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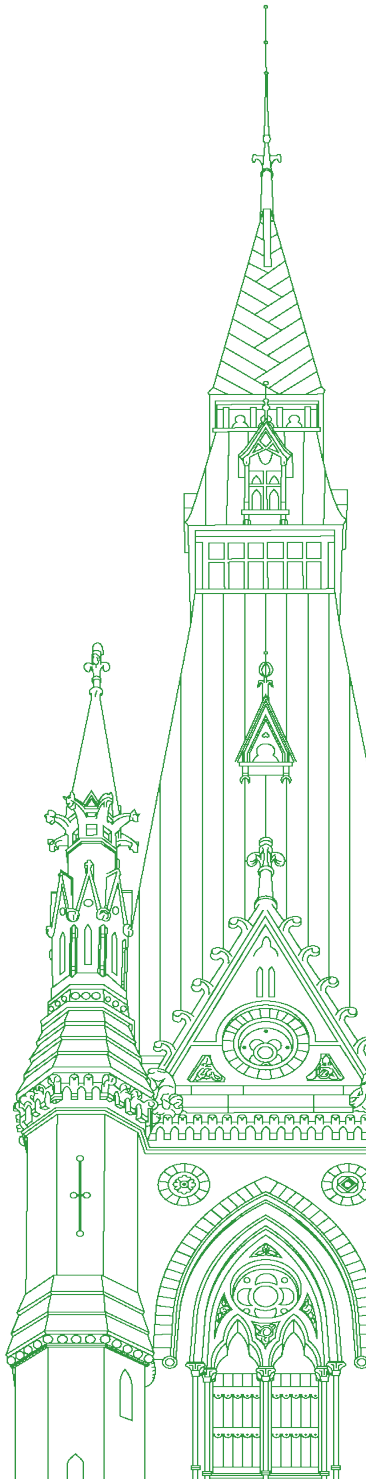
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Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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Chair: Robert Morrissey

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

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● (1100)

[*Translation*]

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

I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 53 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

[*English*]

Pursuant to the motion adopted on Tuesday, September 22, 2026, the committee is meeting on EI parental leave in Canada.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders of the House. Members and witnesses can attend in person in the room or virtually. Today, we have both.

Before I begin, I have a couple of points. For the protection of the interpreters, I would ask all those attending to ensure that their devices are on silent mode and to refrain from tapping the microphone boom.

As well, each person has the right to participate in today's meeting in both official languages, French and English, and I would encourage you, whichever language you choose, to make sure that you have your earpiece on and have chosen the channel that you will participate in so that you can fully understand all the proceedings of today's meeting. For those appearing virtually, click on the globe icon at the bottom of your Surface and choose the official language in which you wish to participate.

If there's an interruption in translation, please get my attention. We'll suspend while it's corrected.

As well, before we welcome our witnesses, I would like to provide a warning. We will be discussing a variety of experiences that may relate to sensitive topics. This may be triggering to viewers with similar experiences. If any participants feel distressed or need help, please advise the clerk. For all witnesses and for all members of Parliament, it is important to recognize that these are very difficult discussions, so let's try to be compassionate in our conversations on this particular topic.

I would like to request as well that you please address all comments through the chair, and wait until I recognize you by name before proceeding.

In the first hour, we would like to welcome, as an individual, Deanne Kukulewich, executive director at York Region Rose of Sharon Services for Young Mothers, who is appearing virtually; from the Canadian Women's Foundation, Mitzie Hunter, president and chief executive officer, by video conference; and from Moms Canada, in person, the executive director, Cherise Kapitaniuk.

Each witness has five minutes for their opening statements. Please remember to speak slowly and clearly for the benefit of the interpreters. We'll begin with Madam Kukulewich.

Deanne Kukulewich (Executive Director, York Region Rose of Sharon Services for Young Mothers, As an Individual): Thank you.

To the chair and honourable members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, thank you for the opportunity to appear today as part of your study on employment insurance parental leave in Canada.

My name is Deanne Kukulewich. I'm the executive director of Rose of Sharon Services for Young Mothers. However, today I am appearing in a personal capacity as a mother of four adult children and as someone who has experienced first-hand how parental leave policies in Canada have evolved.

I appreciate that progress has been made, but I believe that there is an opportunity to take another important step: creating a parental leave system that better reflects the realities of today's families and workplaces.

When I had my children, maternity leave was considerably shorter. I recall having approximately 30 weeks available. When completing my EI application, there wasn't even a designated section for maternity leave. Instead—and I'm dating myself—I was asked to indicate my length of confinement. It felt as though caring for a newborn was being accommodated with an employment insurance system designed for unemployment, not parental leave.

Let me assure you that there is nothing like caring for a newborn being accommodated within an employment insurance system. In fact, I would argue with you that you've never worked harder than when you're at home with your baby.

Today I want to focus on one particular opportunity for improvement, which is allowing parents to temporarily return to work during parental leave without forfeiting their remaining EI parental benefits.

Under the current system, my understanding is that when a parent returns to work, they generally lose access to the remaining weeks of parental benefits. Why should a parent have to make that choice?

Some mothers may need to return temporarily for financial reasons. Receiving only a portion of their regular income can be challenging, particularly for single parents or families already struggling with the rising cost of living. Others may have additional children or children with special dietary needs that increase household expenses. We should not create a system in which parents must choose between financial stability and the time they are entitled to spend caring for their children.

Let's remember what caring for a newborn involves. Breastfeeding alone can take four to five hours a day from birth until the baby is about three or four months old. That's not accounting for the feedings, diaper changes, bathing, comforting, medical appointments and everything else. This is a 24-hour-a-day responsibility. Parents deserve flexibility in how they use the leave available to them.

There's also an important benefit to the employers that deserves consideration. Throughout my career, I have held leadership positions, and in those positions, organizational knowledge, timing and continuity are critical.

In a previous position, I was responsible for negotiating a five-year contract agreement worth approximately $30 million. Having worked with that organization for 12 years, I understood its operations, funding requirements, budgets, staffing needs and long-term commitments. Imagine having to step away during that critical process because you have welcomed a baby, only to return a year later and discover that decisions affecting the next four years of the organization have been made without your experience or involvement.

This is not a criticism of temporary employees; it's simply a recognition that institutional knowledge, established relationships and experience matter.

● (1105)

The same applies in my current role as executive director of Rose of Sharon. There are critical times in our organizational calendar, including our largest annual fundraiser, annual audits and annual general meeting, when my participation is particularly important. Allowing an experienced employee to return for a period of time to support a critical project, meet an important deadline or maintain organizational continuity would be beneficial for both the employer and the employee.

● (1110)

The Chair: Thank you—

Deanne Kukulewich: The employee could contribute their expertise, support their colleagues and then resume their parental leave without sacrificing the remaining weeks of benefits. The organization benefits. The staff would benefit. The clients receiving services would benefit. The parent benefits by maintaining professional continuity while preserving time with their child. This is an opportunity to recognize that parental leave flexibility can support employers as well as families.

There is also a much bigger issue we must consider. Canada's aging population—

The Chair: Madam, you've gone well over the allotted five minutes. I apologize, but as we continue, I'm sure you'll get questions on this.

I have to move to the next presenter.

Deanne Kukulewich: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll move to Ms. Hunter for five minutes or less.

Mitzie Hunter (President and Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Women's Foundation): Good morning, everyone.

Thank you so much for the opportunity for the Canadian Women's Foundation to meet with the committee and discuss employment insurance parental leave.

We are Canada's public foundation to advance gender equality in Canada. For more than three decades, the Canadian Women's Foundation has invested in community-based organizations that are working to end gender-based violence, advance economic justice and strengthen the rights and opportunities for women and gender-diverse people across Canada. In that time, through the generous support of our donors, we've contributed nearly $290 million to fund life-transforming programs throughout Canada in every province and territory.

Discussion on EI parental leave sits in the context of the unequal economic status of women, trans and non-binary people in Canada, particularly those who are Black, indigenous, racialized or living with a disability.

Women still make up roughly two-thirds of part-time workers and 60% of minimum wage workers. While men most often cite economic conditions as their main reason for part-time employment, it—

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

The Chair: We seem to have lost sound.

Ms. Hunter, we'll just pause for a moment.

Mitzie Hunter: —responsibilities as their reason.

I'm sorry....

The Chair: You may continue. We can hear you now.

Mitzie Hunter: I'll just say that women cite parental responsibilities as their reason for part-time employment. Almost two-thirds of them cite that as a reason.

Carrying a disproportionate share of family caregiving responsibilities leaves women overrepresented in part-time and minimum wage work. Employment sectors where women, especially racialized and immigrant women, are overrepresented are seeing the largest increases in part-time or temporary work, with on-and-off work patterns.

That can be an uneasy fit with existing EI regulations. Hours worked and previous earnings determine access to maternity and parental benefits, pension plans and the level of benefits that will be received through our EI system. Part-time workers, two-thirds of whom are women, are disadvantaged on both income and eligibility. The long-awaited modernization of the EI system could provide better support to women.

Despite the general belief that accessing maternity and parent leave protects against job loss, dismissal for reasons unrelated to taking leave is legal and is common. A recent survey of mothers found that 15% had been dismissed, had been laid off or had contracts not renewed during pregnancy leave or upon return to work. When such layoffs happen, sections of the EI Act prevent recipients from accessing regular unemployment benefits. A recent Federal Court of Appeal decision in Chalifour-Racine v. Attorney General of Canada ruled that this violates equity rights under section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

I want to go to some recommendations we have.

Refrain from appealing the Federal Court of Appeal decision in Chalifour-Racine v. Canada. We're asking that it not be appealed.

Take timely and decisive action to revise the EI act to ensure that parents can access regular benefits if they lose their jobs because they were dismissed or laid off or their contracts were not renewed during pregnancy, maternity leave or parental leave, or upon return to work,.

Make it easier for part-time workers, particularly those with multiple jobs and irregular hours, to qualify for EI. Adjust the rules to facilitate access for workers with multiple jobs. For those who lose their employment, have pathways to qualifying. Addressing these issues would mean that individuals experiencing gender-based violence and economic abuse will also have pathways to receiving EI benefits. In fact, we're asking for a minimum rate of $500 to ensure that EI benefits provide adequate income support.

As well, advance the modernization of the EI system to provide better support to women and to gender-diverse workers. Applying a gender lens to this policy review that you are doing will ensure that this policy benefits the 47% of the workforce who are women and gender-diverse people.

Thank you so much.

● (1115)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hunter.

We'll now go to Ms. Kapitaniuk.

Cherise Kapitaniuk (Executive Director, MOMS Canada): Thank you, Chair and members of the committee, for the opportunity to contribute to this study.

My name is Cherise Kapitaniuk, and I am the executive director of Moms Canada, a non-profit organization dedicated to empowering, encouraging and equipping single moms through our empowered moms program, our online community and practical resources. I also bring the lived experience of raising my three daughters as a single mother for six years.

While my remarks focus on the single moms we serve, I recognize that single fathers face similar challenges and should also benefit from reforms supporting parents who are raising children alone.

Many of the moms we serve never expected to parent alone. Their lives change through separation, abandonment or the death of a partner. When a mother's circumstances change, the support available to her needs to respond. She needs opportunities to provide for her children today while building financial stability for tomorrow.

First, I want to address opportunities for education and skills training during parental leave.

We hear from moms who expected to raise their child with a supportive partner but found themselves parenting alone after childbirth. Without the financial support they had counted on, pursuing education or upgrading their qualifications became crucial to securing a higher-paying job. A mother facing these changes is already balancing her children's needs with concerns about their future. She needs to understand her options without added confusion or fear about losing essential income.

I recommend clear guidelines that give single parents confidence to pursue education while caring for their children and that respect their judgment about how to balance those responsibilities.

Second, I recommend allowing supplementary paid child care income without a corresponding reduction in parental benefits.

Some single moms have told us how helpful it would be if they were able to provide child care while home with their own children. For a mom already struggling to cover household expenses, a reduced income can make meeting her children's needs even more difficult. Providing paid child care could help her cover those expenses while also creating another child care option for another working single mom. This could strengthen the financial stability of both families. Of course, applicable child care and safety requirements must continue to be met, and taking on additional child care must remain a choice.

Third, I ask for fair access to parental benefit weeks for eligible parents caring alone. Encouraging parents to share caregiving is valuable, but when no second parent is available to share that responsibility, one parent must carry it. I recommend allowing that parent to access the additional parental benefit weeks otherwise reserved for sharing between parents. A child's access to financially supported time with a parent should not depend on having two parents available to claim it.

Finally, I ask the committee to ensure continuity of support in the event of the death of a parent receiving EI parental benefits. At Moms Canada, we walk alongside moms whose partners have passed away. While grieving, they must meet their children's daily needs and face a future very different from the one they had planned. A child's need for care does not end when a parent dies, and I recommend that the surviving parent be able to access the remaining parental benefit entitlement without interruption in essential financial support.

Thank you again for welcoming me here today to share the challenges we hear from single moms. Through our work at Moms Canada, we have seen how important a supportive community is for single moms. The systems they rely on should offer the same support and encouragement. Federal support should expand their choices, not restrict them.

I ask the committee to ensure that reforms to EI parental benefits reflect the heavy responsibilities carried by parents raising children alone.

Thank you. I welcome any questions.

● (1120)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kapitaniuk, for your presentation.

We'll begin the six-minute round with Madam Cobena, please.

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

I would like to direct my questions to Ms. Kukulewich.

Ms. Kukulewich, thank you for being here with us this morning, for making the time, for your opening statement and for the incredible work that Rose of Sharon does in Newmarket.

You have years of experience working with vulnerable mothers. There are mothers who oftentimes find themselves fighting to be there for their babies and also fighting to be able to provide for them, and that is a very difficult balance. From your experience, can you tell us a little bit about what that looks like for a young mother?

Deanne Kukulewich: Thank you for the question.

It is quite a challenge. The majority of our young mothers are single. They have a high risk of homelessness and very few supports, and they come to Rose of Sharon for help.

I think the changes to EI and parental leave are absolutely amazing. This will give them hope that, moving forward, they will have those additional supports. We work with moms of all ages. They struggle. I hear, time and again, from our mothers that there are things happening in the places of employment where they have built their reputation. They're very worried about what is happening to their position now.

Women work very hard to establish where they are. Twenty to 30 years from now, if fewer families are coping with financial insecurity.... Having to choose between having babies down the road and one's profession is unfair. Our young moms have had babies, but a woman's decision to delay having children—or not—is not due to lack of desire; it's driven by concerns about affordability, child care, job security and the impact that having a child may have on their future careers.

● (1125)

Sandra Cobena: If I may, when a mother is forced to return to work due to affordability issues—one of the main crises we have right now—they have to give up their parental leave. That doesn't mean they don't need the support.

When that happens, where do they turn for that support?

Deanne Kukulewich: There are very few resources for a mom who makes that decision. It comes down to finances. For many, leaving EI without the opportunity to return to it is devastating. Again, we serve moms of all ages. We hear from the mothers that it's quite a decision they have to make, and not one that is made easily.

From my understanding, EI was created for people who are unemployed. Young moms are not unemployed. They have a very important job. They should be able to access that without being penalized for needing to return to work for a period of time, working and receiving 100% of their salary during a certain period and then returning back to child minding.

I don't know if the members are aware of the cost for a child under a certain age to receive day care support. It is astronomical, and when you need to find child minding, it is almost impossible to find child minding for a baby under the age of one. To a mom, it's very frightening. The baby cannot communicate. You are trusting those who are taking care of your precious little one. Why are we putting mothers in that position?

Sandra Cobena: Ms. Kukulewich, one of the programs Rose of Sharon has, which I personally love, is that if a teenager finds she is pregnant and expecting, or has had a baby, Rose of Sharon offers a program whereby they are able to continue their studies while there's baby minding. Oftentimes, they have graduated with their high school degree. They are then getting ready to enter the workforce.

Once they do, of course—because of how rigid the policy is right now—if they want to continue studying, have another baby and be off again or come back to their baby, all of that is very rigid. They don't have that option, but they have the desire.

Can you talk about the flexibility of being able to come back to their baby, return to work at busy times or, perhaps when they're off, upgrade their skills? What would this mean for that mother?

Deanne Kukulewich: It's life-changing—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Cobena. It's well over your time.

Madam Kukulewich, you could address that in another question.

We'll move to Mr. Joseph for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Natilien Joseph (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'll address Ms. Hunter through you.

Ms. Hunter, you raised some points that caught my attention. Here's my first question.

Given that the majority of Canadian workers are subject to provincial labour codes, how important would it be for the federal government to work with provinces and territories to harmonize support measures and ensure that surviving spouses can benefit from consistent protection, regardless of where they work?

● (1130)

[*English*]

Mitzie Hunter: I do think it is very important that there be coordination and co-operation between the provinces and territories and the federal government on EI policy. I would support that being as seamless as possible across the country to facilitate labour mobility as well as portability of benefits.

This would include retirement benefits, in fact. An important part of what we're discussing here today is recognizing hours and years worked, and that's also a part of, ultimately, the calculation for retirement benefits.

I do want to leave the committee.... All of us, as witnesses, are really painting the picture of what it is like for women who make choices about where to work and how to work to support themselves and their families. They oftentimes have to prioritize caregiving needs ahead of their employment needs. This is a benefit to us as a country, and it should not be seen as a disadvantage or be in any way penalized through how we structure the EI system. I do appreciate your question about making it seamless for labour mobility across the country.

[*Translation*]

Natilien Joseph: Thank you very much, Ms. Hunter.

I'll continue along the same lines with Ms. Kukulewich.

What aspects of the federal system should be harmonized with those of the provinces to prevent inequalities or gaps in support for families in such a situation?

[*English*]

Deanne Kukulewich: I think it's really important to review the current process.

I think the process right now is arranged for anyone unemployed; I do not think the process considers those who are on maternity leave or parental leave. We need to be looking at how we can support our young mothers now. Canada needs to set a precedent for all countries to follow. We need to be looking at what best fits our families.

It has been a long time since we have looked at changes within the EI process under parental leave, and it is time that we recognize that this particularly penalizes women who have built up their careers. They're working while they have families and they're making decisions that are very difficult.

I've had an opportunity to speak with a lot of women who would like to have more children, but there are financial barriers and barriers through EI. We really need to be proactive. In 20 or 30 years, we shouldn't be in a crisis, looking at babies who are no longer here to be able to support our amazing country, Canada. We should be looking at how to support these young mothers now, encouraging them and supporting them in any way we can.

● (1135)

[*Translation*]

Natilien Joseph: It's very important. Thank you very much.

Through you, Mr. Chair, if I have a minute left—

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

Natilien Joseph: Okay. I'll ask Ms. Kapitaniuk a question.

Based on your understanding of the current employment insurance system, are there any other areas for improvement that this committee should consider?

[*English*]

Cherise Kapitaniuk: I agree with Ms. Kukulewich about being able to pause the EI benefits. I think it is helpful in many ways, even for a short time, such as for a single mom who may have a mother who lives out of province and has only limited access to support. If her mother is able to come and help with the children for a period of time, then that's a great opportunity for the mom to return to work.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Joseph.

Ms. Larouche, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

I'd like to thank the witnesses for joining us today for this study. I'm taking a lot of notes.

We need employment insurance reform. We need to modernize this act. We've even said before that this act is not feminist, as it discriminates against far too many women. We need employment insurance to be more feminist in 2026. This is a battle that we in the Bloc Québécois are waging. I want to pay tribute to my predecessor, Louise Chabot, who began this battle when she was elected in 2019.

Ms. Kukulewich, I know you ran out of time. Do you want to add a brief conclusion or make a few final recommendations? I'll give you a little time to finish your opening remarks.

[*English*]

Deanne Kukulewich: Thank you very much.

I was hoping to be able to share my final points.

I encourage this committee to seriously consider changes to EI parental leave that would allow parents to temporarily pause their parental benefits while returning to work and then access the remaining time afterwards. Appropriate parameters could be established to ensure the system is practical and consistent.

Parents should have greater choices. They should have choices in determining how to use the parental leave available to them. Having a child should never come at the expense of a woman's career that she has worked so hard to build, or at the expense of financial security or future opportunities.

I believe we need to stop viewing parental leave simply as time away from work and recognize it as an investment in our future families, our workforce and Canada's future. Parents should feel supported when they welcome a child into the world. No one should have to choose between building a career and building a family. Why can't women have both?

Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to share.

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: You're quite right that these are precious moments that won't come back. I know it. As the mother of a four-year-old daughter, I try to make the most of every moment I have with her.

There's another unique aspect to this study. Quebec's parental insurance plan makes us trailblazers. We have an agreement that was signed in 2005, under which Quebec has been administering its own parental insurance plan since 2006. However, I'll come back to that because I'm realizing that I had a question.

Ms. Hunter, you mentioned something that is another cause I'm fighting for. You talked about the completely absurd situation faced by women who are fired during their maternity leave and lose their entitlement to benefits. My colleague, at the time, welcomed the decision handed down by the Social Security Tribunal of Canada that struck down certain provisions of the Employment Insurance Act. However, that decision was subsequently appealed. In January 2022, the Federal Court of Appeal finally ruled that denying benefits to women who lost their job during or after their maternity leave was discriminatory.

You even say in one of your recommendations that there should be no right to appeal. Why is this significant, and how is what's happening right now completely anti-feminist?

● (1140)

[*English*]

Mitzie Hunter: Thank you so much.

It does bring to the forefront just what women face in these precarious workplaces when something like that happens. We're saying to refrain from appealing the Federal Court of Appeal, which would allow the decision around upholding charter rights and upholding the rights of women in the workplace to stand. We would support refraining from appealing in that instance, and also support recognizing that women are making these choices on behalf of their family, as we've been discussing today.

We do want our system to be supportive of the way in which women choose to work and how they choose to work without being unduly burdened by the EI system. In fact, they should be enabled to contribute as much as they are able to.

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: Yes, that's what the government and we have stated. We considered filing an appeal.

What message does that send to women on such an important and significant issue at this stage of their lives?

Ms. Hunter, can you answer that question?

[*English*]

Mitzie Hunter: Yes, sure. The federal government is bigger than any one person who is facing this system, which is why all of us need to stand together to say that women who are on maternity leave or people who are on parent leave should not be penalized through the EI system when they're dismissed.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hunter. Thank you, Madame Larouche.

Mr. Genuis, go ahead for five minutes.

Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses for your presence here and for the work you do.

I want to start with Ms. Kapitaniuk on the issue of the continuation of EI when a parental recipient passes away. This is crazy to me. It was brought to my attention by my colleague Mr. Jivani, who had a constituent bring it to him.

If a parent who has paid into the system passes away while they're on leave, immediately their leave ends. They've paid into the system, the family is dealing with the tragedy of their loss and they lose a benefit that they need and have paid into.

We, as a committee, asked the Parliamentary Budget Officer to give us costing on it. We just received that costing today. It would cost less than a million dollars a year. Think of the vastness of federal government spending.

We're not talking about very many families. We're talking about less than a million dollars a year that would make a world of difference to families in an unimaginably terrible situation, families that are trying to also attend to their financial needs in the midst of it and trying to keep their benefits. We would love to see this change in the budget. It's something we've been advocating for a long time.

I wonder if you can share a bit more. You raised in your testimony the importance of the continuation of leave when the parent on leave passes away.

Cherise Kapitaniuk: Absolutely.

I think this is definitely a sad reality that we have to deal with as well. As I said, we support single moms who have lost their partners to death. Obviously, there are men who can lose a wife or a female partner as well.

In my experience, it's a trickle effect. If that money is taken away and just ends, it causes even more stress and more emotional and mental strain on the single mom, and it rubs off onto the children.

This is what Moms Canada addresses. We want to see healthy women, because we know that healthy women can have healthy children. We want to do our best to support them. In personal conversations with women who have lost their spouse, it's almost a no-brainer. Why aren't we doing this?

● (1145)

Garnett Genuis: I agree. Thank you for sharing that perspective about the cascading effect and the link between financial hardship and stress, and how they compound the struggles that people are facing.

Let's talk a bit about learning on leave.

This is something we've proposed as part of our suite of suggested parental leave reforms, and you've talked about it as well. Right now, it's ambiguous, situational and a judgment call as to whether a parent can pursue a course of study in the midst of their leave. That can create, I would imagine, a lot of uncertainty. What we're proposing is to ensure that while parents are on leave, they will always have the ability to take courses, learn and upgrade their skills.

Could you share a bit more about the importance of this, since you mentioned it in your opening statement? What do you think the impact would be on single parents if they were able to have the certainty that they can take courses in the midst of their leave?

Cherise Kapitaniuk: This is a huge thing. We have a lot of single moms who are sharing with us the frustration.

First of all, everything is hard when you're a single mom. Finances are hard. Emotions are hard. Parenting is hard. Your mental load is challenging. When there are confusing rules around education or learning on leave, a lot of women feel like they just can't add yet another stumbling block to their path.

Have very clear clarification, but it's not even just that. Actually encourage learning to set a woman up for success so that she knows she can use this opportunity to take a course or take a class. Again, we've had many single moms share with us about how they wanted to, but they felt it was too complicated, the rules were too ambiguous and it was just another stress or strain they would have to bear, instead of feeling they had the freedom to say, “I want to do this to better myself, better my family and be a better provider.”

It's empowering to women to not have to feel like they have to rely on government supports for their whole life and to feel that they can see an end to the path and can say, “I can do this” and be empowered from there.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

[*Translation*]

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

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

I thank all the witnesses for being here today. This is a truly moving topic.

I'm a father of two. Back when we had children, there weren't many support measures in place. I remember that my wife and I chose to tighten our belts so that at least one parent could stay home with the child. We took turns, and it was very complicated. Things have improved since then, but there's still work to be done, of course.

Ms. Kapitaniuk, I don't know if you'll be able to answer my question, but, to your knowledge, how do other countries handle leave and benefits when a parent dies, for example? We need to address that, as well.

Can you tell me a bit about that?

[*English*]

Cherise Kapitaniuk: Unfortunately, I'm not an expert on other countries' laws or regulations.

[*Translation*]

Louis Villeneuve: In your opinion, what would be the best way to improve the surviving parent's situation?

[*English*]

Cherise Kapitaniuk: Again, it's just maintaining that. If the other partner who passed away was already collecting EI parental benefits, as I said, it's almost a no-brainer. Why would we stop that in the moment of somebody's greatest life change of losing a loved one or, in many cases, the sole income provider? The smart choice—the responsible choice—is ensuring that the support is ongoing.

That's not to say necessarily that it may be life-changing, but in those first six or 12 months, when somebody is going through the most grief and maybe needs to pursue counselling and therapy, not just for themselves but for their children, even that added cost alone.... It's having those extra funds to be able to provide that support for themselves and their children as well.

● (1150)

[*Translation*]

Louis Villeneuve: Aside from continuing to provide benefits to the surviving parent, are there any other measures you would suggest to ensure that things go well for both the parent and the child?

[*English*]

Cherise Kapitaniuk: That's a wonderful question. I appreciate that you're bringing it up.

As I said, we work with a lot of single moms who have lost their loved ones. Yes, I think there may be more areas that we could look at to see how we can support them in other ways.

Coming into this committee meeting, I didn't necessarily do background work on any other policies or countries, so I can't think of anything right off the top of my head, but I think it is something that should absolutely be pursued.

[*Translation*]

Louis Villeneuve: Thank you, Ms. Kapitaniuk. I wanted to give you an opportunity to maybe talk about that.

You mentioned the recommendation to continue providing benefits to the surviving parent. I understand that. However, if you had a choice to make—if you had a magic wand to tell the government what measure it absolutely must take and even improve upon—what would that measure be?

You can take the time to go into detail, as I have about a minute left. I'm giving you the space to comment on that. I'm truly speaking across party lines when I say that I really want us to help improve women's situation.

[*English*]

Cherise Kapitaniuk: Number one, I would obviously ensure that the surviving spouse can continue to receive those payments.

Number two is the one that I just reflected on, about counselling and mental health support. When a partner dies, sometimes their insurance benefits end shortly afterward as well. Ensure that both the children and the surviving partner are able to pursue counselling or therapy in that traumatic time. I think that would be a huge thing.

At Moms Canada, we encourage strong emotional health, and we believe counselling is very beneficial.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villeneuve.

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

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you again, Ms. Kukulewich and Ms. Hunter.

In my last turn, I'll address Ms. Kapitaniuk.

I think we have a good understanding of the situation facing single-parent families, who are disadvantaged by employment insurance. This is something that we in the Bloc Québécois would like to address as part of a more comprehensive reform of employment insurance. You explained clearly that you would like to see the creation of a surviving parent benefit and action being taken on this matter.

As part of the employment insurance reform, we are also considering other measures, such as extending the qualifying period for special benefits—which includes, among other things, maternity leave—as well as ending the exclusion from regular employment insurance benefits for people who leave their jobs owing to domestic violence, a return to school or family responsibilities.

How could an employment insurance reform that includes these measures make a difference for women?

● (1155)

[*English*]

Cherise Kapitaniuk: An important part to consider is women who have gone through trauma or experienced abuse. As I mentioned previously, at Moms Canada, we believe a lot in healing and being able to heal.

Your proposition to make the benefits ongoing and not have an end date could be something wonderful to explore. I would want to ensure that the support or finances are there as well, so that the woman can receive healing. We hear so many times in so many provinces that the cost of counselling or an appointment with a psychologist is sometimes $200 an hour. If a woman doesn't have insurance, how is she to afford that for herself and her children?

As I said, I think it's a wonderful idea to explore, but I would want to ensure that they don't have just that financial support and that there is also support to ensure that they're able to heal while they're in their time off.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kapitaniuk.

Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[*English*]

We have Ms. Falk for five minutes.

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

I'd like to thank all our witnesses for being here.

I'm grateful that this study is happening. In my former life, I had the opportunity to learn and practise social work. Specifically, my experience was in a medical setting. We were given situations where we had to then navigate for our patients. Bureaucracy is not easy. It is very difficult. I can tell you that when we are dealing with emotion, with a sudden loss or a sudden trauma, our judgment can be very clouded. We may not even know how to do the basic functions of just getting up, getting out of bed, feeding ourselves and feeding the little ones who rely on us, so I'm glad this conversation is happening.

I struggle with the bureaucratic system, because it's created so that everything fits in a box. If it's a yes, you go here; if it's a no, you go there. If it's a maybe, well, too bad, so sad. That's just where it lies.

I had a situation a few years ago. Someone birthed a baby, and unfortunately, he was stillborn. Because the mother had the baby at 18 weeks' gestation, she did not qualify for maternity leave. The bureaucracy says you need 20 weeks' gestation. I have kids myself, as I know a lot of us do. That maternity benefit is specifically created to help mom heal, to help her body heal, which is why non-birthing parents can't access that benefit. They can access just the parental benefit.

I was so frustrated. Grief doesn't stop because it wasn't at 20 weeks. The healing still had to happen. She still had to birth a baby. She still couldn't do the things she could do before her pregnancy.

I struggle with this. Why does everything have to be so bureaucratic? Sometimes it just takes the worker on the other end of the phone to extend the grace of understanding: “Yes, this doesn't fit into the box, but what can we do to help you?”

Ms. Kapitaniuk, do you have any thoughts on the system being more flexible and the importance of that? It's not just after; it's also beforehand, as in this situation. This mom and dad didn't have any access to any leave. Dad still had to take time off work. Mom still couldn't go back to work. Physically, she couldn't go back to work. What are your opinions on the importance of that flexibility?

● (1200)

Cherise Kapitaniuk: I would agree with you 100%. Even in our empowered moms group, which is basically a support group for single moms, some single moms go through this curriculum two, three and four times, and they still want to keep returning.

As you say, healing looks different for everyone. Maybe a few sessions of counselling can really set them up and maybe that's sufficient, but others process grief differently. I think it's important to support them where they're at. That's what we do in our organization. We meet the single moms where they're at. I think our government needs to respond in the same way. Meet them where they're at. Support them not just for the sake of supporting them but with the purpose of healing and growth.

We want to empower women. We believe healing is possible for all women, and we want to encourage that. It's sad to sometimes have healing become stagnant because of restrictions or, as you say, because they didn't check a specific box. Their healing has to remain stagnant because they can't afford to—

Rosemarie Falk: Yes. I want to thank you for what your organization is doing, because that's really on the front lines. You're dealing with raw emotion and the intensity of the situation. I want to thank you for what you're doing, standing in the gap and helping those parents through a difficult time.

Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Falk.

Ms. Nguyen has the floor for five minutes and will conclude this round.

Chi Nguyen (Spadina—Harbourfront, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for being here for such an important conversation about a critical program in the federal system.

I want to start with Ms. Hunter.

You talked a bit about the transformative programs that the Canadian Women's Foundation has to support women through different chapters of their lives. I wonder if you want to share one or two anecdotes from those experiences as we think about how we can improve maternity and parental benefits.

Mitzie Hunter: All the witnesses have shared the very challenging impacts of being a woman in the workplace, and of the choices women are making.

The work we do at the Canadian Women's Foundation is aimed at having a gender-equal Canada. For instance, we know women earn less than men in all categories of work. That's why we still have a persistent gender wage gap. When it comes to intersectionality—racialized and indigenous women—that gap is even wider.

Many of our programs have an economic perspective and are aimed at creating pathways for women to access the workplace. There are programs that do financial literacy, help women start their own sole-entrepreneurship companies or strengthen economic choice.

A lot of this is linked to safety for women in Canada. One of the startling statistics I'll leave with this committee is that a woman or girl is killed every 48 hours in Canada. Safety is a very real thing. Several provinces have declared intimate partner violence to be an epidemic in the country.

The conversation comes up around intimate partner violence. It adds a layer of complexity to the EI system, which does not recognize the complex barriers faced by individuals experiencing gender-based violence or economic abuse. The eligibility rules do not reflect survivors' realities. Rigid insurance-hour requirements disproportionately affect women and fail to account for employment sabotage by an abuser, such as restricting transportation, withholding child care, or on-site harassment. These disrupt women's employability.

The benefits aren't enough to live on, sometimes. Right now, the EI replacement in Canada is in the middle of the pack among G7 countries. Other countries are doing much better. For instance, in Germany, a top-up is added when someone has children. There are other models that can help our study.

The system is hard to access in a crisis. The one-week waiting periods and ID requirements in this outdated administration all create layers. For survivors whose devices or accounts are monitored or withheld, applying can mean surveillance, exposure and risk to life.

I want to emphasize that the lens we need to apply in this study is one of gender. Women's interactions are different.

● (1205)

Chi Nguyen: I have one minute left.

I want to ask Ms. Kapitaniuk a question.

I have a friend who is an absolute overachiever. During her second maternity leave, she went off and did an MBA. You talked a bit about the skills training that some moms want to pursue. Can you tell me about some of the considerations or challenges in being able to maintain EI or parental leave supports through that period?

Cherise Kapitaniuk: Yes.

As I said, from the conversations we've had, I know that it is frustrating in many circumstances. Women feel they're at risk of losing their EI support if they choose to pursue school.

What does this look like? Just last week, I had a single mom tell me that in order to maintain her EI, she had to answer whether she would be willing to work full time, 35 to 40 hours a week. She was a full-time student and a single mother. She said, "How could I possibly maintain full-time employment while being a full-time student?" That put her at risk of losing her benefits.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Nguyen.

I want to thank the witnesses for taking your time to appear before this committee. Thank you for sharing your personal experiences and what you have learned through that process, and thank you for your very good recommendations to this committee. Thank you so much for taking the time.

We'll suspend for a moment now while we transition to the next hour.

● (1205)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1210)

The Chair: Committee members, welcome back to the second hour of today's meeting.

I will remind those who are joining us that you have the option to participate in today's meeting in either official language. If you're in the room, ensure that you're on the channel that gives you the language you're comfortable participating in. If you're attending virtually, please click on the globe icon at the bottom of your Surface and pick the language that you will participate in. Please stay on that channel so that you can fully understand all those who are participating, regardless of the language in which they're speaking.

As well, please direct all questions through me, the chair, and wait until I address you by name to begin.

I would like to introduce the following three witnesses for the last hour.

We have Nadine Fearon in the room. She is appearing as an individual.

From Bothwell-Accurate, we have George Vassallo, chief executive officer. He is appearing virtually.

From Les Perséides—Soutien au deuil périnatal, we have Brendon Watters, vocational rehabilitation counsellor, by video conference.

We'll begin with Madam Fearon, who's in the room, for an opening statement of up to five minutes.

You have the floor.

Nadine Fearon (As an Individual): Thank you so much, Chair and members of the committee, for having me here today.

My name is Nadine Fearon, and I am a single mom of spontaneous natural triplets and a teenager. I'm also an educator and an advocate for parents of multiples.

I'm grateful that Canada provides maternity and parental benefits, including the recent increases this year. However, I want you to understand what these policies have meant for parents of multiples.

I have been fighting for my triplets since the day I found out about them, before they even took their first breath. In January 2020, a doctor told me, "If I were you, I would have a reduction." At seven weeks, complications had me on full bed rest and out of work. At 20 weeks, I nearly lost them again. I had to have an emergency cerclage and I spent two weeks in the hospital.

I was my family's primary income earner. Then COVID closed my partner's workplace.

At 30 weeks, my triplets arrived via emergency C-section. They spent nearly two months in two NICUs in the GTA. I went home every single night without them, terrified, while still having to care for my older son. Three weeks after their birth, their dad had emergency back surgery.

Bringing my triplets home didn't mean that their medical challenges were over. I was able to access the critically ill children benefit for one of the three children who were hospitalized. Their father was not eligible to claim for another.

On top of feeding, comforting and caring for three premature babies, for their first two years of life, we travelled to appointments at hospitals across the GTA weekly, biweekly and monthly. I pumped milk, but they still needed specialized formula that cost approximately $2,500 a month. I had private insurance, which then excluded me from being able to access OHIP+. My standard EI payments replaced approximately 30% of my teaching salary.

Financial pressures sent me back to work when my triplets were six months old. That's just four months corrected. Returning to work wasn't simply a matter of choice. Many parents of multiples feel pressured to return to work due to the financial pressures of having multiples. I struggled with postpartum depression and anxiety, and I eventually needed an extended mental health leave from work.

Child care was another barrier. I joined over 36 wait-lists. It took nearly two and a half years to find a centre that could take all three babies at the same time, and only one centre ever called us back. I needed time to heal. My children needed care, but financially, it felt impossible.

Consider the purpose of EI. Maternity benefits provide up to 15 weeks of income support relating to pregnancy and childbirth. Parental benefits support caring for “a” newborn or newly adopted child, yet multiple births bring no additional paid parental weeks. The 18-month option means smaller weekly payments, and for primary income earners or parents of multiples, that simply is unaffordable, and two eligible parents still share a very limited pool of weeks.

Quebec provides additional paid weeks for eligible parents of multiples. Bill C-464 proposed federal reform in 2013 but lost by 11 votes.

My Change.org petition gathered nearly 5,000 signatures, and the parliamentary petition had approximately 1,019 validated signatures. The government's response to my petition further acknowledged the inherent flaw in the current system for parents of multiples.

Families have been asking for change for decades.

For two eligible parents and for solo parents, I ask you to recommend additional paid benefit weeks for parents of multiples and to recommend provisions for maternal recovery.

Lastly, examine a dedicated parental benefit system outside of EI. Parents on parental leave are not unemployed; they are raising Canada's next generation. My children weren't one baby because they shared a womb: Each needed to be fed, each needed to be held and each needed time to bond.

I'm not asking for special treatment; I'm asking for equal recognition. If every child matters, every child must count, and it's time our policies reflected that.

Thank you.

● (1215)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Fearon.

We'll now go to Mr. Vassallo for up to five minutes.

George Vassallo (Chief Executive Officer, Bothwell-Accurate): Good afternoon, and thank you to the committee for this opportunity to talk about Canada's parental leave practices in supporting families and protecting businesses.

Today, I want to speak about an important issue that affects our families, our businesses and the future of our workforce: Canada's current unemployment insurance parental leave practices.

As a country, we should be proud that Canada recognizes the importance of giving parents time to care for their newborn or newly adopted children. The arrival of a child is one of life's most meaningful moments, and parents should have the opportunity to be present during those early stages of their child's life.

Under Canada's current employment insurance system, eligible parents can receive maternity and parental benefits. Maternity benefits provide up to 15 weeks of support for the person giving birth. Parents can then choose between two parental leave options. The standard option provides up to 40 weeks of benefits shared between parents, with one parent limited to a maximum of 35 weeks. The extended option provides up to 69 weeks shared by parents, with one parent limited to a maximum of 61 weeks.

These benefits provide valuable financial assistance, but they also raise some important questions. Are we providing enough support for families while ensuring our businesses remain competitive, productive and sustainable?

For many families, taking parental leave means accepting a significant reduction in household income. For many employers, however, the challenge can be equally significant. When a valued employee takes an extended leave, the company must continue to operate. Projects must be completed, customers must be served, deadlines must be met and other employees must carry on with their responsibilities. The company may have to recruit and train a temporary replacement, pay overtime to existing employees or redistribute responsibilities across the organization. In many cases, the person taking leave has specialized knowledge, experience and relationships that cannot easily be replaced. This can create a considerable burden, particularly for smaller businesses that may not have the resources or depth of personnel to absorb an extended absence.

There is another important consideration, which is that the cost of parental leave does not end with the employee taking leave; it often transfers to the employees who remain. Colleagues may find themselves carrying additional workloads, working longer hours and taking on responsibilities beyond their original roles. This can create stress, frustration and, in some circumstances, resentment. Meanwhile, the company continues to incur operating costs, and the impact on productivity, profitability and customer service can be substantial.

The current system provides some benefits to eligible employees, but it does not directly reimburse employers for their cost of replacing employees, training temporary workers or managing the disruption caused by extended absences. Employers also contribute to the EI system through payroll premiums. While parental leave is an important social benefit, businesses are often left to manage much of the operational financial impact themselves.

There is another important part to this conversation that we cannot overlook, and that's child care. If we want parents to have the opportunity to return to work earlier during their scheduled parental leave, we need to make sure that appropriate child care is actually available. Today, many parents face long waiting lists, limited infant day care spaces and a lack of flexibility in their child's arrangements. In some communities, finding a day care space for a newborn or infant can be extremely difficult.

We need a better child care system across this country, one that provides more accessible, affordable and reliable day care and more entry points for newborns and infants. Parents should have the option to return to work when they feel ready, not simply when their parental leave benefits run out.

Also, businesses should have the opportunity to welcome those employees back earlier, if that is what the employee and employer agree is best. A more accessible day care system would give parents greater freedom, give businesses greater flexibility and help Canada make better use of its workforce. I believe this should be a priority for governments and policy-makers.

Supporting parents and supporting businesses are not opposing objectives. In fact, they should go hand in hand. We need a system that allows parents to spend meaningful time with their children without placing unnecessary financial hardships on families or unreasonable operational pressures on employers.

● (1220)

We should also recognize that parental leave is not simply a women's issue: Fathers and partners should be encouraged to support and participate equally in raising their children. The question is not whether parents deserve time with their children; they absolutely do. The question is whether our current system adequately balances the needs of families with the responsibilities and realities of the businesses that employ them. We should consider whether benefit levels adequately reflect the rising cost of living, whether employers can be better supported when employees take extended leave and whether more flexible arrangements could help parents transition back into the workplace.

● (1225)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vassallo. Could you wrap up?

George Vassallo: Sure. I'll leave it at that. That's fine.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vassallo.

We'll now conclude with Mr. Watters for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Brendon Watters (Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor, Les Perséides, soutien au deuil périnatal): Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today as part of the deliberations on employment insurance parental leave in Canada.

I am a vocational counsellor specializing in pregnancy and infant loss, and I work for the organization Les Perséides. We support families who are coping with the loss of a baby during pregnancy or shortly after birth. In my practice, I regularly meet parents who are going through one of the most important transitions of their lives. Some are learning how to parent a living child. Others must learn to live with the absence of a child they were expecting. Both of these realities require time, adjustment and, above all, support.

Today, I'd like to draw your attention to some current limitations based on the experience of the bereaved families we support and my expertise in career development and psychological health in the workplace.

When we talk about parental leave, we naturally think of a live birth. However, a pregnancy can also end in medical termination, a late miscarriage, a stillbirth or the death of a newborn. In all these situations, the parents' needs are very real. The mother's body needs to recover. Her psyche must also cope with the profound loss of a child. As for the father and partner, they often have to simultaneously deal with their own grief, support their spouse and meet the demands of work. Many parents quickly find themselves facing a difficult reality: the lack of measures sufficiently tailored to their situation. For some families, financial constraints make a prolonged absence from work virtually impossible. Bereaved parents therefore return to work while still in a state of shock, physically and psychologically exhausted. We should not assume that someone who has just lost a child is immediately able to resume normal work duties.

Another issue that deserves the committee's attention is the role of fathers. Although the physical consequences of pregnancy primarily affect women, perinatal bereavement profoundly affects both parents. In my practice, many men tell me that they felt intense pressure to return to work quickly to provide for their families. They often find themselves caught between two responsibilities: being there for their spouse and children while remaining the household's primary breadwinner. This tension is nothing new, and models of fatherhood are evolving. Many fathers want to be more involved with their children. Yet many confide in me that they regret not having had the time they needed to fully experience this period. When a child is lost during pregnancy, this pressure can become even greater, as the grieving parent must cope with their grief while meeting their employer's expectations.

Let's now talk about productivity. As a vocational counsellor, I believe it is essential to consider not only the issue of absenteeism, but also that of presenteeism. A person who is physically present at work is not necessarily able to perform at their usual level while experiencing perinatal bereavement. New parents or bereaved parents therefore face similar challenges, including reduced sleep quality, diminished concentration, increased financial concerns, a weakened ability to adapt and, in some cases, significant symptoms of depression or anxiety. In my opinion, a good parental leave plan should recognize the full range of possible experiences related to pregnancy and parenthood, including perinatal bereavement. We should recognize that parenthood is not limited solely to the birth of a child.

Becoming a parent is a major life transition that requires time and adjustment. Better access needs to be provided to psychological support for both parents, whether the pregnancy proceeds as planned or ends in a loss. Specific measures must be established for perinatal bereavement situations to alleviate the void currently felt by many families. We must take into account the physical and medical complications that can arise during and after a pregnancy, even when no living child comes home. In addition, more flexibility must be allowed for in the use of parental leave so that it can meet families' real needs.

In closing, I would like to remind everyone that parents who are adjusting to a child's presence, just like those who are adjusting to a child's absence, are undergoing a profound reorganization of their lives. Becoming a parent or learning to live with the loss of an expected child is not a transition that can be measured in a few hours, a few days or even a few weeks. It is a process that permanently transforms an individual, a couple and a family.

● (1230)

As part of your discussion on the future of parental leave programs in Canada, I invite you to also consider families whose parenting journey is marked by grief. They, too, deserve to be recognized, supported and protected.

Thank you for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Watters.

[*English*]

We'll now begin the first six-minute round with Mr. Jivani. Thank you.

Jamil Jivani (Bowmanville—Oshawa North, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Fearon. I'm really glad to have you here at committee. I've had the privilege of being able to see some of your journey to get here. You first reached out to my office to point out this injustice or unfairness in how EI payments are being distributed. We met at the Tim Hortons near the Oshawa Centre. I suggested to you that a petition is a good way to start getting this on people's radar. You followed through on that, and you've pursued this relentlessly ever since. I really commend you for that. I respect you a great deal.

Because you've been so open and public, I wonder if you can share your experience as a mom of triplets, and also something about the challenges you face in the system as a mom of triplets. You've had many other moms and dads reach out to you to share their stories. Maybe you could share some of what you've heard from other folks with the committee here today.

Nadine Fearon: Yes, I can, for sure. It's been a pleasure to work with you on this. Thank you so much.

I do a lot of social media, so I have a lot of parents reaching out to me to share their stories. I feel very blessed because my triplets are all here and healthy. They're all great now, but that's not the reality for so many parents of multiples.

I'm really happy that Mr. Watters mentioned that with multiples, sometimes one baby survives and one baby doesn't. What does that mean for parents who are struggling to go back to work after that? They still have their one child, but the other one is not there. That's something that can be incredibly difficult for some parents. After one year or 18 months, it hasn't gone away. It hasn't changed how you're feeling about trying to transition back to work.

As I mentioned, when I first found out I was pregnant with triplets, the doctors said, “This is very high risk. You should have a reduction.” Well, some families choose selective reduction, for whatever reason. That's their choice. However, sometimes you also risk losing all the babies instead of just one or two.

It also depends on what your family structure is. I know a mom of quadruplets who is also a teacher like me. She was fortunate enough to be able to hire an au pair and have somebody come to their house full time. I believe her kids are now three years old. She had that, but what if you don't? I never had that. What does it look like when you don't have that support? Again, it's about looking at different family structures and at what's going on within a family home. It's not all the same.

It's difficult to see this program insisting that all families are the same when, really, they're not. There are so many different factors and so many things happening when you have multiples like twins, triplets or more.

Jamil Jivani: My mom is a twin. I remember hearing stories from my grandma about what it was like raising twins while also having two other kids at the same time. My sister is the mom of twins who are 20 months old right now. I am called on to do babysitting duty frequently. When you told me that you had spontaneous triplets, I could only imagine how challenging it was. I certainly appreciate, as many other people do, that you've shared your story.

In your submission to the committee, there is a line that I want to ask you to elaborate on, because I thought it was a great way of explaining why the change you're requesting is so important. You said, “I ask this committee to recommend a federal EI parental-benefit framework that recognizes children, not merely birth events.” I think that was a great way of explaining what you're asking for from your government.

Could you explain what you mean by that?

● (1235)

Nadine Fearon: Yes.

Right now, as we know, the way it stands is that it's per pregnancy. This is what they're looking at: You were pregnant, and whether you had one child or you had five children, however many children you had, the EI benefits are exactly the same.

When you're looking at having multiple births, you know that the needs are different. It's not simply that you need three car seats or you need three cribs. It's really not that easy, because if you've ever looked at getting a triple stroller, you would know that the cost is 5.5% greater than it is for a regular stroller. I remember having to order it from the U.K. because there were none available in Canada unless I wanted a steering wheel on the back and I wanted it to do all this stuff.

Again, what we have to look at is that each baby needs that time. We were in two NICUs across the GTA. Things didn't just stop when we went home. There were still individual needs that the babies had, because they were all different. They all had their own needs. One of my daughters had hip dysplasia. One of them had something called metatarsus adductus, which is almost like club feet. Their needs were different. Another one had to go to physio several times a week, and I had to take them all with me when I went.

Looking at that, does that mean that after one year we were fine? No. We went to those appointments for two years, even though I had to go back to work when they were six months old, so that meant taking extended time.

There are so many different factors in my situation and so many others' situations that the EI program as it stands right now doesn't consider.

Jamil Jivani: This is my last question.

I'll ask you to point out some of the hidden experiences that you have had as a mom of multiples that the average person might not be aware of.

Nadine Fearon: I mentioned earlier the cost of what that looks like. It's not just one for one. It doesn't look like that.

As a mom of multiples, you're looking at a high-risk pregnancy. You're not looking at a standard pregnancy in which you will have your ultrasound and everything will be fine. Oftentimes you are hospitalized. Maybe you will have an emergency C-section, and on top of trying to heal from your C-section, you will also be at the NICU struggling to heal and take care of those children at the same time.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Fearon. Thank you, Mr. Jivani.

I will now go to Madam Koutrakis.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor for six minutes.

[*English*]

Annie Koutrakis (Vimy, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to our witnesses for being here with us this afternoon.

Ms. Fearon, I will start with you.

I didn't have multiple pregnancies when I gave birth to my children. I had single pregnancies, and I can remember the challenges of a new life with new responsibilities and of trying to juggle raising a baby with making sure that I didn't stay out of the workforce for too long, because there would have been repercussions for my career.

By choice, I stayed out of the workforce for nine years when I decided that I wanted to stay home and be with my children. Obviously, the parental leaves and the maternity leaves when I had my children 40 years ago were not the same as they are today. The federal government is working hard to make sure that we have the EI flexibilities we need to make sure that parents, given today's realities, have the programs and the benefits that they require.

Do you feel that these programs we have in place are working? If they are not working, especially for the multiples, what would you recommend changing?

Nadine Fearon: I think that we need to be looking especially at the parental leave portion and how we can add additional weeks if there are multiple births. Again, we're not looking at one child; we're looking at two or more children. What would it look like if you had additional time to really care for and bond with those children?

I'm not sure if anybody read my brief, but the studies already show that there's an increase in premature births. You're looking at more time in the NICU, and you're sometimes looking at more health risks and things that happen.

It's not just about standard care. We're looking at some of the things that come with having multiple births, additional things that you might not necessarily get a chance to see in a singleton birth.

● (1240)

Annie Koutrakis: Thank you for that.

I want to ask a question of Mr. Vassallo.

Having been a small business owner myself when I was helping my family with their business years ago, I often heard employers say that there wasn't enough flexibility in that program and that their needs were not really heard.

I would like to give you the opportunity to tell us what that balance would look like. Could you provide us with a recommendation for how we can help employers and parents make sure that they have the right amount of time with their children and time to look after their family and their obligations without leaving small businesses behind? Have you heard some recommendations that you perhaps think would be helpful for this study?

George Vassallo: I think there are multiple things that need to happen.

Training is a very big factor for a business, not only for the person who has left on maternity leave or parental leave but also for the person you bring in as a part-time filler for that individual. I think it's vitally important that governments start to realize that in order for business not to be hurt in any way, they have to make it easier for both the person who is leaving the workforce for up to 18 months to stay trained in the way that the business is changing and also for the person who comes in on a part-time basis. That's one thing that needs to happen.

The other thing that I wish they would look at is not only early returns but a part-time return, so that people can have more money during that parental leave. I think business has a responsibility to help the individual. It truly is something that needs to be undertaken by all individuals.

One of the things that I'm trying to work on right now is day care. Day care support is very much lacking in today's world, both for women and for men. What I'm trying to do is get a trifecta whereby government, business owners and unions participate in not-for-profit day care centres for parents. That would allow parents to come back into the workforce earlier, knowing that their kids are being taken care of.

One of the other things I've noticed with day care is that it's imperative to have nurses and doctors participating in day care centres that care for babies.

It's not that we have to protect the business or the individual solely; we have to work better together in order to make the system better. It's not just a government problem; this is a societal problem. I think it's vitally important that employers listen to what the new parents are asking for.

The only thing I would ask is that the training period really take effect through both government and employers so that we can work a lot better through the system and we don't feel overwhelmed or overburdened.

Annie Koutrakis: Do you think parents are aware of the various social programs that are in place to help them while they're on maternal, paternal or parental leave so that they can transition to work slowly, have an agreement with their employer on the side or be able to secure safe, affordable child care spaces for their children?

With all these programs that are in place now, and the conversation that is happening in society, have you seen a difference? Has there been an uptick of parents or businesses feeling more supported?

George Vassallo: Honestly, for our business, I have been—

The Chair: Mr. Vassallo, you will have to respond to that later.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Larouche, you now have the floor for six minutes.

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

I'd like to thank the witnesses for joining us to talk about this topic, which can indeed be very sensitive. I'd like to thank Ms. Fearon, to whom I'll come back later. I also want to thank Mr. Vassallo.

I'll first address Mr. Watters.

A representative from Les Perséides testified during the study of Bill C-222. I believe your organization had expressed its position on that bill.

Now that the bill has been passed, what remains to be done? Can you remind us of what is not included and what still needs to be done to broaden its scope as much as possible?

● (1245)

Brendon Watters: Someone from our organization did indeed come and testify. I believe it was last April.

Now that the bill has been passed, we have to consider people who have had a pregnancy termination before 20 weeks and who are not covered by the bill. These people will lose their child, and they will be asked to return to work even though they are not psychologically ready to do so.

In this context, there is still a gap to address. In fact, the recovery time for people experiencing perinatal bereavement varies from one case to another, depending on the criteria used to define it. So there are still situations that fall between the cracks, especially for people who have experienced a pregnancy termination before 20 weeks.

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

I'll now turn to you, Ms. Fearon.

First, I'd like to congratulate you on your family. It must be quite a lively household now that the children are growing up. It must be fascinating to see each of the triplets' personalities develop.

In your opening remarks, you briefly mentioned a bill. However, I did not quite catch which bill you were referring to. We did understand all the exclusions, though.

Since 2006, we've been proud in Quebec to have a system that's unique. In fact, as you said, there is additional support and extra weeks for multiple pregnancies in Quebec. Perhaps that's something we could draw inspiration from.

Are there other aspects of the Quebec system that you think might have been helpful to a mother in your situation?

[*English*]

Nadine Fearon: Thank you so much for your question.

I'm not sure how Quebec does all of their policies or what has changed. I specifically looked at what they are doing for families of multiples.

I really liked that they have and allow additional benefits. They recognize that when people have multiples, it's not just one child. They need additional time to be able to support those children and whatever needs they may have. I'm not familiar with some of the other things that are there, but I just really appreciated, and I thought it was really commendable, that they recognize multiple births and the needs in taking care of multiple children at a time.

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: I can imagine how hard it is to find baby products. It's hard enough to find everything you need for one child. Doing it for three children at the same time must be quite something.

I want to come back to the bill you mentioned in your opening remarks. You talked about Bill C-464, which was introduced in 2023, I believe, and a petition that accompanied it.

Can you remind us what the bill could have changed in terms of multiple pregnancies?

[*English*]

Nadine Fearon: Yes, that bill was actually presented at the time by Multiple Births Canada, which has since closed. They were proposing essentially some of the things I've mentioned already, like looking at having additional time per child, not just per pregnancy.

They were also looking at how parents who are eligible could utilize their parental time simultaneously, especially if they're both eligible. If you have three children, you could have three separate leaves, potentially, if you're eligible. If you have multiple children and the parents are eligible, why can't they do that simultaneously? They also looked at that as well.

The system is a bit different now from what it was in 2013. Some of the numbers don't really apply anymore. Primarily, they're just looking at the amount of time allotted per child for parental leave—not maternity leave, but parental leave—as well as using those concurrently.

● (1250)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Larouche, you have 15 seconds left.

Andréanne Larouche: Ms. Fearon, did the petition accompanying the bill simply ask that the bill be passed?

Was it a petition that supported the bill or did it ask for something else?

[*English*]

Nadine Fearon: I'm sorry. Can you repeat that?

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: You talked about the petition that accompanied the bill. Was it simply asking for the bill to be passed or was it asking for other measures?

[*English*]

Nadine Fearon: The petition was looking at the current figures. Again, that petition was started in December.

If you have an opportunity to look at the brief I provided, you'll see that the change now gives the current numbers of what that would look like. For example, if you have one baby, one pregnancy, those numbers for the standard EI would be approximately $36,000. If you have twins or triplets, again, you're getting that same $36,000. However, when you are looking at two babies from—

The Chair: Thank you. We're well over. You can continue that with another question.

Mr. Genuis, you have five minutes.

Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you so much to all the witnesses.

Mr. Vassallo, thank you for bringing the employer's perspective into this conversation. One thing I hear you say is that flexibility can be a win-win. It's a win for employers and a win for the parents. Is that a correct take, do you think?

George Vassallo: It very much is.

One thing I didn't get a chance to talk about in my speech is flexible hours, so that if the mother is taking maternal leave and the father comes home at five o'clock, she could go back to work and still fulfill her job duties as well as get paid. It's a win-win for both the employer and the employee. I think flexibility is very important in this situation.

Garnett Genuis: That's great.

Perhaps I can drill down on a couple of points.

In the last hour, Ms. Kukulewich spoke about long-term employees who have built up knowledge and are working on ongoing projects. It would seem to me that from the perspective of both the employer and the employee, a more flexible structure could allow that employee to continue or to offer advice to their replacement, maybe even for a few hours a week, so that they could be paid to be in touch with the workplace and provide advice on the continuation of those projects while they're on leave. If done right, and respecting everybody's autonomy in the process, that could be a real win-win for everybody involved.

The current system doesn't provide for that flexibility. Would you agree with that?

George Vassallo: Yes. That's correct.

Garnett Genuis: I gather that in your business, you have a lot of seasonal employees as well. Is that right? You have busier times and less busy times.

George Vassallo: That's correct. In the winter, we drop about 40% of our workforce.

Garnett Genuis: How do you think the kind of system we've proposed, one in which a parent could pause and then resume leave, might lead to a kind of negotiation conversation between employers and employees that takes into consideration that seasonality? An employer could give someone the opportunity to come back to work in a particular busy season for a short period of time and then resume their leave. Right now, that isn't possible.

George Vassallo: I would agree with that completely. That's why I said that it's not just government that can resolve this issue; it has to be employers as well.

Garnett Genuis: Yes, the current system for EI parental leave gets in the way of that. You can't pause and resume your leave.

Outside of that parental leave window, you could negotiate these things, and nobody would be any worse off. Basically, the government gets in the way of that mutually beneficial negotiation.

George Vassallo: That's correct. It can't be an on-and-off situation. It's either on or off.

● (1255)

Garnett Genuis: Yes. Thank you.

Ms. Fearon, you talked about a doctor proposing the idea of a reduction. Can you clarify whether that was a conversation that the doctor brought up out of the blue?

Nadine Fearon: I know that they have to explain what your options are during these conversations, especially with higher-order multiples, but he didn't say it as a way of letting me know what my options were. He specifically said that if I were you, this is what I would do. That's how it was posed the day I found out I was pregnant with triplets.

Garnett Genuis: Is that something you've heard from other parents of multiples as well?

Nadine Fearon: I have heard some people say that this was also kind of pushed on them. This doctor not only told me what I should do; he also went so far as to make all the appointments at the only hospital in the GTA that would do that. I got a second opinion and never, ever went to that hospital. I said I wasn't going to do that. I wasn't going to that hospital, even though it's only one of two hospitals in the GTA that deliver higher-order multiples.

Garnett Genuis: How did that make you feel?

Nadine Fearon: I felt awful about it. Six years later, it's still something I think about. That really has sat with me.

I look at my kids now and wonder who would they have chosen. Those are the thoughts I have in my mind.

Garnett Genuis: Can I ask one other quick thing?

It seems to me that what might be helpful for leave is to have the support of an extra person during those early years. What do you think about the possibility of allowing a grandparent, in a case of multiples, to take leave as well, so that you have extra support?

I'm thinking out loud here—

Nadine Fearon: Yes—

Garnett Genuis: —which is a dangerous thing to do on the record, but do you think that, especially for—

Nadine Fearon: An uncle, maybe....

Garnett Genuis: What do you think about that option?

Nadine Fearon: For me, I don't have my mom, and my partner at the time did not have his mom either. I also didn't have my grandparents.

That seems like it could be a great option for some people, but not everybody has the privilege of having their parents around to give that additional support.

If the father could....

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

We'll now move to Mr. Saini for five minutes.

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

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

I'm going to go to Mr. Vassallo.

Our government believes in a multipronged approach to supporting new parents and young families. That's why we have modernized the employment standard, implemented the national school food program, put forward the Canada groceries essential benefit and prioritized affordable child care spaces.

Can you speak on how such approaches are helping businesses and families?

George Vassallo: I think they help a lot. The problem that we run into all the time is that there isn't space available in day cares, and that is a huge issue. That's one of the reasons we're trying to get involved in having a not-for-profit day care centre to help our own industry. If you're doing shift work, which we have in our workplace, you can't find any child care that is going to be open at 10 o'clock at night. It's just not available. You can go to the automotive sector and you can go to the health care centres and you can go to the police, and we've talked to all of them.

The government is great from eight to five, but working extended hours doesn't leave paternal people free enough to allow them to manage their systems. Day care is a 24-hour-a-day system. It's not eight hours a day.

Business can participate in that, but I think it's more than that. It's government as well as the employer, and a lot of the unions as well.

Gurbux Saini: Ms. Fearon, I feel the pain that you have gone through and I admire the advocacy work that you are doing for society.

I know you have looked at the Quebec system, because you mentioned it. Have you looked at any nations outside of Canada that may have those programs, and if you have, can you share that with us? How can they benefit society?

● (1300)

Nadine Fearon: Thank you so much for for asking that. There are a number of them. I wrote them down just in case somebody asked.

In looking at a number of places, we see that all the leave options are different. In China, they have something for multiple births and they add additional weeks. Poland has 20 weeks for singletons, and then they have 37 weeks for multiples, so they allow additional weeks. In Colombia, they add additional weeks. In Denmark, they add 13 weeks for each parent. Right now, they're the ones that are very progressive in how they are looking at multiple births.

There are a number of places that have already looked at this issue and have already chosen to implement special circumstances, if you will, for parents of multiples.

Gurbux Saini: You also talked about Bill C-464. Can you elaborate a little more on that? What was the gist of that? I'm a new member of Parliament, so I'm not sure what went on.

Nadine Fearon: That bill was in 2013, and I think it really came from parents of twins, mainly, who were looking at why both parents couldn't utilize their EI benefits if they were both eligible and they had two individual children. It relied heavily on that. They were looking at making it so that both parents could be eligible simultaneously if they were both eligible for the EI benefits.

They were also looking at additional time and the monetary aspects of the EI program at that time, in 2013.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds. Do you want to give it back to me?

Thank you, Mr. Saini.

[*Translation*]

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

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you again to the witnesses.

Ms. Fearon, you have done a lot of research on what happens elsewhere. It is extremely interesting. In addition to looking at what happens in Quebec, you have provided ideas that we could learn from. A witness in the previous panel told us that Canada is barely in the middle of the G7 group of countries when it comes to employment insurance and that we could do better.

I'll now turn to you, Mr. Vassallo.

I'd like to hear your reactions. I understand that we can't solve everything with employment insurance, but this statistic, or figure, clearly confirms that businesses, but also the government, can do better to help families.

[*English*]

George Vassallo: Personally, I'd like to see it offered more to the individuals who are unemployed, for whatever reason. In our society, we're far too willing to have government be responsible for everything, and I think it's about time for the employer to step up and participate. It may not be as fully or completely as the government does, but I think it's time that we all started to realize that this is not a government issue. This is a societal issue.

From my point of view, I believe we need to step up and assist to give more to the individuals who truly need it. Perhaps it's through covering health care assistance. Postpartum care has been covered a bit today, but certainly not to the extent that I think it should have been. We, as employers, need to participate more in that. There's still a lot more the employer can do to assist government in taking care of its populace.

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: Mr. Watters, you say that there are organizations such as Les Perséides. You raise an extremely interesting aspect. In Quebec, social services, under the Ministère de la Santé, de la Prévention et des Aînés, also provides support.

Shouldn't there also be health transfers so you can provide more care?

Brendon Watters: We are actually a non-profit community organization. Therefore, the integrated university health and social services centres, or CIUSSS, are major partners. We mainly serve clients who are not served by the CIUSSS. In fact, we are the safety net for Quebeckers, because the laws don't cover all avenues.

● (1305)

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll conclude with Ms. Falk and Ms. Church for five minutes each. We do have some time.

Rosemarie Falk: Thank you very much, Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for their testimony today. I don't even know who to start with, because all of you have brought such valuable information.

Ms. Fearon, thank you for your willingness to be vulnerable and your courage in sharing your story, because you're sharing a lot. I could unpack it all. Thank you so much.

You brought up your NICU stays. I also had a NICU experience with my youngest, but mine involved three ambulances, one of them being an air ambulance, because I'm rural. I'm hearing about your situation in an urban area, where you had more than one hospital that you had to trek to through Toronto traffic, which I can only imagine being frustrating, and there's a cost for travelling, as well as for hospital parking. Whether you're a patient or you're visiting, you still have to pay to visit.

I think that's interesting from an urban perspective. In a rural neck of the woods, the closest children's hospital I have would be a drive of two and a half or three hours. I think it's important for us to take that into account as well. If you're urban or rural, there are those costs. Even this can be a barrier for a mother trying to see her child in the hospital.

I want to ask you this: If there is one single policy proposal the government should do, what is it?

Nadine Fearon: I definitely think it should be additional parental time for parents of multiples.

Rosemarie Falk: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Vassallo, I want to thank you for speaking from an employer perspective.

I have four children. I had two of them while I have been elected here, in this place, which is different to begin with, but for my first one, I had an employer that I had to work with. I just want to say thank you so much for being flexible and willing to have conversations like this, understanding that this is not necessarily a government problem to fix. We need to have these conversations to help society and make things better for these families.

I want to pose the same question to you. If there is one policy that the government can do today to help with flexibility, especially when it comes to parents and young children, what would that be?

George Vassallo: The biggest issue we have is training.

One of the things that I've talked to certain government officials about is this: If we know that someone is leaving for maternity or parental leave, then we should be able to bring somebody in three months earlier, let's say, for argument's sake, and have assistance to help train them. Then, when the individual comes back after the time allowed for maternity or paternal leave, it would be to give them the same thing, providing three to four months to re-evaluate the system when they come in. Changes happen so consistently today that we almost have to have a longer runway, and most of that is for training purposes.

You can't just replace people arbitrarily. They have to be trained to take the position. In our industry, we have found that it takes almost three years for somebody to learn the applications that we need them for. I can't ask for three years, but I can certainly ask for three or four months.

● (1310)

Rosemarie Falk: That helps with the stigma, because I think there are a lot of parents, whether it's the father or the mother, who want to take the leave but are fearful of having that conversation because they may not have a job afterwards, especially if it's in a male-dominated field, for example, and the father wants to take the leave.

I want to follow up with Mr. Watters.

Thank you for coming here. I appreciated your comments about fathers and about having fathers involved with their children. Fathers have a very important role to play when it comes to the family dynamic, especially when it comes to a sense of belonging, self-worth and identity. I think it is important that we, as lawmakers, also keep that point in mind when we're drafting these policies. I want to thank you for highlighting that and also for noticing that in your practice.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Falk.

We'll conclude with Ms. Church for five minutes.

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

I also want to extend my thanks to all of the witnesses today. I thought this was a very interesting conversation, and like my colleagues across the way, I think it's one that many of us here at the table relate to as parents and as mothers.

Ms. Fearon, thank you very much for sharing your experience. We had close friends who found themselves in a similar situation. They had their first child, and when they were going for their second, they had triplets. We saw, very much first-hand, the extended family, in their case, and the effort that it took to care for three infants at the same time. It was a wonder. I really appreciate the effort and what you have been through to raise your children.

One of the things that I know I hear a lot about—and I'm curious if you experience this or experience it in your advocacy for multiples—is the Canada child benefit, which becomes very much available at birth and is per child. It offers, I think, close to $8,200 per year per child right now to try to offset some of those costs that you mentioned.

Have you seen any impact of this? Is it one of the ways in which the financial supports that the government can offer address some of the immediate challenges, especially with the heightened expenses that come from having a multiples birth?

Nadine Fearon: Definitely, it does help. I'm not going to say it doesn't. It absolutely does help, but it is also based on your income.

The year before I had triplets, my income was significantly higher than it was after that year, so that benefit wasn't really true to what my situation was at that time. It does help, but it wasn't helping the situation that we were in at that moment.

Leslie Church: I really appreciated the suggestion that you had about being able to use parental benefits concurrently. That seems to me to be a practical example when you're caring for multiples. To the extent that we can make that policy more flexible, it is a very good policy idea.

In terms of some of the challenges that you experienced leading up to the birth, which ring very true in terms of additional appointments and the type of specialized care that you were probably receiving, are there other benefits that were accessible to you at the time?

I'm thinking along the lines of things like the EI sickness benefits. In addition to the maternity and paternity benefits that exist, there's also a sickness function. Had you found that those were accessible and available to you as a parent?

Nadine Fearon: As an educator, a teacher in Ontario, I was fortunate that my job has that built in. I was able to utilize my sick benefit for six months, and I was pregnant for only seven. For the most part, it covered the whole time that I needed it, but I know that there are some parents who don't have that option. They are not able to have it.

I think the EI sick benefit portion is available and could have been available for some parents who needed it. As I said, in my job, I was fortunate to have sick leave from my work.

Leslie Church: That's good to know.

To Mr. Vassallo, thank you as well for your perspective on what I think is a matter of utmost importance to us, which is child care. I think we've heard this across a variety of sectors.

I'm wondering whether I could give you the final 30 seconds or so left on the clock to talk a bit about the flexibility that's required in your particular business, and about what you are hearing from your employees and the type of flexibility that they would appreciate.

● (1315)

George Vassallo: One thing that I'm having some difficulty with now is that a lot of the flexibility is with single parents or new mothers. Because we are a unionized workforce, it's stipulated that you have to work from roughly 7 a.m. till 3 p.m. Because unions view them as specialty employees, to go outside of that is really frowned upon.

What I'm trying to do is to say that a woman or a single person has to have the flexibility to work, for argument's sake, from 10 a.m. till 7 p.m. It's outside the normal operating hours, but we need to be flexible, in any way we can, to bring people into the work environment and keep them in the work environment. Otherwise, they become a cost.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you to all the witnesses.

Ms. Fearon, I have twin brothers and twin sisters, and, Mr. Jivani, I have multiple twin cousins.

Thank you to the witnesses for giving very personal testimony on your experiences. It would seem that lawmakers should be prepared to act on some of the points that you raised here, which were very important.

With that, witnesses can leave at their will. The committee will stay in session to deal with one business item, but you're free to leave. To those appearing virtually, you can log out. Ms. Fearon, you can do that.

As we came to the end of the last meeting, we were in discussions on how to organize the work schedule on Bill S-209. I believe, Mr. Genuis, you had proposed—

Garnett Genuis: Yes, but you can go ahead, Annie, and just read it out.

The Chair: Madam Koutrakis, go ahead.

Annie Koutrakis: Thank you, Mr. Chair. There have been some discussions on the motion, which I would like to move at this point, and I think you'll find that we're all in agreement.

The Chair: Do we have consensus on that? I'm seeing consensus.

Madam Falk, go ahead.

Rosemarie Falk: I just want to hear it first.

Annie Koutrakis: Let's hear it. Let's read it first.

The Chair: Oh, I'm sorry. You would like to hear it.

Annie Koutrakis: It reads as follows:

> That, regarding the committee's consideration of Bill S-209, an act to restrict young persons' online access to pornographic material, the committee:
>
> Undertake a study of the bill with at least six meetings with witnesses before proceeding with a subsequent meeting for clause-by-clause consideration of the bill;
>
> That the committee invite the Senate sponsor of the bill, the House sponsor of the bill, and the Privacy Commissioner of Canada to appear;
>
> That parties be invited to submit witness lists to the clerk of the committee by Friday, November 13, 2026, at 4:00 PM EST; and
>
> That parties be invited to submit proposed amendments to the bill no later than 48 hours prior to the start of clause-by-clause consideration of the bill.

I can also read it in French for the record.

The Chair: It has just been circulated by the clerk to all members in both official languages.

You've heard the motion of Madam Koutrakis.

I'm seeing nodding, so the motion moved by Madam Koutrakis has been—

The Clerk of the Committee (Alexandre Longpré): Could I raise a quick point?

The Chair: Sure.

The Clerk: Thank you, members. Typically, I try not to participate in these discussions.

I'm wondering whether members would be amenable to accelerating the date for the witness lists by one day, so instead of Friday, November 13, it would be Thursday, November 12. It simply gives a bit more time for us to contact these witnesses. That one day does actually make a big difference in this particular study.

The Chair: Okay.

I want to deal with that item first, Madame Larouche. Ms. Falk and Mr. Genuis are advancing it.

(Amendment agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: We have agreement on that.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Larouche, did you want to ask a question?

Andréanne Larouche: I would like to know what you are proposing.

You want to move up the 48-hour notice by one day. Is that correct?

The Clerk: No, I'm sorry.

In terms of the list of witnesses for the study, we currently have Friday. I suggest that we move the date to Thursday.

● (1320)

Andréanne Larouche: I have another concern, Mr. Clerk. We're talking about 48 hours' notice to submit amendments before the start of clause-by-clause consideration.

Translation services must have time to provide us with all the translated recommendations. We don't know how many there will be. Therefore, we must be sure to have the recommendations in front of us in both official languages before we begin clause-by-clause consideration.

The Clerk: Yes, we need amendments in both official languages. That was going to be my next point.

The analysts also like to prepare a summary of the amendments proposed by members for clause-by-clause consideration. If we changed that deadline to one week before the start of clause-by-clause consideration, that study would be pushed to the new year, because we would devote six meetings to it. If members are in favour of this suggestion, we could do it in the new year.

That would give plenty of time to consider amendments, after considering the witnesses' testimony, for the clause-by-clause study. A week before clause-by-clause consideration is what we would propose. However, we can obviously work in the meantime, and translation services will usually give priority to proposed amendments to a bill.

[*English*]

Annie Koutrakis: We're good.

The Clerk: Do members want to solicit briefs on the topic and issue a news release on this matter?

One thing we recommend is reducing it from 10 pages to two. It is a pretty standard practice. It would be two pages and 1,000 words, rather than 10 pages and 4,000 words. It's pretty standard for most committees.

The Chair: Okay. There is consensus on all the points you raised.

(Motion as amended agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Are you clear, Clerk, on how we're proceeding?

The Clerk: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you, members, for your co-operation on that and for clearing the schedule. By the way, we're meeting Thursday. Some committees are not.

With that, is it the will of the committee to adjourn?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: We're adjourned.

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