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⊕ (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): Good afternoon.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on March 8, the committee will continue its study on the federal government's initiative to resettle Syrian refugees.

Appearing before us today is the Honourable Peter Kent as well as Rabea Allos, representing the Catholic Refugee Sponsors Council. I am welcoming both of you.

We will begin with a brief statement from the Honourable Peter Kent, for seven minutes, please.

Hon. Peter Kent (As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, colleagues.

I'll get to the point very quickly. All of the wonderful truths about Canada's welcoming generosity over the decades and with successive governments notwithstanding, I believe the rush to achieve the Liberal campaign promise targets created a domino tumble of foreseeable but unintended consequences.

My observations today are those of a private sponsor. I became a private sponsor with my wife Cilla last year after working for the last few years as an MP with constituents in the GTA's Armenian community's orthodox and evangelical congregations and with the Melkite Catholic Church.

By way of background, the Canadian Armenian community has sponsored close to 15,000 Iraqi and Syrian Armenian refugees over the past eight years. In the last six months almost 4,000 Syrian Armenians were sponsored. At the moment more than 500 Syrian Armenian refugees are waiting for air transport to Canada, and roughly 2,000 Syrian Armenian refugees are waiting for air transport to Canada. I'm sorry. I correct that. Almost 2,000 Syrian Armenian refugees are waiting for sponsors.

Back to the larger picture, most of the almost 10,000 privately sponsored refugees in the government's 25,000 target group had been in the admission process for many months before the election. Those arriving before November 4; in multiple family groups of 20 or 30 men, women, and children at a time; allowed sponsorship agreement holders and individual sponsors time to manage all of their settlement responsibilities.

That all changed when SAH quotas were dropped and arrival numbers soared into the hundreds weekly. Even when the original unrealistic end-of-year deadline was extended by two months, SAHs and individual private sponsors were overwhelmed by the sudden accelerated volume of arrivals in terms of finding temporary accommodation, permanent housing, furniture, schooling, documentation, and so forth. Where government-sponsored refugees were provided paid hotel accommodation and per diems for weeks—and, in some cases, months—before being settled, privately sponsored refugees were covered for one hotel night only and then went on to the private sponsor's tab. This was not a problem before November, but...a serious financial burden for some private sponsors in December and January.

SAHs worked literally around the clock to manage the flood. The good news is that with the help of community groups, generous hotels, and a good number of reasonable landlords settlement of the bulge of privately sponsored refugees has been, I believe, largely accomplished.

However, the abrupt deceleration of refugee processing after February 29 caused new frustrations for SAHs and private sponsors. Many millions of dollars are now sitting idle in SAH escrow accounts. Substantial financial losses have been incurred by some sponsors who leased accommodations—at government urging—for refugees who, they are now told, might not arrive until next year. I'm told by sources close to the Canadian embassy in Beirut that more than 2,000

refugees are now ready to fly to Canada. Airline bookings are very tight. The embassy has had trouble finding flights. Also, there is continuing uncertainty over payment, the ticket loans, the repayment conditions, and—of course, as you are aware—the collection agencies pre-November 4 and post-February 29.

I have a few suggestions the committee may wish to consider with regards to your terms of reference. First and foremost, treat refugees equally, waive the ticket loan program regardless of arrival date, reinstate the charter program, restore and speed up the application process, and create new protocols or temporarily relaxed rules to accept internally displaced refugees. Many of the religious minorities are not in United Nations camps. Many are having a very difficult time living on the economies in Jordan and Lebanon.

I have a few other suggestions.

Sensitize the Lebanese and Jordanian governments to the plight of those Syrian refugees who entered those countries in flight but illegally, who have submitted applications to the Canadian embassies, and who will be handed to the Syrian government if caught by authorities.

⊕ (1535)

I think this is critically important given Syria's military conscription policies. I would suggest that the government increase the number of joint government private sponsorships, adopt a temporary rental subsidy program for refugees faced with high rental costs. I have no doubt that many, if not most, will become highly productive contributing members of Canadian society, both many of them need short-term support.

I would suggest that the government encourage professional associations to better improve certification processes for arriving professionals.

Finally, Mr. Chair, in response to the minister's remarks earlier this month regarding Canada's broader global refugee obligations I believe that it's wrong to pit one refugee group against another. The government said Canada could do more. The government asked Canadians to do more, and I believe it is the government's job to ensure that more is done, but done properly. It is one thing, Mr. Chair, to land refugees on Canadian soil, it is quite another to fully settle them in to Canadian society.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kent.

Mr. Allos, please for seven minutes.

Mr. Rabea Allos (Director, Catholic Refugee Sponsors Council): Honourable members, good afternoon.

I would like to thank you for the kind invitation. I am honoured to be here today to speak on behalf of Catholic Refugee Sponsors Council. I am one of the founding members.

In the time I have today I would like to talk about three things. First, I will give you a background about the Catholic Refugee Sponsors Council and myself. Second, I will talk about the repatriation and resettlement of refugees in need of protection. Third, I will talk about the two streams of refugees who come to Canada; the government assisted refugees, the GARs; and the privately sponsored refugees, the PSRs.

The CRSC was established in 2013 after the second national Catholic conference on resettlement, which took place in Toronto in December, 2012. At the conference, it was felt that there was a need to form a national body for Catholic refugee sponsors of refugees to share experiences and knowledge about refugee resettlement programs, given the important role that those agencies play in sponsoring refugees. There are about 100 sponsorship agreement holders across Canada, and about 30 of them are Catholic agencies.

In 2015, all Catholic SAHs, combined, privately sponsored more than 7,500 refugees. About 50% were Syrian nationals. Iraqi nationals were the second largest group, in addition to Somali and Afghan refugees.

I personally started getting involved with refugee resettlement advocacy in 2005. A group of concerned Canadians grouped together trying to raise awareness and help Iraqi Christians and other minorities when the war in Iraq escalated to a civil war. In 2013, as a result of the second national Catholic conference on resettlement, Catholic sponsorship agreement holders started to advocate for resettling Syrian refugees as the civil war in Syria intensified. In June 2013, I joined staff and volunteers of the Office for Refugees, Archdiocese of Toronto, ORAT, on a trip to Lebanon to meet and interview Syrian refugees to select the most vulnerable for sponsorship in Canada. At the time, no one in Canada was discussing the Syrian refugee crisis. In fact, bureaucrats at CIC asked the SAH council to condemn ORAT, as there was no Syrian refugee program in place at the time.

In any refugee crisis you have to distinguish between protection need and resettlement need. The first goal for the international community is protection of refugees locally until a durable solution is available. A durable solution would be voluntary repatriation after the end of the war or the crisis, local integration in the host country, or resettlement in destination countries. Most refugees would prefer voluntary repatriation, meaning that their preference is to return to their homeland rather than resettling abroad.

Resettlement to destination countries like Canada needs to be prioritized for the most vulnerable refugees, who will be hard to repatriate; the minorities of the conflict area, such as ethnic and religious minorities, political activists, women at risk, and homosexual and transgender groups.

Resettlement of refugees is the most important part of solving refugee crises. This resettlement should ensure that the refugee is integrated into the society and gains financial independence as early as possible. The longer the refugee remains on financial aid, the more difficult it will be to

integrate them into the society. That will ensure refugees do not end up in ghettos or on welfare for extended times.

The council recommends that the program name be changed from private sponsorship program to civic resettlement program. This will make the program more attractive to Canadians and will enable Canada to bring in more refugees who will be contributing to Canada's economy and growth. It will certainly remove belief that the refugee sponsorship program is a burden and entitlement for financial aid.

As you know, Canada has two streams of refugees: the government assisted refugees and the privately sponsored refugees. The GARs are usually selected by the UNHCR, an organization that is politicized by their donors.

⊕ (1540)

Hence, the selection of the refugees is not based on needs, but on the wishes of the donor countries. For example, in the Middle East minority groups do not stay in refugee camps, but rather live in run-down areas and work in black markets to make their living, as they would be persecuted against in refugee camps. Therefore, UNHCR does not refer those refugees for resettlement in large numbers, even though they're the most entitled to it. We encourage the government to look into other options for referral agencies such as sponsoring Canadian missions to troubled countries for the selection of refugees among the most vulnerable.

The program in Canada provides the refugee with generous financial supports that encourages many refugees to feel entitled and not to work. In comparison, the United States offers refugees financial support for three-months, to be extended only if the refugee proves they need it.

CRC believes that the GAR program needs to be modified and turned into a blended system of financial support from the government and involve private communities and groups to provide the moral support and ensure integration. We believe that the government should not be in the compassion business.

The Chair: Thirty seconds, Mr. Allos.

Mr. Rabea Allos: The PSR program has the following advantages that the GAR lacks: extended family unifications; mission trips to select most vulnerable and disadvantaged; more economical and less of a financial burden on taxpayers; refugees are integrated and embraced by the society, and hence less likely to be financial burdens or radicalized; builds bridges and fights against racism, prejudice, and xenophobia.

⊕ (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Allos.

Ms. Zahid, seven minutes, please.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I will take this opportunity to thank our witnesses for joining us today and providing their input.

My first question is for the Honourable Peter Kent. Last September, several news outlets such as CTV, the *Huffington Post*, and CBC, reported that you had tweeted and later retracted a photo of a Syrian refugee falsely claiming him to be an Islamic State fighter. You also called for more prudent and detailed refugee screenings. However, it is very clear that the government has put into place security screening addressing the concerns of the RCMP, CSIS, and CBSA. Given this, what further security screenings do you feel are necessary?

Hon. Peter Kent: Sure. I'll just explain, with regards to that tweet, I didn't endorse what was said. I agreed that it was an ominous portrayal of the uncontrolled migration from Turkey through Greece and into Europe.

With regards to screening, I agree that screening is certainly necessary, and indeed to meet the government's 25,000 quota that screening was enthusiastically carried out with additional resources. But that ground to a halt after February 29. I think that while it's certainly prudent to ensure that those who we welcome into Canada as members of Canadian society need to be thoroughly processed, not only on a security basis, but with regard to health and other conditions, I think it can be done at a much faster pace now, and we know that there is a backlog in both Jordan and in Lebanon.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: But previously when you mentioned all these screenings were done as was said by the RCMP—

The Chair: Ms. Zahid, it might be coming out of the scope of what our study is to look at, so perhaps if you'd like to move to the next question.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: I'll move to the next question.

You stated in a media release on January 11 that government-sponsored refugees receive unlimited support funding by locating housing and support services, however, this is not true. GAR received a limited amount of supplemental government assistance and it is rather dangerous to perpetuate this notion that GAR has access to unlimited funding and government assistance. Government assistance ranges from city to city for all the GARs. For example, in a city like Toronto, a family of four refugees, parents and two children under 18, would receive \$5,455 as a one-time benefit, and also \$1,507 in monthly support for up to one year or 12 months.

Therefore, perpetuating this myth only serves to further challenge an already disadvantaged and vulnerable group and generate confusion among the Canadian people. Do you feel this is...?

Hon. Peter Kent: No let me remind you again I'm here as a private sponsor sharing my personal experience and perceptions. I'm not appearing as a representative of my party. I'm not

appearing here to defend many of the perceptions real and imagined about the inequities involved between government sponsored and privately sponsored refugees. I spoke to the issues of inequities that I see with regards to the travel costs, and with regards to the financial burden imposed on private sponsors when the volume of arrivals increase the burden on private sponsors and private sponsor groups, SAH holders.

That one night hotel was an almost insignificant benefit to the private sponsors who all of a sudden for example...I'll give you a good example, a number of the members of the Armenian community are sponsoring more than one family and they spaced out over several months were able to receive a family of normally five, six, or seven members, find accommodation, settle people, find their furniture, get them in, get them into schools. But all of a sudden in December and January when the government accelerated the program and began using in the early weeks the private sponsors who had already been in the works for some months, in some cases years, effectively dumping multiple families on people who had expected to settle one family at a time it became a real burden both in terms of the cost of temporary accommodation and hotels, and in finding permanent accommodation and all of the other settlement procedures that are involved.

⊕ (1550)

Mr. Arif Virani (Parkdale—High Park, Lib.): Ms. Zahid has given me some of her time. I have to say your submissions are actually quite refreshing, Mr. Kent. I appreciate you wearing your personal hat and not your previous hat, or parliamentary hat. For somebody who has served in the last government and continues to serve in Parliament is actually quite refreshing to hear somebody of your partisan background profess a newfound enthusiasm for the refugee movement for larger numbers, quicker processing, and for more spending.

There are a few things that I just want to clarify. I just want to get some clarity from you in respect of what you've actually been indicating because you've asked for rental subsidy programs, reinstating charters, paid for flights. You've also indicated that the PSRs should have been staying for longer than one night in hotels, and then moving on to their private sponsored family recognizing full well that the private sponsor is just that it's a private sponsor. It's meant to alleviate the burden on government which allocates funding for the rest of the individuals who are arriving.

I want to ask you about the cost that you foresee in that putting on your previous hat about having been in Cabinet about the cost that was involved in this exercise, but also I find it a bit ironic personally, or professionally for you to say that the divisive politics of pitting refugees against one another should be ended. It would have been refreshing to hear that kind of rhetoric prior to October 19th from people who you previously served with because those divisions were actually accentuated by your party in the previous government. But in any event you also said something and I'd like some clarity from you on this.

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Mr. Arif Virani: You said that the government urged private sponsors to procure apartments and that has never been done. It has never been done. I would ask you to produce some

documents in that regard that evidenciate government urging private sponsors to procure apartments prior to people arriving on Canadian soil.

Hon. Peter Kent: There is a lot to answer.

The Chair: The seven minute timeslot is over. We'll move over to Ms. Rempel for seven minutes please.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Allos, I want to thank you as well as your group. Your group has done amazing work in Canada to a large extent on this issue. It has been one of the largest groups to participate in this initiative. I want to just tease out some of your thoughts around minority groups and refugee camps. The government has said that they are not using religion as a screen. I appreciate the sentiment behind that, but for anyone who has been to the region you have to acknowledge that part of the conflict is religiously motivated. There are religious differences in terms of persecution. I'm just wondering if you could speak to the fact that when we're talking about prioritizing refugees looking at the persecution of certain face isn't xenophobic. It's not a commentary on the faith itself it's more of the fact that there are faiths that are persecuted to a larger extent than others. I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit to your groups experience on how you think that the process could be changed to acknowledge the fact that there are certain minority groups, certain faith groups that are persecuted to a larger extent in the region that perhaps the initiative is not reaching out to right now.

We had heard from government officials that for example only 9 Yazidis cases had been looked at in recent times. Perhaps your organization could speak to some recommendations around that.

Mr. Rabea Allos: Actually, in a way it shouldn't be religious. If you look at refugees in the Middle East, the most vulnerable are the converted Muslims. They are more vulnerable than Christians or Yazidis. Atheists are more vulnerable. Then you have the Yazidis and then Mandaean—it's a small group that follows John the Baptist—and then Christians. Those are the most vulnerable.

Definitely for those groups when the war or the crisis is settled, they are the people who cannot go back, cannot be repatriated. They will be looking to move somewhere else—Canada, Sweden, U.S., or Australia—and they will probably be easier to resettle and integrate into a society than those whose hearts are still back in the region.

At the end of the day, yes, I am a Canadian who is originally from Iraq, but my loyalty is to Canada, and it should be for Canada. It shouldn't be somewhere else.

We really should be looking to help those people who are going to come here, and their heart is here, not somewhere else.

⊕ (1555)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Do you think the government is doing an adequate job right now of prioritizing the most vulnerable groups in the region through the refugee initiative?

Mr. Rabea Allos: I don't think so. There was a political decision of bringing in 25,000 in a certain timeframe, and within that timeframe if you want to make that number, you have to compromise on different issues.

If numbers are more important than anything else, then they will just go to the United Nations, get whatever is available immediately, and bring them over. I would rather give it more time to go out and select the most vulnerable.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: In terms of recommendations we could include in this report, how would you suggest the government could do a better job prioritizing the most vulnerable in terms of their refugee initiatives?

Mr. Rabea Allos: Look at other agencies other than UNSCR. The second largest in the world is ICMC. It's the International Catholic Migration Commission. They work very closely with the UNSCR. They deal mostly with refugees who do not go to refugee camps but rather live in the rundown areas in different parts of the world.

Secondly, I would definitely recommend that the government work with private Canadian groups, send them over to crisis areas, let them qualify the refugees and make sure those are the most vulnerable ones.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Kent, perhaps you could expand upon the experience of resources being lost from privately-sponsored groups.

We've heard complaints across the country, not a partisan issue, that resources have been expended, and there has been a disconnect like a siloed effect of government-sponsored refugees who have been sitting in hotels, and privately-sponsored refugee groups that have facilities available, and there hasn't been that sort of cross-silo approach. This is something we've heard loud and clear.

Is there a way the government could perhaps break down those silos such that we don't see the story of \$6,000 being wasted on accommodations that are sitting empty for months?

Hon. Peter Kent: Certainly. That follows on the earlier question I didn't have a chance to answer.

The government didn't specifically tell private sponsors to go out and engage in long leases, but they did say to prepare to welcome and to assist in the rapid settlement into Canadian society.

Some groups in the absence of information and given the dealings between the saw applications submitted to government and the lack of feedback information during that processing, and being aware of the accelerated volume of refugees coming in November and December in cities like Toronto, which I'm familiar with, recognizing the shortage of affordable

housing, went out to begin to make sure when their sponsored families or individuals arrived in Canada there was an appropriate place for them.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Maybe I could clarify the exuberant remarks of one of my colleagues over here. What you're saying is when the government said look, we're bringing in X amount of refugees, that was in part a clear signal to the privately-sponsored refugee community get ready. You're going to have someone in a very short period of time.

The Chair: Ten seconds.

Hon. Peter Kent: They saw it because the refugees most of them at the beginning, the privately sponsored refugees, were arriving by the hundreds. For example, the Armenian community in Toronto were working 24/7 to meet them at the airport, get them back, and to begin to try to and find the resources to settle them.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kent.

Ms. Kwan, seven minutes please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much to both of the witnesses.

I appreciate, Mr. Kent, for you to come to this table and to leave partisan politics aside and presenting yourself as a privately sponsored individual.

To that end I'm particularly interested in exploring the concept of your support for the government to waive the transportation medical loans for all refugees. Am I assuming correctly that your perspective is for that loan to be waived for all refugees and not just Syrian refugees irrespective of the timeline of when they arrived?

🕒 (1600)

Hon. Peter Kent: No.

I'm talking about this program. In my closing remarks I said the government said the promise during the campaign but the government said we can do more, Canada can do more, and this was seen as on top of the 285,000 to 300,000 immigrants and refugees that are normally are brought in to Canada. My interpretation was that the Syrian refugees were to be seen as above and beyond and as a special project along the lines of the Vietnamese refugees almost four decades ago.

I agree with the suggestion that it be based on need and on assistance, but there's—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, maybe I can—

Hon. Peter Kent: Before November 4th and after February 29th it was a very different situation for both private, certainly for private sponsors because their travel costs were picked up in that period to hit the government's targets and was cut off after that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Correct.

So are you saying that the government should continue to waive the loans for refugees?

Hon. Peter Kent: For the Syrians. For this particular program.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Only just for Syrian refugees. Then how do you square this circle to treat refugees equally?

I think those were your words. That's not treating refugees equally. It's treating certain classes of refugees equally.

From my perspective I would have thought maybe if we're to utilize the suggestion that refugees should be treated equally, all refugees should be assumed that they're in a place of crisis where they're leaving their country of origin and when they come here they have the same demand and needs and therefore should be treated equally with respect to the loans.

Hon. Peter Kent: Well they certainly shouldn't receive demand notices from collection agencies 30 days after they arrive in Canada.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Tell me what you know about the hardships then that the Syrian refugees that have experienced the collection of the loans and the collection agency demands on them. Do you have any?

Hon. Peter Kent: I don't have any firsthand experience.

I know that there are thousands waiting in Lebanon to move to Canada and I would suggest that the government made this a priority refugee program and they should continue that program apace.

If I could simply add to the question of discrimination with regards to some of the processing. I know of at least three family situations involving Christian applications where they've been told by officials in the Beirut embassy that they haven't established their refugee claim by reason of a well founded fear of persecution for reasons of race or religion.

🕒 (1605)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I'd like to explore the issue around resettlement.

So on the question around resettlement the looming problem of course is this month 13 is around the corner for many refugees, many of them have spent months at a hotel waiting to be resettled. So in terms of month 13 for privately sponsored refugees do you have any sense of what might happen then to your family?

Is it your sense then for example, even for yourself on month 13 you'll then exit the arrangement and then those families will—so you'll continue to provide support to them?

Hon. Peter Kent: Absolutely.

The private sponsors and particularly with the communities that I've been working with those communities are bringing in members of their distant communities.

In the case of the Armenians from Aleppo they had been persecuted. Many of them were displaced by the Armenian genocide a hundred years ago, but the community itself reaches out. I certainly have nothing to offer in way of either orthodox or evangelical religion or Armenian culture, but I am there to provide the financial support and the community is there to provide the broader embrace of—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: So your view then on month 13 is that support will continue?

Hon. Peter Kent: Certainly in my case and of those private sponsors I know.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: In the situation where for the government assisted refugees, as we've been provided the information from government officials, in most instances because the housing costs are so high, people are in quite a tight situation. In many situations, in fact by the time the government assisted refugees pay for their market rent they're already actually in the red with the income assistance rate. On that issue do you have any thoughts on how best to address to assist those families who are struggling because they are living in poverty right now?

Hon. Peter Kent: As I suggested in my remarks, for those who are having financial difficulties, and not all of them are, some are arriving with resources and some access to financial support of their own, but for those who run into short-term cash flow problems I would suggest there should be an assistance program, a repayable loan program perhaps, but not by handing over to collection agencies for short-term demand.

I think that even in the case of the air transport, which is still outstanding, and the refugees that I know are endeavouring to make those payments, it should be made over an accommodating period given their resources and their ability to get settled in on their own.

The Chair: Mr. Kent, five seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Should they be offered forgivable loans?

Hon. Peter Kent: That's something to be considered. I'm not an authority in that area.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Ehsassi, seven minutes, please.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd also like to thank the two witnesses for appearing before us here today and making a number of different recommendations.

If I could join my two colleagues, I'm also somewhat concerned about Mr. Kent's conversion on the road to Damascus, if you will. I have an article here before me from 2014 where you do laud the humanitarian traditions within our immigration and refugee system. It's dated early 2014.

I note here that you said nothing about the Syrian refugee crisis or the need for Canada to actually contribute to settling Syrians. Is that correct?

Hon. Peter Kent: No. I don't know what the article is that you're referring to. I was on the border of Jordan and western Syria and Iraq, watching and welcoming Syrian refugees walking across the desert carrying their life's possessions and I wrote quite extensively on that when I returned in January 2014.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Exactly.

Hon. Peter Kent: I posted pictures. I used social media and visited the Zaatari camp. I also remarked on the fact that the oppressed minorities, as has already been mentioned, don't go to the UN camp very often because the oppression is worse in the camps than it was in Syria.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: I suspect I'm referring to the same article. It's the article where you take Mr. Bernie Farber to task.

Hon. Peter Kent: Oh yes.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Having reviewed this I see no indication on your part that as a country we should do a better job bringing in refugees from Syria, but I digress.

Hon. Peter Kent: You can't get everything into every story.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Absolutely.

As you recall, in 2014 when you wrote this article, at that particular juncture...

Hon. Peter Kent: It wasn't an article. I think it was one page...

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: A *Huffington Post* article.

Hon. Peter Kent: Yes. It was not particularly long. It was a response to Mr. Farber.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: At that particular juncture in 2014, Canada had committed itself to bring in 1,300 refugees from Syria, of which 1,100 were privately sponsored.

Hon. Peter Kent: I'll correct you there. The commitment was to Iraqi and Syrian refugees, 25,000, of which at that point in 2014 the number was around 1,300 but growing. The commitment was to continue and to extend, but you're talking now not quite two and a half years ago and the severity of the Syrian displacement was only beginning to penetrate the world consciousness after the Iraqi displacement into Syria and from Syria into surrounding countries, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan.

🕒 (1610)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Okay.

In any event, I'm very happy that you have a very different approach to this issue now and you are asking that the Canadian government do a much, much better job in terms of welcoming refugees from Syria.

Hon. Peter Kent: I'm only asking for them to be consistent.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: One of the challenges, admittedly, we have faced has been the deep cuts that were made to settlement services in 2010 and 2011. That really fundamentally undermined the capacity of settlement agencies to assist as emigrants and refugees were coming into the country. That is an issue that they are still facing to this day.

When did you realize that that was not something that [*Inaudible*]?

Hon. Peter Kent: For the last 15 years I've been involved with TRIEC, the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council. I've been well aware and Canada, as I said, over the decades has been exceptionally welcoming. I can't answer.... Again, I'm here as a private sponsor speaking to, again, the wonderful acceleration, but the unintended consequences of your party's promise in the last election. There was a steady and capable accommodation under way before October 19 and in the rush to hit the 25,000 target—first by the end of the year, then by the end of February, and initially on the backs of the private sponsors—great burdens were created and I think that entirely different burdens or frustrations have now been created with the sudden deceleration after the government hit its 25,000 target.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: If I could just ask you then, I understand that you're saying, again, we should do a much better job. What would you say the government should spend on bringing in refugees from Syria?

Hon. Peter Kent: The government should complete the promises they made. I think those promises are only half fulfilled at the moment, certainly with regards to the privately sponsored refugees and the SAHs. New quotas haven't been issued to the private SAHs. In some cases it's a matter of 100 individuals. There's capacity for some SAHs. Certainly, again with the communities that I've been working with, the Melkite church and the Armenian community, for several thousand more. They could be accommodated over the next few months very easily.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: But would you say you're comfortable with the amount that has been spent so far, and if not, how much more do you think the government should commit?

Hon. Peter Kent: I think much more was spent in the rush to hit a target in an unreasonably short period of time. I think it should have been done over a more controlled and regulated period.

If we take another 20,000, I think that's wonderful as long as, again, they're properly selected and processed and screened. The reality is, most of the refugees in the Middle East today want eventually to go home. The 85,000 or 100,000 in the Zaatari camp and the other camps in Jordan, and those in the economies in the region, the reality is they're not going to be accepted by countries of the developed world. They will eventually have to go home, one hopes, to a peaceful...

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kent.

Mr. Saroya, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Kent and Mr. Allos for coming up and guiding us through a difficult time.

I hear the stories all the time. Private sponsorship people, they have rented places for months and months and the private refugees are still sitting in the back and not knowing when they will arrive, as well as a cap was put on the private sponsor applications. What impact has this had on your work, Mr. Allos?

Mr. Rabea Allos: The Iraqi applications have been delayed. Now it's moving faster. We met with Minister McCallum last week and apparently they're sending 40 extra staff to, I believe, Jordan and Lebanon. They want to clear up the backlog by June or July.

The main problem we faced at the beginning of this year in January was when the instructions came out that you cannot sponsor anybody but Syrian nationals. You can tell that other communities, whether they are.... It's not only Iraqis and Syrians, but you have Somalis, you have Afghans, you have refugees from Pakistan, Burma, and Eritrea. They need to be resettled. Refugees were feeling that they were being persecuted. You go and meet with refugees in Jordan, for example. You're in the same room as Eritreans, Iraqis, and Syrians and you say "sorry, we can only talk to Syrians." They feel that they are being persecuted again. That was the main challenge.

Now things are moving better, definitely.

🕒 (1615)

Mr. Bob Saroya: Regarding the cap that was put up on the thing, is this a good thing in your mind or they should be relooked again by the government?

Mr. Rabea Allos: The cap was introduced I think back in 2011/2012 back then by Mr. Kenney. I believe it was a good thing because the PSR Program was mostly used for sponsoring families. So you have a lot of SAHs that go into the system and submit as many applications as possible in the thousands. If one or two succeed, that's fine. In the meantime, you're creating a huge backlog in the Visa offices.

In Africa right now, we have five to seven years wait in Visa offices. Yes you need to create the cap but I would create the cap with penalties. If your success rate is at 90%, you should be treated differently than if your success rate is 20% because that's what's creating the backlog.

Mr. Bob Saroya: You've been working with these agencies for the longest time if I understand correctly, all the lessons learned in the past regarding resettling the large number of refugees over the years, are you using that same experience to resettle these people here, the previous at this moment?

Mr. Rabea Allos: Sorry, what was

Mr. Bob Saroya: You were doing this for a long time. The lessons learned from the past from the refugee resettlement program, is there any help using the past experience in resettling?

Mr. Rabea Allos: Yes, for sure. First of all, as I suggested, I would do away with the guard program and make it a blended resettlement program. Basically the government can put in financial support instead for the full year, make it six months or three months and deal with private sponsors to do the compassion, the moral support, finding the jobs, making sure that the refugee family is resettled. If they're not financially independent within a few months, they remain on welfare forever. For me, that's not a successful resettlement.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Based on your experience, what changes would you like to see made to our current and the future resettlement strategies?

Mr. Rabea Allos: I would reduce the financial support from one year to three months as they're doing in the U.S. and will only extend it if the refugee proves that they need it because you don't really want them to feel that they are entitled. They sit at home, receive the cheque at the end of the month. They have to go out and work. They have to contribute to the society.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Next question for Mr. Kent

The Chair: Fifteen seconds, Mr. Saroya.

Mr. Bob Saroya: I had tons of I'll leave it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sarai, five minutes.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): I wanted to first thank both of you for coming and I commend you both for doing a great job in terms of you as a SAH to help refugees and you as a privately sponsor of refugees. It's a commendable action and it's putting your money where your mouth is. I duly appreciate that.

Mr. Kent, I wanted to ask you, you had said it's wrong to kind of pit one refugee group against another. But in January 27th, an article in the *Canadian Press* revealed the previous government was in fact doing that. They were cherry-picking Syrian refugees.

As a private sponsor, do you have the same freedom to do that and do you think that was a right choice to do that at the time?

Hon. Peter Kent: My remarks were more I understood from Minister McCallum's remarks and we're friends, we go back a long way. I understood that the was saying enough with the Syrian refugee program, we've got to look at our global obligations for the 12,000, 24,000 a year of refugees beyond Syria. My response to that was that the government had made the Syrian refugees a project of focus and that was above and beyond the normal refugee portion of our 285,000, 300,000 immigrants and refugees brought into the country every year.

With regards to the prioritization that the previous government had with regards to admitting oppressed minorities, giving a priority to the oppressed minorities, I think the remarks that I've heard here again today is that they have not only been displaced from one hostile situation but into others and that where we have an opportunity to easily and at a much lower cost to government to integrate those privately sponsored families into existing communities of the various diasporas including the Yazidis. Not long ago, there was a baptism ceremony at St. Clement's Church in Toronto of a Yazidi family.

🕒 (1620)

Mr. Randeep Sarai: It doesn't matter why. You're doing the exact same thing. You're picking those that have the most comfort here and you're saying they're here, but if you reverse it, the other ones are more vulnerable because they don't have the same support. As Canada, we open our doors to all regardless of—

Hon. Peter Kent: No, but the government-sponsored refugees are from that traditional pool of refugees, but the privately sponsored refugees, some are accepted as unknown quantities. But for those communities that will carry their sponsored families, individuals, into Canada, it only makes sense particularly with regard to the government hitting its targeted numbers, which they did initially.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: What I'm getting from you is you're saying that for the government-sponsored refugees, they should not pick and choose, but for privately I understand because you have networks and community-based support for those that they should be able to pick—

Hon. Peter Kent: —for highly rapid integration. In the Armenian community, and there was an event that I attended, and actually I believe one of my colleagues here was at the same ceremony, and the Mayor of Toronto said that he wondered why there was such a hot spot on the map of the greater Toronto area with a large volume, thousands, of sponsored refugees. He realized it was the Armenian community that over the past number of years has been an active sponsor and has successfully integrated, by not only finding temporary accommodations and schools, but actually found jobs—

Mr. Randeep Sarai: No, no, I'm agreeing with you on the privately sponsored, it was more on the government-sponsored.

Mr. Allos, my question is to you. You're saying we should decrease funding for government-sponsored, and reduce it down to three months, when what we've been hearing from other witnesses as well as other caucus members here is that the fear is the thirteenth month. Their first initial issue was to learn English, and that doesn't happen in three months that you can learn a language, English or French, one of the official languages.

The second challenge is then to, once you've got accommodation, your second is get your language—

The Chair: Ten seconds.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: —and then get a job. How do you think you can justify reducing funding for that?

Mr. Rabea Allos: You don't want them to feel entitled that the financial aid is coming at the end of the month. They have to go out and look for work. They can still look for work without knowing English.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Trost, five minutes, please.

Mr. Brad Trost (Saskatoon—University, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm sitting in today for Mr. Tilson, who unfortunately had to attend a funeral, so a couple of these are questions he asked me to ask.

Here's one question he asked. There exist uncertainties across different sponsorship agreement holders. Since the cut-off at the end of February, some agreement holders have received new quotas, but others have not. What are your observations?

Mr. Rabea Allos: I think the quotas were out about two weeks ago. I'm aware of one SAH that did not get a quota, but probably there is an investigation there. But the quotas were out two weeks ago. In the meantime, only Syrian nationals were allowed to sponsor until the end of March.

Mr. Brad Trost: Mr. Kent, any remarks?

🕒 (1625)

Hon. Peter Kent: Yes. As I said in my opening remarks, there are some 2,000 identified Armenian-Syrian refugees who are waiting for sponsorship now. If the SAH quotas were lifted, they could be filled immediately. There is frustration in that and a number of other communities over either the very low quotas that have been set, or in some cases have yet to be set.

Mr. Brad Trost: Your implied recommendation, then, would be to lift the quotas.

Hon. Peter Kent: Well, to get on with it. But to lift the quotas would also mean putting some of the significant resources in place in Winnipeg and on the ground in Lebanon and Jordan to actually process and transport.

Mr. Rabea Allos: The one thing in previous years the quota was up, so everybody knew which SAH was sponsoring how much. This year, it wasn't.

Mr. Brad Trost: Why is that?

Mr. Rabea Allos: We don't know. We asked Minister McCallum last Thursday and he said that he would look into it. We really don't know who's getting what. For example, the Office for Refugees at the Archdiocese of Toronto sponsored about 2,300 individuals last year, 2015. They got a quota of only 1,000, so their office will be definitely implicated.

Mr. Brad Trost: I appreciate those answers. It will be something for the committee to follow up on.

One of the questions Mr. Tilson asked me to ask is what your experience with tackling housing issues in the GTA is. I know you've dealt with that a little bit here. Do either of you want to expand upon those remarks?

Mr. Rabea Allos: With the private sponsorships, honestly, I'm not aware. Usually families are prepared.

Hon. Peter Kent: I can certainly speak to that.

There is a great shortage of affordable accommodation in Toronto in the surrounding GTA. The accelerated arrivals caused problems just in being able to go to enough places and in ensuring that with leases families weren't taken advantage of by some landlords. There is still a problem. There is still a shortage. Indeed, we have found that in temporary terms, and again in

the communities I've been working with, families sponsoring families very often fill their houses with the families they are sponsoring until they can find locations. Also, very often part of the problem in finding affordable accommodation is proximity to a church or school—

Mr. Brad Trost: A support centre....

Hon. Peter Kent: In the case of the Armenian Catholic community, they want to be close to schools and public transit.

Mr. Brad Trost: You have one minute...a very quick wrap-up of anything you haven't included, because we're just about at the change [*Inaudible*].

Hon. Peter Kent: If I could just make that point again, the incomplete point, I've heard some concerning allegations about immigration officers at our embassy in Beirut, who have been very skeptical and unsympathetic to applications made by Christians, and who have said that they are not subject to persecution. It's already been made very clear that the Christian and other minorities; such as the Melkites, the Yazidis, the Mandaean; are vulnerable.


I would suggest that the minister should perhaps ensure that applications received by the embassy are as sympathetic to Christians as they would be to any other legitimate refugee.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kent.

We will now suspend to allow the next panel of witnesses to appear.

Thank you.



 (1630)

The Chair: I'd like to begin the second part of our hearing today.

Our second panel consists of Judy Villeneuve, counsellor, and Aileen Murphy, senior social planner, both from Surrey City Council and appearing via video conference. Welcome.

Mrs. Judy Villeneuve (Councillor, Surrey City Council, City of Surrey): Thank you very much. We're happy to be here.

The Chair: The video is working, good.

Also, Ms. Chantal Desloges, appearing as an individual.

Welcome, Ms. Desloges. We will begin with your seven-minute statement.

Ms. Chantal Desloges (Lawyer, Desloges Law Group, As an Individual): Thank you.

Honourable members, this is my sixth or seventh time appearing as a witness before this committee. I have to say, it's very nice to see so many new faces here today.

I'm an immigration and refugee lawyer. I have been working with immigrants and refugees in one capacity or another for over 21 years. For over 10 years, I've been working a lot with sponsored refugees, both groups of five private sponsorships as well as sponsorship agreement holders. As a result of that, I've gained a lot of insight into the pros and cons of the system, both as a lawyer and also as a volunteer. Never in my career have I seen so much public interest in the issue of refugees. I often joke with my friends that it suddenly made me very interesting at cocktail parties, which has never happened before.

There are other speakers on your list today who are active in the area of settlement work, and they're probably going to speak a lot more intelligently about that specific issue than I can. As a lawyer, I will focus my advice on how you can use the legal process of refugee selection to choose more wisely and increase the chances of better integration of refugees on the back end. In that respect, I will advance three pieces of advice:

First, focus more on privately sponsored refugees and less on government-assisted refugees. Second, publicize, clarify, and encourage the self-supporting refugees category. I'll tell you what that is in a moment. Third, develop your own priority selection criteria rather than relying so heavily on UNHCR selection of Canada's refugees, starting with the first issue.

I don't think there can be any doubt whatsoever any longer that privately sponsored refugees show much better and faster integration outcomes than government-assisted refugees. Any person actively involved in settlement will tell you that same piece of information. There are exceptions of course. We can all think of exceptions of people who we know who were government-assisted refugees who've done wonderful things. As a general rule, privately sponsored refugees tend to settle down faster. That makes sense, because refugees have a much softer landing when each family is received by a prepared team of people in Canada who have been waiting for a long time and preparing carefully for their arrival in Canada. Their settlement plan, which is part of their immigration package, focuses the sponsors' attention on what to prepare for. It ensures that not only the manpower, but also the funds are going to be in place well in advance.

Furthermore, privately sponsored refugees most often have some pre-existing connection to Canada, whether that's through a family member here or through a supportive religious or ethnic community. This is how they get sponsored in the first place. They find jobs much faster because they already know people in Canada. I can testify to that first-hand because I've hired one of the newly arrived Syrian refugees in my office. Why did I hire them? The sponsorship agreement holder reached out to me and specifically asked me if I had place to hire one. All of this is at virtually no cost to the Canadian taxpayer. Frankly, I think it's a bit of a no-brainer. Not only

does it save money, it also imposes very little pressure on settlement infrastructure; no shelters, no hotels, no welfare.

I don't think it's selfish for us as a country to want to select those people who have the best chance to adapt most quickly to our economic system. That's not to say to get rid of government-assisted refugees entirely. Certainly, we want to help those kinds of people who don't have connections in Canada, but we should do it as we have the means to do so. However, despite that, I would definitely suggest focusing more on private sponsorship of refugees, which I think is the most intelligent and the most economically responsible choice.

Attached to prioritizing the PSR program, I would also add that that this quota system that you've heard so much about this morning really needs to be revised. The sponsorship agreement holders are very frustrated with the way that quotas are being managed. I'm hearing from a number of different SAHs that the system needs to be more predictable and more transparent. If possible, a multi-year plan as opposed to an ad hoc plan, which means from year to year, the sponsorship agreement holder never knows how many spaces they're going to have at any given time.

You have to understand that to run a sponsorship agreement holder, it requires an immense mobilization of manpower, both paid staff and volunteers. Volunteer enthusiasm is not something that you can turn on and turn off like a faucet, it's something that has to be managed over a period of time. The advantage that we have right now is that there is unprecedented public enthusiasm over the issue of refugee sponsorship. Why would we want to squash that by telling them year after year that we don't know how many people you're going to be able to bring, and one year it's going to be high and one year it's going to be low and nobody can properly prepare?

🕒 (1635)

Second issue, I would be interested to know how many people around the room today even know that Canada has a self-supporting refugee program. Has anyone heard of that where you can basically sponsor yourself to Canada? I didn't think so because 99% of the Canadian public has never heard of it either. In the immigration refugee protection regulations there are three ways that you can come as a private refugee.

One is to be sponsored. The other is to be government sponsored, and there's a third one called self-supporting refugee. It's very important because as somebody has mentioned this morning as well not all refugees are poor. There are a lot of people who came from Syria and other middle eastern countries these countries were very affluent before the war. Many people had money invested abroad. Many people were already living abroad and got stranded by the war and are not able to go home, but it doesn't mean that they're poor and they have no money.

I would think that this program really that nobody knows about should really be promoted in the public for people to know that this is an option, and to educate the public on how they can use it because in 20-some years that I have been doing this I've literally have never seen anybody use this program and the question becomes why. It's very difficult to get any information about it. Nobody really seems to know how it works, but if we're talking about integration of refugees

wouldn't it be wonderful if you had a group of refugees who could come in on their own financial support and be able to put themselves through the system without taking any resources from anyone else?

Finally the third issue. I agreed with what Mr. Allos said earlier that there's a huge difference between protection needs of refugees and resettlement needs of refugees. All refugees who run away from their country need protection. However, there's only a certain fraction of those refugees that are never going to be able to go home. Who are those refugees who are never going to be able to go home? Mostly minorities. Not only religious minorities also ethnic minorities, and sexual minorities. Also women at risk of gender violence.

Thank you.

🕒 (1640)

The Chair: Five seconds.

Ms. Chantal Desloges: I think we should focus on the most vulnerable. Definitely I agree with the previous two speakers who talked about selecting the most vulnerable not necessarily relying on UNHCR to pull people from camps which is after all an extremely homogeneous community.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Villeneuve, seven minutes please.

Mrs. Judy Villeneuve: Thank you very much.

Hello, I am Judy Villeneuve and I have been a Surrey city councillor for 27 years. I chair the Surrey Social Policy Advisory Committee and I co-chair the Surrey Local Immigration Partnership. Aileen Murphy is our senior social planner and she's with me here at the Surrey city hall and will be available to answer questions.

It has been an honour to be asked to present.

The issue of refugee settlement has been an area of great concern to me and the City of Surrey for the past several years.

I'll be focusing my comments on our city's efforts to welcome refugees and primarily on the refugee transportation loan program and the impact that the repayment of these loans has on refugee settlement at integration.

As you know loans were waived for Syrian refugees that arrived in Canada between November 4th and February. I applaud this decision and in the interest of supporting refugee settlement am urging the federal government to extend this policy to all government-assisted refugees who are resettled to Canada.

It is poor public policy for vulnerable refugees families to start a new life in this country with debt.

The standing committee's study of the settlement of Syrian refugees is very important for Surrey. About 44% of all Syrian government-assisted refugees have settled in B.C. and they're living in Surrey. Any policy changes that result from this committee will have very important implications for our community.

Refugees are not new to the City of Surrey. Over the past decade it's been a primary destination for the government-assisted refugees arriving in B.C. As a result we have significant Somali, Iraqi, and Karen populations. Over the past decade the struggles of vulnerable refugee children, youth, and families have been a concern in Surrey.

We have been pro-active in creating a welcoming community for new refugees. Since 2009 we have conducted a refugee housing study, a refugee myth busting campaign, held public forums, created information pamphlets for both residents and Syrian refugees, we've provided cultural awareness training for staff, and we're working with the Surrey Board Of Trade to link refugees with employment.

We continue to work with our Surrey Local Immigration Partnership and our Immigrant Advisory Roundtable to develop a refugee integration strategy. As you can see this the City of Surrey cares about settlement and integration of all government-assisted refugees who find a new home in our city, but we know that the repayment of transportation loans is a major burden for these newcomers.

Upon arrival in Canada, as you know, GARs are required to sign a government loan. The loan covers the costs associated with their transportation, pre-entry medical exams, and a service fee. The maximum amount for an individual loan is \$10,000 and with children over 18 can be up to \$15,000.

Refugees are expected to start paying this loan back within 12 months and accrue interest after 3 years. Canada is the only country in the world that charges interest.

I first became aware of these loans in 2009 and thus the City of Surrey put forward a resolution to the Union of BC Municipalities calling upon the government to terminate the requirement for the refugees to have to repay the transportation loans. The resolution was endorsed by all BC municipalities. In 2010 it was endorsed by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and at that time the federal government responded that immigration policies were under review.

In 2013 the City of Surrey, in partnership with our Poverty Reduction Coalition, launched a petition and over 1,000 community members have signed it. Our MP, Randeep Sarai, will be presenting the petitions to the House of Commons and I urge you to support the petition and review this policy at your table.

As a country our goal should be to break the cycle of poverty for all Canadians.

Research shows strong links between poverty and negative outcomes such as poor health, low educational involvement, homelessness, and increased involvement in the criminal justice system. Government-assisted refugees are provided with financial support that is equivalent to provincial income assistance, but it is not sufficient to beat the high rental rates in B.C.

We see refugees with loan payments that are pushed into even deeper poverty.

Anecdotally, we hear of families using their children's tax benefit to pay transportation loans or they're sending their children to work rather than school to pay off government debt.

Simply put the refugee transportation loan is counterproductive. While the federal government makes significant investments in the settlement and integration of GARs, the transportation loan negatively impacts this process. It does not make economic sense.

🕒 (1645)

2014 and 2015 data shows that the federal government could absorb the transportation and the rental expenses for all government assisted refugees admitted to Canada at a cost of about \$13 million to \$14 million annually out of a federal budget of \$290 billion.

Canada's refugee program in our mind is our country's contribution to international humanitarian efforts. Since 2003 government assisted refugees arriving in Canada from war-torn countries have much higher needs. Up until this year, government assisted refugees have only represented 1% of all new immigrants.

With this in mind, I urge the committee to recommend to the Government of Canada to change the policy so that from now on government assisted refugees do not start their new life in this country with a burden of debt on their backs.

I have personally spoken with local MPs Randeep Sarai, Jenny Kwan and Dianne Watts, who will support what could be a cross-party initiative.

As MPs, the elimination of the loan repayment could be one of the most concrete actions that you take to help some of the most vulnerable poor families in our country and I urge you to do so.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Villeneuve.

Mr. Tabbara, seven minutes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our guests for coming here today. I know you're taking time out of your busy days.

My first question is for Judy Villeneuve. On January 20 of this year at the City of Surrey Community Forum on Refugees you were quoted as saying:

We are fortunate in Surrey to have a number of highly skilled and experienced organizations that have been settling refugees and immigrants for decades. These agencies know what is needed and when it's needed.

In my region of Waterloo region we have been settling Syrian refugees and we've done a fantastic job. We've taken in 4.5% of the Syrian refugees and our region has done a fantastic job, but they mentioned before that there are cuts to some of their funding to settlement agencies. Can you elaborate a little bit on previously if you've had cuts to your settlement agencies in the City of Surrey and what that was like and how it affected your agency?

Mrs. Judy Villeneuve: Thank you.

As a city councillor I actually act as chair and convenor for discussions with our organizations. We do have a Syrian local immigrant partnership table that has been working together on a plan to strengthen our ability to settle refugees and to employ our refugees and immigrants.

Over the years organizations have had cuts and they've also had a change of contracts from the provincial level to the federal level. Understand that they all had contract applications in at the federal level when the Syrian refugee announcement was made and the federal government at that time held off on decisions about funding for their contracts. We were assured intermittently that there would be extra funding available for our schools, for our ESL classes, for our organizations to be able to take on increases in emergencies, but I do know in our city that the organizations all could use extra funding for ESL training, particularly the language training and the opportunity for apprenticeship training. Those are the two areas that I think would most benefit Surrey.

I said that we have local organizations with expertise, organizations that have been here certainly as I have been over 25 years, and they're well regarded in our city and well supported by the community.

🕒 (1650)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you.

My second question is for you as well, Mrs. Villeneuve. Could you tell us about how the administrative and political role of local government and non-governmental organizations in the planning and execution of the settlement efforts?

Mrs. Judy Villeneuve: Our city came together hand-in-hand through the Syrian Local Immigrant Partnership table to deal with the issue together. What we did was that we called a number of forums and our senior planner elaborate on exactly the steps that we're taking in an effort to bring people together to face this challenge [*Inaudible*].

For the settlement providers, part of the task has been them coordinating their efforts, figuring out where the gaps are, etc. The provincial has funded refugee response teams for a one year

period to focus on that. As a city, what we've been doing is making an effort to bring along the rest of the community to be welcoming of the newcomers. So, we've developed resources that are providing an out to the general community in terms of how they can get involved in helping. We produced a pamphlet for Syrian refugees settling here that's translated into Arabic that kind of welcomes them to the city and gives them a sense of what's available. Then this is actually going to city council tonight, it's called Everyone in Surrey Belongs and it's the three local immigration partnerships strategic planning going forward.

But I think our point of appearing before the committee today was really concerns around poverty. We know, particularly, the Syrians that have arrived in Canada as government-assisted refugees are very vulnerable. We know most of them think the English language is going to take some time. They are starting with little to no English and we have housing issues in metro Vancouver already with high housing costs and we're just concerned about people starting off a new life living in such deep poverty.

I'll conclude that statement by saying that our city council, our city management team and the staff at city hall have all been working collaboratively to actually help settle the Syrian refugees. But with the issue of poverty and refugees, in general, we've had a number of public forums with the community to see how they could be brought in and we have a poverty reduction coalition that continually deals with the needs of our newcomers. Really, the transportation loan issue arrives on a daily basis when we hear presentations from people in the community about their day-to-day struggles of making ends meet with the high rental costs and the cost of living in British Columbia.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: You mentioned poverty and I'll be very quick. Do you have any long-term followup programs to track the settlement efforts?

Mrs. Judy Villeneuve: We, particularly, don't have a long-term program that the city is responsible for but I know that we're working Immigrant Services B.C. who will have a program to track that will be setting some benchmarks and be reporting back to the federal government. I'm sure that our major organizations will be reporting back, through their applications and through the grant reporting, on what they see the challenges are and what their successes have been and they in turn report to city council

🕒 (1655)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Just before we proceed, I would ask our panellists from Surrey, they had shown us some pamphlets and some documentation, is it available online and, if not, if they could forward those documents to us?

Mrs. Judy Villeneuve: We certainly will do that. Two of our documents are available online, the pamphlets for refugees and for the public. We'll have the report published online just as soon as it goes to city council tonight and we'll also send you our [*corporate?*] reports and update where we're at with the specific settlement of the Syrian refugees in our community.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Rempel, you have seven minutes, please.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll start with Chantal. I am just wondering, that you talked about a set of principles, perhaps, that the government could use in prioritizing refugees in terms of the most vulnerable. In terms of recommendations on how the government could approach that, are there certain criteria that you would use?

Ms. Chantal Desloges: What I would do is I would partner with groups who are victims of—I know that word might not be popular in this room, but—genocide. There is a very serious situation happening with religious and ethnic minorities in the Middle East and it's not only religious and ethnic minorities it's also sexual minorities. You cannot be a gay person in a refugee camp in the Middle East. You simply can't. For those people, again, they will never be able to go home. A lot of the people in the camps eventually when the situation dies down they will be able to return back. But these particular groups, which I would say are targeted a specific campaign against them based on their inalienable identity of who they are, those are the groups that should be targeted not people who are victims of general war.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: You also talked about, and again, this is sort of a recurring theme, the fact that there are very much silos between the government sponsored refugees and privately sponsored refugees in terms of support services and whatnot that are given. You talked about how there are so many groups across the country, that there's an enthusiasm and a desire to bring refugees into these groups.

Do you think there's a way we could look at a hybrid model where if the government is setting a target on refugees that perhaps privately sponsored groups could somehow be prioritized and then government sponsored refugees could backfill or that there could be an insertion into those groups? I'm wondering if you could give some concrete recommendations to fix what we've been hearing over and over again in the media that the government has sort of failed to adequately equip privately sponsored refugees with the tools that they need from a processing perspective to get refugees into these groups?

Ms. Chantal Desloges: Yes.

Well, I have to say I really like the idea that Mr. Allos spoke about earlier, which was collapse the two programs together and make it a blend so you don't have a silo of PSR and a silo of GAR anymore. What you would have is one refugee sponsorship program which is run consistently and uniformly across the board and allow the government to back up the people who, after all, are willing to do the work for free. Again, that's a no-brainer.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: We had heard from departmental officials that they really don't have a way of tracking or a sense of the unemployment rate in the current cohort of Syrian refugees. Do you think that's important in terms of a social outcome and to ensure we're monitoring social inclusion and integration among this cohort?

Do you have any suggestions around how we can better monitor employment rates and then conversely use that data to come up with better strategies to help refugees integrate into the Canadian economy?

Ms. Chantal Desloges: I'm not an expert in that, but I would say more information is never wrong. Certainly, tracking those outcomes would be your easiest way to find out what those outcomes actually are. I'm surprised to hear that information is not being kept now. If it isn't, it definitely should be.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Okay.

On a broader basis, going back to your first comments around principles and criteria by which refugees should be emerged in this country, I think we all will admit and say that what's happening in Syria is one of the largest refugee crises that we've seen in several generations.

However, there are certainly other groups in different pockets around the world that have legitimate refugee claims in terms of Canada. The government has been very clear in saying that they are treating Syrian refugees differently. Can you speak to when there is a refugee crisis that comes up in one region ensure that refugees from other areas aren't being marginalized or really bumped down the list. What sort of criteria could be used rather than just saying, well, politically, we're going to take this group because there's a lot of attention on it?

Do you have any thoughts on that particular issue? Do you think it's right to say we're treating this group differently?

🕒 (1700)

Ms. Chantal Desloges: I certainly think there's nothing wrong with when a crisis blows up to say for a short period of time we're going to set aside and look at this one group. But where you do it at the cost of everyone else, that becomes an issue. I have heard this many times before. I hear it from my own clients and I hear it from sponsorship groups as well, that everybody wants to help the Syrian refugees. I've not heard anyone say that they don't.

However, when they see that their people group or their certain type of application is going down and down the list on an indefinite basis with no end in sight, that becomes very upsetting for people and they feel they're not being treated equally.

I would say if that's going to be a very temporary situation, I don't have an issue with those groups being prioritized, but that can't be a long-term solution. I'm actually rather discouraged by the fact that all of the media discourse is about Syria, Syria, Syria and there are so many

deserving refugees in the world. It's not only a Syrian crisis, it's a middle east crisis in fact. It's a very volatile region altogether.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: In terms of how that could be rectified, because, certainly, I think we're seeing media reports of other refugee groups being bumped down the list right now, and perhaps a lack of clarity around the intake, certainly, again, on the PSR side as you so eloquently stated.

Do you have some recommendations that the committee could consider in terms of how the government could ensure that situation doesn't occur as we see it happening today?

Ms. Chantal Desloges: Well, I do know that the government intends to put into place geographic regional quotas and I think that may not be the best way to approach the situation, especially if you're going to focus on private sponsorship of refugees. Let people sponsor who they want to sponsor. Let the public decide that. If there are groups that want to sponsor Eritreans, then let them sponsor Eritreans. Why should we tell them that they can't, especially as I just said if it goes towards private sponsorship, then that's very easy to do.

The Chair: Twenty seconds.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: With the time I have left, what you're kind of saying is have a set of criteria that prioritize the most vulnerable, look at a hybrid system between PSR and GSR, and then have more public input and kind of eliminate the propensity for a UNHCR classification.

Ms. Chantal Desloges: Exactly, and give the private sponsors their headway. They are excited. Let them go.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, for seven minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses.

Councillor Villeneuve, first off thank you very much for your years of advocacy in both economic and social justice. I've known you in your work in your community for a long time.

I'm particularly interested in the city of Surrey. You mentioned that some 44% of GARs are settling now in Surrey from the Syrian refugee crisis. Based on the numbers the officials had given us, that's about 700 GARs approximately for the numbers that have settled in Vancouver.

To that end, there are two areas I want to explore, one which you spoke about and that's the transportation loan question, and the impact for the Syrian refugees who are saddled with the burden of carrying this loan. Those who came before November 4th are carrying this loan, and I would also argue not just Syrian refugees but other refugees as well.

Given your vast experience and knowledge base in your community, can you speak about the real impacts for them in terms of people's ability to pay for rent, and particularly after the twelve-month sponsorship period, and the ability for the children to engage in the broader community's activities that may require cost and all those kinds of burdens.

Can you give us some examples of what that's been like for the refugee community saddled with this burden?

Mrs. Judy Villeneuve: What I'd tell you is that as Chair of the Social Policy Advisory Committee in 2009 when this was brought to my attention, I think our entire city council was shocked that the poorest of the poor refugees coming out of war-torn countries were required to pay back a transportation loan when they really were coming here with nothing. That is the reality.

We have had presentations by Somalian women for example that came with a translator to talk about how grateful they were to be in Canada, how they wanted their children to have a sense of hope for the future, that how economically they were struggling, and the transportation loan is an extra stressful burden in their lives.

I'm sure as an MLA in your riding particularly, MP Kwan, you have heard these stories before that families with high rents in B.C. are struggling just to pay the rents. They get an average for a family of four about \$750 for rent supplements, and then they have \$400 for living costs, and they are expected to pay all of the other deals plus the kids' clothing.

We see growing line-ups at our food banks because ends can't be meet. But just the stress of being grateful to Canada, but also often scared of the government, but having to pay another \$89 or \$100 a month after 12 months to pay back their loans is taking food out of their kids' mouths. Honestly, some of them are sending their teenage children out to work in order to meet this obligation because they don't want to go back, and they want to be good citizens.

I think any of us can understand what it must be like to start your life with a burden with no employment opportunities at that time, to be relying on another government assistance, but also obligated to that government to pay the money back.

I can give you an example, [*Inaudible*] for example, who is a young man from the Sudan who came with his two brothers. He's settling in New Westminster in an apartment. He's working two different jobs. He's back and forth trying to take care of his younger siblings who are in high school. He has worked at several different kinds of jobs. He was forced out of dropping out of upgrading courses at Douglas College when he was told he wasn't eligible to apply for a student loan until his federal bills were fully covered.

If you think about most of the immigrants I had talked to and the refugees, they want to contribute to community, but there are just so many barriers facing them. Really, anybody I present this issue to whether it's rotary clubs, ratepayers organizations, different committees, non-profit organizations, they are shocked. They are shocked that we are asking the poorest of

the poor to have this burden on their back. One thing I do know is political people I talk to across parties agree this is an unfair burden.

I think I was very excited with a new government coming in. We tried to work through the old government system, and we did take all the time to go through all the proper channels, through all the local councils in B.C., throughout the country, and through all the non-profit organizations, all [*Inaudible*] is that public policy that may have been put in place in the 70s they are now considering that the needs and the high cost of living in Canada is no longer something that's really acceptable or humane in my opinion.

🕒 (1705)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The Chair: You have 50 seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm going to move on to the youth concerns. You talked about youth programming. Other presenters have raised that as well. Quickly can you tell us what needs to be done in terms of resettlement services to support youth so that they have a chance to succeed?

Mrs. Judy Villeneuve: I think that funding is necessary for more programming for youth. Our city is a city that has almost over a third of its population are under 19. We're very focused on getting youth the kinds of opportunities that they need to be engaged to get the wrap around services when they're struggling. So any kind of fund financial aid of the city is really helpful for us at this time. I think that the parents want to have their kids supported and engaged that often don't have the money to put them in extra things like extra classes, or sports. Our city opens up its doors to its recreation facilities either granting passes for families, but there's many other areas where youth don't have that opportunity. In order just to make family ends meet financially many of those youth are looking for other kinds of work to bring in money, and sometimes it's good and sometimes it's not so good. We need to be aware of that. Our goal is to make every one in this city have an opportunity to meet their capacity and to do well.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I would just invite I guess for a later time because we're running out of time if you have any specific suggestions as to what kind of program, what order of funding needs to be in place for you to present that to the committee by writing.

Also I wonder if you can also share with us the UBCM and FCM resolutions in support of the waiving of the loans that would be most helpful.

🕒 (1710)

Mrs. Judy Villeneuve: I would be definitely be able to do that. We can send a package back to Ottawa. We supplied it to another immigration committee full package on the issue and all the resolutions. I really appreciate you giving me an opportunity to speak to this issue today. I know

there are many other issues for the committee, but this one is a concrete action that you can take, and our whole city is urging you to do that public change.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chen, for seven minutes.

Mr. Shaun Chen (Scarborough North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to first congratulate Councillor Villeneuve and Ms. Murphy for their work and to the City of Surrey for accepting, welcoming, and helping to settle refugees affected by the crisis in Syria.

I know that it's heartening when we see communities welcome refugees and give them a sense of belonging. Unfortunately, at the same time it's disheartening to see that in certain instances we have witnessed racist, rhetoric, discrimination, against Syrian refugees. In particular the *National Post* reported on February 21st that there was a school in Calgary where the walls were spray painted with messages of hate. I quote "while Syrian refugees feast in hotels Canadians starve on the streets".

You mentioned in your statement earlier that you started a myth-busting campaign. I'm very interested to know what are some of the myths that you've encountered in your work, and how did you go about addressing those myths in the campaign that you launched?

Mrs. Judy Villeneuve: Thank you very much.

I'm going to let Aileen respond to that because she was more directly involved with that particular campaign. I will say I'm really proud that we were very proactive when the Syrian refugee settlement began working with the community. To date in our city—even though at the beginning there were letters to the editor concerned about this decision—I would say our community has not faced a lot of racism regarding this issue. In fact, there has been overwhelming support by people wanting to help. The biggest challenge has been linking them with the people who can be able to connect them with how they can help, but the response from the community has been very helpful.

I would say overall our biggest issue is ensuring that economically we have opportunities and enough support for newcomers in our community to get a chance to do well here. There's an overwhelming sense that we want to accept newcomers, and we're depending on it, and we're a young city and this is where many should be. So I'll let you talk to the myth-busing campaign.

Ms. Aileen Murphy (Senior Social Planner, City of Surrey): The Refugee Myth-Busting Campaign was actually a campaign that we did in 2012, 2013, so it was prior to the arrival of the Syrian refugees specifically, but it was in response to the number of refugees who we had in the community, and some of the misconceptions around, so it's often for security of refugees, even for getting into trouble then that becomes sort of our base of perspective of refugees.

I would say the biggest myth about refugees is, I think, refugee settlement is about nation building and that's, I think, been part of Canada's proud history is, particularly the next generation, and I think with the Syrians, the whole promise of this group is...I know in Surrey, 60% of the Syrians who have arrived are children and youth, and so I think if we work with those families and with those young people, they will become our next citizens contributing to the community.

Our Myth-Busting Campaign, there was a real focus on the education sector and so what we did is develop training everywhere from elementary school through to post-secondary. With the little guys it was around artwork that children produced and stories, and then with the high school and post-secondary it was actually workshops that were developed by a team of young people. It was really just making sure that as refugee children and youth hit the education sector that their needs are understood and that they're properly supported and encouraged, and that there's expectations for them to succeed.

We also did some digital story telling so some young refugee youth were trained and made videos about their experiences, about their views on issues in terms of English-language training, and so forth. Then we created some materials that a community...just in terms of who were the refugees, what were the numbers, etc. I think often the community thinks the numbers are much larger than they are, where in fact they really are a small percentage as compared to our total immigrant population.

🕒 (1715)

Mrs. Judy Villeneuve: We continue to work with Simon Fraser University and Quantum University as well doing research and setting benchmarks for our city in this area. I think that kind of partnership really informs us on what steps to take so that we're not just doing it in a scattered way, but in sort of very well researched and a benchmark set manner, so that we are as productive as we can be, supportive as we can be. We're playing a strong advocacy role and we see where some of the major issues are, such as the transportation [*inaudible*].

Mr. Shaun Chen: It's so important, and you've focused on youth and the schools, because research demonstrates that when youth feel a sense of belonging their educational outcomes are greater, and at the same time to educate that next generation of Canadians to understand the lived histories of the Syrian refugee children, and to be more caring and compassionate is such a wonderful project.

It reminds me of the title of the guide that you showed us, *Everyone in Syria Belongs*. Can you explain more about that campaign and how that has helped to create a better sense of community with the refugees coming from Syria?

The Chair: Forty seconds, please.

Ms. Aileen Murphy: This is actually the local immigration partnership. It's a federal program that funds communities coming together and developing local strategies and approaches for human rights. We actually are in the fall will be developing a very specific refugee plan. This is

really just for all newcomers in Surrey. As we said, it's hot off the press. We'll be starting implementation immediately.

Mrs. Judy Villeneuve: Then we have our federal funding to do the planning and that's been very [*inaudible*].

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Saroya, five minutes, please.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses, Chantal here and the councillor in B.C. Thank you for coming out and educating us.

My first question to Chantal here.

I never heard the third category, the first time I ever heard it. If you could please tell us more, explain to us more how does this system work? It seems like it's equally important to push this third category as the private-sponsored program as well as the government-sponsored program. How does it work, please?

Ms. Chantal Desloges: Well, you're really hit the nail on the head because nobody knows. It's part of the problem. Very few people have ever heard of it. You have to be kind of like a lawyer nerd like me to have actually gone through and picked things apart and read about it.

The awareness about the program is very low and there aren't any instructions on how to use it. But I think it's a gold mine sitting there just waiting for people to use, if only they knew how. And I wish I could help you out there, but the fact is that there's really very little information available about it.

Mr. Bob Saroya: What can be done to educate people first of all, any easy way out for people like myself can learn more about this category?

Ms. Chantal Desloges: The IRCC website really should have a section on this. But if you look through it, again there's really no information. If you go on there, you'll find a lot of information about how to sponsor refugees, how do government assisted refugees come, but there is no information about this category. So I think that would be step number one is just to get the information out and to the public. And maybe even just an awareness campaign, like can the sponsorship agreement holders maybe play a part in that in disseminating that news? Maybe take a little bit of financial pressure off of those agreement holders?

Mr. Bob Saroya: Is it possible if you can provide us this information to the entire committee? At least we know something is out there and we can use it and we can educate it in our ridings, among other places.

Ms. Chantal Desloges: I'll certainly see what I can find. Again, I don't think there's much out there that actually exists, but whatever there is, I will certainly be happy to provide it.

Mr. Bob Saroya: The other thing you talked about is a no brainer, private sponsors where it says the government sponsors the number one, you talked about the cost, where it says that it's easy to find jobs, the people who sponsor them, they have the jobs lined up from time to time, the language, do those private sponsors help every single need, the people who come to the country. But at the same time, we also need to balance the books. Do you have any thoughts on balancing the books on the private sponsors versus those unfortunately the minorities, or who are the person is. Any thoughts on that?

🕒 (1720)

Ms. Chantal Desloges: Do you mean balancing in terms of numbers or finance?

Mr. Bob Saroya: Numbers, please.

Ms. Chantal Desloges: Like I said before, we definitely don't want to create a system where we exclude people from the system who desperately need our help. But at the same time, we have to be sensible and know that we cannot help everyone, so there are decisions that have to be made.

As I mentioned earlier, there could be a way to collapse programs together to make a blended refugee sponsorship program. And where those refugees would come from, whether they're provided from an external agency or whether they're self-selected by the sponsorship agreement holders, those are details that could be worked out. That would be a very good way of mobilizing all of those enthusiastic volunteers across the country who are very excited about this program right now and allow them to participate in the process as opposed to the government and the taxpayer having to bear the entire burden for them. Yet you still get to help people who have a lot of misfortunate.

And even if you look at private sponsorships, if you look at this organization called Lifeline Syria, they're a perfect example of an organization that does a lot of private sponsorships yet at the same time, their not picking people from specific ethnic or religious communities like some of the other sponsors are, because they're not a faith-based organization.

There could be a million other organizations just like that. Again, if you give them their headway and let them do what they want to do, they know what the right thing is.

Mr. Bob Saroya: The cap passport on the private sponsorship recently, what are your thoughts? Is it a positive or do we need to make any changes to that?

Ms. Chantal Desloges: I didn't hear the first part of your question.

Mr. Bob Saroya: On the private sponsor refugees, a cap was put on how many people that can be brought in, what are your thoughts on it?

Ms. Chantal Desloges: I disagree on quotas at all. That's one thing that I disagree with the previous speaker before me this morning. I think as many people as want to privately sponsor refugees, let them do it. Let them do it.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Absolutely.

The Chair: Fifteen seconds.

Mr. Bob Saroya: I have a question for the counsellor in Surrey. How many people have found a place to live up there in B.C. It's a beautiful place. I was there last week and I have about 20 million cousins living up there. How many people are still looking for a place to live there, please?

The Chair: Two seconds, please.

Mrs. Judy Villeneuve: I think that we have 746 refugees that are located in Surrey, and I think there's about 1,700 that are located in B.C. I we're just looking at about 50 or 60 Syrians are still looking for places there.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sarai, five minutes please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to first thank Councillor Villeneuve and Ms. Murphy. I want to thank you for appearing before our committee today. I know that you and your colleague, Vera LeFranc, have been active on this file of transportation loan programs and rescinding it. I want to let you know that I'll be presenting your petition regarding the transportation loan program this week in the House of Commons. I also want to commend you on your activism because it's partially due to that the government in this regard of the \$25,000 that came for Syrian refugees, this issue was front and centre of the minister. I understand it's partially one of the reasons it was not charged. I also want to make it aware that any Syrian privately-sponsored refugee that was interviewed before March 1 was also not charged the transportation loan, so your efforts have not been without fruition, they've carried good dividends.

I also want to let you understand that the balance of the remaining program is under review and I think the department, we asked this the last time, it's under their review to see how they can help this issue, I know it is front and centre.

My question to you is in regard to your correspondence with the committee from February. In that letter you noted that Surrey has emerged as a primary destination for government-assisted refugees settling in B.C. I'm wondering if you might be able to share with this committee examples of refugees in Surrey, some of the first-hand accounts of the impact that it has on the repayment of their loan. I know you mentioned one about the Somalian refugee, but if you can, particularly in Surrey, show how it affects people so this committee has a better idea.

Mrs. Judy Villeneuve: Let me say that I remember I had a direct conversation with the most recent Syrian refugees because right now they're just sort of getting settled and will be having their report back to our Syrian at the end of June.

I will tell you that I can give you another prime example. In order to educate the public we have published a number of publications so that people become aware of the issues and the impact on their lives. This is more—

🕒 (1725)

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I'm sorry, I'm actually specifically asking if the transportation loan, how it's affected refugees. Obviously the Syrian refugees that have come now have not been charged it, but those refugees that have come in the past, how it's specifically affected or hindered their ability to resettle.

Mrs. Judy Villeneuve: Let me just say that it hinders their ability to resettle because they have that debt on their back. With the money they get through provincial assistance—it's close to, at the most, \$1,100 a month for a family of four—and MP Sarai, you know what the high living costs are in Metro Vancouver to pay rent. Two young men living together get \$1,000 a month for rent and they have to split that, plus their costs, so they are only receiving \$700 apiece as refugees and as welfare recipients in this province, so the higher cost of living is very high for them.

What we are seeing now is that most people are not being able to make ends meet by the end of the month. We've seen an increase of over 600 new refugees going to the food bank in our city, which is not funded by government—it's funded by people in the community—because they're having a difficult time feeding their families and you can imagine trying to make ends meet in British Columbia, or in Surrey, where you live, trying to survive on \$1,100 a month which includes your rent, your food, your hydro, your phone, your education costs, your clothing costs, and to then have a government debt that you are owing to pay back, and you would have come and arrived probably with no assets.

I think it affects every new refugee who arrives on the government-assisted plan because they're really starting with nothing. I would say when I immigrated to Canada in 1970 I had English language and a college education and I had a lot of difficulty just getting settled and established. I had the ability to find work quite easily. Just to get your feet on the ground as a newcomer is difficult and when you have nothing it's even more difficult, and with the high cost of living it's certainly in our province.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

What aspect of the loan repayment is the most troubling, the interest, the repayment schedule, or the size of the loan? Can you perhaps quickly say.

Mrs. Judy Villeneuve: The size of the loan of course. I'd say the entire loan is troubling. I think it's really unfortunate that we would be putting that kind of debt on people's backs, but all of it whether it's either waiving the loan—I don't agree with that—it should be eliminated, it's bad public policy.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Villeneuve.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for appearing before the committee today.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.