more about that.

Madam Marin, my first question is for you.

What would you say is the root cause for the steady rise in food prices beyond normal inflation—because clearly this is not normal inflation—over the last five years? That lines up with that 28% increase since 2021.

● (1155)

[*Translation*]

Valérie Marin: We depend heavily on food that comes from elsewhere. We bring food in instead of growing it here and strengthening local agriculture so that more of what we consume is produced locally. Transportation is a big issue. Our food comes from elsewhere. We're very dependent on food that comes from elsewhere.

I would also point out that the grocery market in Canada is dominated by three major players. I can't tell you exactly how it works because I'm not involved in it, but consider a franchised grocery store that wants to promote local products and local producers. It's at a disadvantage because it doesn't buy in bulk or because of the fee structure. We had conversations with local grocers about why grocery stores and food retailers weren't promoting local products. There's a much larger, more powerful structure that puts them at a disadvantage if they put local agricultural products on their shelves.

So, yes, I think the lack of diversity in food distribution across Canada is a problem.

[*English*]

Colin Reynolds: Do you know how much of the food we consume here in Canada, on a percentage basis, is from Canada?

[*Translation*]

Valérie Marin: I don't know what that would be for Canada as a whole, but I can tell you that it's less than 4% in the RCM of Brome-Missisquoi.

[*English*]

Colin Reynolds: Okay. Thank you.

My next question is for Madam Lavoie.

You mentioned that in Canada, we have a food waste problem and a food distribution problem. I'd really like to hear more about that, if you could elaborate on it.

Melissa Lavoie: Certainly. Loaves and Fishes is really founded on the belief that there is an abundance of food in Canada. It is not like some other countries that simply do not have food resources available. We have food. It is simply not utilized to its highest and best use. It is not made available widely to the population. A lot goes to waste and ends up creating other problems in terms of landfill use, recycling problems with the plastic packaging and all of those other ancillary issues that arise from our food supply beliefs.

For example, when you stop at the grocery store on the way home from work at eight o'clock at night, you expect to see a full shelf of beautiful strawberries in their plastic clamshell packaging, but where do those go the next day, when they're no longer suitable for distribution to the public? They go to the landfill, unless we have a food recovery system that can take them and redistribute them elsewhere.

That is what I mean when I say we have an abundance of food in Canada. A great portion of it goes to waste, and what doesn't go to waste is often not distributed appropriately across the country.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Reynolds.

To conclude, we have Ms. Nguyen for five minutes.

Chi Nguyen (Spadina—Harbourfront, Lib.): Thank you very much.

I want to say a huge thank you to the witnesses for joining us today.

[*Translation*]

I'm going to ask my questions in English, because I'm more comfortable in English.

[*English*]

I want to start with the Breakfast Club of Canada.

I know that in the Toronto area you are supporting over 850 breakfast programs and reaching more than 250,000 children. Can you tell me what this means in terms of the level of need of school food programs that you're seeing in the city?

Judith Barry: In Toronto, and in Ontario specifically, more public schools than ever are accessing public funds for implementing snack, breakfast and morning meal programs, and lunch programs as well. What we've been witnessing is that the quality and variety of food that is offered is problematic. We can provide a program in pretty much all public schools, but is it really five days a week? Is it really universal and providing healthy, nutritious food? It's not, everywhere.

● (1200)

Chi Nguyen: Thank you for adding a little bit of detail.

Madam Marin, you talked about reducing stigma in the idea of a universal program for food. I was wondering if that principle applies to other kinds of programs and supports that we need to see in communities to keep them resilient and functioning well. It's the idea of universality of these approaches to keep making sure that kids can access the food they need.

[*Translation*]

Valérie Marin: I know United Way has some programs that provide schools supplies every year. There are a lot of programs like that to help children out every fall so that they have all the school supplies they need, just like everyone else.

We worked on that with United Way. We made sure that the people helping with sponsorship didn't have children at the participating schools because we didn't want kids recognizing donated items. Stigma is still an issue in schools and can lead to many other issues, such as bullying.

Chi Nguyen: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

For my last question, we know that communities are really struggling, so there are a number of federal interventions that are being supported by our government, whether it's the Canada child benefit, the national school food program or the groceries and essentials benefit. Can each of you talk about the ways in which policy interventions and these resources are helping communities immediately?

[*Translation*]

Julie Desharnais: I'll start.

They are tools. They also send a clear message that we all need to work on improving how we do things to reduce waste and make healthy food more accessible. I think all these programs help us spread that message to the community, rally everyone around this objective and find solutions.

That said, I would conclude by saying that there is no single solution. Everyone has to work together. That's where our strength lies, and that's how we'll be able to address inflation and the fact that children are showing up at school every day with empty bellies. I think communities must rally around this objective, and therein lies the strength of the programs the federal government is promoting. Communities that embrace them must continue to champion that message.

Judith Barry: Yes, these programs can complement one another.

[*English*]

When those programs can interact together, it really helps us to optimize the resources invested. We witnessed that through the school food infrastructure fund while we were connecting food hub and food bank initiatives that were able to distribute food to schools. Following some infrastructure investment, they were reaching 47% more students with the same funding for food. The infrastructure optimized the production and transformation of food and probably included food waste measures.

There are always ways to better connect those initiatives and ensure that we can join forces in ensuring a safety net that is really strong for our communities and families.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Nguyen.

Thank you to the witnesses.

[*English*]

We will now suspend for a few moments while we transition to the next hour.

● (1200)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1210)

The Chair: Welcome back, members, for the second hour of today's panel. We have witnesses appearing in person and virtually.

To those new who are joining, I would ask you to familiarize yourself with the translation. Use the earpiece unless you're fluent in both official languages. It's important that everybody participating understand the testimony and the questioning from all members of the committee *en français et en anglais*. Virtually please click on the globe icon at the bottom of your screen. Choose the language that you are comfortable participating in. If there is an interruption in translation service, please get my attention and we'll suspend while it's corrected. As a final note, please direct all questions and comments through the chair. Wait until I recognize you by name before proceeding.

In the last hour, we have in the room with us, from the Coalition for Healthy School Food, Carolyn Webb, policy and engagement lead.

From Food Banks Canada, we have Nick McRoberts, vice-president, advocacy and research.

We also have, from Les Cuisiniers Différents, Chantal Pagé, executive director, by video conference.

Each witness has up to five minutes for their opening statement.

We'll begin with you, Ms. Webb.

Carolyn Webb (Policy and Engagement Lead, Coalition for Healthy School Food): Thank you, Mr. Chair and committee, for inviting me to speak.

The Coalition for Healthy School Food is Canada's largest school food network, with over 550 organizational members and endorsers from all provinces and territories.

I spoke to this committee in February and am pleased to speak again today about the positive impacts of the program and how it can grow to achieve its vision. The program is working, and all jurisdictions are experiencing its benefits. Our members tell us how important it is that they can count on stable funding now that the program is permanent, and they're investing in longer-term infrastructure, staff, and expansion to new schools.

The program has incentivized provincial investment in the Atlantic provinces, which have leveraged the funds to create universal quality programs, with New Brunswick and Nova Scotia now serving breakfast and lunch. In Ontario, programs have increased their food quality and reliability so more students can access food on more school days. One provider shared that they have seen “record program growth, including the onboarding of 29 new programs over the past year—the highest expansion in our program’s history”.

[*Translation*]

Federal funding has enabled service providers in Ontario to replace some prepackaged foods with minimally processed or unprocessed foods, such as fruits and vegetables. Some have also started offering hot or ready-to-eat meals at lunchtime and providing a wider variety of foods from different culinary traditions. These measures support families experiencing food insecurity, and providers have reported reduced stigma and improved student behaviour.

[*English*]

I also just heard about a remote indigenous community in Saskatchewan that used federal funds along with education commission funding to start offering breakfast, lunch and two snacks to all students in 2025. They've seen improved literacy and math scores and increased attendance.

While we're seeing invaluable impacts from the national investment, it needs to grow to achieve your policy goal of reaching all children and youth in Canada. Many schools still don't have programs and with federal investment at around 20¢ per student per day with varying matched funds, many programs can't offer quality meals, often providing something closer to a light snack.

You ask about food inflation. Rising food prices significantly impact families and school food providers. We're asking you to double your funding from $200 million to $400 million per year to match the over $400 million from provinces, territories and municipalities. This would help Canada advance its vision of a universal program and get us closer to other high-income countries, which invest around five times our provincial, territorial and federal funding amounts combined.

You ask about measuring impact. We recommend following Sweden's example by developing a coordinated national research and evaluation plan to implement longitudinal studies on health, education, economic and food system outcomes. This would let us monitor progress towards the national policy, share learning across jurisdictions, strengthen policy decisions and demonstrate the impact of investment.

● (1215)

[*Translation*]

You asked us about ways to ensure equitable access across Canada. The working group on school food in Black communities recommends ensuring that foods served are diverse and culturally representative, encouraging the participation of parents and members of Black communities and creating community economic development opportunities, including by supporting farmers, school food service staff, chefs and entrepreneurs from Black communities. Increased investment will, of course, have a significant impact on equitable access.

[*English*]

You asked about design and delivery. Flowing funds to provinces, territories and indigenous partners is working. We recommend creating a national school food program round table or other structure for the federal government, provinces and territories to coordinate the collection of impact data and to support information sharing, innovation and problem solving among governments, indigenous communities and non-profits.

Last week, my colleague Brent, a Vancouver teacher, ran about 30 kilometres around the Parliament Hill lawn to draw attention to our recommendation to increase annual funding. He and others collected 1,000 postcards from students thanking your government and describing the importance of healthy school food.

I have some here for you today.

Two grade 8 students in Kingston shared this: “Dear Prime Minister, students need healthy food to have good mental health. Food is what provides us with energy and gets us focused during our classes. When you provide us with healthy food, it makes us feel like you recognize us and care. Thank you.”

Thanks.

The Chair: Mr. McRoberts, go ahead for five minutes.

Nick McRoberts (Vice President, Advocacy and Research, Food Banks Canada): Thank you, Chair and members of the committee.

My name is Nick McRoberts. I'm the vice-president of advocacy and research at Food Banks Canada. We represent a network of 5,500 local food banks and community organizations from coast to coast to coast.

Your study is looking at two things together: food price inflation and school food. In our experience, they are closely connected.

I would like to begin by recognizing progress. The current government has reconfirmed its support for the national school food program. That permanence gives schools, provinces, territories and community partners something they can plan around.

At the same time, we see every day how much families are still carrying. Our newly released “HungerCount” shows that food bank visits have more than doubled since 2019, reaching a record 2.35 million people in March 2026 alone. Over 35% of monthly food bank visits are from one- and two-parent families. One in three people walking through a food bank's doors each month in this country are children. When a household's grocery budget is cut to cover rent or hydro, it's children who feel that first. In our latest polling, one in five people in Canada said that they were eating less because they could not afford more. They are being forced to make impossible choices.

This isn't a static problem. Trade instability with our largest trading partner, climate-driven disruptions to production and volatile input costs are all still moving through the system and landing directly on grocery bills. Food price inflation isn't separate from the program's design question.

I would ask the committee to look closely at the gap between funding meals and the need for infrastructure that makes meal delivery possible. Food Banks Canada ran a school food infrastructure fund last year through Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada that shows exactly what that gap looks like. With $1.6 million provided across 24 grants for things like refrigerated vans, freezers, blast chillers and storage, community organizers went from supporting 190 schools to 241 schools, reaching nearly 8,000 additional students and moving an extra quarter of a million pounds of food each month. A food bank in Barrie grew from 26 schools to 30 schools served by a single refrigerated vehicle. A kitchen in Revelstoke was able to increase the number of meals served by a third with four chest freezers. Building capacity is the difference between a school food program that's reliable and one that's improvised. This is particularly important for low-income, indigenous, northern, rural or remote communities.

School food is one important part of a bigger picture, and our After the Bell program helps show why. Started in 2015, After the Bell delivers child-friendly food packs through local food banks to school-age children over the summer, when school meal programs are closed. It began with 700 packs. In 2023, 185,000 packs reached children in more than 200 communities across the country. The need for it tells us something very important: Children's food needs don't stop when the school day or the school year ends. School food and community food support work best together.

With that in mind, we offer three suggestions for the committee's consideration.

First, consider infrastructure alongside per-meal funding in the program's funding model so that programs can run reliably. Infrastructure at every level continues to be one of the largest inhibitors to moving food effectively in this country.

Second, when looking at outcomes, look beyond the school day to summers, weekends and holidays. Ensure that children always have access to healthy, adequate meals.

Third, keep household income in view. The federal government estimates that school food can save participating families with two children about $800 a year. That is real help. Income support remains what can directly address food insecurity. Our October polling found that one-third of respondents with household incomes below $50,000 had skipped a meal in the past three months because they could not afford it.

Food insecurity, hunger and poverty are not inevitable. At the same time, they won't solely be fixed by school food programming. We need structural changes to social supports to improve the lives of people in Canada. That is why we must relieve hunger today in order to solve hunger tomorrow. Food banks are glad to be partners in this work, and we would welcome the chance to share more of what we have learned.

I look forward to your questions.

Thank you.

● (1220)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McRoberts.

[*Translation*]

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

Chantal Pagé (Executive Director, Les Cuisiniers Différents): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

Thank you for inviting us to share Les Cuisiniers Différents's experience with Canada's national school food program.

Les Cuisiniers Différents is a social enterprise whose primary mission is to integrate young adults with intellectual disabilities, Down syndrome or autism spectrum disorders into the workforce through the world of cooking.

The pandemic prompted us to build on that initial mission by developing a second mission focused on food security for students attending schools in disadvantaged communities. We also have a social and circular economy component that allows us to recover certain food products and repurpose them so that they can be delivered directly to children in schools.

Les Cuisiniers Différents is based in Montérégie, in the greater Longueuil area. We've also been providing services to schools in the Lower St. Lawrence over the past year because that region didn't have access to an affordable school catering program. Over the past year, we've enabled more than 225 children in the Lower St. Lawrence region to access affordable meals.

We provide school meal services every day. We are members of a network called La cantine pour tous, providing both home meal delivery and meals served in schools. It is important to note that La cantine pour tous operates on a sliding scale pricing model that allows parents to pay according to their means. Last year, the program provided lower-cost meals to 725 children and seniors.

Inflation certainly has a significant impact on our day-to-day operations. As inflation goes up, our clients' needs grow and our costs rise too. That means we always have to keep a close eye on our margins.

Now, to our recommendations. If we want to help as many children as possible, we have to look at how we can provide them with services within these programs. Here's what I mean by that. Children who go home at lunchtime do not eat at school because their parents don't have enough income to afford child care. In many cases, these children get food in the morning from the Breakfast Club, but they go home at noon because they're not registered for child care. We can be quite sure that what they eat at home will probably not be a meal of the same quality as the ones we can offer them through the school meal program.

I think it would also be worthwhile to have strategies that place more emphasis on equity when it comes to funding organizations in the regions rather than those in metropolitan areas or major urban centres. Based on my experience, the amount we have to cover the cost of a meal for a child in the Lower St. Lawrence is the same as for a child in the greater Longueuil area. However, we know that costs, particularly for food and transportation, are much higher in the regions. That's why there are fewer caterers and fewer resources in the regions trying to serve as many children as possible.

I would even suggest exploring group purchasing arrangements to see if these solutions could help us reduce our costs and make sure more resources are going directly to children.

● (1225)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Pagé.

[*English*]

We will begin the first round of six minutes with Ms. Falk.

Rosemarie Falk: Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for taking the time to be here today and to share their expertise with us.

As I said earlier—I'm not sure how many of you were here for the first hour—I'm from a riding that is rural in nature. You have to travel everywhere to get anything. When I met with one of the food banks, they said their biggest push for donations is at Christmastime. After last Christmas, they ran out of food by March. That has never happened before. They were trying to navigate this, but they were also trying to be more creative to be able to garner donations. I think the trend we're seeing, which is a little scary, is that the people who donated to food banks are now lining up to use the food banks. Some of them are dual-income families. The cost of everything is so expensive that this is just where they've landed.

I would like to start with Food Banks Canada.

Mr. McRoberts, thank you again for being here. We heard a lot of statistics today in the first hour. You also presented some statistics. At the end of the day, these are real Canadians. They're real people. They're not just numbers. They're not just something on a fact sheet. These are real people who are going hungry and making decisions: “Am I getting my medication? Am I going to fuel up the vehicle or eat?”

I'm wondering if you're able to share a couple of examples of the kinds of circumstances that are bringing people into the food banks.

Nick McRoberts: Yes. I'm happy to.

First off, I'm glad you recognize the creativity of food banks. We always say that if you have a problem, find a food banker. They will find a solution.

You're right to call out the fact that these are large numbers that can be hard to understand, and yet there are people behind them. We hear stories of individual families accessing food banks because of a number of compounding pressures. I don't want to give the idea that one single issue is causing people to access food banks.

Rosemarie Falk: No. I'm not assuming that. I'm just wondering if there is a trend. Are we noticing job losses? Are we noticing the cost of everything, such as rent and that type of thing?

Nick McRoberts: It is the cost of everything. We see houses in the lowest-income quintile in the country spending more than 100% of their expendable income on housing, transportation and food costs. That leads to untenable situations where people are taking on more debt, accessing credit and that sort of thing. We're also seeing situations where 20% of food bank users are employed. The highest-cited reason for accessing a food bank is low or delayed wages.

Fundamentally, food bank usage is an income problem. We've heard from previous witnesses at this committee that we don't have a lack of food in Canada—and we don't; we have an issue with getting that food where it needs to go. We also have an issue with the amount of money people are taking home at the end of the day. Yes, it has to do with their expenses and how much money that's costing, but it also has to do with their access to such supports as employment insurance and the groceries and essentials rebate, which, while a welcome support, is not taking in the realities in northern Canada, for example.

Rosemarie Falk: For sure. I would also add rural Canada in there as well, not just northern Canada.

Has Food Banks Canada noticed certain provinces or regions experiencing a sharp increase in food bank usage?

● (1230)

Nick McRoberts: Of course.

Rosemarie Falk: Some of the prices in northern Canada are out of this world. I just saw a brick of cheese for $72. That's absolutely ludicrous. There's also acknowledging the fact that transportation costs have a big factor in that, especially when you have to ship something, which in other places would be countries over but here it is literally in the same country, Canada.

Nick McRoberts: Generally, food bank usage across the country has risen. In some provinces that has decreased in small amounts. That has more to do with food banks actually shutting down than fewer people accessing services.

Rosemarie Falk: In which parts of the country is that decrease?

Nick McRoberts: It's in Newfoundland, for example. Mainly it's in the Atlantic provinces where we see a decrease.

Rosemarie Falk: For what reason would they be shutting down?

Nick McRoberts: It could be for a number of reasons. I'm not going to speculate on why individual food banks may or may not cease services, but that has to do with the decrease in numbers. While we may see a decrease in some provinces, it's not necessarily representative of the long-term trend in that province, in Newfoundland, for example.

Rosemarie Falk: Are you able to get those reasons to our committee so that we have an understanding of whether it's about operational cost, labour or the lack of people who have time to volunteer?

Nick McRoberts: We can pull individual statistics as much as possible. However, as a trend, 80% of food banks purchase food, and 21% or so of food banks turn people away because they are running out of food.

Rosemarie Falk: How many of these monthly visits involve children?

Nick McRoberts: The number is 775,000.

Rosemarie Falk: How has that number changed since 2019?

Nick McRoberts: I don't have that number in front of me, but since last year, it's up by about 65,000 year over year.

Rosemarie Falk: Can you get me the number from 2019 and also table that with this committee?

Nick McRoberts: Yes.

Rosemarie Falk: Thank you so much.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Joseph, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

To begin, I would say that we should never have to fight to convince anyone to help the most vulnerable, especially children. I was a child myself, and I remember that, when I was young, my parents struggled to provide me with enough to eat when I went to school. This is Canada. We must ensure that our children never have to go through what I went through.

I want to thank Ms. Pagé for her commitment, her compassion, her experience and, above all, her frontline expertise.

Ms. Pagé, based on your experience in the field and, above all, on your truly invaluable contribution to our community, could you tell us what improvements could be made to Canada's national school food program to better meet the needs of the families and organizations that provide these services?

Chantal Pagé: In fact, there are various blind spots we can examine, but each region will certainly have its own unique realities. As I mentioned earlier, what really concerns me is the children whose families do not have the resources to access child care services and who go home to eat. Will these children actually eat? What we're told in the schools is that the children are fed by the Breakfast Club in the morning. Then they go back home and when they return in the afternoon, the schools notice that the children are less focused and more restless. I would say there are ways we can help them. We need to put programs and resources in place to provide them with a meal, so they can take that meal home and eat properly.

Natilien Joseph: Thank you, Ms. Pagé.

Are there any specific needs on the ground that should be given greater consideration in the implementation of these programs?

Chantal Pagé: You know, Mr. Joseph, we're in your riding, and we're in the Lower St. Lawrence region, and the realities are not the same. When we deliver meals to schools in rural areas, where we have to travel 30 kilometres to serve a school with a capacity of 40 students, the costs are exorbitant for our social economy enterprise. It's difficult to provide these meals because of the cost of the ingredients we need to prepare them.

The program needs to be more equitable, not equal, toward all caterers in Quebec and Canada. The amount per meal should not be the same in rural areas as it is in metropolitan areas.

● (1235)

Natilien Joseph: Thank you.

Ms. Pagé, have you received any feedback from families and students about this program?

Chantal Pagé: This program provides relief for families. Inflation is putting a strain on parents' budgets. As I mentioned earlier, the school program called La cantine pour tous is a subsidized meal program. Parents pay according to their means. This means parents have the option of providing their child with a low-cost meal, which gives them peace of mind. They know their child will be well fed, so they have one less thing to worry about.

Natilien Joseph: Thank you.

I'm not sure if I have any time left, Mr. Chair.

I will continue with you, Ms. Pagé.

Has demand for this type of program changed over the past few years?

Chantal Pagé: Yes. Compared to last year, demand has increased on our end. We serve new schools every year. This year, we are serving two new schools in your riding, the greater Longueuil–Saint-Hubert area. In the Lower St. Lawrence region, we are able to serve four new schools this year. The needs are urgent.

Natilien Joseph: I have one last question since I do not have much time left. What kind of support would enable organizations like yours to increase their capacity to meet demand?

Chantal Pagé: Everyone's situation is different. For us, several factors are important, including the capacity of our facilities, the cost of food, labour costs and employee retention. When we are hit by the ups and downs of inflation, it's harder to meet growing needs.

Natilien Joseph: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Joseph.

Ms. Larouche, you have six minutes.

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Ms. Webb and Mr. McRoberts, for being here with us today. It's concerning to see that in 2026, so many people are still going hungry. This is a situation that needs to be addressed.

My first question if for you, Ms. Pagé.

As we can see, your organization plays a very important role on the south shore, in Longueuil. You mentioned in your opening remarks that you actively integrate people with disabilities into your workforce. That is very interesting. It allows them to thrive. There's no doubt about it.

You said that it was a social economy model. I'd like you to explain a little more about what sources of revenue this model allows your organization to tap into and how you go about doing that.

Chantal Pagé: I am very proud to tell you that our social economy enterprise is profitable even though it receives no recurring funding. I would say that it's the for-profit initiatives we've launched alongside our food security projects that enable us to achieve this feat. Selling our products to businesses that support our cause or our clientele, and that keep coming back to us, allows us to hire employees and maintain a supervised workspace where we can prepare low-cost meals for schoolchildren.

We also prepare a lot of snacks that are distributed free of charge or sold at low cost in schools. The schools pay us with the funds they receive under budgetary measure 1390 on food assistance.

Andréanne Larouche: That's really interesting.

You also mentioned a few times what I call gaps in service provision. At one point, I worked as a substitute teacher in elementary schools to look after the children in the schoolyard during lunch, as well as to supervise their meals. The school where I was working didn't have a cafeteria at the time. I could see the disparity in the contents of the children's lunch boxes. The staff had to get creative to look around the school to try to find a little something to eat for some of the students, while other students right next to them had full lunch boxes.

We can certainly surmise that this disparity isn't limited to school, but, as you said, that it also has an impact outside of school. There are gaps in the services available. I'm thinking in particular of children whose parents can't afford to pay for child care, whether at school, after school, or during the summer.

I'd like to give you the opportunity to go over a few recommendations for addressing these gaps in our service offerings.

● (1240)

Chantal Pagé: I would recommend an option that would allow what we call “walkers”, that is, children who walk home, to pick up their meal at school and take it home.

The child care centre staff often tell us these days that sometimes a lunch box contains only the main meal and no snacks. There's nothing else. That's why we also work with partners like Moisson Rive-Sud, which provides us with the ingredients we use to prepare the food. That way, we repurpose certain foods to prepare small snacks and lunch bags that we send to school.

These are all measures that can be implemented.

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much.

Mr. McRoberts, I will now turn to you.

Back home in Granby, the food bank is SOS Dépannage. I think it is even a member of your organization, Food Banks Canada. In fact, it has also developed a social economy model. Following the release of the Hunger Count report, the executive director of SOS Dépannage asked to meet with me to discuss its findings. The profile of those in need of food assistance is changing. There has been a steady, slight increase in the number of food bank users over the past few years. Among other things, the number of seniors using food banks continues to rise slightly. There are now more working people with children as well. As I said, it's frustrating to see that even people who work cannot guarantee their own food security.

As we can see, food prices are having an impact on the organizations you manage, and even on food banks. We can also see that fixed incomes can no longer keep pace with food inflation. There are recommendations on this issue, such as increasing pensions for seniors, which are fixed incomes that are not indexed to inflation.

I invite you to go over other ways to increase revenue.

[*English*]

Nick McRoberts: I struggled to hear the interpretation, but what I can say about folks who have a fixed income or the inability to use that income to access affordable food is that we continue to see that expenditure at the lowest income levels as far above what they're taking in as a household.

What ultimately needs to happen is to look at those fixed incomes and see whether or not they're actually meeting the need and to look at benefits and make sure that they're indexed against the poverty line and against inflation. We need to be cognizant of the cost pressures. These income benefits are there to serve a purpose, and right now they're just not.

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: In other words, we need to proactively increase incomes to help people make up for shortfalls and eat better.

[*English*]

Nick McRoberts: Yes, we need to continue working to increase those.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[*English*]

We'll now move to Ms. Kramp-Neuman for five minutes.

Shelby Kramp-Neuman (Hastings—Lennox and Addington—Tyendinaga, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to address my comments to Mr. McRoberts.

On the landing page of the Food Banks Canada website, in bold letters is the suggestion that households are at a breaking point—everything you've been speaking about here today. It also says that hunger holds us back. Underneath that are some of the alarming statistics that have been raised. More than one in four people in Canada now lives in an insecure household; one in five households that rely on food banks are two-parent families; and nearly 18% of people who access food banks have jobs but are still not able to make ends meet.

Reviewing the data on your website, 2,355,075 people have visited food banks this year. In one year, that was an increase of 8.7%. It's clear that food security, long thought to be a problem of those who were underemployed or under-housed, is now becoming a very real problem and something prevalent for many demographics.

Where do you see the root causes of this? To expand on what my colleague was asking earlier, is it wages, increased housing costs, food prices or food distribution, as you mentioned earlier? If you could elaborate a little bit on that, I'd appreciate it.

● (1245)

Nick McRoberts: Yes, of course.

One thing I do want to clarify is that the 2.35 million number that we're seeing is monthly food bank users, not yearly food bank users. That indicates visits, not unique individuals. I could talk about our methodology all day.

As for the root causes, obviously, the top cited reason for using food banks is low or delayed income, but what we actually see are the contributors as to why that is the case, and those are housing, transportation and food costs. Food costs have increased by about 30% since last year. The numbers are 28% and 24% respectively for housing and transportation. Seventy-two per cent of food bank clients live in rental housing.

It's a broader issue than just food costs. Folks are having to spend their income across the essentials at a rate that is just not sustainable for them to be able to live the lives they want to, and it's forcing them to make those impossible choices. It's also putting pressure on food banks. They weren't intended to meet the need that they're seeing right now. My long-term concern is their ability to continue meeting the need should this demand increase.

Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Through all of our lenses, the collective thought is that food is a basic necessity. It's not an optional expense. It's not a luxury.

Could you speak to the growing reliance on food banks and what it says about affordability and food insecurity in all of our collective communities?

Nick McRoberts: It's emblematic of the pressures that all of us can say we're feeling when we go to the gas station or when we go to the grocery store. That just continues to exacerbate as we go down the income quintiles. The cost pressures that we're all hearing about at a very macro level from large industry are being felt all the way through to food bank clients and food banks themselves. Fuel and transportation costs impact their ability to purchase and move food. That's why we've continued to advocate for investments within the food banking network.

More broadly, it shows that we haven't looked at the social supports and the income supports in Canada. For example, with EI, we just haven't reviewed it in this country. It was built at a different time for a different job market than what we have now. As one example, EI needs to be changed to match the current labour market we're seeing, where people are piecing together multiple part-time jobs, for example, to make ends meet.

Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Have we considered the cause and effect of the growing reliance on food banks?

Nick McRoberts: We've talked about what causes people to use food banks.

The impact is that 80% of food banks now have to purchase food. A significantly higher portion, from the previous year's report, is having to turn folks away because they have inadequate levels or they're feeling the cost pressures that large industry is also feeling, whether that be fuel or transportation. Refrigeration is another thing.

That's why we're advocating for infrastructure investments.

Shelby Kramp-Neuman: I have one last question.

Earlier it was mentioned that the people who used to donate to food banks are now some of the ones who are lining up. When food bank usage is rising, clearly the need for donations will be rising. This runs into the obvious issue that if Canadians are using food banks more, it means fewer Canadians are able to donate to meet that increasing demand.

How dire is the situation, from your perspective, for the food banks, as well as for the volunteers, the staff and the donors themselves?

Nick McRoberts: It's very dire. We've never seen a number like this. It's up 117% since 2019.

Again, the issue is not that we don't have the food. We have an issue with getting food where it needs to go. I'll go back to those infrastructure investments from the federal government, which make sure that food can access the rural, remote, coastal and indigenous areas of this country.

Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Excellent. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kramp-Neuman.

Ms. Church, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Leslie Church (Toronto—St. Paul's, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of our witnesses for being here on a very important study.

As a Canadian and as a parent, it makes me very proud that we have the national school food program. It never ceases to amaze me that this program is only a few years old and that we were the last of the countries in the G7 to have a national school food program. The fact that it's been created, negotiated with provinces and territories and made permanent in those few short years is a testament to the need. It's also just a space where we ought to be.

I'll start with Ms. Webb.

You mentioned that the partnership with the provinces in particular is working very well in this case. I'm wondering if you could expand on that a little bit. Is it your sense that the provinces are seized with this? Is there anything you're seeing in terms of innovative approaches or best practices that particular provinces are bringing to this?

● (1250)

Carolyn Webb: It is a very broad question. Every province operates differently, but I can speak to a few great practices.

In these postcards that came from Kingston, Ontario, we're seeing that federal investment, along with some more fundraising and some contributions from parents, has led them to be able to serve lunches one day a week, which isn't nearly where we want to be ultimately, but it is a huge step up. It is showing what might be possible in Ontario, because most programs really operate breakfasts and snacks here in Ontario.

We're also seeing in the Atlantic provinces significant contributions from the provinces and territories. Nova Scotia is now providing up to four dollars per day, per child, so is serving hot lunches to all its children. With that, as well as with federal money, they're able to serve breakfast and lunch.

Every story is different. In B.C., they're now able to reach 20% of students for lunch programs, but those additional 80% of kids in schools do need more support and investment.

I also wanted to touch on one reflection around food inflation and the cost. School food programs, in our minds, are low-hanging fruit. They are an opportunity—a ready-made solution to reach families, children and youth in a way that is universal, non-stigmatizing and makes sure those children and youth have access to food every day.

Leslie Church: Thank you so much.

You've mentioned some of the letters you've received. I'm sure the committee would love to receive some of those. Please do send those along. We'd be happy to have those in our record.

Mr. McRoberts, thank you for your report, which I think provides for us every year a very important picture of the challenge we are facing.

I want to push you a bit on this question of building capacity and of infrastructure. You know that we've also, as a government, brought forward a national food security strategy. We are investing in food terminals and local hubs, as well as in the individual infrastructure in some of the organizations that are delivering programs like this.

What are the specific things that you think we should be building to make this program scale and make it easier to deliver?

Nick McRoberts: We obviously welcome the national food security strategy and the investments the government wants to make under the food-link fund. Food banks will play an active role in applying to that and being a part of a broader food system. I think that narrative around the need for infrastructure is one that we see both at that national level, when you look at terminals and hubs, and in terms of the role food banks play, and then coming down to school food.

We have seen a marked difference in the number of meals that were served per month just by the $1.6 million we got through the school food infrastructure fund. I think the change in that was about 83,000 more meals with a $1.6-million investment.

Our research and our experience show that schools need to have the capacity to deliver this program. They obviously have the desire. They understand why it has to happen, but alleviating the pressure on them by putting in more cold storage—something we're hearing—at the industrial scale, more ability to transport and more interconnectedness between their local community food hubs, like food banks and the schools themselves, is critical to moving that food I've been talking about.

The Chair: You have five seconds for a short question, possibly.

● (1255)

Leslie Church: Affordable housing continues to be a major driver of increased costs. Is that correct?

Nick McRoberts: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Church.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Larouche, you have two minutes and 30 seconds.

Andréanne Larouche: Again, thank you very much, Ms. Webb and Mr. McRoberts, for being with us for this important meeting. Thank you also to Ms. Pagé, whom I had the opportunity to ask questions during my first round.

I would like to come back to something you just mentioned, Mr. McRoberts. Earlier, I was talking about addressing income issues proactively. We know that the old age security pension for seniors aged 65 to 74 has not been increased, unlike that for seniors 75 and older. Beyond the working population, there are also seniors who are now struggling to afford housing and food. That's what I was referring to when I was talking about prevention. You're welcome to add anything, if you'd like. I just wanted to clarify that from the outset.

In one of your responses, you just mentioned the issue of employment insurance. That's another issue I'm advocating for. I have been calling for employment insurance reform to modernize it so that it better reflects the current situation of workers and those who lose their jobs. I will give you the opportunity to elaborate further, because I believe there is indeed a direct link between people's lack of income and the employment insurance reform that many are calling for. I'd like to hear your recommendations.

[*English*]

Nick McRoberts: Yes. Obviously, unemployment insurance is a system that, again, has not been reformed in nearly 40 years. It continues to reflect a labour market that was built on someone having a full-time job and then losing that job and finding a full-time job. That's not what's happening. People have precarious work situations that lead them to finding part-time work, gig employment or things like delivery driving or something similar, or they're self-employed and they find it hard to access employment insurance.

We see that 20% of food bank users are employed, but we also see only 20% of food bank users having employment as their main source of income. They're accessing provincial social assistance and accessing employment insurance. Fewer food bank users are accessing pensions.

We need to ensure, as we look at precarious employment in this country, especially in light of tariffs, that the support is there. In fact, when the government brings in supports and when they institute tariffs, one of the things they do is waive the EI reporting period. Why don't we just make that permanent if we're understanding that it's a barrier to accessing employment insurance? We need to make sure we have resilient systems if we're going to have a resilient country.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[*English*]

We will conclude this round with Mr. Genuis and then Mr. Saini.

Mr. Genuis, you have four minutes.

Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you to all of the witnesses for their presence here.

I want to start my questions with Mr. McRoberts regarding food banks.

Thank you for being here and for the important work that you and everybody connected with Food Banks Canada does. I know you do great work in my constituency. There's been some visionary growth recently in terms of the activities of food banks in my riding that I'm very proud to see.

Would you say that we are in the midst of an affordability crisis right now in Canada?

Nick McRoberts: I would say that increased cost pressures across a number of areas are leading to more individuals having less income to spend.

Garnett Genuis: Okay. I would describe that as an affordability crisis, but I won't press you on that point.

On the issue of who is accessing food banks, I think it's quite striking to underline the numbers around the proportion of people who are working and also need to use food banks. This strikes me as a relatively new problem in terms of magnitude and proportion.

You're nodding, so would you agree that it's a relatively new phenomenon?

Nick McRoberts: It has continued to increase.

Obviously, employed individuals have always accessed food banks, but it's the significant rise in numbers over, I would say, the last 10 years that is particularly concerning.

Garnett Genuis: Yes. This seems like a distinct problem. Obviously, for folks who are unemployed, the priority is trying to help those folks access employment, but for those who are employed and still struggling, that strikes me as requiring a particular set of attention and interventions.

One thing we haven't talked about is the taxes that low-income folks pay. Of course, income supports are an important part of the discussion, but a lot of low-income folks do pay certain kinds of taxes. They pay payroll taxes. They're responsible for input taxes on the goods they buy.

I wonder if you have any reflections on a strategy that would, as a first step, have the government doing no harm—that is, charging less or nothing to folks in low-income situations.

● (1300)

Nick McRoberts: Our policy recommendations continue to focus on putting more money in individuals' pockets. Obviously, tax cuts play a role in that. It lets them keep more of their income. However, there's a balance here between cutting those taxes and making sure that there are supports available for individuals.

Garnett Genuis: Just to be clear, I'm talking about low-income folks specifically in this case and the taxes that people in these situations of vulnerability are themselves paying.

I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Nick McRoberts: Of course. It's an important seesaw, right? We can't just cut taxes for low-income individuals and think that the problem is going to go away. They have to have those supports as well because of the situations that lead them to being in a low-income quintile.

For example, when we look at housing costs, we can look at cutting development taxes at municipal and provincial levels, but we also need to make sure that the federal government plays a role in spurring the development of those adequate homes to make sure that these supports are working for the largest number of people they can.

Garnett Genuis: Housing affordability, the big increases in costs that people have seen in the last 10 years.... You're describing a phenomenon increasing in that period of time. I wonder if you could comment on policy around inflation, the fact that the cost of everything has gone up, especially the cost of food. What is the proposed policy response that you guys have on the inflation issues?

Nick McRoberts: On inflation, we look at things like the Canada workers benefit or the groceries and essentials benefit, making sure that those are both indexed to inflation and to meet the poverty line. Right now, they're not. They're inadequate.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

Next is Mr. Saini for four minutes to conclude.

Gurbux Saini (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses and for the great work they do.

Our government has two major programs. We have the groceries and essentials benefit, which gives Canadians about $1,800 to $1,900 per family, and then we have the program for school children, which also saves families $800. Sometimes I hear from my colleagues that they don't support those programs. What would be the impact if those two programs were eliminated? How would it affect our society?

Nick McRoberts: On the groceries and essentials benefit, any program that puts more money into individuals' pockets is helpful. We would not advocate for the removal of that program. Its removal would have an impact in taking money away from Canadians. We don't have data yet on the full impact of it on food bank usage, but we expect to.

On things like the school food program, again, I don't think we should ever be having a conversation about taking benefits away from children and the ability to feed children. Any continued investment in school food is a national imperative, in my mind.

Gurbux Saini: Carolyn, would you have a viewpoint on that?

Carolyn Webb: Yes, thank you.

I can primarily speak about the national school food program, but yes, taking funding away from the program would set us back to when we were saying that we were the only G7 country without a program. We know that these programs do equalize food for children and youth. They have health benefits, education benefits and benefits for communities and local economic development, so we would be significantly regressing, in many people's minds, as a nation.

Gurbux Saini: In your testimony, you mentioned that the food program not only helps children with hunger, but also makes them better students. They are better prepared to deal with life. Could you elaborate on that point?

Carolyn Webb: Yes, absolutely. School food programs have been shown to support children's preferences for healthy eating. They would support the government's healthy eating strategy, moving towards more fruits and vegetables in a diet. Now, that is very dependent on income, in many situations, but at the same time, we've seen less bullying. We've heard of students being less involved in gangs, because gangs can often attract kids through food. We have heard very interesting statistics about teachers noticing behaviour in the classrooms really settling when they provide a snack. I've heard of providing students with food before standardized testing so that they can boost the scores.

There's a wide range of different impacts on, as I said, preferences for food. As well, schools can integrate food literacy, and those schools can engage their children in developing the school meals, being part of those cooking processes, growing food and building those skills that they will have with them for life.

● (1305)

Gurbux Saini: I heard previously from both of you that we don't have a shortage of food, but there's lots of waste. What can we do as a federal government to reduce that, and how can we help Canadians?

I'll start with Mr. McRoberts and then to Ms. Webb.

Nick McRoberts: I think the biggest piece is continuing to push the national food security strategy, from our point of view, specifically the food-link fund, through both the terminals and the hub model to ensure that there's more investment in processing, cold storage and transportation capacity in this country. We're a large country. Our population is spread out geographically, so building the infrastructure to move that food at scale, at a lower cost, is critical to ensure that the cost of food comes down and that more food can get to more Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you.

Give a short answer, Ms. Webb.

Carolyn Webb: Thank you.

Yes, we would echo that, and the coalition is asking for increased investment in the school food infrastructure fund and the buy Canada fund. As well, it's the opportunity that schools present to support local infrastructure because they are everywhere. If we can invest in the school food program and the infrastructure, they entwine, and they can really support each other as well as our local producers.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Saini.

Thank you to the witnesses for taking the time to be here and providing answers to the members' questions.

Members, our next meeting will be on Thursday, when we'll continue on this subject.

Is it the will of the committee to adjourn?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: We are adjourned.

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