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COMMITTEE

ON

HUMAN RESOURCES

Thursday, December 12, 2019

Committee Room

Foreign Certified Professionals Finding Work in Their Trained Fields

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HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Brendan Maguire, Chair
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Claudia Chender

[Keith Irving replaced Hugh MacKay]
[John Lohr replaced Brad Johns]

In Attendance:

Judy Kavanagh
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Nova Scotia Office of Immigration

Kelliann Dean, Chief Executive Officer
Shelley Bent James, Acting Executive Director

Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia

Nabiha Atallah, Advisor

Department of Labour and Advanced Education

Ava Czapalay, Associate Deputy Minister
Nancy Hoddinott, Senior Executive Director, Skills and Learning Branch



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2019

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Brendan Maguire

Vice-Chair

Suzanne Lohnes-Croft

THE CHAIR: Hello everybody. This is our final meeting before the holiday season, and I will bring to order the Standing Committee on Human Resources. My name is Brendan Maguire, and I'm the Chair. Today in addition to reviewing appointments to agencies, boards, and commissions, we will hear from the Nova Scotia Office of Immigration and the Department of Labour and Advanced Education regarding foreign certified professionals finding work in their trained fields.

A reminder to turn your phones off or on vibrate. There's coffee and tea to your left, and washrooms can be found in the room next door. In case of emergency, please go through the Granville Street entrance and go to Grand Parade or wherever. Just go home. Get out of here.

We'll start with introductions.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: First thing, we will get the committee business out of the way, so we'll do the agency, board, and commission appointments. Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: I would like to make a motion to appoint five members to the Acadia University Foundation. William Parker, Kathryn Swenson, Rod Morrison, and Ian Murray are reappointments. The new appointment is Terry Hennigar, who I know quite well. He is an alumnus of Acadia. He taught there for 20 years as a professor and 50 years in his work as a hydrologist and is a fine selection for the foundation. With that, I would like to move the appointment of Terry Hennigar, William Parker, Kathryn Swenson, Rod Morrison, and Ian Murray to the Acadia University Foundation.

THE CHAIR: Are there any questions? Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

That's it for agencies, boards, and commissions. Now on to our topic. We'll get the panel to introduce themselves.

[The committee witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: We have a few minutes for opening remarks. Who would like to start? Kelliann Dean.

KELLIANN DEAN: Good morning. Thank you very much for having us here at the Standing Committee on Human Resources to speak about foreign-certified professionals finding employment in their fields. You have met our witnesses, so I won't reintroduce them. We appreciate the opportunity to discuss our work and how our processes support foreign-certified professionals who come to Nova Scotia.

To begin, I would like to share our approach to immigration in a Nova Scotia context. Our communities have demographic and labour market shortages with aging populations and shrinking workforces. We know that immigration plays an important role in addressing these challenges. It increases our population, fills labour market needs, and sustains and grows our population. Last year, almost 6,000 immigrants arrived in Nova Scotia, and we are on track to surpass that in 2019. Since 2015, we have nominated over 2,400 foreign-certified professionals, including financial auditors and accountants, continuing care assistants, early childhood educators, and nurses.

We are seeing the positive impact that immigration is having on Nova Scotia. Our population is growing and getting younger because of immigration. The influx of young families and professionals is helping to keep our communities vibrant, our businesses strong, and it is helping to offset our aging demographic.

This doesn't happen by accident. Our approach to immigration is planned, it's supported, and it's invested in. We share responsibility for immigration with the federal government. The federal government approves all admissions to Canada and determines the number of immigrants to the province each year.

The key to our success is in consistently meeting and exceeding our annual spaces and our innovation in recruiting the workers we need. In 2013, Nova Scotia was allocated 600 spaces. Five years later in 2018, our allocation had increased to 2,272 spaces. We focus on maximizing every opportunity to bring in newcomers, including working with the federal government for increases in our allocations.

Most immigrants to Nova Scotia are economic class immigrants who come through our Provincial Nominee Program or the Atlantic Immigration Pilot. We have labour needs in specified certified professions, and we work with the licensing bodies and other partners when looking to address these.

A great example of this is our Labour Market Priorities Stream. We designed the Labour Market Priorities Stream to be adaptable to Nova Scotia's complex and ever-changing labour market needs. Under this stream, our office invites qualified candidates in the federal express entry system to come to Nova Scotia based on the priority identified. It's a flexible and responsive program allowing us to work directly with employers and licensing bodies, so selections are matched to registration and licensure processes where they exist.

Last year, Education and Early Childhood Development identified a need for more early childhood educators to expand the pre-Primary program across the province. We responded by inviting qualified early childhood educators to apply to Nova Scotia through the Labour Market Priorities Stream. Approximately 160 early childhood educators have immigrated to Nova Scotia through our programs in just over a year, more than in the last four years combined.

The selection of candidates with the right skills and education is important, but we also need to help newcomers to settle permanently. Under the Atlantic Immigration Pilot, we are testing a new settlement and retention model. Each endorsed candidate must have a needs assessment and settlement plan for themselves and their family for when they arrive. This built-in settlement approach brings employers into the settlement conversation to ensure wraparound supports for newcomers.

Since the launch of the Atlantic Immigration Pilot in 2017, we've endorsed nearly 200 job offers in certified professions, including nurses, engineers, and accountants. We also partner with settlement service providers like ISANS to support the settlement, adaptation, and integration of workers who come to Nova Scotia.

Research shows that these programs can be crucial to the success of foreign certified professionals. Right now, we fund a network of 15 service providers that deliver settlement and immigration supports to immigrants across the province. This year we are investing \$6.4 million for newcomer services for programs such as pre-arrival education services, language assessment and training, bridging programs, employment-related services, and Community Connections.

One program, Pathway to Success, is demonstrating remarkable results. It's funded by our office and offered through the Nova Scotia College of Nursing and the Nova Scotia Community College. It helps internationally educated nurses prepare to take national nursing exams to become licensed practical nurses.

Stephen Condenuovo is one of them. Stephen immigrated to Nova Scotia from the Philippines where he was educated as a registered nurse. Stephen completed the Pathway to Success program and successfully passed the national exams on his first attempt to become a licensed practical nurse. Since then, he has been licensed as a registered nurse and is currently completing a Master of Nursing at Dalhousie. Stephen credits the Pathway to Success program as his first stepping stone to achieve his dreams of working and integrating in Canadian society.

We know that integration is key to retention, and we are always working to help ensure candidates will be successful in Nova Scotia. Our retention rate is holding steady, even with the increasing numbers - about 71 per cent, which is the highest in Atlantic Canada.

Nova Scotia is competing with countries around the world and with other provinces to attract and retain skilled and educated workers and their families. We all have a role to play. Our strength and advantage is collaboration with partners in helping to recruit and retain immigrants. From the employers using our programs to hire international workers to the Nova Scotians who welcome families into their communities, immigration is a key tool to strengthen the economic and social fabric of our province, and our office is here to help immigrants and employers find their way.

I look forward to the discussion, and I'll now pass the microphone over to my colleague from Labour and Advanced Education.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Czapalay.

AVA CZAPALAY: Thank you. Good morning, Mr. Chair and committee members. I'm very happy to contribute to today's discussion and to share what our department is doing to support foreign certified professionals finding employment in their fields.

Nova Scotia is a welcoming province. Many people immigrate here largely because of our sense of community. That's also what helps them decide to stay. My own grandparents immigrated through Pier 21 over 100 years ago, and they moved here to create a better life for themselves and for their children and grandchildren. They were proud Canadians for 60-plus years.

As Deputy Dean mentioned just now, over 6,000 immigrants have arrived in Nova Scotia in the past year and from Yarmouth to Sydney, our communities are welcoming more and more newcomers every year. Immigration has a positive impact on our province.

It diversifies our communities, grows our economy, and expands our way of thinking. Our workforce should be reflective of our communities.

With our partners, we're working to ensure the province's workforce is inclusive and welcoming for newcomers so that they can not only live here but thrive here. We work collaboratively with provincial regulatory bodies, immigrant-serving organizations, and educational and training institutions to deliver programs and supports to newcomers.

At Labour and Advanced Education, we fund many bridging programs and support international qualification recognition for different fields to help remove barriers to certification and to connect these individuals to careers in our province. I will highlight a few of these programs now.

The Internationally Educated Engineers Bridging Program helps remove barriers to licensure by providing individuals from this field with relevant Canadian work experience and support. The Internationally Educated Health Care Professionals bridging program focuses on the pathway to licensure for pharmacists, dentists, and nurses. The Financial Services Bridging Program provides access to educational supports, technical and communication skills, and job-readiness workshops.

These bridging programs are working. In 2017, ISANS conducted a study to measure the outcomes of internationally trained individuals who had participated in bridging programs between 2012 and 2017. Between 68 per cent and 82 per cent internationally educated engineers and health care professional participants were employed in their field in 2017. The Financial Services Bridging Program was launched only one year before the study, but already showed 101 of 250-plus participants having secured employment in their field.

In addition, past rates for internationally educated dentists and pharmacy bridging program participants on licensure exams were well above the national pass rates: 60 per cent and 68 per cent of internationally educated dentists and pharmacists were licensed. Of internationally educated engineers pursuing licensure, 64 per cent had become successfully licensed as professional engineers.

ISANS does a great job in supporting immigrants as they build a future here in Nova Scotia. LAE's Employment Nova Scotia division provides funding to support ISANS in providing Employment Support Services including employment counselling, job search, mentorship, and more. Government, with our partners, is focused on advancing our efforts to attract and retain people in Nova Scotia, to help them set down roots here, grow their families here, and to make sure immigrants have access to quality education and employment.

Our department has many programs and policies that help connect members from under-represented groups, including new Nova Scotians, to our workforce. I will touch briefly on a few of these initiatives.

Graduate to Opportunity and Innovate to Opportunity help young people land meaningful careers in their field. Since Graduate to Opportunity launched, Nova Scotia businesses have created full-time opportunities for over 1,000 new graduates here in the province. Both programs' diversity bonuses have already supported more than 275 young, diverse graduates in landing good, well-paying jobs in their chosen field. About 120 international student graduates have taken advantage of both the ITO and GTO programs.

[10:15 a.m.]

The Study and Stay program supports international post-secondary students to do just that: study and stay here in Nova Scotia. Students are provided with the essential connections, resources, and mentorship that they need to transition from student to professional. To date, three cohorts have completed the Study and Stay in Nova Scotia and Atlantic Canada's Study and Stay - Nova Scotia program. Fifty-two students graduated in July, 46 of those graduates are living in Nova Scotia, and 24 have full-time jobs.

Like our province, we know the number one thing that keeps people in Nova Scotia universities is their sense of community. I just want to mention here that Dalhousie retained a national firm called Academica to do a study on Dalhousie student retention, why they stayed at Dalhousie. The number one reason for them staying at the university was this sense of community. They found that students who were on sports teams and students who lived in residence or students who participated in a club or activity or student government were more likely to persist with their university education.

There are currently about 43,000 students in Nova Scotia universities: 48 per cent of those are Nova Scotians, and 52 per cent come from out of province. Of these, 38 per cent, or about 8,500, are international students from about 120 different countries. International students are a potential source of immigrants, as many do want to stay here, and they will stay here with support and encouragement.

The Connector Program, which we presented to this committee previously, helps to attract and retain the valuable talent our province is known for. Through this program, about 3,100 new and young Nova Scotians in the Halifax area have been connected with local businesses and organizations. Of those, more than 1,300 participants have already been matched with jobs. Others, through entrepreneurship, training, and supports, are finding and creating new opportunities for themselves in Nova Scotia. We know new grads and new Nova Scotians in our communities have the skills and the determination to succeed here, and Labour and Advanced Education is here to support them.

We recognize the importance of opening our communities, our homes, our schools and post-secondary institutions, and our businesses to new Nova Scotians. We strive to ensure that our pathways are barrier-free so immigrants can connect to jobs in Nova Scotia in the field they're trained in. Increasing our population, as Deputy Dean said, is key to growing our economy. That's why immigrants are needed to be attracted and retained in Nova Scotia through efforts to attach them to work.

With that, we would be pleased to take your questions.

THE CHAIR: We'll start with Ms. Martin.

TAMMY MARTIN: Thank you very much for your presentation. I'm wondering if anyone could explain or talk about doctors who would be living in Nova Scotia but aren't practising doctors because their credentials aren't recognized.

NANCY HODDINOTT: In Nova Scotia, we have regulatory bodies that are governed under legislation through departments that define the Acts and legislation for those regulatory bodies. Also, at Labour and Advanced Education, we have the labour mobility coordinator, and we oversee the Fair Registration Practices Act, which ensures that all of those regulatory bodies are established to ensure that individuals who are licensed and certified to practise in this province meet the requirements established by those regulatory bodies.

For any regulated profession, when they come into and apply to work in Nova Scotia, they have to make connections with the regulatory body, and then that regulatory body needs to assess their credentials and ensure that the credentials and the training that they have received equate to the standards and guidelines of credentials required to practise in Nova Scotia. There is a bit of a timeline for that. There has been some progress nationally around physicians applying to come into Canada and having some of that assessment done at a national level. Then if there's agreement, that information is sent to the provincial regulatory bodies. Then those regulatory bodies sort of take ownership for ensuring that those qualifications are reviewed, and if there is an alignment and they meet the qualifications, they are granted a licence and certification to practise.

TAMMY MARTIN: Do we have any idea of how many, though, are currently living in the province or who came to Nova Scotia with the hopes of practising medicine but, for some reason, haven't fulfilled the regulatory requirements?

NANCY HODDINOTT: I wouldn't have the numbers on that. What we do monitor every year as a requirement for these regulatory bodies is to provide us with data on the number of applicants, where the applicants are applying from - so their country or province of origin - and then to give some data around how many of these individuals have actually been certified to practise in the province, how many are pending, and what has been the timeline required to get to that registration and certification.

If there's something specific around physicians, we could sort of look into that and perhaps get back to you. Our understanding is regulatory bodies have made progress in the past number of years in sort of reducing those timelines, and there are certainly processes in place like our bridging programs and some of the work that we're doing with ISANS that help with some of those pieces.

We also know what the barriers are for internationally certified applicants and the top two barriers are firstly, language, and secondly, their ability to actually provide the documentation required for the certification and then that assessment of the piece. Those are the first two issues, I guess, that individuals have identified in terms of taking a little bit longer or not receiving their certification.

If an individual does apply to be certified and they are denied, the regulatory body is required to provide them with a reason for that denial and the options for appeal. They're given the process that you would follow to appeal that decision as well as to identify where the deficiencies are in the application and some opportunity in terms of where you might go to get some support to address that. That's a requirement that we monitor with the regulatory bodies, as well.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Atallah, did you want to speak?

NABIHA ATALLAH: ISANS provides a bridging program for internationally educated physicians funded by the provincial government. We provide, specifically, a number of services. We have practice exams for them because one of the exams that physicians have to go through is with simulated patients to actually simulate a visit in a medical setting. This is very culturally specific, so it's really helpful for physicians from other cultures to practise that.

With a lot of support from volunteers at Dalhousie, we have a program where they can prepare for these exams. They're doing very well in passing these exams first shot. In fact, in Nova Scotia last year, 100 per cent of our clients who took that program passed their exam first shot compared with an average of 46 per cent across Canada. That's very encouraging.

We also provide study groups where they can have peer support. These are live-streamed across Nova Scotia so people from across the province can access that. We do have communication for health care professionals. It's more than English; it's the appropriate language and the way of addressing patients, colleagues, et cetera, and dealing with language in the workplace in the medical field.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Latin?

NABIHA ATALLAH: That they know. That, they tend to know.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Lohr.

JOHN LOHR: One of the things that you said, Associate Deputy Minister Czapalay, was about your family. My parents came to Canada in 1958 from Holland, and it was very definitely the result of government programs, actually, at the time in cooperation between the Governments of Holland and Canada. So, government programs do work and do have a lasting impact.

My question is about very newsworthy cases of people who are doctors, who are working at Home Depot in the province. How do we take those international qualified people and bring them here and help them through this process? When I was looking at the website for LAE, I noticed that you have the Recognition of Prior Learning - RPL - program and the International Qualification Recognition Funding Program, which appear to be directly targeted at - not at individuals, but those programs are for sectors.

I'm just wondering, are they being picked up by, for instance, the College of Physicians and Surgeons? Are they taking advantage of these programs and are these programs working for these sectors? Maybe just tell me how they're doing and what's happening with them.

NANCY HODDINOTT: The programs that you mentioned are the initiatives that we are really focused on through LAE through Skills and Learning. We actually partner with a number of organizations like ISANS to ensure that those programs are in place.

Your initial comment around individuals in this province who are not practising in the field that they've been trained in in other countries, I will just add that the purpose of establishing these regulatory bodies in this province is in the interest of public health and safety. It's to ensure that individuals who are coming into Nova Scotia meet that standard of training and certification that we require in order for them to be practising in their fields. They take that work very seriously. That's the purpose of the regulatory bodies. We are only one of four provinces that have the Fair Registration Practices Act that ensures those regulatory bodies are objective, fair, transparent, and that they're doing the work they are required to do in this province. They are serving individuals as well as Nova Scotians as best they can.

Some of the things you mentioned in terms of - if we think about the barriers to individuals coming in and being certified - when those things are recognized that people are attempting to come here and work in their fields, we do a lot of work within sectors and we do a lot of work with partners like ISANS. The RPL and bridging programs that you mentioned are actually things that my colleague Nabiha is speaking about.

We have bridging programs and multi-stakeholder working groups in a number of professions - 13 multi-stakeholder working groups and 20 professions that bring together government, the regulatory bodies, people who are practising in that area in this province. They work together to help individuals meet the certification requirements, ensure they pass the exams and things that are required, and then actually help them find employment. We know that those working groups are working because you did an evaluation a couple of years ago. Individuals who are looking to be certified and to participate in those programs actually have much greater success coming to Nova Scotia, getting certified, and actually finding work in their fields in this province.

JOHN LOHR: I appreciate the answer. My question is, are those programs being picked up by the College of Physicians and Surgeons, and are they being employed to help doctors specifically?

NANCY HODDINOTT: We and the college work closely with the Department of Health and Wellness on these pieces. The multi-stakeholder working groups and those bridging programs are required to have the college participating in them. They're one of the active participants in those, so yes, they're very actively engaged - with a number of others, whether it's the universities or it's professionals who are internationally trained who actually come and sit around those tables as well, to support other people who are looking to do that same thing.

THE CHAIR: Ms. DiCostanzo.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I don't know where to start about my excitement because I have been following immigration for the last 20 years. The difference that I have seen and noticed in the last seven or eight years is incredible. It's really obvious in my riding. I make a point, whether it is the barbecue at the Park West School or any event that's happening, I meet so many new immigrants - very highly educated and they're all working. The first things I ask, what program did you come under, how long did it take you to get here, and how happy are you with things?

Honestly, I truly have seen an incredible difference in the answers that I get now from 10 to 15 years ago. The whole immigration system, how it has changed, targeting what is needed has helped not only our province, but the new immigrants. That is the biggest thing we have done, and we have done it so well. I speak so highly about our immigration and how well we do it here. Especially in the last few years, it would hurt me so much to have accepted so many, and they would move to other provinces or move out. That was so hard for me. I don't see that anymore. It is so refreshing and so wonderful. We're bringing the best of the best from so many countries. That is going to enrich our society beyond, truly.

[10:30 a.m.]

One of the main programs that I just heard about recently is the pharmacy, and there is a pharmacist from Shoppers Drug Mart on the board of my riding. She is doing a lot of that training. I want to know how we came up with that. To me, the best trainers are the ones who are immigrants themselves because they know what the education on the other side is like and here, and they become the link in comparing. It's not the knowledge of the study. It's the culture and the system. Our system is different than the system in their country and where they study. There's nobody better to educate them on the differences than somebody who has done it on both sides. I commend you for that one. If you can just elaborate on how it started and what is happening.

NABIHA ATALLAH: This is a great opportunity to tell you about the multi-stakeholder working groups. This is a model that was developed in Nova Scotia about 15 years ago. At ISANS, we have always been trying to help internationally educated professionals to find their pathway to licensure. What we found back then was that often a professional would go, say, to the university, and then they would go to the professional association, to the regulatory body, and they would get a different answer from each group, which was really discouraging.

Being in Nova Scotia and able to connect with these people, we called together all the stakeholders. For pharmacists it would be the Pharmacy Association, Dalhousie University, some employers who were really interested in hiring immigrants, and some immigrant pharmacists themselves, and we formed the multi-stakeholder group for pharmacy. The first step in every multi-stakeholder group was to have every partner at the table agree on the pathway. They created maps for each profession - when you come in, this is what you need to do to get to licensure. We have 13 of those pathways on our website today. All the stakeholders are in agreement - these are the steps.

Then we look at those steps and ask, are there gaps or barriers? Are some people not able to progress along this pathway? We identified some. In pharmacy, one of the gaps was the exam that I just mentioned. They have a similar exam to physicians where they need to work with a simulated patient. There's so much culture involved in that. What questions can you ask a person? How do you phrase it? We noticed that pharmacists, although they passed the first exam, which is a written exam on pharmacy which they know well, this second one was very difficult for them. We started to do practice sessions, again with a supportive volunteer pharmacist from the association and from Dalhousie School of Pharmacy. That was a big bridge that really helped.

Another thing we recognized was that at the time, pharmacists were required to do two internships - one in the community and one in a hospital pharmacy. While it was easy for them to get the community placement, it was very difficult to get a hospital placement because we have fewer opportunities, fewer hospitals, and the Dal graduates take a lot of those first - they have priority.

This was discussed at the multi-stakeholder table, and the professional association said, we'll take this back and work on it. They returned after a couple of months and said, we have eliminated this requirement because we see that the internationally-educated pharmacists have experience. They generally don't want to work in a hospital. If they want to work in a hospital, they still need to do the internship, but if they want to work in a community pharmacy, they are not required to do that internship anymore. That was another barrier removed, a systemic change.

The internationally educated pharmacists in Nova Scotia who take the bridging programs with these supports are doing very well in passing their exams and in finding employment. That's really a good news story, and there are a lot of good news stories. Unfortunately, the older stories have a stronghold in the community, and we hear more of

what was happening in the past. As Rafah said, more recently there are many good news stories.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: In the same line, I find a lot of the newcomers are business people and they are entrepreneurs and they open businesses, but they have a lot of issues with dealing with employees because our standard is so different. I wish we could have more multicultural people who have learned over the years to be their mentors. We really need to emphasize and bring that because it's not that they don't have the finance or the knowledge; it's just how to deal with their staff or their employees.

That's their biggest issue and they lose money and they lose their reputation, so I'm wondering how we can get the business people to take ownership of this mentorship so that they don't look at them as competitors but for the good of the whole. The more businesses we have, the better for everybody, and we just need to educate them. I don't know if you're doing anything in that.

NANCY HODDINOTT: I can start, but others can join in. We have, through Skills and Learning, lots of supports for individuals looking to be an entrepreneur and open their business. There are also supports that they can receive through sector councils, which is another organization that we fund.

We have one program called the Self Employment Benefit. If somebody's looking to start their own business, and they're currently unemployed, they can apply for funding to get local support around their business development pieces, how they're going to plan those things, and then through the sector councils, if they're engaged in those, there's lots of support available particularly around the HR side of things.

You're saying you have some issues in that particular community; we know we have HR capacity to build in small- and medium-sized enterprises across the province. We focus very intentionally through our Sector Council Program in doing that, so there may be some opportunities there.

We're currently doing an evaluation of our Self Employment Benefit piece. I appreciate your comments, so I will bring that back in terms of if we're looking at those kinds of very specialized and particular services that are provided locally to help newcomers or immigrants who may be looking at opening their own business and what we might be able to do differently in that regard. I thank you for that.

NABIHA ATALLAH: ISANS does have support for immigrant entrepreneurs, and our programs are funded provincially and federally. That is definitely an issue that our clients struggle with, dealing with their employees, and it is something that we cover.

We also have mentorship programs. It's a little bit more challenging to find entrepreneurs to mentor than it is to find professionals to mentor. We have a lot of

professionals who are mentoring people who are on a professional path, but we are working on it.

AVA CZAPALAY: I just have a quick comment on that point. We've found that a lot of our international students come with an entrepreneurial mindset. Through the Sandbox Project and also the Study and Stay program, they're engaging early on with employers while they're still in university and practising those critical skills as they develop their business ideas. We've found that to be quite successful.

THE CHAIR: We'll turn it over to the NDP caucus. Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: My colleague had asked about physicians, and I recognize the role of the college and the multi-stakeholder group. I can't remember if one of the key barriers that you mentioned, Ms. Hoddinott, was documentation; that's the one we've been hearing about lately.

We've been hearing about that in the news, and I think some recent discussions talked about the necessity to get certain institutions to fax certain documents places and just the general sense that the collection of that documentation might be pretty outmoded. Of course, we see that all over the place, it's not confined to this.

I wonder, given the government, LAE, and others' emphasis on cutting red tape and regulatory effectiveness and all those good things, are you looking at that here - and physicians and any of the other shared working groups, but we've been hearing about that piece of collecting documentation and the deep frustration that folks have. Of course we need to verify those credentials, there's no question, but perhaps there could be a more efficient way to do that. I'm wondering if there is any specific work happening there.

NANCY HODDINOTT: We have 49 regulatory bodies in this province, so I can't comment on what each of those individually is doing in that regard. I can tell you that we facilitate discussions with those regulatory bodies on a regular basis. We're also connected across the country with other provinces to really identify the best practices around foreign qualification recognition. There are ongoing attempts to make these processes quicker and a little more seamless.

I don't know if, Shelley, you can comment on one of the biggest things with respect to physicians is the national place where people can all enter through the one portal approach. That is really around assessing some of those initial documentation pieces and filtering that into the provinces.

I can tell you that through our FRPA and through our ongoing conversations with regulatory bodies, those are the things that are coming up. Those are the things that we monitor in terms of time lags from application to licensure, the barriers and those kinds of things. If that's coming up regularly enough for a regulatory body, I can tell you that it's something that they're thinking about and looking to reduce. They want to do well as well.

We publish reviews of these regulatory bodies on an ongoing basis. They're publicly on our FRPA website and they want to be able to say that we are being fair, accessible and transparent. There are requirements to meet to be able to say that. They're in an ongoing improvement mode against that, for sure.

I think one of the other pieces that's happening is, I know that the Department of Health and Wellness is working with the college as well, and the Office of Regulatory Affairs and Service Effectiveness in Nova Scotia, to look at issues like that. Is there some low-hanging fruit that we could be looking at now to reduce that regulatory burden with respect to physicians. There is ongoing conversation with people outside of this table on that as well.

SHELLEY BENT JAMES: The role of immigration is obviously to create a pathway for foreign trained physicians to come here and practise. We know that they're needed and wanted here in the province and certainly in our health care system. Our work with the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia, as well as the Nova Scotia Health Authority, has enabled us to create different pathways that will address the labour shortages that we're seeing in the health care system.

The first piece that a foreign-trained physician does - as Nancy had indicated - is they have to upload all of their information to Physician Supply, which is the federal body. Then they are reviewed by the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, and then that information is translated to the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia. After they receive the eligibility for licensure, they then look for an opportunity with the Health Authority. Finally, immigration is the last step in that continuum.

We do know the first step is obviously getting the approval at the federal level. It is different, depending on whether they're general practitioners or specialists. So when we are recruiting, we target areas where there is a reciprocity agreement currently between the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia with - there are five jurisdictions in the world where their credentials are recognized. Particularly if they're general practitioners and have practised for more than five years, they're able to achieve licensure quite quickly here, but the first step is always through the regulatory bodies for licensing.

THE CHAIR: We'll move on to Mr. Harrison in the PC caucus.

LARRY HARRISON: It's good to hear the information because you do hear the bad stories of a physician that's maybe driving a taxi or whatever. You hear those - you know as well.

My question is, I think we have an open-door policy as far as immigration is concerned in this province, which is a great thing. We need as many people here as we can get. At the door, do we have people who are wanting on their initiative to come in - what percentage would that be - as opposed to those we seek, that come into the province to do certain tasks. What would be the percentage of that?

SHELLEY BENT JAMES: I'm not sure that I understand your question.

LARRY HARRISON: There's a door to come into Nova Scotia. At that door, do we have people who have taken the initiative to want to come in through that door into this province? I'm assuming we also had people who maybe we have sought to come in. What would be the percentage of the two?

SHELLEY BENT JAMES: We receive an allocation from the federal government every year. To the open-door policy, it is dependent on the number we receive from the federal government. This year through our Provincial Nominee Program, our number is 1,350. Through the Atlantic Immigration Pilot, we receive an additional allocation which was originally 1,046 and was then increased to 1,173 - I had to do the math quickly in my head.

A number of those candidates who would be using either pathway are connected directly with an employer, so they're actually filling a labour market gap and are coming in and they're being employed in the province.

There are probably hundreds of thousands of individuals around the world who are interested in coming to Nova Scotia, coming to Canada. We do our best to ensure that we are selecting those who have the highest chance of being successful here in the province - finding employment and working in their chosen field.

We're doing really well. We are one of the leaders in having individuals work in their chosen field when they arrive in Nova Scotia. Also the wage gap between Nova Scotians and foreign nationals coming in and working in their field is the lowest in Canada here in Nova Scotia.

We're doing well. There's always more that we can be doing, so we are very strategic in the selection of individuals coming into the province who are not connected to an employer, but that is always based on what is needed in our labour market, what employers are saying, and how successful they would be here.

LARRY HARRISON: Let's take the doctors, for instance. We need doctors. Does the Department of Immigration now go out and seek doctors in a similar culture with similar standards to bring in?

KELLIANN DEAN: I'll start this one. Over the past year or so - I've been with the portfolio now for six months. I'm learning a lot in this meeting as well. What I do know in terms of the activities of the Department of Immigration is that we are very proactive, and we work collaboratively with the Health Authority and the IWK when we are recruiting.

We base our recruitment efforts on the markets or jurisdictions where we think we have the closest alignments. Shelley talked about reciprocity agreements that we have between certain countries: the U.K., Ireland, Australia. We haven't been to Australia yet,

but we do spend a lot of our time in the U.K where there is a real reciprocity agreement and a real willingness of those doctors to come to Nova Scotia.

We're trying to make sure that we're focused on areas where we have the greatest likelihood of success in attracting them to Nova Scotia. It's a collaborative effort so we make sure we are in close contact with the Health Authority, the colleges, and LAE in those efforts. As a result, we've seen 48 physicians come in just the last year or so to Nova Scotia as a result of some of these efforts collectively.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: I want to thank all of you for the work that you do. Certainly, I think times have changed in Nova Scotia with respect to immigration, thanks to the work of all of you and Nova Scotians opening their doors to immigration.

My first question - and it might be for Ms. James or Ms. Dean - is the increase in our allocation from 600 to 2,276, and I think you gave me some different numbers moments ago. That has been significant. I think the Atlantic Immigration Pilot has been part of that. I was at the announcement, I think it was in Wolfville, if I've got the right announcement in my head.

It was driven by the four Premiers, and MP Brison at the time, to put a real focus on immigration but again, the allocation is controlled by the federal government and I'm just wondering if you can give us a sense of what they look for. What drives them to say this year, it's this number; next year, it's the next number. Do we have insights into that and are we positioning ourselves for continuing to ramp those numbers up?

KELLIANN DEAN: I'll start to answer your question. Yes, you're right - our allocation is given on an annual basis by the federal government. They set a number for the entire country and then they divide it among the provinces and territories.

There are historic allocations that have come into play and some of those levels were higher than what we would have seen in our province. As you indicated, our goal is to continue to maximize the numbers we have and to grow those numbers. We believe we can certainly do more and we have raised that with the federal government, as well, to say that based on our track record and the success that we've seen - particularly in the past five years - we think that our capacity to attract and retain has been growing.

The numbers that we talked about earlier, just a couple of clarifications, our allocation in 2018 was 2,272. That's combined - the Nova Scotia Nominee Program as well as the Atlantic Immigration Pilot program that you spoke about - so there's a set allocation there. We have been able to max that out and then attract additional numbers from other provinces.

What can also happen during a year is if the provinces don't use all of their allocations, other provinces that could use them sometimes are able to receive them. In 2018, as an example, we got an additional 50 in our Nominee Program and an additional 80 in the Atlantic Immigration program. Every year there's an ability, sometimes, to benefit from other provinces who may not have been able to use their full allocations.

Based on the fact that we have been over the past several years, we're very hopeful that the federal government will continue to allocate increases to us and we look forward to hearing what that might look like for 2020. Those numbers are set on an annual basis.

KEITH IRVING: Great, thank you. I don't know who to send my next question to amongst the panel here. It's probably someone with the most senior experience, I guess, with respect to immigration in the province.

I've sensed that, in my 14 years in Nova Scotia since returning, there's a change in how Nova Scotia is welcoming immigrants. Although I still think there is a narrative that continues to percolate in some parts of Nova Scotia - not so much in my area, I think, which is affected by the acceptance of foreign workers from Jamaica and Mexico - but I do think there continues to be a bit of a narrative out there percolating that immigrants are taking jobs away from Nova Scotians.

I think we're dispelling that, but I just wondered if someone could confirm my view from outside of the system, I guess, that things have changed over the last number of years, how they've changed, where the room for improvement is, and how do we work together with Nova Scotians to make sure those welcoming doors open wider and wider throughout the total province.

THE CHAIR: Who would like to take that? Ms. Dean.

KELLIANN DEAN: Maybe what I'll do is just start. I'll set the stage with some research that we've done recently that speaks to your point. Interestingly, we did some quarterly polling last Winter, and 82 per cent of Nova Scotians who responded believe immigration is important to the provincial economy. That's very strong support for immigration, which is another factor in getting the federal government to increase our allocations because we know that we have a welcome and receptive community here.

Also, 72 per cent believe that immigrants increase the number of jobs and strengthen the economy. Your perception is bang on, and Nova Scotians are seeing and feeling that and expressing that now. That's a 20 per cent increase over 2013, when that number was 52 per cent. There has been a shift.

It's interesting to note some of the economic research that we did which shows that there's no major gap in employment rate between permanent residents and the general population in Nova Scotia, so the new immigrants. According to the 2016 census, 55.6 per cent of immigrants were employed compared to 55.5 per cent in Nova Scotia overall. It

isn't that perception that they're taking jobs. That's not it at all. That doesn't bear out in the research. We've also said that the average earnings of immigrants is higher compared to the provincial average, slightly higher - 48.8 versus 43.8 - and that the rate of self-employment among immigrants is significantly higher than the provincial average. They are creating jobs, and they're contributing meaningfully to employment in Nova Scotia.

The other point that we've found through our research is that immigrants tend to receive lower amounts of government transfers and social benefits than average for the general population in the same age group. An evaluation of our Provincial Nominee Program in 2016 showed that most nominees are employed now, 88 per cent, which is very high, with the same employer and are staying in Nova Scotia, at 74 per cent.

Setting the stage, some of the research is showing that there has been a shift, that there is greater success in terms of immigrants landing. Our retention is strong. It's 71 per cent. That speaks volumes. They're coming, and they are staying in Nova Scotia, which is what we want.

AVA CZAPALAY: I'll speak about the secondary and post-secondary experience of international students. Many of you will know that in communities throughout Nova Scotia, we're welcoming high school students from other countries to study. Those students are being embraced by the communities, and they are generally home stayed. They're deliberately selecting Nova Scotia because they're home stayed, and they have those wraparound supports of a family but also an entire community. We hear stories about students from warm countries coming here and joining a hockey team, for instance. Their classmates are embracing them, and they're having a very, very positive experience. The Nova Scotia International Student Program coordinates those students, so we have about 1,200 a year in our secondary system.

Then we have, as I mentioned, about 8,500 international students in our universities throughout Nova Scotia. Those students, as well, are very engaged in their communities and also on their campuses. Many of them are seeking part-time jobs. Many of them are expressing a willingness to work during times when employers have found it's difficult to find workers: early mornings, on the weekends, that kind of thing. They're also engaging in volunteer activities. We're aware of an organization based at Saint Mary's that has over 1,000 international students from all metro universities engaging in volunteer activities just to understand the culture of living in Nova Scotia.

I think these young people are setting an example and paving the way for how they can adjust to living in Nova Scotia while holding close their own cultural beliefs.

I just wanted to mention that, and then my colleague Ms. Hoddinott will talk about the employer side of things.

NANCY HODDINOTT: We do a lot of work with sector councils, which are large groups of employers and industry across the province, as well as some individual training. We have online training and resources for employers in lots of areas around HR.

[11:00 a.m.]

What we're seeing through the sector councils and what we're seeing in terms of programming uptake is an absolute wanting from employers to ensure that their workplaces look different and feel different, and what they need to change so that they have an inclusive workplace where anybody who comes in can feel safe and feel good about the work that they're doing. We do a lot of work in that regard with employers.

One of the sectors I'll mention specifically is the trucking sector which has done incredible work over the last couple of years. If you're in Truro somewhere and want to drop into the Trucking Human Resource Sector Council, they're doing phenomenal work. You hear from employers that they actually give out diversity and inclusion awards to their employers every year. They're recognizing people who are doing incredible work in this area.

We've had employers that access our programs for wage subsidy support, for example, to bring in a new worker. A few months in, they'll come back and say we're done with the wage subsidy because this person's staying. We want them to stay and we're going to bump their salary up to whatever level we think they're absolutely needing to work at this different level. They're coming in and they're staying with us.

They've done huge work around the province just bringing employers together to talk about what it actually takes to have a workplace where anybody and everyone can come in and feel good about the work that they're doing. From an employer perspective, I think it's an area that many employers are very actively engaged in. Others are wanting to be more proactive in that regard and are seeking out lots of training and supports in that arena.

Employees are actually reporting, I think, through all the programs that we do. We were here a few months ago talking about new opportunities for work. The big thing that came out of that from employers was: Thank you so much for the training you provided before people actually came to our workplace. It was just good to bring our management teams together to talk about this and to think about the environment we want people to land in on the first day and what's the environment we want them to experience over the longer term.

Lots of work and lots of interest in that regard and I think workplaces are shifting all the time.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Martin.

TAMMY MARTIN: Everything that I'm hearing is very positive. Unfortunately, we're not seeing that in Cape Breton and being my focus, Cape Breton is in serious decline. I've introduced a bill to try to help Cape Breton; to have a pilot project to have government supported services to encourage - and I forget the number now - 500 or 1,000 immigrants to come to Cape Breton and to be provided the support and the opportunities.

A group in Cape Breton - New Dawn Enterprises - did a study saying that in order for us to continue to survive, we need X number of immigrants per year. I don't see that support. I don't see government investing and encouraging these resources in Cape Breton.

KELLIANN DEAN: Thanks very much for that. I appreciate it is difficult and I know, as well, from the viability study that was done recently that that highlighted an acute issue with respect to people leaving Cape Breton and the shrinking population. I appreciate that there are challenges there.

One of the things that we've tried to do collectively with LAE, ACOA, ourselves, and the Department of Immigration is do a study to take a look exactly at where some of the gaps are and where some of the areas might be that we could continue to focus and be more targeted, so that we can help identify areas where immigration potentially could help fill some gaps.

We know that there continues to be shortages in the areas of construction and physicians, and some of the certified professions that we were talking about today. The efforts that have been undertaken to recruit are for the whole province, but I recognize again that sometimes trying to get people to stick in the community takes a whole of community approach.

There are some fabulous supports in Cape Breton. We were there recently and met with some of the settlement workers with New Dawn, YREACH, as an example and the work that we are doing right now to identify some of the gaps and shortages will help us further target our efforts. I think when we're able to see specifically where employers are lacking workers, we can then respond. We can open some of the streams that we have. We can recruit very specifically for some of those streams.

What I'd also say is that we've been working really closely with the Cape Breton Partnership and they've been aligned on the Atlantic Immigration Pilot. One of the things that we have seen with the Atlantic Immigration Pilot is that there is a growing number of designated employers in Cape Breton as a result of that, so I think that's helping to boost interest. I'm not going to say it's making up for the total shortage, but some of those efforts are having an impact and they are going to take time, for sure, but we're certainly committed to doing what we can to really focus on the specific needs in Cape Breton because we recognize that there is an issue there.

AVA CZAPALAY: We had spoken about the international students at Cape Breton University and their rapid increase in international students, particularly from India, has

been in the headlines and the media. Also, you just have to go into the community and it's very obvious that something has changed in Sydney.

When I was last before this committee, Ms. Martin asked me about busing. Since then, the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage has provided the metro transit for the area with funding to address that situation and also provide a new bus shelter for CBU. Something as simple as transportation is a big barrier for new immigrants and for international students who want to get to their work and so on.

I have a graphic image in my mind of a photo that the vice president of Cape Breton University sent to me on the first day of class and the subject was: We need a bus shelter. The photo was maybe 300 students waiting for a single bus on the lawn of Cape Breton University. It was a very compelling message. It said more than 1,000 words.

When I met with quite a number of international students, and also the head of the Student Union who is from India, I was struck by a couple of things. One is that the international students, to a student, indicated that they love Cape Breton and want to stay in Cape Breton. They don't have starry eyes for Toronto. They want to stay and the key for them being able to stay is finding a job opportunity.

They're predominantly registered in business, IT and health-related studies at Cape Breton University, so those are the fields that they're looking for. They would be access-ready for labour if jobs were available to them because they have the language requirement. They're adapting very quickly to cultural opportunities here in Nova Scotia, in Cape Breton. They often have families back home who also want to come. They come with skills already.

I'd just say that's on our radar and Ms. Dean, Shelley, a number of others and I went to CBU and had a meeting with them to talk about their international student cohort and what that might mean to Nova Scotia.

NABIHA ATALLAH: I'll just add a couple of small examples of some positive steps. One of the streams through which international medical graduates can find work in their field is called the position of clinician assistant - somebody who is a physician, recognized, has passed their exams can work under supervision. They can't work independently, but they can work under supervision. Traditionally, it has only been available within the HRM, but recently that has been expanded and there are two international medical grads working in psychiatry in Cape Breton just recently this year. That's a really promising model for the physicians to have that now available for specialties and outside HRM.

ISANS is also in discussion with partners in Cape Breton, specifically around the regulated occupations to find new ways to offer support in Cape Breton. We're discussing possible programs with New Dawn, YREACH and other partners in Cape Breton.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Lohr.

JOHN LOHR: I have a question about the Atlantic Immigration Pilot also. Every time I look at the list, it seems like there are more companies there. I think the first time I looked at that list maybe a year ago, there were five or six pages, and now I think there's more than 1,000 companies listed on that list.

When I look at it, I think every one of those companies is looking for more than one worker, and I'm sure that there's a combination of skilled and unskilled workers needed to fill all the different jobs those companies would represent. I'm just wondering if you have some sort of estimate of how many workers all those companies are looking for, and what is the breakdown of skilled versus unskilled or do you have that information?

SHELLEY BENT JAMES: Thank you for your question. You are correct that the list is quite long, so as of December 3rd, we have 1,126 employers that are designated in Nova Scotia.

The other point I'd like to make is that it's a really nice mix between urban and rural. About 40 per cent of employers outside of HRM have signed on to be designated employers. To become a designated employer doesn't necessarily mean that you have a labour market gap, though. We have many employers who are champions for immigration in their particular community and have signed on to be just that: the champion for immigration. They've had a great experience in using immigration to bring in a skilled worker, whether it was through one of our pathways or using one of the federal pathways.

I will say that based on what an employer indicates in their application for designation, it is a mix between high skilled and intermediate skilled. One point I wanted to make to Ms. Martin, as well, is that the International Graduate Stream under the Atlantic Immigration Pilot has been extremely successful for us, because it actually eliminates the need for one year of work experience related to the occupation.

It opens the door for many employers in the province to hire international graduates who have studied here - they're familiar with the province, they understand the climate - so they know exactly what they're signing on for if they choose to remain here permanently. It is a very nice mix between high and intermediate skilled; in fact, we are endorsing more high-skilled candidates than we are of intermediate for the International Graduate Stream.

In terms of how many have been indicated, I don't have the number right now. We could certainly get it for you, but it's always an estimate. There are employers who became designated because they needed that one unicorn person who had the niche skill set that they required for their business and had such a great experience in using AIP that they have actually hired more individuals. Their application estimate may have been for one and they've actually hired three to five, for example. It would be a bit challenging to give the exact number, but we can certainly provide that later.

JOHN LOHR: I guess I was looking for just a rough estimate. I know maybe you're not ready to give that, but my guess is there's a significant pent-up demand here. The true number would be 4,000 or 5,000 workers needed out of those 1,000 companies listed. I'm just wondering, would you agree that there's a multiple of the actual number of companies?

SHELLEY BENT JAMES: I would say that there is probably more than one that has been with every employer who has been designated. I will also say that, as I mentioned earlier, allocation under the Atlantic Immigration Pilot this year is 1,173. We are actually at our 1,173 and have raised our hand for some extras if they're floating around in the region.

We also have quite an inventory to support us very well into next year. While there was a bit of growth that needed to happen within the province in terms of educating employers around the benefit of immigration, what we are seeing is a lot of interest. As you pointed out, many employers are now turning to immigration to fill those labour market gaps which, as the deputy pointed out, positions us well to have those discussions with the federal government.

So there's a lot of interest, and more than one application has been coming in from employers.

THE CHAIR: Ms. DiCostanzo.

[11:15 a.m.]

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: This has been really interesting. I had a question in regard to refugees. In my mind, refugees are a federal jurisdiction, in who comes and the numbers. Can you give us an idea of how many - in my mind, it's about 15 to 20 per cent refugees and the rest are coming all the other. I could be totally wrong, so please correct me. How have the refugee numbers been in the last five to six years?

We do it for humanitarian reasons and I love Canada for that, but a lot of them are also highly skilled. How are you adding those numbers and are these numbers included in the other highly skilled workforce and what are you doing to increase that? It's an amazing collaboration, I'm hoping.

SHELLEY BENT JAMES: As you pointed out, refugees are actually under one of the federal pathways. Last year in 2018 - and again, everything is based on numbers from the federal government - our allocation was 380. Obviously, when we look back to 2015 with the Syrian refugee initiative, we welcomed 1,500. Our numbers for that year were quite a bit higher, but the federal levels plan does indicate growth in the refugee pathway program.

The one point you mentioned around refugees having high skills - Nova Scotia is participating in a pilot program with the federal government around economic pathways.

It's the Economic Mobility Pathways project. It is for employers in the province to look at hiring skilled refugees. They would come through traditional economic pathway programs, but it's just an extra cohort of individuals that an employer has to look at. We have an employer in the province who is extremely engaged and has made five job offers at this point to refugees coming out of Africa. It's through the work with the federal government and Talent Beyond Boundaries.

So there are a lot of initiatives that are happening to recognize the skills that refugees bring and while they may be refugees, it's certainly through no fault of their own and they still have skills that are needed in the province. So we're trying to find ways to bring them here.

NABIHA ATALLAH: ISANS works with all the government-assisted refugees to Nova Scotia and we're also a sponsorship agreement holder for private sponsorship - one of about seven or eight in the province. A lot of the increase in the federal plan is in privately sponsored refugees. We are hoping that we will see groups and individuals stepping up. We are always limited by the allocations because there are actually a lot of refugees who settled and are integrated in Nova Scotia who want to privately sponsor people they know. The private sponsorship agreement holders don't have enough allocations to meet all of those requests and demands.

In fact, this is one example of how immigrants - because refugees are immigrants, and as Ms. James mentioned, the only difference is that they were forced to leave their country - how immigrants add to our capacity. Further to what Mr. Irving was saying, I think that's part of the message that has been changing gradually - that it's not a finite pie and we each get a smaller piece if there are more people. Immigrants help make that pie bigger. That's the message that I think is starting to take root in Nova Scotia.

We see a lot of the refugee clients have a great number of skills and even those who don't have high levels of education, many of them are skilled in the trades, for example. Many of the Syrian families who came in, we had many people skilled in auto mechanics, cooking and construction, and we were able to match some of them to employment. Language has been a barrier with that particular group and people still need to work on their English for those areas, but I think that the large number of refugees that came at once actually was great for public awareness and for an opportunity for Nova Scotians to demonstrate their welcome. I think it was a big step for our province in becoming more welcoming, showing how welcoming we are, and it opened up a lot of opportunities.

THE CHAIR: We're going to keep it down to one question. We're going to do one last round.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: Do I get my supplementary?

THE CHAIR: Ms. DiCostanzo, sorry.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: It's not related to this, but a lady - I believe she's with NSCC right now - was helping international students find housing. There is an issue for students finding housing, so her idea was really amazing, and she said there's a lady in the Valley who has started where they match the students with seniors. Seniors need help living alone; they can't look after their own light bulbs or whatever, and maybe matching them.

I thought wow, what a wonderful idea. This is a double-whammy: we help our seniors and we help our students, so I asked her why she didn't do that as a business. This is a great idea, but we need more of that because we have the seniors who need help and immigrants. Maybe we can combine that as an idea of having the seniors looked after by new immigrants and solve the housing problem. A lot of seniors are living in big homes that they can't look after financially or physically, and I thought that was a really good idea that maybe we can follow up on.

I don't know if you've heard about it or not; sorry, that was the question.

THE CHAIR: Who would like to take that? More of a statement than a question. Ms. Hoddinott.

NANCY HODDINOTT: I'll give it a go. I haven't heard of it. It sounds fantastic. We do know that we have a number of immigrants entering into streams of continuing care assistants, going into professions that are actually caring for people in the community, and then moving from that into even LPN and RN training. A caring sort of community makes sense that there would be some opportunities to link youth and new immigrants coming in with seniors, but I don't know anything official around that. Thank you, I'll follow up.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Chender. We'll do one question, one round.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I'm going to try to condense my two questions into one. I know there are these multi-stakeholder working groups and you're working in different professions and working with different groups of immigrants coming in, but I'm also wondering whether there are other lenses applied. In particular, the two things I'm thinking around are geography, so rural versus urban, specifically. I know you did mention there was a mix, but is there a sort of proactive system to identify opportunities that are rural and urban and employment that is rural or urban?

Also, gender. We look at different industries and different programs and whether there is a gender lens applied to those. I think it's like one question with two parts? (Laughter)

THE CHAIR: Yeah, it's a great question. Who would like to take that? Ms. Bent James.

SHELLEY BENT JAMES: In terms of employment opportunities, it is dependent, obviously, for immigration, folks need to be connected to an employer the majority of the time, unless they're coming through a selected pathway.

If we were to look at the opportunities - and I don't have the information right now - it would be spread pretty consistently with those numbers of 60/40 in terms of individuals who are coming to Nova Scotia.

In terms of a gender-based analysis lens, we do not apply a gender-based lens when we're analyzing jobs or individuals and it doesn't factor into approval of applications. We know that historically immigrants coming to the province is pretty evenly split between male and female, but it certainly doesn't affect our approval rate whether someone is of one gender or another or has declared no gender. It doesn't factor into our approval process.

We do know that settlement programming is important to integration in communities and we have seen that a lot of programs being dedicated towards women has been successful in ensuring success for that person as well as their family. We know that language programs, for example, seem to be a bit higher demand for women because traditionally in a lot of countries, the male member of the household is the major breadwinner. They're the one who is working, and women sometimes aren't as engaged in conversation in the English language, for example, as perhaps their spouse would be, so there has been more an increase in participation in language programming.

We do look at the demographics, and we're always interested in learning about the characteristics of newcomers to the province, but we haven't done any formal research into that. It's certainly something we're always interested in. We like to know the profile of individuals who are selecting Nova Scotia and who are making their life here, but in terms of anything formal, we wouldn't have anything formal other than that.

LARRY HARRISON: More of a statement than a question - I want to thank you for the information, number one. I sense a great passion from every one of you for what you do. When you open a door, there's a welcome mat. Your departments are the welcome mat. I hope you continue to do things to make folks welcome, find it easier to get work, and so on and so forth. I do want to thank you for what you do. Continue on with the good work.

THE CHAIR: We should just end it right there. (Laughter) Mr. Horne.

BILL HORNE: I'm just so amazed by all the things you do and all the spillovers to different organizations and groups in community and in governments, federally and provincially. I haven't heard much about HRM about filling in some of your helpful suggestions.

Having said that, what's the crystal ball, I guess, that you would see you need in order to double the number of people coming in or triple or whatever over a short period

of time, the next three to five years? I'm sure there are limitations that you have. Maybe we should be talking about some of those.

KELLIANN DEAN: Our ambition is to grow the number of immigrants that we have because we recognize the important role that they play in Nova Scotia and certainly in helping us enrich the diversity of our province and the contributions they make, culturally and economically - it's not just economically.

I think what's important is to make sure that the settlement piece continues to be strong because that's the key to retention. We want to attract people, but we want to keep them. We don't want them to come here and then make their life somewhere else in Canada. Although it's a gain for Canada, and I know that that's important, we really want immigrants to be successful here in Nova Scotia.

I guess what I would say is, if we were going to double our numbers - and I think we could, absolutely from where we are - over time, we would take it as a phased-in approach so that we continue to ensure that we have the right supports in place as we grow. That takes a commitment from all of us around the table and a continued focus on community. It is us around this table, but I also want to make the point that what you need is a whole-of-community approach. It's about everybody together wrapping their arms around new immigrants and helping them to settle and find the resources that they need.

One of the things that I'm learning is some of the things that we take for granted. If we moved from one province to another, we wouldn't see much of a difference, but some of the people coming to Nova Scotia need to figure out how to open a bank account. They need to figure out things that we take for granted. That settlement support is so important.

The other piece I would say is just that we need to make sure as well that we're filling gaps in employment that we have. There may be skill sets in Nova Scotia that we're not necessarily ready for, and we may find them in other areas. If we identify, for example, areas of innovation or areas of focus in technology or some of the priority areas of the province where we may not have enough workers - I'll say ocean tech as an example - immigration also offers us a huge opportunity there to try to attract people who will help us grow in areas where we may not necessarily have the skill set. That would be a way that I would say we could ensure that we can continue to take more.

I guess working together and in partnership is something that you see around this table and that you see in communities all over the province. That continued approach will help us continue to be successful and grow immigration in the province.

THE CHAIR: Will the committee allow me to ask a question? My question is, in the community that I represent, we've seen a lot of new immigrants come to our community. They're settling in the Spryfield area, they have started businesses, they're volunteering, and they've been welcomed with open arms.

One of the questions that I had was, when we look at the immigration numbers - and you said things like working together and then we talked about the settlement piece and things like that - are you working with Housing Nova Scotia and the private industry on the housing stock? There was a huge impact on the housing stock in HRM in particular when all the immigrants came in. We welcome them with open arms, we love them, and we want more, but the truth of the matter is that a lot of them are under-housed and it has had a significant impact on public housing and on the housing sector.

When we first went down the road with numbers, was there any co-operation between the Office of Immigration, the Department of Labour and Advanced Education and Housing Nova Scotia with the private sector and the developers? The truth of the matter is that if we look at what Housing Nova Scotia has - there is a gentleman in my community who we order food from all the time. He's a butcher in Spryfield. If you haven't been there, it's fantastic food. I don't know how he makes money because it's cheap. I was there last night and they just had their eighth child. They were in public housing originally. They have since moved out of public housing.

We have families that come into our constituency office all the time who are saying, I have four or five children and I'm in a one or two bedroom. Also, it's having impacts on people who are waiting to get off the housing list and it's also having an impact on the prices of housing in HRM.

We've talked a lot about integrating into the community. We've talked about jobs and skills, but I haven't heard housing at all. I'm wondering if there was a housing lens put on this. Who wants to tackle that? I'm sorry - everyone was so positive at the end.

NABIHA ATALLAH: ISANS has been in discussions with local and national groups involved in this issue because we see it impacting our clients very much. As you mentioned, the large families especially remain under-housed. Fortunately, with the federal government paying a bit more attention to housing, there are some opportunities now to look at programs.

We've also historically worked with landlords to house refugees because the housing allowance they have is quite limited and so trying to be creative, we've developed a lot of relationships there. We're trying to align ourselves with other groups in the province that address the issue of housing because we recognize that it's not only immigrants or refugees, but it's an issue for many Nova Scotians that there isn't enough affordable housing, so we're trying to work together with partners such as United Way and other groups that are addressing this issue. We've done a lot of meetings and some writing about that recently, so it's an ongoing issue that we're dealing with.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Lohr.

JOHN LOHR: I want to bring us back to the topic of the meeting, which was foreign-certified professionals. My question is really one about the Atlantic Immigration

Pilot and Nominee Program. When a foreign-certified professional is accepted in those programs, who determines if their credentials really will be adequate to work here? Does the Nominee Program or the Atlantic Immigration Pilot program take a look at it and say, yes, or are they brought here and then they find out when they get here, oh my goodness, I've got to do all this extra work? I'm just wondering, how does that work?

SHELLEY BENT JAMES: For a foreign national to immigrate to Nova Scotia, they are connected to an employer, so the employer has done the assessment of the individual skills, experience, and abilities and determined that they have what is needed to do the job.

There are many occupations where there is certification. What we do as the Office of Immigration is provide the information and the links where the individual needs to go, but in terms of the assessment of their foreign credentials, that is not a role that we would do. We offer the pathway for them to come here and then rely on the colleges and other governing bodies in the province. I'm sure Nancy could speak to the role that they have in ensuring that the individuals have the certification that is needed in order to work here.

NANCY HODDINOTT: The individual would need to reach out to that regulatory body in the province to sort of understand what the process is in terms of getting certified and to provide the documentation that would be required. The regulatory body would be making that decision for certification or not.

THE CHAIR: Okay, this was educational. Who wants to finish it off? Everybody's looking at Ms. Dean.

KELLIANN DEAN: I would just like to thank the members for the questions. We really appreciated the opportunity to share what we do and to provide you with more information and we've appreciated your support today, so thank you very much and have a wonderful holiday.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of everybody here, I think this is a topic we can all agree - it has had an extremely positive impact on every corner of Nova Scotia and we welcome the new immigrants with open arms. They've been exceptional neighbours, friends, and colleagues. Thank you all for your work and like Mr. Harrison said, it shines through when you speak about it, so keep up the great work.

The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11:37 a.m.]