

**TRANSCRIPTION/TRANSCRIPTION  
BRIEFING/MISE À JOUR**

**Transcription prepared by Media Q Inc. exclusively for Public Health Agency of Canada**

**Transcription préparée par Media Q Inc. exclusivement pour Agence de santé publique du Canada**

**DATE/DATE:** March 23, 2020 4:30 p.m. ET

**LOCATION/ENDROIT:** Teleconference

**PRINCIPALS/PRINCIPAUX:** Dr. Howard Njoo, Deputy Chief Public Health Officer

**SUBJECT/SUJET:** The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) holds a daily COVID-19 technical briefing for Parliamentarians.

**Operator:** Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the technical briefing to Parliamentarians on COVID-19. Bonjour mesdames et messieurs. Bienvenue à la séance d'information technique à l'intention des Parlementaires sur l'appel COVID-19. I would now like to turn the meeting over to the Public Health Agency of Canada. J'aimerais maintenant céder la parole à l'Agence de Santé Publique du Canada. You have the floor.

**Moderator:** Good afternoon. Joining us today on the phone are the following departments and agencies: Employment and Social Development Canada; Service Canada; Global Affairs Canada; Canada Border Services Agency; Agriculture and AgriFood Canada; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada; Indigenous Services Canada; Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada.

Bonjour à tous. Les ministères et organismes suivants se joignent à nous aujourd'hui : Emplois et Développement Social Canada, Service Canada, Affaires étrangères, Agence de services frontaliers, Agriculture et agroalimentaire, Immigration, réfugiés et citoyenneté Canada, Services autochtones, Innovation, Science et Développement Économique.

Please note callers will be permitted one question. We would ask you keep the question to around 60 seconds as there are many callers on the line who wish to have a chance to ask their question. Veuillez noter que vous pouvez poser une question à la fois. Nous vous demandons de limiter la question à environ 60 secondes car il y a de nombreux appelants sur la ligne qui souhaitent avoir la possibilité de poser leur question.

Please identify yourself and inform us which riding you represent. Veuillez s'il vous plait vous identifier et nous informer de la circonscription que vous représentez. I would like to turn the meeting over to Dr. Howard Njoo, Deputy Chief Public Health Officer of Canada. J'aimerais maintenant céder la parole à Dr. Howard Njoo, sous-ministre en chef de la santé publique du Canada. Go ahead, Dr. Njoo.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** Thank you very much, merci. Good day, bonjour à tout le monde. I'll give you a brief outline in terms of what's been happening around the world and in Canada in terms of case counts. As you can imagine case numbers change rapidly. I'll give you the numbers I had at 10:30 this morning and they've changed since then. Globally there are 340,000 cases in 189 countries. In Canada as of 10:30 we officially had 1,474 cases and 20 deaths with over 102,000 people having been tested with test results for COVID-19 in Canada.

À l'échelle mondiale il y a plus de 340,000 cas dans plus de 189 pays. À 10 :30 ce matin il y avait 1,474 cas et 20 décès au Canada et plus de 102,000 personnes avaient subi un test de dépistage de COVID-19 au Canada avec des résultats. With that I'd like to open the line for questions.

**Operator:** Please press \*1 at this time if you have a question. Veuillez s'il vous plait appuyer \*1 pour toute question. The first question is from Mike Lake. Please proceed. Your line is now open.

**Hon. Mike Lake:** My question is the same, sort of follows up on my question from two days ago. It revolved around testing and tracing. Just to give some stats and a timeline on March 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> when David Beasley from the World Food Program was in Ottawa and met at least 20 to 30 Members of Parliament. I met with him a few times, shook his hand several times during those couple of days.

On March 16<sup>th</sup> David was tested and on March 19<sup>th</sup> he was notified he was positive. I was immediately notified by the World Food Program from Ottawa. I immediately called the 15 Members of Parliament, Conservative Members of Parliament who had met with him at a meeting organized by me on March 11<sup>th</sup> and then called 811 to explain to them what happened here in Alberta.

I explained to them I also had very minor symptoms, just a minor cough, persistent though and minor illness, no fever. They said I should be tested. That was March 19<sup>th</sup>. Today is March 23<sup>rd</sup>. I have not been called in for a test yet at this point. My understanding is most of the MPs who met David have reached out to their own authorities. In most cases have been told to watch for symptoms.

This seems to me to be odd. It seems to be odd that 20 some MPs who met someone who has been diagnosed with COVID-19, many of those MPs having come into contact, shaking hands and the like, would not be tested. We've since gone out and met with no end of Canadians in our role as MPs including of course meeting with other MPs in the subsequent days.

The question I have is if we're not being tested, if it's taking four days for us to even in this case four days for me to be notified and I still haven't been notified to come in. It will take another four days for me to be tested. This seems very concerning to me in a world where everybody is talking about rigorous testing and tracing as being critical to getting on top of this.

Maybe in that context you can tell me how many people are there in Canada who we know should be tested but haven't yet? When one takes the test how long does it take to process in an ideal world? How long are those numbers now? I could go on but I'll let you answer. I know there's lots of people on this call.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** First of all as you can appreciate testing at healthcare services is at a provincial level. In terms of where you – you're from Alberta but I'm not sure depending on where you are now I'm not sure if you went to get your test in Ottawa, in Ontario or was it back in Alberta?

**Hon. Mike Lake:** I haven't been tested. I'm in Alberta. I've been in my home for now 10 days without seeing a single person because – I'm in Alberta, in Edmonton.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** That's what I want to know because the people would be giving you advice and then recommending testing or quarantine regime would be Alberta health officials. It has nothing to do with myself here or anyone else in terms of the federal government in Ottawa. That was the only question I was asking because if you were resident here then you might as a resident of the city of Ottawa been directed for testing by city of Ottawa officials.

It's always local public health officials. I can't speak to what's happening in Alberta in terms of their testing regime and availability. I would say Public Health and healthcare officials across the country have agreed upon an approach to testing. I don't know the particulars and that's the part I don't want to get into because it's not my place based on personal details.

For example, even if you were exposed to COVID-19, it all depends on when that person became symptomatic because the peak in terms of infectiousness would be someone who was symptomatic and coughing at the time you were exposed as opposed to they developed symptoms a few days later and then went for a test.

I don't think we need to get into the details of your personal situation. I would advise you to follow up with local public health officials regarding testing. It's not my place to comment. However your general question about testing in Canada, how many people could or should be tested. Like I say, it's all based on the need to be tested based on symptoms.

Have you travelled? Are you in a high risk profession such as healthcare? Are you in a hospital? That part you can't put a number on that because who knows how many people are getting sick even today. I would say our testing regime in Canada overall if you compare it to other countries, we're doing very well.

I wouldn't say we're at the top but no other country has been close to the gold standard at this time in terms of systematically in a very high volume testing their citizens and

that's South Korea. The last time we checked in terms of statistics they were testing at a rate of about 6,000 per million population. For Canada as a whole our current testing rate is about 2,600 per million population. That's a lot more than the US where I would say there's probably less than 1,000. I don't have an exact figure. I don't know what's going on specifically.

It's not just numbers of tests. It's testing the people who really have a potential of being infected with COVID-19. The last statistics we had this morning were that 102 tests were done in which results were available.

If you do the math, 102,000 test results this morning, about 1,474 cases. That means there are over 100,000 negative test results. In terms of finding the clusters, looking at where we can break the chains of transmission; overall in Canada we're doing well.

I can't speak to turnaround times for testing. I know if a sample is sent to our national microbiology laboratory the turnaround to do the test is one day or less than 24 hours. Of course it might be logistical issues in terms of the time it takes to get that sample from the patient and the time to ship it.

I can't speak to what the logistical issues might be in terms of individual locations in provinces and where the provincial lab is, etc. That's it in terms of logistics, numbers. Have I missed anything, just to make sure I've covered everything?

**Hon. Mike Lake:** I know I'm not supposed to have a follow up but I'm not concerned about myself at all. What I'm concerned about is 20-30 MPs who are super spreaders, many of whom didn't self-isolate afterwards because they didn't have any reason to and found out a week later they had shaken someone's hand that had COVID-19.

I would think that is not something that should be addressed necessarily level. I would think the federal government would be seized with the fact there's 20 to 30 of our national MPs from every province who met David Beasley and haven't been tested.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** Here's the point again in terms of contact tracing Alberta officials, I don't want to get into details but if – let's say for the sake of hypothesis the individual wasn't ill at the time you were meeting and coughing and so on and the members are now monitoring their symptoms, they're well past the normal incubation period.

If they had developed symptoms especially 4 or 5 days after meeting this individual which has been the case because we're now close to 10, 12 days afterward, if they had not developed symptoms it's unlikely they had developed a COVID-19 infection. You're at the outer range of the incubation period.

Just by having contact with a COVID-19 case doesn't make you infected and become a super spreader or transmitter in your own right. You have to be infected with it and

develop symptoms or become ill yourself to then have a reason to get tested and determine if you have the disease. Just having a contact doesn't mean 100% you'll become infected and a spreader. I hope that answers your question.

**Operator:** The next question is from Scot Davidson. Please go ahead.

**Scot Davidson:** I thank you very much. Scot Davidson from York Simcoe. At 4:10 today I received calls from two fire services in my riding that were running extremely short on PPE equipment. They may have 1 to 2 days left. They're having trouble receiving it. Is there someone federally that can answer where I could direct the fire chiefs or myself to acquire some of this equipment and what is the federal government's last count on PPE equipment?

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** For the PPE that's within the province so it wouldn't be a contact through the federal government. You'd be going through the appropriate provincial channels. You're in the province of Ontario. That's the local level or whoever the structure is.

The federal government's role has been to coordinate with the provinces and territories in terms of bulk procurement and having supplies like PPE present, and then what we've done through a common agreement is distribute it back to the provinces so it's a central location if you can call it that.

They then distribute as appropriate based on jurisdictional context, where the needs are and so on. That's the federal role in terms of procurement but not for individual fire departments to be contacting the federal government.

**Scot Davidson:** I understand that. It's just concerning to me that these calls were made and they're having trouble sourcing this. This thing has only just begun and we're already seeing these shortages and cracks. It's a comment to make and maybe the federal government to put numbers out that we could call to acquire some of this equipment and have counts on where we're at with this.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** We'll pass it on to our provincial counterparts in terms of like I say maybe they need to I'm not sure that they're not but maybe make sure it's acceptable or publicized that various services like frontline fire departments and so on can make sure they have the right number to call for that.

That's all I can say because there's really no specific role or number they could be calling the federal government for because we're not in the business of giving supplies out to individual fire departments across the country. Thank you for making the point. It's well taken.

**Operator:** The next question is from Yonah Martin. Please proceed.

**Senator Yonah Martin:** I'm going further with the question I asked yesterday. I know Heather at Global Affairs said she would be reaching out to the Immigration folks on this call so this involves both I believe. I have a list of 7 children who are in Haiti. They are all part of an adoption process which has been about 5 years. The youngest of these children is 2 years old.

There is one flight, there are two flights but the one that's most reasonable is March 29<sup>th</sup> out of Haiti to Montreal but with Air Transat. Their seats would not be secured in that these children are not registered with the registry of Canadians abroad. Their parents are Canadian and their files are in progress in terms of that last piece to get them to Canada.

My question is whether the embassy in Haiti, Port au Prince, is aware of these children and whether even though they're not on this registry list is there someone overseeing this and since there's no adult with them I'm not sure how these children would come to Canada unaccompanied.

Whether someone at the embassy would be given the authority to travel with them or whether one of the parents, perhaps the parent of the 2-year-old could be given authorization to go and stay on the plane so that's not taking up an extra seat.

My concern is they're not in the registry these children but their parents are in Canada and they've been trying to get some clarification. They haven't been able to get through to the embassy. My question is for Global Affairs and Immigration officials regarding these children in Haiti.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** I'm not sure that we can answer this. This might be best taken off line in terms of an individual management of a situation that you're bringing to our attention. I will open up to callers from Global Affairs and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship if we have any initial comments to make at this time.

**Operator:** Just one second, sorry. We were looking for Global Affairs Canada or IRCC to take Senator Martin's call. Is it possible for someone on the line from – we don't know if Heather Jeffrey made it on the line or not. Can you –

**Heather Jeffrey:** I'm here. I was just going to answer. When you say file in progress that probably means the citizenship and adoption process hasn't been finished so we really do need IRCC to comment on that specific case. These are commercial flights. They're not evacuation flights.

Accompanying them and all those issues are significant consular issues as well that would need to be resolved but the first thing is to make sure that the process is concluded and the right of these children to travel to and reside in Canada is sorted out, complex case.

I will I promise I'm following up and I will get back to you. This is a circumstance that we see in many countries, especially Haiti, and they are very complex. I appreciate that parents have invested a lot of time and are very anxious to have the children travel to Canada but we'll have to follow up offline on this one because it's a lot of details about a very particular situation. I've registered it and I've been in communication with the embassy in Haiti and we will send you a message shortly after this call to connect people.

**Operator:** From Marc Dalton, please proceed.

**Marc Dalton:** Thank you very much. This comment was made a couple of days ago, just that follow up if all the information given here could be transcribed or comments and sent to the MPs afterwards that would be helpful. Also sometimes comments are taken offline so just to make sure we are able to get connected with the comment that's taken offline.

My question is what is being done with respect to maternity, adoption leave benefits specifically working expectant mothers who are now being told to stay home or be laid off. They're worried they won't have enough hours to qualify for maternity benefits and they had originally planned on receiving them.

Can an exception be made so they can begin maternity leave now and carry on through to their post deliver date, keeping ongoing with this those who are currently on maternity leave but will retire soon and are also being laid off what program will be available and will they fall under emergency support for CRA?

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** Thanks for your question. I'm not sure exactly who is online, colleagues from ESDC, turning over to ESDC.

**Unidentified Male:** I'll take that. What's been announced is an emergency are benefit. Basically it's providing \$900 bi-weekly. The measures for that are evolving but I would say they're pretty open. If people have been affected in any way by COVID-19 they would be eligible for this. This includes self-employed people who don't qualify for EI sickness.

I don't know specifically about maternity but I would suspect that would be included in that. I'll follow up if that's okay. I'm quite sure that would be the case but they would also be included and be able to benefit from this. Basically anyone impacted by COVID-19 would be able to apply as long as they didn't quit their job.

**Marc Dalton:** Okay, good. When you say follow-up that's the sort of thing I'm saying. If we can get that follow-up and get the response to that, that would be appreciated. Thank you for the answer.

**Operator:** The next question is from Mike Duffy. Please proceed.

**Senator Mike Duffy:** Thank you very much. We've been getting calls from families in Prince Edward Island who have family members who are with various missionary groups in Honduras. The question I have is will there be a repatriation flight for Canadians in Honduras who weren't there as tourists in the pure sense but who were there on various civic projects and missionary work and economic rebuilding, Honduras specifically?

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** Thank you very much Senator for your question. I'll pass it on to my colleague from Global Affairs.

**Unidentified Female:** We've been working with Canadian carriers to work on two flights in upcoming days to Honduras which will be announced to all those Canadians who are registered on our registry of Canadians abroad. It doesn't matter whether you're there as a tourist or there for a longer period of time as you described.

They just need to be registered with us and as soon as those flight timings and ticketing details are confirmed, we'll be reaching out probably in the next day to notify Canadians of those flights. Yes, two flights coming to Honduras very soon.

**Senator Mike Duffy:** This applies to tourists and to Canadians there on other projects?

**Unidentified Female:** Yes, any Canadian citizen or permanent resident who is registered on the registry of Canadians abroad will receive the notification.

**Senator Mike Duffy:** Thank you so much. This is quite important and helpful.

**Operator:** The next question is from Mary Jane McCallum. Please proceed.

**Senator Mary Jane McCallum:** This question is from Jane Johnston and Lucille Bruce who work with the homeless population in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Their understanding is the federal government is going to provide additional funding to work with the homeless populations.

They believe there's additional monies for housing and that Indigenous persons make up 70% of the homeless population in Winnipeg. They are requesting clarity to funding for homeless programming and housing. With this question I was wondering if you wanted me to forward their contact info to the appropriate office.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** Certainly, I think we can do that. First of all, I put an open request to any of the colleagues online. I'm not aware personally of as you mentioned specific funding for the homeless. I'm not sure if there's a specific aspect in

terms of Indigenous Services. I'll open up to any colleague online from a federal department that may have something to offer.

**Senator Mary Jane McCallum:** I have that document here that says there's support for people experiencing homelessness to reaching home and there's \$167 million for that.

**Unidentified Male:** It's Chris from ESDC. I can respond to that. You're right, there is Reaching Home initiative with \$167 million to continue to support those experiencing homelessness. There's not much details on that yet but I'd also say there's other supports to look at vulnerable workers, vulnerable people: \$50 million to women's shelters.

We have an Indigenous Services Canada \$305 million to First Nations, Inuit and Metis through a new community support fund as well. We are looking at different measures on how to target those most vulnerable as well.

**Senator Mary Jane McCallum:** Can I forward this information, their contact information to your office?

**Unidentified Male:** If you do forward it to me I will try to get you a much better answer and any further details on that, yes.

**Operator:** The next question is from Laurel Collins, please proceed.

**Laurel Collins:** I have a question about folks who are stuck overseas and all together the \$5,000 loan Global Affairs is making to Canadians. I want to know if it's interest free, if the loan can be accessed after the fact, like if a constituent pays exorbitant prices with their credit card to get on a flight now would they be able to access the federal loan to pay down the high interest credit card after the fact?

Wondering if repatriation efforts are expanded to include permanent residents and I heard someone on the call mention they can register as Canadians abroad because some of the folks contacting our office thought that as permanent residents they couldn't register and they haven't been getting information. If you can also answer how permanent residents in Canada are being supported through our emergency measures that would be amazing.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** Thank you very much. I'll pass it on to Global Affairs.

**Heather Jeffrey:** Yes, Heather here. The emergency loan program is destined for Canadians who are abroad and to sustain them abroad so I'd have to look into the special circumstances but currently in the guidelines it doesn't contemplate providing loans to Canadians once they're back here in Canada.

The circumstance you outlined to pay down credit cards, that's not the purpose. It's to sustain people while they are overseas. In terms of the provisions of the loan there is a 180-day interest free period and at that point in time the loan would be transferred for recovery. It's payable after 180 days and that's interest free. In terms of permanent residents, the flights we have Canadian citizens are given priority unless the permanent resident is a member of a direct Canadian family. We are prioritizing Canadian citizens first so of course we don't separate family groups so permanent residents are included.

We have been including permanent residents in repatriation flights as space is available and they can register in the ROCA system if they wish to do so but there is no guarantee that there would be places available on the flights.

**Laurel Collins:** Just permanent residents here in Canada, are they able to access any of the emergency EI or non-eligible EI funds?

**Unidentified Male:** It's ESDC here. That one is tied to employment. If they had employment earnings in the past year then they could be eligible but it is tied to employment.

**Operator:** The next question is from Elaine McCauley. Please proceed.

**Kelly McCauley:** It's Kelly not Elaine. Thanks. I appreciate everyone being on the line. I didn't hear PSPC attending today but what is the government doing to speed up our RFP process so we can get the respirators and the other equipment purchased as soon as possible?

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** You're right. I don't think we have someone from PSPC here. I can just tell you that at a technical level we've made all the inquiries in terms of looking at from a material point of view what the needs are, not just from the federal government but in terms of our bulk procurement process what the provinces and territories are requiring, be they PPE or swabs, etc. that are required for the COVID-19 response.

That's been put together and my understanding is with all due speed everything is being done to acquire ASAP, recognizing it is a global market and for many of the things we're looking for it is in some ways a competition.

**Kelly McCauley:** I'm not worried as much about the global market having had the pleasure of sitting on the (unintelligible) committee. Our process is so horrible and so difficult to work through I'm more worried about too many layers of red tape delaying much needed purchasing when we've got to get it done now.

Perhaps if you're able to grab someone from PSPC to be on for the next few days we can ask them directly.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** We can look into that. My sense is notwithstanding your comment about red tape I think neither to defend or make a comment, I think the normal processes people recognize with these extraordinary times, my understanding is that things are being done in all sorts of areas across the government in a much different way and much more accelerated compared to what might be a usual standard process. With that I'll thank you for your question and move on to the next, thank you.

**Operator:** The next question is from Paul Manly. Please proceed.

**Paul Manly:** Thank you for these ongoing briefings. My question is about seniors. I've been getting a lot of messages and calls from seniors who say they want to see an increase in their old age security. They've lost investment income. The income reflected by their tax returns is what sets the rate for the seniors' homes they're renting based on income.

They're not able to get financial institutions to make changes to their investment portfolio so I'm hearing this a lot. They seem to feel a lot of things are targeted towards families and people on unemployment but they've been hit really hard with the crash in the stock market. I'm wondering if there's any plan to help seniors and what I can be telling them.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** Good question, I don't know. That can be multiple departments but I'll turn it over to my colleague at ESDC, who has something to offer.

**Unidentified Male:** That is a good question. I have not heard of anything to date. What I will do is take that back and I think it's a good point and connect with my colleagues on OAS and maybe put the idea to them as well. I haven't heard of anything yet.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** So the point is made. We'll forward that on. Thank you very much for your question. We'll move on to the next question.

**Operator:** The next question is from Iqra Khalid. Please proceed.

**Iqra Khalid:** Thank you very much for that and quickly I want to say first of all thank you to all of the officials for all of the great work you're doing. There's a lot of misinformation being spread. It's adding to the panic, the negative morale of Canadians.

I know the Prime Minister announced today that we are going to be rolling out more awareness campaigns but I'm wondering if you have any advice for each of us Parliamentarians and Senators as to what we could be doing on the ground to make sure we are spreading positive information, that we are giving reasonable information to people and not inducing panic in our communities.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** I'll give you a comment from a public health perspective. That's one of the things that we've been well aware of for quite some time just in the public health world. For example we know that on social media there's always been a lot of misinformation propagated through bots, etc., especially before on the issue of vaccine hesitancy.

We're aware of that and we recognize sometimes that it seems to be coming from sources outside of Canada. We understand the same situation may be in play for COVID-19. The general advice at least from a public health agency perspective is you direct people to "trusted credible sites" for information such as [Canada.ca/coronavirus](https://Canada.ca/coronavirus) to get at least information as it relates to Canada.

If people really want to get more other general information I would say there are other trusted sites, probably for example besides government of Canada another good site we have good connections with is the CDC in the US. Those two are a starting point. Of course I would say the international organization we always point people to is the WHO, the World Health Organization, so three trusted sources.

I would go to that. It's hard to say. There are probably lots of good academic sites, universities but I wouldn't go out and promote one over the other. By going with big international websites from public health organizations plus our own at the government of Canada that should be the main advice you should give your constituents.

**Iqra Khalid:** Is there something that you are specifically doing to combat the fake news out there?

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** I know that there's been conversations. I can just give you one example not just here in Canada but Facebook they've also done some changes so that even if someone does a search or looks for anything coronavirus a banner pops up that points people to the [Canada.ca](https://Canada.ca) website. etc.

Other than that I'm like you. I see the news on cybersecurity, folks at intelligence indicate that is a growing issue and they're aware of hacking attacks and they're taking it seriously and addressing that. That's all I can say. I probably don't know much more than you in terms of that regard.

**Calvin Christianson:** Calvin Christianson from Canada Border Services Agency. Just a little something to add is we have something called the border information service, which is a telephone process where people can call in and get information about border measures. We encourage people to call in and get straight facts regarding the situation that we have with regard to restrictions and exclusions.

I'll give the number right now. It's 1-800-461-9999. You can search it through Google search as well, border information service and we've got that line running 24/7 right now. It's available to anyone. We're having good results with that.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** Thank you very much Calvin and thank you for the question. We'll move on to the next.

**Operator:** The next question is from (unintelligible), your line is open.

**Unidentified Male:** Thank you very much. This is a question for Global Affairs. Heather, your team is doing a great job. I'm wondering if there have been any decisions to close missions abroad and in bringing non-essential staff home. Are they all being brought to Ottawa? How are they being housed? Are they being advised to go into self-isolation for two weeks? I would like some answers.

**Heather Jeffrey:** Hello. Yes we've done an assessment of the different health conditions and the situation of our staff and dependents at our missions abroad. We have repatriated non-essential staff and dependents beginning with those that have medical conditions or other things that make them particularly vulnerable to coronavirus through normal commercial flights.

Those have been taking place over the last week. All of our missions currently remain open. They are providing consular services although in many cases those services are being provided remotely because we have to respect local conditions where closure of public buildings is required in many jurisdictions.

The building itself might be closed and you can't walk in but you can reach us on the phone and we can provide emergency services by appointment where that's required. Today we have no mission closures as a result of this, although in many cases we have people working from home to respect quarantine restrictions just as we do in Ottawa.

The non-essential staff that have departed missions have been brought back to Ottawa. They are all undergoing mandatory quarantine as instructed by the Chief Public Health Officer and the Public Health Officer of Ontario. They are respecting that. When they're done that most of them are working remotely, continuing to provide service to their missions and to us here at headquarters.

**Operator:** The next question is from Pierre Vanier (ph). Please proceed.

**Pierre Vanier:** Yes, hello, Pierre Vanier, political advisor to Luc Thériault, the Member for Montcalm. I have questions concerning the assistance available to self-employed workers. I have three questions in the same vein with Employment Insurance. Self-employed workers who aren't coming back from abroad, who have no symptoms, who haven't been in contact with anyone affected, are they covered?

Also, to have an answer for constituents whose Employment Insurance will be ending in the next few weeks, what happens with them? Help for students, my third question, help for students who have lost their job, who don't have enough hours to be covered by Employment Insurance, or seniors who are currently working, will they be covered at some point? Thank you.

**Dr. Howard Njoo :** Thank you for the question. I'll turn it over to Employment and Social Development Canada. Is there someone who can answer the questions?

**Unidentified Male :** Yes, he raises a few questions, but I'd like to try to answer each of them. First, it's not necessary, the hours aren't as important as the amount. So people have to have had a salary of at least \$5,000 last year to receive our benefit.

I can't answer the other questions about Indigenous people, but for Employment Insurance, it's not necessary to have hours. It's more important to have at least \$5,000 of salary last year.

**Dr. Howard Njoo :** Thank you. Another aspect for seasonal workers, I don't know, is this something for Immigration? Or maybe not. I think that's good. Next question.

**Operator:** The next question is from Richard Cannings, please proceed.

**Richard Cannings:** Thank you. I have just one question. What is the latest update on the seasonal agricultural workers program? We have people trying to get here from Mexico to the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia. It's essential for this economy here. I heard there would be more news today on whether those flights were going to happen. I just wanted to know if anyone could update me on that.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** Yes, I think our colleague at Agriculture and AgriFood Canada could respond to that question.

**Unidentified Male:** Hi. You would have seen the news release that came out last week as part of the temporary foreign workers program in which seasonal agricultural workers would be allowed into the country. We are still working with our colleagues in ESDC and IRCC as well as FAC to finalize some of the details as to how that's going to work.

We've also been in constant contact with industry and with the provinces and territories to come up with solutions as to how, when this is going to be in place and how we can make it work so we're protecting the health of Canadians but able to bring in the workers of the agriculture industry. We hope we should have more very soon.

**Operator:**

The next question is from Gord Johns. Please proceed.

**Gord Johns:**

Hi there. I'm hearing concerns. I have a couple of questions here, concerns from both staff working for the RCMP and for Canada Post that they're not getting the protective materials they need while they're doing the job.

I've had local postal workers, local RCMP staff raising concerns, wanting to contribute, wanting to be at work to help support Canadians during this crisis. I wanted to make sure I brought that to your attention.

Secondly I'm getting flooded still with people that are seniors, youth, seasonal workers especially because of fishing and tourism that either their EI has run out or they're not EI eligible.

What programs is the federal government going to offer those people because right now they've got no income and we're headed into what is typically a very busy season on the coast of BC on many different fronts? We haven't had any clarity about what you're going to do for those workers.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:**

Maybe I'll pass it onto ESDC.

**Unidentified Male:**

Things are moving pretty quickly. We're making adjustments but there was an announcement of an emergency benefit package whereby people would be able to receive up to \$900 bi-weekly so long as they earned \$5,000 in the past year. It's a minimal threshold and so long as they've been affected in some way by COVID-19 and if they're unable to work they'll be able to benefit from that.

We're currently working on implementing that. We expect the Prime Minister announced it would be available in April and that's the date we're working towards to get money out. Again it's a pretty low threshold and it's meant to be an emergency benefit for those people who through no fault of their own have been affected by COVID-19 and it's impacted their employment.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:**

I could maybe take a shot at the first question about the RCMP and postal workers. First of all in terms of guides for all federal workers that's under occupational health and safety. Health Canada has put various advisories out if you want to call it that in terms of guidance for all federal workers.

I'll take it one at a time. For postal workers just from a public health perspective I'm not sure what the risk may be. I think the question was raised at some point earlier about what might be the risk in terms of handling packages and so on but from the science the risk is not there at all in terms of the virus viability on cardboard, letters and so on. There really is no issue in terms of any risk to workers in the postal handling facilities.

As for the workers going out about their business I would say they're not in the healthcare system dealing with sick patients in their normal duty. Delivering letters and packages there's no risk from what I can see. Right now we're telling everyone to stay home, stay inside your house. As they go about their business you're putting into mail boxes, mail slots and there should be no chance of interaction.

For the RCMP depending on how they're defined as first responders, my sense is they should have the same kind of equipment that other first responders have depending on the situation in terms of having the right equipment for the right situation. That's all I could say on that. I'm not sure if there's any comment from anyone else who might want to contribute to that. Okay, if not we'll go to the next question.

**Operator:** The next question is from Carol Hughes, please proceed.

**Carol Hughes:** Thank you very much. I didn't think I was going to get a question. A couple of things: I think sometimes there are some misleading words out there saying people are going to be entitled to EI if they're affected by COVID. At the end of the day it's only if they have physically the symptoms and are diagnosed with or if they're sent home for self-quarantine.

Someone who loses their job or is laid off and maybe our friend from the EI department would be able to speak to that is considered just laid off and will have to wait the one week waiting period and will get -- his processing time will be with 28 days so they say but we always know that goes over.

I think you need to be extremely careful. You may want to elaborate on that. I've also asked if there's a way we can get a list of officials from each department that we can have the MP access to, MP liaison to make sure we are able to address those particular questions we have without bogging down the phones.

There was also an indication at one point that there was some regular briefings with the Indigenous populations regionally. I'm wondering if there's a way for us to tap into those conference calls as well.

I'm very concerned about what's going to happen come spring thaw for places like Attawapiskat and Kashechewan and how that integration is going to happen in the population that's already doing the self -- like, how we would be able to do that especially with the self-isolation piece.

That's it except for border services. I want to emphasize because there is somebody there from border services. I heard that response. There is apparently a huge issue at the Sault border and I'm not sure about the other borders. People are not told to self-isolate.

They're not telling them they must self-isolate. I'm told it's been very lax there and so I think that needs to be emphasized. I'm getting daily bombarded with people saying they've just seen whoever just came back they're at the grocery store shopping and all of that.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** I'm seeing at least three departments for the questions you've raised, first of all ESDC and I saw a comment from Indigenous Services and then finally CBSA.

**Carol Hughes:** CBSA is just something for them to look into.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** Okay, okay. I guess ESDC and Indigenous Services. Let's start with ESDC.

**Unidentified Male:** Maybe I can loop back to another question that I wasn't able to answer that I am now. Just to flag that maternity and parental benefits would count towards this so long as they received the certain threshold of income.

From the EI perspective, the Prime Minister announced it would include anybody self-employed who was quarantined, anybody who didn't qualify for EI benefits, anybody taking care of a family member, an elderly parent, parents with children who require care, supervision so again the announcement around this benefit has been pretty wide and does cover again pretty much generally people who have been adversely impacted by COVID-19 and are unable to work because of it.

**Carol Hughes:** Again I just want to say, like my brother-in-law got laid off because of the impact that COVID-19 has had on the business but he's going to have to wait that one week, right? I'm getting tons of people from my constituency. They're laying off their people but they're being told they're going to have to wait one week and then the 28 days processing that they don't apply for the one week waiver.

**Unidentified Male:** That's something that again the system – we haven't been able to process. You're right. We're well aware of that.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** Good, thank you. I'm not sure if Valerie from Indigenous Services can take questions about teleconferences and specific reserves or so.

**Unidentified Female:** The question around would it be possible to participate, we are having daily calls in regions with leadership with respect to what's happening and taking questions and addressing communities' specific issues when those arise. We're keeping a log of all those calls coming in and what concerns are being expressed, what we're doing about them.

There are daily calls also happening at the senior management level with the regional executives to ensure everybody is on top of what is happening. With respect to

whether or not it would be possible for others to listen in, I think there's a bit of sensitivity with respect to people – there's a lot of people already on these calls and there's limited teleconferencing capacity for them but also the intention is for those communities to be able to discuss directly with departmental officials and public health officials some of their concerns.

We've not opened it up more broadly to observers including even individuals from my office because we're trying to respect that direct relationship. Obviously if there are some specific community issues that you want us to respond to, we're happy to send you that information. I can assure you that with respect to communities that are at risk of spring flooding we are on top of that.

We are specifically adapting the pandemic preparedness and response plans in those communities to be able to account for special measures that will be required in the evacuation process.

**Dr. Howard Njoo:** Thank you very much all my colleagues. I think we'll have to bring this teleconference to a close. We're way over the allotted time that we initially intended. Thank you everyone online for your patience, for your questions. At this point we'll bring the teleconference to a close. Thank you.

**Operator:** Thank you, merci. The conference has now ended. Please disconnect your lines at this time. We thank you for your participation. La conférence est maintenant terminée. Veuillez s'il vous plait raccrocher votre ligne. Nous vous remercions de votre participation à tous les participants qui se sont joints.