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• (1535)
[English]

The Chair (Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC)): Good afternoon.

Welcome to meeting number 36 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates.

We are continuing our study on the CER. We have witnesses with us from Library and Archives Canada.

Welcome to OGGO.

I understand, Ms. Weir, that you have an opening statement. The floor is yours for five minutes. Please go ahead.

Leslie Weir (Librarian and Archivist of Canada, Library and Archives of Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, everyone. I am Leslie Weir, and I'm the librarian and archivist of Canada at Library and Archives Canada. I am joined by my colleagues Jennifer Schofield, who's the assistant deputy minister of collections, and Jean Deschamps, who is the acting chief financial officer and assistant deputy minister of corporate services.

Thank you so much for the invitation to appear before this committee and for rescheduling because of travel conflicts.

Library and Archives Canada's mandate is to serve as a source of enduring knowledge that is accessible to all and to act as the continuing memory of the Government of Canada and its institutions. We serve not only as a government institution but also as Canada's national library and Canada's national archives. In doing so, we provide broad access to our collections, which is a cornerstone of our existence.

In determining the 15% reduction in our 2025-26 main estimates as required by the comprehensive expenditure review, we had to make very difficult decisions. This was not the first round of reductions for Library and Archives Canada. Previous reductions had impacted all program areas related to acquiring, preserving and making accessible our documentary heritage, as well as our internal services.

When we at LAC examined the reductions for the CER exercise, we were limited in where else we could reduce. We decided to focus our reductions in three key areas.

The first is the discontinuation of the documentary heritage communities program, which was supporting organizations across Canada to preserve and describe documentary heritage and make it

accessible. This represents a reduction of \$1.6 million annually. LAC will continue to work with the organizations through non-financial means.

The second is a reduction of the temporary funding that had been allotted to ATIP and proactive access activities by \$13.6 million by 2029. This includes eliminating the declassification and reappraisal functions at LAC, as well as reducing the number of ATIP employees and other ATIP-related functions across the organization. LAC has made significant gains in reducing the backlog and increasing compliance through policy and procedural changes with the temporary funding we received, and this has allowed us to be more sustainable as a program at a lower funding level.

Lastly, given all the reductions, Library and Archives Canada has reviewed its organizational structure to identify further savings of \$6.9 million by 2028-29. Through this review, we have reduced the number of executives and managers and some administrative support, and we have grouped functions to try to be more efficient and focused on both LAC priorities and the priorities of the government.

These reductions will impact our workforce. Specifically, by 2028-29, approximately 161 positions will be reduced. Of these, 56 indeterminate employees will see their positions eliminated through either workforce adjustment or executive career transition measures.

Of important note, the government has allocated LAC funding for its ATIP function in the amount of \$81.9 million over four years beginning in 2027-28 and \$22.4 million on an ongoing basis from 2031. The temporary funding for ATIP and proactive access will still need to be reduced by \$13.6 million over three years, as outlined in LAC's CER proposal.

This ongoing funding will ensure that LAC can maintain improvements to its ATIP services, including sustained efforts to reduce the backlog, increase on-time compliance and advance innovative initiatives that enhance access to its collections.

Thank you very much. My colleagues and I look forward to answering questions from the committee.

• (1540)

The Chair: Thanks, Ms. Weir.

We'll start with six minutes for Mrs. Block, please.

Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you very much, Ms. Weir, for joining us today. It's my understanding that you are the librarian and archivist, although your position is probably comparable to that of a deputy minister. Is that correct?

Leslie Weir: I'm actually a deputy head.

Kelly Block: You're a deputy head. Okay, thank you very much.

I was looking at your departmental plan, and I noted it states that processing ATIP requests will remain a top priority. You mentioned this today, but you haven't been able to meet the targets that your department has set in previous years.

We know that cuts are being undertaken. Will the cuts being made in your department affect your ability to respond to access to information requests?

Leslie Weir: Yes, they will.

You have to realize that the main estimates for 2025-26 included the ATIP money that we have been given as project funding. As I mentioned earlier, we have already reduced the rest of our operations to an absolute minimum.

Of course, we're not just the memory of the Government of Canada; we are here to ensure that our collections reflect Canada's literature, music, culture and history. We need to be sure we can meet our obligations related to the government record, provide access to those records and, at the same time, ensure we are still fulfilling our legally mandated responsibilities to reflect the identity of Canada.

In terms of the actual details around the reductions we are doing and the impact they will have, I'm going to turn to my colleague Jennifer Schofield, who oversees our access to information operation within the sector of collections.

Jennifer Schofield (Assistant Deputy Minister, Collections Sector, Library and Archives of Canada): Thank you.

I would note there is a risk there we will not be able to comply, because there is an unknown in the requests that we receive. We believe that our ongoing funding will allow us to continue to improve and to maintain the improvements we've already made, but if we were to receive a really large request, at that point we would have less capacity for flux. That is a risk.

That being said, we have data on the access to information requests that we have received over decades now, and our plan re-

flects that data, so we will be able to maintain and continue to improve through our policy and procedural changes.

Kelly Block: Just to be clear, you're not meeting your targets, you haven't met them for a number of years and you have a backlog, but you're confident you're going to be able to maintain where you are right now, where you're not meeting your targets. Is that correct?

Leslie Weir: We meet 80% of the targets for incoming access to information and privacy requests. The challenge with the current legislation is that if we were to get a request for one million pages of restricted records, this would need to be dealt with, in theory, before we could move on to any other requests that have been submitted. This, at an average cost for restricted records of \$75 per page, would be a \$75-million request.

The scale, as Jennifer mentioned, is key. We may get thousands of requests for a relatively limited number of pages that we can easily go and pull from our collections, digitize, redact as appropriate and serve up to the requester, but then when we get a request for hundreds of thousands or millions of pages, it can make our processes more complicated.

Kelly Block: The fulfillment of these requests is a requirement of the law, so how do you rationalize not fulfilling these requests when it is the law and you could be breaking the law by not fulfilling the requests and your mandate?

• (1545)

Leslie Weir: We respond to requesters within 30 days and have exchanges with them about the records they require. We try to fulfill requests as best we can. When we have requests of a very large scale, sometimes the requester is interested in breaking their request down into a series of requests so that we can be sure we give them the highest-priority materials they're looking for.

You have to realize that we have more than 200 linear kilometres of federal government print records that are all in boxes. We have them in different buildings across the country, including in British Columbia, Winnipeg, Renfrew and Ottawa-Gatineau, and the process to go and physically get the boxes, bring them to a site where we can digitize them and then provide the digital records to the analyst...

Kelly Block: However, that's what you've been mandated to do.

Leslie Weir: That is correct.

Kelly Block: Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks.

Ms. Sudds, go ahead.

Hon. Jenna Sudds (Kanata, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

I thank all of you for being here with us today.

Can you explain why Library and Archives Canada receives among the highest volumes of ATIP requests within the federal government? How has the demand changed over the years?

Leslie Weir: Thank you very much for the question. I think it's a very important one.

We are the custodians of the historical government record. We have records that are no longer in active use, and we hold those records for more than 300 government entities; about 172 of those entities are still actively functioning.

Under the current access to information law, the way the system works is those records come to us once a department decides that they're no longer active and that they can be turned into an archival record. This could be after five years, 30 years, 50 years or 100 years. They come to us basically closed by default. Restricted records remain restricted when they're transferred to us, and then we have to consult with the department that was the originator of those records.

The vast majority of our records are print—analogue—but we do, of course, ingest digital records. When we have digital records, we can leverage tools to ensure we can serve up the information far more quickly than when we're dealing with print records.

Jennifer, do you want to add anything?

Jennifer Schofield: Over time, what we've moved from, as have all government organizations, is a model of file cabinets with very clearly marked records into one in which we now, as Ms. Weir mentioned, have over 200 linear kilometres of records. These records require a lot more manual labour to retrieve and process than they would in a normal organization. They are paper. The box has to be found and gone through. If there's mould on the records, it has to be remediated.

We have a lot of additional challenges that you wouldn't think of regarding the condition of some of the records and so on, and that's all before digitization and processing them. It can take longer, and we've seen that play out over the years.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: That piques my curiosity.

Are there efforts under way to digitize so you can move away from having to store all of these records?

Leslie Weir: We have substantial digitization initiatives, which historically covered many parts of our collection, to digitize books that were out of copyright and digitize other special collections that we have.

Currently, 95% of our digitization efforts are probably dedicated to supporting access to information. We do proactive disclosure on records, and we have a team that has worked to identify high-use records that can then be digitized and made available in a proactive manner, so people don't have to make a request and go through access to information.

Interestingly, some of our most popular files are military records, especially about World War II. We have a major push on to digitize records related to serving members of the Canadian military for World War II, especially as we look at upcoming anniversaries.

• (1550)

Hon. Jenna Sudds: This ties in with what I am going to ask next.

What categories of requests consume the greatest amount of time and resources?

Leslie Weir: I'll start by saying that the records of the military go from National Defence directly to us. For people who think they might go to Veterans Affairs, they don't; they come to us. We're dealing with the personnel who have left the military.

We get historical requests, but we also support them in getting individual retired members access to their own files.

I'll ask Jennifer to jump in about some of the other high-volume requests we get.

Jennifer Schofield: That is the greatest amount. More than half of our backlog relates to personnel files from the military and federal public service.

I was looking at my numbers. There are 4.85 million personnel files. It's a huge volume, and it's mainly paper, although we're working on that. We've put policy changes in effect as well so that if the former Canadian Armed Forces member's date of birth is more than 110 years ago, we will go ahead and release the records, presuming the time has passed.

Right now, this eliminates about 30% of the requests we have coming in, and we anticipate that by 2030, 64% of the requests coming in will no longer require this review, so they will be much faster to process and get through the system. It's one way we're reducing our backlogs.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Is that part of your ATIP action plan? Could you perhaps elaborate on the items in the action plan and the status to date?

The Chair: I'm afraid you have only about 15 seconds for an answer. We'll have other rounds, so perhaps you can answer then.

Go ahead, Madame Gaudreau.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Let's talk about access to information. I am really concerned. We are talking about penny-pinching. We are talking about being more efficient. Seriously, I would like to know the direct consequences for citizens, journalists and our media. I would like to know what this entails, as we will have to take action.

Can you tell me in detail about these consequences?

Leslie Weir: I'll start, and then my colleague can add to my answer.

It is worth noting that prior to the 2019 amendment to the Access to Information Act, when journalists and academics, amongst others, submitted a large number of requests for information, they were required to cover the costs associated with the process of our team members providing them with the requested information. Since 2019, they no longer have to bear these costs, and we have found that the number of requests has increased significantly, particularly the number of large requests.

On the other hand, we receive many requests where the number of pages corresponding to the information requested is reasonable. We try to manage the workload by responding to 80% of requests within the time limits prescribed by law, but in the case of the largest requests, this could have a significant impact on the applicants.

• (1555)

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: What might that impact be, for example?

Leslie Weir: I think Ms. Schofield has some information on this, but I'd like to give you an example. When a master's or doctoral student knows they are going to have a discussion or a debate on a certain topic, they may decide to obtain information from us, and we might end up having to process thousands of pages of information. This could affect their research and their ability to complete the necessary work within the set deadlines. That would be one example.

Jennifer Schofield: Another example would be individuals who need documents for a court case, an administrative procedure or an appeal, for instance. If they indicate that they have a deadline or that it is urgent, we can prioritize their request to respond a little more quickly.

Furthermore, we have also put a triage process in place. When we receive new requests, archivists work with the applicants to see if there are any documents already open to the public that they could access. This process has enabled us to process 30% of new requests outside the freedom of information process.

It is things like this that help members of the public, researchers, students and other individuals receive their documents within more reasonable time frames.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: This really worries me, given that, in this age of misinformation and speed, the work of archivists and our living memory—our collective memory—are precious assets. It is as if we were sending a signal that, at \$75 a page, it is ultimately no longer necessary to provide kilometres of documents. On the one hand, the requests may be excessive in some cases. On the other hand, there are people asking us why certain information isn't digitized and accessible.

How are you going to manage that, without a magic wand?

I've got one minute left. Convince me.

Jennifer Schofield: We have several processes for access, but one of these is bulk review. This process allows us to open collections using a risk-based approach that takes into account the age of the records and the subjects in question. All of this takes place outside the official access to information process. At Library and

Archives Canada, we are always looking for ways to provide access to information outside the formal process.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I will continue later, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thanks.

Go ahead, Mr. Patzer.

Jeremy Patzer (Swift Current—Grasslands—Kindersley, CPC): Thank you very much.

This is a separate question right off the bat.

Have there been any difficulties or benefits for you due to the change in the copyright term—going from 50 years after death to 70 years after death?

Leslie Weir: The major change is that, as we're trying to make collections available, it's become more restricted. It's around access. When we look at the materials in our collections.... We have 22 million books. We are in collaboration with partners to digitize some of those books, rather than using our digitization services to do that, in order to make them available. Of course, we used to be able to digitize things that were published up to a certain year. Now we've had to block off a large additional period of publications that no longer fall into the public domain.

Copyright does have an impact on us.

Jeremy Patzer: Have you run into any issues with infringement of the Copyright Act? Have you ever dealt with any of that?

Leslie Weir: We're very careful when accessing our collections to be sure that, when we share our collections, we are in fact following the copyright law fairly closely. Of course, there are interpretations around fair dealing and such things, but we have not had any issues with infringement brought to our attention at Library and Archives of Canada.

Jeremy Patzer: Thank you.

I'm sorry. This was a bit of a detour from the meeting. I appreciate your indulging me.

Getting back to the issue of ATIPs, do you happen to know the exact number of ATIPs that are currently in the backlog?

Leslie Weir: We know the exact numbers in the backlog—the numbers we get annually, etc.

I'll ask Jennifer to address those numbers.

Jennifer Schofield: We include informal requests in our backlog because these are the ones that relate to the federal public servant or military personnel files. All told, as of December 31, there were 6,321.

If I may, I'll add that this is down significantly from 2022-23, when the number was over 14,000.

• (1600)

Leslie Weir: Of course, our backlog grew radically during the pandemic because we weren't able to access our records the way we normally would.

Jeremy Patzer: Okay. Suffice it to say that there's a lot of catch-up at play. With the types of cuts you're facing.... How difficult is that making it for you?

Leslie Weir: It's difficult to address the backlog while we're also dealing with the regular requests that come in, because what we don't want to have is a backlog building up again. We make every effort to respond to the requests we're getting within the legal time frames, currently, while also continuing to bring the backlog down.

Jeremy Patzer: How do you triage that, then? I know you alluded to this earlier. If somebody asks for a million-page document, you have to finish this first before you can move on to the next thing. How are you planning to balance that—to make sure the backlog is dropping while also still managing new requests coming in?

Leslie Weir: We triage the larger requests we have, and we negotiate to do those over a certain period of time so that they don't hold up all the other requests we're getting. We need to balance it.

Then there are other requests that may have time issues. They might be dealing with litigation, land claims or other kinds of records for which we get requests.

Jennifer Schofield: I can add to that.

Our reductions have a course of three years, so we still have several years left with a contingent of staff who will continue to work on the backlog. At the same time, the new requests coming in are being responded to, at 80% to 85% on time. Our backlog is not continuing to grow at the same rate as before. We are attacking it from both ends, and we anticipate clearing it by the time these reductions come into place.

Jeremy Patzer: Quickly, to finish up, were you guys consulted prior to the announcement of the cuts?

Leslie Weir: Were we consulted about what the comprehensive expenditure review would be before it was announced?

Jeremy Patzer: Yes. Were you given any awareness, or was it, "Here, find these savings and go"?

Leslie Weir: We knew there would be additional cuts, because we'd already been cut during the refocusing of government spending. At the time, we had worked on a refocusing of government spending two, which ended up not coming to fruition. We were anticipating that there would be the equivalent of the comprehensive expenditure review, but I wouldn't say we were specifically consulted about it.

Jeremy Patzer: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Gasparro, go ahead.

Vince Gasparro (Eglinton—Lawrence, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Thank you all for being here.

I'd like to pick up where my colleague Ms. Sudds left off in regard to your ATIP action plan. What concrete improvements have resulted from the action plan, from your vantage point?

Leslie Weir: To be sure that everyone's aware, we created the ATIP action plan to respond to the systemic investigation that was tabled in the House. We've had a very comprehensive approach, in terms of revamping completely the way we're organized in access

to information, the way we respond to requests and how we deal with complaints.

I'll ask Jennifer to speak about some of the details of those changes.

Jennifer Schofield: Our biggest achievement was the creation of an archival research team. This brought together archival researchers into our ATIP unit, who were able to conduct in-depth research about specific subjects on which ATI requests were coming in. Now, instead of sending out consultation packages to other government departments, which is a very lengthy process, we do that research internally. This has resulted in our sending out 95.6% fewer pages for consultation. That not only allows us to process our own requests faster but also saves the rest of the government departments from this burden.

We also invested in our ATIP database. We now publish the access to information releases of historical records online for people to view and download. We saw 25,000 downloads in 2025, as well as 45,000 views since it launched in 2024. This too takes requests out of the ATIP system.

I mentioned the triage team we've put in place that works with requesters and the archival research team to determine, when a request does come in, whether there are already open records that might satisfy their request. This has led to 30% fewer requests coming in.

There are a number of other things as well. I could go on, but those are our biggest accomplishments, I would say, from the action plan and the plans we've put in place.

● (1605)

Vince Gasparro: That's great. Thank you for that. I appreciate it.

When it comes to the current backlog, how much is driven by complexity of the files or staffing constraints versus sheer volume?

Leslie Weir: Really, it's a combination of those.

I'll have Jennifer jump in.

Vince Gasparro: You're on the spot now.

Jennifer Schofield: That's all right.

We talked about the volume of military personnel files and federal public servant files. Roughly 27% of those have mould on them. The mould remediation process is something we realize only when we get into the records, so it requires us to take extra time, which we don't always know about in those first 30 days. We try to estimate what our time will be, but this lends itself frequently to requests being past their due date and then in our backlog. It is something we can't control, really. That's part of the addition to our backlog and how we ended up there.

The other one is the influx of requests that we saw during the pandemic. We were not able to process requests at an appropriate rate, truly. That landed us in a backlog situation.

Vince Gasparro: Okay.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thanks.

We'll go back to Madame Gaudreau and then to Ms. Jansen and Ms. Rochefort.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Weir, you mentioned in your opening remarks that 161 people would have to leave their posts, is that correct?

Leslie Weir: Yes, 161 posts.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: How are these people reacting?

Leslie Weir: It is never a positive reaction, and this was not the first time we had had to initiate such a process, as we had already had to cut jobs within another team in September.

We try to ensure the process is as humane as possible and to be transparent. We have processes in place to ensure that, when a team is to be downsized, all members are treated equally. We have clear processes in place, we work closely with the unions and we try to support our team's morale.

However, I must say that the people who work at Library and Archives Canada are there because they believe in our work. They are not people who want to work in just any department.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: They are passionate people.

Leslie Weir: Yes.

It's not easy for those directly affected, nor for their colleagues.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I imagine that, in your case, you do not often resort to outsourcing to clear the backlog of some 6,000 applications, because you have the necessary in-house expertise, do you not?

• (1610)

Leslie Weir: Yes, that's right.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: This worries me greatly. It also worries me to know that, in other sectors, we will be relying on subcontractors. Here, we are looking at the contracts. Sometimes, we tell ourselves that it doesn't matter if we no longer have the necessary staff, since we will simply have to award contracts to subcontractors. However, the bill we'll receive will be three times higher. I'm very concerned.

My speaking time is up, but if you have any proposals or brilliant ideas—apart from a complete U-turn—we'd love to hear them so we can include them in our report.

Leslie Weir: The government is currently conducting a periodic review of the Access to Information Act, and we are working closely with Treasury Board to provide our input on existing barriers and ways in which the government could have a more effective system.

At the same time, we are also holding discussions on the whole issue of classified documents. All our allies in the Group of Five already have a process in place to adopt a proactive declassification approach. We hope that Canada will have such a process one day, because it will greatly facilitate the access to information process.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That is noted.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Jansen, go ahead, please.

Tamara Jansen (Cloverdale—Langley City, CPC): Thank you.

I think all of us in this room would agree that transparency in a democracy depends on effective access to information. That's why we have laws in this country to ensure access for Canadians.

Some of the biggest scandals in this country were uncovered through access to information requests, or ATIPs, whereby ordinary citizens exercise their legal right to ask questions of the government and get answers. An ATIP is one of the most important ways by which a free people holds power to account.

Now, when a government knows that its decisions can be examined, abuses are less likely to take root, mistakes are more likely to be corrected and the public is far more likely to get honest and competent government, yet here we are. Your own report shows that you are already struggling under a serious backlog, and now you propose to eliminate positions over the next few years while asking Canadians to believe that service will somehow improve.

By what reasoning do you expect that Canadians would accept that fewer people and fewer resources will produce better compliance with the law?

Leslie Weir: As we mentioned, we did in fact have a large backlog that was created by the pandemic. We have been working on bringing the backlog down and are targeting to try to have it removed by the time we move into an operational state.

I would say that we bring in the most effective approaches we can. We have the best transparency we can. We try to work very closely with the requesters. At the same time, like every department, we have competing situations. We could decide to stop getting every book published in Canada and just not have other functions.

Tamara Jansen: Have you hired outside contractors for help with your ATIPs to get ahead of your backlog?

Leslie Weir: It takes more than a year to hire someone to work on these kinds of requests.

Tamara Jansen: I'm asking just about contractors. Have you hired—

Leslie Weir: We have not hired contractors to do this work.

Tamara Jansen: Okay.

You started off 2025 with nearly 12,000 unanswered. You mentioned now that you're at 6,000, but you're going to cut 87 staff from the office responsible for answering them. How isn't this setting yourself up for failure?

Leslie Weir: We have targets to meet under the comprehensive expenditure review. We've made our best efforts to maintain our legislated responsibilities while meeting those targets.

Tamara Jansen: You also have a legislated responsibility not to break the law and to make sure those things get answered in a timely fashion.

Leslie Weir: We have a number of legislated responsibilities that relate to not breaking laws. The access to information one is one law. We have other laws that we're covered by.

Tamara Jansen: What does the Information Commissioner think about your cost-cutting plan that could force you to break the law? Did she give her stamp of approval on this?

Leslie Weir: We certainly consult with the Information Commissioner and her team on a regular basis and work very closely with them. We kept her informed of the proposals that we had to give under the comprehensive expenditure review. She is aware of the changes to our funding.

• (1615)

Tamara Jansen: Has she given you any thoughts on whether your plan looks as though it will work?

Leslie Weir: Not specifically, no.

Tamara Jansen: I want to go back to the proposals. It's true, basically, that you expect you're going to break the law because of these cuts, but you use the language in your report to say that it "may impact" compliance.

I don't really understand. You're aware that this is going to be a problem. Canadians need to access information. I'm not sure we should be satisfied with, "Well, there are lots of different responsibilities and things we have to do, so this may be one thing for which we just have to break the law."

Leslie Weir: We're not purposely breaking the law. We currently meet the timing for 80% of the requests we receive. Right now we have additional funding for the next two years that will be sunset. We still have time to deal with the backlog while we are addressing the current requests we receive. Our goal is to reach 100% compliance, and we will work towards that.

The Chair: Thanks.

We'll finish with Ms. Rochefort.

Pauline Rochefort (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.): Thank you.

Ms. Weir, prior to 2019, were you able to charge different fees?

Leslie Weir: Yes. That's correct. There is still a five-dollar fee that can be charged, but Libraries and Archives Canada has waived it. Previous to the revisions to the Access to Information Act in

2019, if a request was of a certain size, the requester would have to pay the cost to get the information. This requirement was removed in 2019.

Pauline Rochefort: Then COVID happened, and people had free time and made all kinds of requests. There's also the baby boomer phenomenon in ancestry, and many people are active in that. It could be cyclical to some extent. There may be in 20 years or 30 years....

That said, I was looking at what all the provinces charge for access to information. I see that the majority of them have some form of a clause that allows them, if it's demanding, if it's a very long request, to add additional fees.

I've mentioned before that I was in municipal politics. We changed our regulations, our rules, and if there were frivolous and vexatious types of requests, we added a fee. Has this been considered in your discussions with Treasury Board, as you mentioned, to reintroduce this moving forward, given that the fee was introduced prior to COVID and there have been so many changes in our society?

Leslie Weir: We've certainly identified to Treasury Board what some of the barriers to access are, as well as some of the barriers for us to respond to the requests. I think they are quite aware, with input from many government departments, that there was quite a radical change in the number and the size of requests after the revision of the act.

Pauline Rochefort: Would you encourage or recommend an increase in the fee for certain files, certain requests for access to information? Well, you know—

Leslie Weir: It's a good question.

Pauline Rochefort: Talk to me about other countries. What do they do? Do other countries charge fees?

Leslie Weir: I think there's a mix in terms of fees, but other countries have quite different regimes than we do. In many of them, there's required disposition in a certain time frame. In some countries, the records are open by default and only certain categories of records can be retained as classified. This makes a huge difference in terms of the size and number of requests that have to go through the access to information channel.

Of course, before we had the Access to Information Act, we had a cabinet directive from 1973 that all records had to be transferred at 20 years and they were open by default. We've had an evolution.

Now, we don't want people who have less wherewithal not to be able to access information. The thing is, when you get to a very small percentage of massive requests, where they are for hundreds of thousands or millions of pages, it is onerous for a government department to respond to those requests at all, let alone within the legal time frames.

● (1620)

Pauline Rochefort: Would you be able to return files? For example, on Veterans Affairs, would you say, “Well, that's really not our responsibility.” Has that ever occurred? What is the reaction when that occurs?

Leslie Weir: It's generally not the model we have.

I will say that the model they have in Australia is that their National Archives does not respond to access to information requests. They return the records to the departments in question, which have to respond, but that's not the model we have in Canada.

Pauline Rochefort: I have a very quick question. I think my time is coming to an end.

On the documentary heritage communities program, is there some overlap with other programs within Heritage Canada where some of that work might be picked up?

Leslie Weir: That's a good question. There may well be, and I'm sure our team is looking at opportunities to refer people to programs that might be able to pick up some of what we do.

We have worked very closely with minority language groups in Canada and, of course, with first nations, Inuit and Métis nations, as well as with people who are in remote and rural communities, to try to ensure that they have the capability, the expertise, to preserve and make accessible their records. It has been a very successful program, and I know the communities are concerned with the requirement for us to cut this program.

The Chair: Thank you for being with us today.

Before I let you go, I have a couple of quick questions.

I want to follow up on what you just mentioned. I was going through your grants and contributions. There's a fair amount of smaller totals going, as you were mentioning, to preserve language and culture, which is wonderful, but is this reimbursed by transfers from Indigenous Services to your department? Or should it be?

Leslie Weir: We did have a—

The Chair: Is there anything to help out? Is this something they should be covering the cost of?

Leslie Weir: We had a program for digitizing archives in indigenous communities. We had funding support for it. The funding has sunsetted, so the program has been retired.

The Chair: Should this be handled by that department, instead of your department?

As well, there was a substantial amount for archiving CNE materials. I'm thinking about whether this is something, in this environment, that would be better spent in your department, rather than on helping the CNE.

Leslie Weir: Yes. I mean, we digitize the collections we hold, but this was a specific program to support communities digitizing their own records, which they would retain.

The Chair: Okay. I'm not criticizing. I'm just wondering if, in this environment—in which you're looking at layoffs affecting ATIPs—perhaps those cities or departments should help fund them for you.

Can I clarify your answer to Mrs. Jansen about outside contracting for ATIP help? You said no. Was that no to the backlog, or do you not do that as a practice, period, in your department?

Leslie Weir: What we've found is that we do quite extensive—

The Chair: I understand that, but is it—

Leslie Weir: We don't.

The Chair: You don't, at all.

Jennifer Schofield: We haven't in the last few years, at least. I don't know about the years before that.

Leslie Weir: Since I've been at Library and Archives of Canada, we have not.

The Chair: I was just trying to clarify that.

Thank you for being with us today. We appreciate your responses.

We are going to suspend for a few minutes to bring in our next set of witnesses.

● (1620)

(Pause)

● (1625)

The Chair: Good afternoon. We are back. I appreciate everyone's patience.

We have an opening statement from Mr. Groen.

The floor is yours for five minutes.

Cliff Groen (Associate Deputy Minister and Chief Operating Officer for Service Canada, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. It's a pleasure to be here today. It's nice to see many of you again for a second or third time.

My name is Cliff Groen. I'm the associate deputy minister of Employment and Social Development Canada, as well as the chief operating officer for Service Canada.

[*Translation*]

On behalf of ESDC, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before this committee today.

[English]

I would like to begin by acknowledging that the land on which we are gathered today is the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

I'm accompanied today by Danielle Lawlor, who is beside me. She's the director general of the financial management advisory services directorate within ESDC.

• (1630)

[Translation]

Our department strengthens Canada's economic and social security and gives all Canadians a fair chance to succeed at every stage of their lives.

This means ESDC invests in programs like Canada-wide early learning and child care system and the national school food program.

ESDC also helps Canadians connect to good jobs and build the skills needed in a rapidly changing labour market. This includes supporting youth as they start their careers, advancing skilled trades and expanding opportunities for under-represented groups.

Our goal is to ensure Canadians are ready to seize the opportunities of the future.

And we continue to advance safe and fair workplaces by modernizing labour protections and fostering co-operative labour relations.

ESDC's ongoing work also strengthens income security for aging Canadians, providing them with greater stability and peace of mind.

Furthermore, through Service Canada, we deliver programs and services directly to Canadians. This ensures they receive timely and accessible support whenever and wherever they need it.

[English]

Budget 2025 sets out a new direction for the public service by advancing the comprehensive expenditure review, or CER. Budget 2025 also reinforced the central role of the ESDC in supporting workers and families through economic disruptions and ongoing affordability challenges. With that direction in mind, our department will continue delivering high-quality services, including digital services and AI capabilities as priorities, and creating a more seamless Service Canada experience.

At the same time, we are committed to meeting the CER goals, which include reducing ESDC's funding by \$780.5 million by 2028-29. Meeting this commitment does require workforce adjustments. ESDC is planning to reduce its workforce by 5,313 positions, plus 98 executive positions. It is important to note, however, that this includes 3,391 positions that were already reduced last fiscal year. The process related to the workforce adjustments is ongoing.

As part of these measures, 3,028 indeterminate employees received affected letters this past January, which is expected to result in the elimination of 931 positions, in addition to 39 executive positions. The remaining reductions will be achieved either through at-

trition or through the natural end of term positions. We expect final decisions to be made no later than this summer.

Regarding the future direction of ESDC, implementing these savings provides us with an opportunity to continue delivering high-quality services for Canadians while enhancing efficiency and sharpening our focus on the government's core priorities, such as spending less on operations to strengthen the economy and bringing down costs for Canadians.

ESDC is looking inward to ensure that organizational structures and resources are aligned with the program volumes and needs. This includes consolidating management and administrative support functions, reducing our reliance on external consultants, and limiting travel and conference attendance.

[Translation]

ESDC will also streamline program delivery through changes to the departmental grants and contributions programs, such as by merging Canada service corps and supports for student learning to lower administrative costs.

This will help us continue prioritizing spending on services to Canadians.

[English]

We look forward to working with this committee to advance our ambitious plans to deliver for Canadians and to strengthen our country's future.

I look forward to your questions. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll start with Mrs. Block for six minutes.

Kelly Block: Thank you, Mr. Groen and Ms. Lawlor, for being here today. I look forward to the testimony that you are going to provide.

Your department has identified 98 executive-level positions to be eliminated under this review, notwithstanding what was already identified last year, with the number of positions being cut. Can you tell us when those 98 positions will be officially eliminated?

Cliff Groen: Notices have been provided to 46 executives who are being directly affected. Essentially, they've been advised that their positions are at risk. Some additional executive reductions have been implemented already, such as through attrition and not backfilling someone who has left the public service. The full reductions of the 98 positions will be completed by 2028-29.

• (1635)

Kelly Block: You have sent out only 46 letters to those potentially affected. How many do you need to send out before all 98 executive positions will be removed?

Cliff Groen: I made one small error. It's 47 notices, not 46. I'll correct that for the record.

We anticipate that the 47 notices are all that we will have to send out. The other reductions will be achieved or have been achieved already through attrition. That naturally occurs when people either choose to retire or move on to other roles, and we will not backfill those.

Kelly Block: Why are you waiting until 2028-29?

Cliff Groen: Under the comprehensive expenditure review, it's a three-year implementation. We have specific targets for each year to obtain reductions. The reductions have to be fully realized by the third year. This is the first year of the CER measures. The reductions have to be fully realized by 2028-29. It would be no later than 2028-29, but the vast majority would certainly be achieved prior to that timeline.

Kelly Block: Can you tell this committee what the lowest executive-level employee earns without a bonus?

Cliff Groen: EX-01 is the lowest executive level. Off the top of my head, I'm not absolutely familiar with the exact executive pay range. It is readily available online. I'm not sure if Danielle has a specific number. I believe it's in the neighbourhood of \$150,000, but we can certainly verify that information.

Kelly Block: The bonus is around \$17,000. Based on information that we reviewed, you have 834 total executives listed at ES-DC. Only four of those did not receive the at-risk pay, which is, in my understanding, actually a bonus of \$17,000.

I'm trying to understand this. You're reducing your executives by 100 executive positions. We've been told by other departments—and I think the narrative continues—that we can reduce our numbers and it's not going to impact the service. If those positions aren't needed, you can eliminate them.

Why are all of them receiving a bonus of, on average, \$17,000, on top of a six-figure salary?

Cliff Groen: There are a couple of pieces for clarification, which I think would help you understand the dynamics.

It would not be appropriate to characterize the \$17,000 as a bonus. It is correctly understood as at-risk pay. There's a certain percentage of executive pay that is at risk. It is part of the salary, but it is at risk. It's based on performance and meeting performance objectives—

Kelly Block: I'm going to interrupt you there. Looking at an actual document, which is “Results of the Performance Management Program for Executives for 2024-2025” at Canada.ca, at-risk pay as defined on that page is a performance-awarded bonus.

Cliff Groen: Within the executive compensation scheme for the public service, there are five different performance ratings that individuals can receive, ranging from “did not meet” to “succeeded-minus”, “succeeded”, “succeeded-plus” and “surpassed”.

Individuals who rate between succeeded-minus and succeeded-plus are entitled to performance pay, which is part of their at-risk pay. Only people who receive a performance rating of surpassed—a five out of five rating—would receive a bonus.

• (1640)

Kelly Block: That's extra pay.

Cliff Groen: Yes, that's part of the executive compensation scheme. I would also highlight a couple of other points to address your question.

The reduction we are seeing in our executive workforce equates to 12% of our current executive workforce. We have definitely put greater focus on reductions at the management levels rather than at the officer level. The non-executive reduction—

The Chair: I have to cut you off there. We're a bit past our time.

Ms. Khalid, go ahead, please.

Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair. Through you, I thank the witnesses for being here today and for sharing their valuable knowledge.

I want to pivot. As we're talking about executives, I want to talk about what's happening at the front lines. Millions of Canadians are relying on the services that Service Canada provides, whether it's passports, employment insurance, old age security or so many other programs.

How do you reconcile cuts and job cuts with service delivery? Can you provide us with reassurances that Canadians are going to continue to get the proper service delivery they require, with everything Service Canada has to offer?

Cliff Groen: As we were looking at the objectives related to the expenditure review reductions, we certainly placed top priority on ensuring the continued and ongoing delivery of services to Canadians. That is absolutely a key, top priority for our organization.

Many of our programs are, in fact, not part of the expenditure review reduction targets—specifically, these are programs for which there is a separate financial account. Whether it be the employment insurance program, the Canada pension plan or partnerships we deliver for other government departments, such as for passports or the Canadian dental care plan, none of those programs or the delivery of those services was part of the expenditure review. There has not been any reduction of those services as a result of the comprehensive expenditure review.

For the programs that are not part of separate accounts, we similarly ensure the ongoing delivery of frontline services to Canadians. As a result of the CER and the reduction targets that we have, there have not been any reductions related to the service to Canadians.

Iqra Khalid: As members of Parliament, we are all hearing that there are current backlogs and delays in service. How do you reconcile that?

Cliff Groen: Certainly, being responsible for a very large organization in which we deliver and interact with millions of Canadians, we know some service delivery challenges will occur. We answer about 250,000 calls from Canadians every week, so millions of Canadians every month are relying on our products and services. I am very proud to report that we achieve the vast majority of our service standards. We continue to find ways to try to maximize how we can most effectively deliver our services. As part of the expenditure review reductions, finding ways in which we can be more efficient is absolutely a big priority for us. This includes further advancing digital online adoption and leveraging new technologies. We have started using artificial intelligence to help us become more efficient. There's a myriad of other things we're driving to make us more efficient.

Protecting the ongoing delivery is absolutely the top priority we have. While I would love to say that every single interaction we have with the millions of Canadians is perfect and that not a single client will see a delay, unfortunately, that's not possible. However, we meet the vast majority of service standards.

Iqra Khalid: I appreciate that.

I come from an urban neighbourhood. However, I'm starting to understand a lot more of the challenges rural communities are going through. How are you looking to improve the services we provide to rural communities, especially with physical offices and making sure that those offices are staffed as well?

You were talking about artificial intelligence. Is artificial intelligence the replacement for these 930-some jobs you're cutting?

Cliff Groen: First, I'll answer your question related to rural service delivery. Through Service Canada, we have 317 in-person offices spread throughout the country. We provide an additional 300 outreach services, in which we go to different communities on a scheduled basis. We absolutely know and recognize that delivery of services in person for Canadians spread throughout the country is a top priority. There is no reduction of our in-person services, in all the rural communities across the country, being contemplated as part of the expenditure review.

Regarding the measures we have implemented related to artificial intelligence, it is geared toward focusing on our becoming more efficient. I'll give you one example of an AI tool we have used. We're leveraging AI to help our officers find information more quickly. We have vast amounts of guidance and direction for our staff to understand the rules and legislation associated with the program. Traditionally, agents would have trouble finding large guidance tools. Now we use AI to help bring that information to our officers more quickly so that they are able to answer questions from clients.

• (1645)

Iqra Khalid: How are you transitioning? What does the process look like between modernizing your digital services from paper—for example, faxing?

I'm not sure if people still know what faxing is.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Iqra Khalid: How are you transitioning on that?

The Chair: I'm sorry. We're past the time. Give a brief answer, if you're able to.

Cliff Groen: Sure.

There is a big transition that we need to undertake related to driving toward more digital. We have very dedicated change management strategies—in particular, to help our staff and then our clients to adapt to the new way of working.

The Chair: Go ahead, Madame Gaudreau.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have the impression that we are going to experience what we have already experienced in Quebec. Some of you may not know this, but there was massive attrition between 1998 and 2000. I know so many people—including nurses and teachers—and I can tell you that the collateral damage was very severe. After five, ten....

Is the interpretation working? It seems so. It's important that you hear the interpretation. The interpreters do such good work.

In short, I feel like we've already squeezed the lemon dry, and now they're trying to make us believe that we're not making a change to the role of the state. We're always talking about cuts, digitization, outsourcing to the private sector, or centralization. Yet when I go back home to my district, I see that there are still municipalities without access to fibre optics and people without cell-phones. What do they do? They come knocking on my door, especially on Fridays because they know I'm there, and they tell me they can't get the services they need. A member's office can therefore become a Service Canada branch.

How can we do things better and do more with far fewer resources? What is this secret formula I'm not aware of?

Cliff Groen: For us, it is absolutely essential to ensure that we are there for all Canadians, and especially for the most vulnerable Canadians. In fact, that is precisely part of our mandate.

I know that many citizens are very comfortable using the Internet and would like to do things online. I am one of those people. I don't like having to wait in line at a Service Canada office to apply for a passport, for example. If we can do something like that online, that suits me just fine, and it suits a great many people in our society as well. In fact, that is why renewing a passport for an adult Canadian can now be done online.

However, I also know that there are other Canadians who are not comfortable using computers and do not fully understand how to do so. That is why we have made a commitment to maintain our service points across Canada. More than 96% of the population lives within 50 kilometres of a Service Canada office, and we intend to keep it that way. We are here for Canadians, especially the most vulnerable among them. Furthermore, we know that in some parts of Canada, broadband Internet service is not available. It is therefore very important for us to maintain these service points.

• (1650)

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That is an excellent answer.

I ask this question every time: What happens if there is a lack of services? Will you resort to outsourcing or contractors? What is your plan for the next five or ten years?

Cliff Groen: Generally speaking, the vast majority of services we provide to Canadians are delivered by public servants. However, this may differ for certain aspects of the work, especially when it comes to developing new technologies or modernizing our systems. It must be said that we have systems that are over 50 years old. In such cases, specialized expertise is required, so we work in collaboration with private sector suppliers. However, the contracts include a requirement—and this is especially true for large contracts related to technology systems—that there must be a transfer of skills and knowledge to the public service.

One of our priorities when reviewing expenditures, although we have already made progress in this regard, is to continue reducing our reliance on private sector services.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: In fact, it's clear that if more people have access to online services—for example, to renew a passport—it can be a positive development for many people. It's easy to see that there will be less pressure on Service Canada offices.

That said, I'm reassured to know that no offices will be closed. It's true that some offices are truly very efficient. If I understand correctly, there is therefore no possibility of centralization. There are still quite a few jobs and senior management positions.

My last question concerns the legislative aspect. After all, whether we like it or not, that's what we're here for.

Do we have all the necessary safeguards to ensure the digital transition? That worries me. As of 2019, we were still using social insurance numbers, and now it's the banking institutions that have implemented biometric authentication and two-factor authentication.

Are we up to date, or even ahead of the curve? I'm concerned about that.

Cliff Groen: There are legislative challenges. If I'm not mistaken, the Privacy Act dates back to 1982, and it hasn't been modernized since then. It was enacted when we lived in a world without the Internet. It is therefore essential to modernize this act, first to ensure that Canadians' personal information is well protected, but also to ensure that services are delivered in the best possible way. Sometimes, certain constraints in the act prevent us from sharing certain information between departments to deliver services. Cana-

dians have expectations. Service Canada and the Canada Revenue Agency—

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry. We are well past our time. I have to cut you off.

Mr. Patzer, you have five minutes.

Jeremy Patzer: Thank you very much.

I'm just going back to the at-risk pay issue; 830 out of 834 received this pay. Do you know how much money was paid out to those people?

Cliff Groen: I don't have the information with me, but I would certainly be able to provide it to the committee after the meeting.

Jeremy Patzer: If you want to follow up with the accurate information, that would be great.

If we do some quick math, it looks as though it was a little over \$14 million that was paid out in the at-risk bonus that was alluded to. Only four people didn't get it. When I look at the department plan, at the targets that have been set and at the performance of the department throughout it all, there is nothing that stands out as being such a stellar indicator of people—830 out of 834—deserving to get, basically, a performance bonus.

What exactly is the metric that is used for somebody to qualify to get the maximum amount of the at-risk pay?

Cliff Groen: I would say that in order to qualify for performance pay—which includes both the at-risk and potentially the very small percentage who would receive the highest rating, “surpassed”—all executives have individual performance management agreements. The overall architecture for those agreements is set by the Treasury Board Secretariat, based on the overarching priorities of the government. However, each and every one is then specific to the particular role of each executive. The performance expectations are set out within the performance agreement, expectations upon which they are measured as part of the performance cycle through both a mid-year review and a review at the end of the year. Individuals with the “succeeded-minus” rating would have demonstrated that they met some of the objectives within their performance agreement but that they did not meet 100% of them. Those who “succeeded” would have demonstrated that they met the performance expectations. The “succeeded-plus” and “surpassed” ratings would reflect the individual performances of those executives.

• (1655)

Jeremy Patzer: Is it normal that only four out of 834 would not qualify for this? How did those four fail so spectacularly that they didn't get it?

Cliff Groen: I can't speak specifically to those four individuals for a number of different reasons. However, through the assessment, there is a determination about whether they met the performance expectations. The assessment that was completed found that those individuals did not meet those expectations and, therefore, did not qualify for any of the at-risk pay.

I think it is really important to understand—and this is very deliberate with how the performance regime is set up—that the at-risk pay is part of the base salary of executives, but there is a holdback based on their ability to demonstrate that they have met the performance expectations. This is why it's considered at-risk pay. It would not be appropriate to understand it as a bonus. Only those who receive the “surpassed” rating are eligible for a performance bonus.

Jeremy Patzer: Okay. I think the terminology available online for Canadians to read might need to be updated if this is not to be considered as a bonus, because that is what it says online.

What was the number of employees throughout all of ESDC? If you were to go back five years, what does the employment number look like across the entirety of ESDC? Do you have a ballpark number for that?

Cliff Groen: Do you mean a ballpark number of employees at ESDC?

Jeremy Patzer: Yes.

Cliff Groen: There are approximately 41,000. It's in that neighbourhood.

Jeremy Patzer: The number today is roughly 41,000.

Cliff Groen: Yes.

Jeremy Patzer: Okay.

You said that last year you already laid off 3,300. Did I understand that correctly earlier?

Cliff Groen: There was a reduction of 3,300. I wouldn't characterize all of those as layoffs. Some are people who left the public service and were not replaced. However, it is a reduction of the total number of positions by 3,300.

Jeremy Patzer: Okay.

If you look at the GC InfoBase website, in 2021, it was about 32,700-ish, so it's increased by almost 10,000 in the last five years.

Cliff Groen: There's some challenge regarding what a full-time equivalent employee is, etc. I'll quote the numbers we have in our departmental plan to make sure we get the information correct for the record.

In 2023-24, the population of full-time equivalent positions, which is the standard way the number of resources is reflected in the public service, was 36,600 employees at ESDC. At the end of 2024-25—that would be the baseline—the number was 38,219. The quote of 41,000 reflects different ways you can count the numbers. A reflection of going from 36,000 in 2023-24 to 38,000 in 2024-25.... We have now reduced it to—it's not fully confirmed, since the fiscal year just ended—34,500 in 2025-26.

We are forecasting a further reduction in subsequent years. This is in our departmental plan, which was tabled in Parliament.

Jeremy Patzer: Okay. That's our time. Thanks.

The Chair: That's your time.

Go ahead, Ms. Sudds.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Thank you very much, Chair.

I want to go back to a comment you made to an earlier question about Canadians adopting more digital technologies.

I think it's fair to say that more and more Canadians are expecting to be served how and when they choose. Often, that is online.

You mentioned that ESDC is adopting some new technologies to serve Canadians. Could you speak a bit about what this looks like right now?

● (1700)

Cliff Groen: It would be my pleasure.

I have two primary examples.

First, we deliver, in partnership with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, the passport program. Up until very recently, if you were in Canada, you could apply for a passport either by coming in person to an office at Service Canada or applying via mail. Those were the only two options available.

We had some really significant challenges related to the passport program about four years ago. I'm very pleased to report that, in the last fiscal year, we exceeded our service standard. More than 90% of Canadians received their passports within 10 days if they went to an in-person office. Similarly, over 90% received it through the mail service within the standard of 20 days. It is important for Canadians to understand that the issues related to the delivery of the passport program are certainly behind us. It is still very paper-driven or in-person-driven. With the availability of an online application for passport renewals—if it's an adult passport renewal—you do not have to go in person now. You can complete it fully online.

Second, the old age security program is a very crucial program that serves 7.7 million Canadians. Up until last year, it was on a 60-plus-year-old system. We used to like to comment that the system was almost old enough to be eligible for the benefit—you have to be 65. We put it into a modern system. It has successfully migrated all the existing clients in the program. We are now paying 7.7 million Canadians on time every month, related to the program.

For the last two years, clients have applied online for OAS. Then, behind the scenes, it was entirely paper-based. I think people could apply online, but our system—because it was 60 years old and not built for the Internet age—required a manual re-entry of all the data clients submitted. Now, with the modern system, people can apply fully online and, to a great extent, it is fully automated behind the scenes as well, which is helping us drive efficiency.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: That's amazing. I have a passport to renew this year, so I look forward to doing it online.

Taking this a step further, and thinking about leveraging modern systems and cloud platforms, of course, you have a responsibility to shepherd and protect Canadians' data.

Can you speak to the privacy safeguards that are being upheld to ensure that Canadians' data is being protected through this transition?

Cliff Groen: This is absolutely a key priority of ours as well.

There are very hard requirements established by the Treasury Board Secretariat in terms of what security protocols we need to meet. For any large IT migration, there is close work that happens between the host department—in this situation, the ESDC—the Treasury Board Secretariat and the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security. Those are key partners. When we implement any new system, there's an authority to operate and an approval that needs to be provided, which includes certification that all appropriate privacy and cybersecurity controls have been met. A very high bar has to be met before we can go live.

Because you mentioned the cloud, the other piece I would highlight is that some of our programs are being delivered in the cloud. Data sovereignty is absolutely of fundamental, critical importance to us. In the contracts we have related to any of our cloud service providers, there's a requirement that all the data remains resident within Canada. This is an absolute requirement that we always adhere to as well.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: That's fantastic. That's great to hear.

Can I ask how often your cybersecurity protocols are reviewed or updated?

Cliff Groen: They are reviewed on an ongoing basis. There is a really high bar in recognition of the continued evolution of cybersecurity threats, etc.

The reality of cybersecurity threats in 2026 is different from what it was even in 2024-25. We are subject every day to literally millions of attacks—cyber-attacks against our systems—but because of the protocols we have in place, we do not see a disruption of services as a result of the attacks.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: That's fantastic. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Madame Gaudreau is next.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I just have one question to ask, and it is fundamental.

Specialists who work with people, such as psychologists or psychotherapists, tell me that a significant portion of their clientele consists of public servants. These public servants were told that no one really knew what was coming, but that they would find out this fall. What does this create? There are many cases of distress and anxiety. I'm thinking of them. It's happening in every department. We could talk about Canada Post, but we could also talk about those who work specifically in Service Canada offices.

What have we come up with? How are we going to correct this? Right now, these people are living with such uncertainty that they have to seek help. They are worried about their future, and I understand them.

What is your strategy?

• (1705)

Cliff Groen: I completely agree with you. The world today is truly difficult. We are experiencing crises we never thought we would see. It is clear that public servants are part of our society and that they have serious concerns about the world today.

So there is this spending review, and public servants have questions regarding their work. That is normal. At Employment and Social Development Canada, we have made certain commitments to our employees. First, we are absolutely committed to optimizing our workforce. We know we need to reduce our workforce. This is essential; it is one of our commitments. We also want to maximize the number of public servants who would like to leave the public service, whether to retire, change careers, or for other reasons.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Many want to change roles, become consultants, and offer services for double their salary. Let's be honest, lots of people tell us they have a great solution coming up. I'm not a prophet of doom, but...

Cliff Groen: There may be such situations, but I would say that, for a large number of public servants, this is not the case. We really want to maximize the number of people who want to leave the public service, thereby reducing the number of public servants who will be forced to leave against their will. That is one thing.

Another factor is that we are very committed to the process. Management is holding discussions with employees and with the unions. In our department, the unions are key partners. They play a very important role for their members and for our employees. Almost immediately after the announcement of the spending review, we established management round tables with the unions to consult them on approaches to managing the workforce reduction. That is also very important to us.

[English]

The Chair: Thanks.

Ms. Jansen is next, please.

Tamara Jansen: ESDC, or Employment and Social Development Canada, delivers some of the most basic services Canadians rely on when life goes sideways—when someone loses a job and appeals an EI decision, when a disabled Canadian is waiting for CPP disability reconsideration, when a worker files a labour complaint, when a senior calls about their pension or when families are simply trying to get answers about benefits they depend on. Canadians pay a lot in taxes for these services. They have a right to expect them to work in a timely fashion, but your own numbers read like a failing report card.

For example, on EI reconsiderations, the target is to get 80% of your cases done within 30 days. You manage it only 25% of the time. On CPP disability reconsiderations, the target is to get 80% of your cases resolved in 120 days. You manage this only 42% of the time. On labour complaints, the target is 60% in 180 days. You manage it only 28% of the time. By any standard, you're failing rather badly, yet, curiously enough, when you look at performance bonus pay, which one would expect to be based on achieving targets, your department shows that 739 executives received their performance bonus pay and 91 executives received extra bonus pay on top of that.

How on earth do you think your plan to reduce your staff by almost 40% will not cause further failures—or are you not worried about a lack in service, since it seems you will all get your bonuses anyway, no matter how badly the department performs?

• (1710)

Cliff Groen: There are a couple of elements to your question that I'd like to make sure are properly addressed.

Related to the employment insurance program, you quoted the results we have for requests for reconsideration. This is certainly an area we have been focusing on. We recognize that we need to improve the service. For the employment insurance program, I am happy to report that on the speed of pay, or getting clients into pay to receive their first benefit, we have a service standard objective of paying people within 28 days of their application. For this past fiscal year, we achieved 87.7%. This is very positive.

Requests for reconsideration are certainly a challenge. This is why we've implemented an action plan to reduce that. There has been a particular challenge in that there's been a significant spike in the number of requests we are working through. I'm confident that this fiscal year, we'll reduce it further.

Tamara Jansen: I was talking to you with regard to the failure to meet targets when the bonus pay was still being paid out. You suggest it's not actually a bonus, although the website calls it a bonus. Why are you cutting employees in the department when perhaps cutting performance bonuses for executives might be more appropriate to enable you to achieve your targets?

Cliff Groen: Regarding the impact on service that you asked me about, this is why we have ensured that the reductions under the comprehensive expenditure review do not include reduction of staff who are directly serving Canadians. The national headquarters function is to set new policies and develop guidance, etc., so it's not direct delivery. Overall, the workforce is being reduced by 4.9% out of the reductions, versus for regional delivery, which is less than 1%. It's 0.7% that we're reducing it.

Tamara Jansen: Obviously, admin has to ensure that the targets are being met. They're not being met, yet executives are getting their bonuses. Before making cuts to staffing and operations, did you ever consider freezing or eliminating executive bonuses until service targets were consistently met?

Cliff Groen: As I responded previously, the performance management regime within the public service is set based on the terms and conditions of employment. There are controls in place related to the establishment of the performance agreements. The at-risk pay

is considered based on individual assessments about their ability to meet their objectives.

Tamara Jansen: I'm curious: Did any executive have their performance pay reduced because of missed targets, which—as we've already discussed—have been missed badly?

Cliff Groen: Certainly, as part of individuals' performance agreements, they have specific targets within their agreements. This would have played into the overall assessment of—

Tamara Jansen: It appeared to be possibly only four, according to the numbers we see.

Cliff Groen: No, I would argue—to go back to the description of how the performance regime is managed within the public service—that—

Tamara Jansen: Who's in charge of hitting those targets, then? If it's not them, who's in charge of getting those targets hit?

Cliff Groen: As I indicated, in the overall management of the delivery of the programs, lots of different factors go into how we achieve the performance results. The performance assessment of an individual is based on the specific agreement they have. It includes an assessment: Did they meet those commitments or not?

Tamara Jansen: Is no one held accountable when they don't hit them?

The Chair: I'm afraid it is past our time.

Mr. Gasparro is next, please.

Vince Gasparro: Thanks to both of you for being here. Thank you for your service.

When will the quota on online renewals for passports be lifted?

I just went through the renewal process. I tried to do it online. The quota seemed to be filled every day, so I went in and took care of it.

How long will it take?

Cliff Groen: We are working in partnership with IRCC.

You're right. There is a daily maximum that we allow into the window. On the vast majority of days—not 100%—we do not reach the limit. The limit depends on when you did it. Over the last couple of weeks, it has increased further as we gain greater efficiency in how the system is managing that. We anticipate that it will be eliminated within the year as we work on final elements related to that project.

Vince Gasparro: That's great to hear.

You touched a few different times on integrating AI and modernizing some of the processes so that you maintain efficiency and reduce costs. How are you also managing risk around data breaches and making sure that people's information is kept private?

• (1715)

Cliff Groen: Thank you for the question.

Mitigating any potential risk associated with data breaches is absolutely a top priority. There have been a couple of data breaches. There are sometimes data breaches that occur within our department, very often tied to human error.

Related to accessing our systems, there are high data security protocols we have to meet that are established by Treasury Board Secretariat. We work with different experts in the field, both within our own team and with the Centre for Cyber Security, as well as Treasury Board.

Before we go live with any new system or any new service being delivered through a technology solution, there are specific requirements that have to be confirmed and certified.

Vince Gasparro: Thank you for that.

I have no further questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gasparro.

Mr. Groen and Ms. Lawlor, thank you very much for being with us. We appreciate your time. You are dismissed.

Quickly, colleagues, we have a couple of budgets that went out earlier, and for millions of dollars, as always.

The first one, for \$500, is for our meeting with the procurement ombudsman.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The second one is for \$2,000 for four meetings on the CER.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: If there's nothing else, we will adjourn.

Next Tuesday we have the economic statement, which runs into our meeting, but we will cancel the economic update so OGGO can meet instead.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: No, we'll cancel OGGO.

For Thursday, we're waiting to hear back from witnesses, probably on the mains still. Next Tuesday we are not meeting.

If there's nothing else, we're adjourned.

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