

**TRANSCRIPTION
BRIEFING**

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DATE/DATE: March 24, 2020 4:30 p.m. ET

LOCATION: Teleconference

PRINCIPALS: Rhonda Kropp (ph), Director General, Health Portfolio Operations Centre.

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

Moderator: Good afternoon and welcome to the technical briefing to Parliamentarians on the government's response to Covid-19. Joining us today are the following departments and agencies: Department of Finance, oops, Department of Finance won't be here. It's Employment and Social Development Canada, Service Canada, Global Affairs Canada, Canada Border Services Agency, Agriculture and Agri-food Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, Indigenous Services Canada, Innovation Science and Economic Development, Public Service and Procurement Canada, Public Safety.

Please note callers will be permitted one question each. We would ask you that you keep the question to 60 seconds as there are many callers on the line who wish to have a chance to ask their question.

Please identify yourself and inform us which riding you represent. I would like to turn the meeting over to Mrs. Rhonda Kropp (ph), director general of the Health portfolio operations centre.

Rhonda Kropp: Thank you Louise. Hello everyone. Thank you everybody for being here today, delighted to have you all on the call and thank you to my federal government partners who are able to join us from multiple departments today to address questions from Parliamentarians and Senators.

I'm going to start with a short set of opening remarks. We will then open the floor for questions. As you would have heard from Dr. Tam and Dr. Njoo today on the press conference, globally we are at over 380,000 cases of Covid 19 in over 195 countries. As of this morning there were 2,176 cases and 25 deaths in Canada. Over 120,000 people have been tested for Covid 19 in Canada and approximately 10,000 people are being tested per day at this point.

We are currently at a state where we are at an equal mix of cases that are related to travel and to community transmission which is quite a change from where we were a week ago. Some good news, we were able to release 220 repatriated Canadians from the Trenton quarantine site today.

These are those that were asymptomatic. Others who had tested positive during their quarantine will remain along with their asymptomatic contacts and the quarantine date has been reset based on when they were diagnosed and had symptoms. Again I want to thank everybody. At this point I will open it up to questions.

Operator: Thank you. We will now take questions from the telephone lines. If you have a question and you're using a speaker phone please lift your handset before making a selection.

If you have a question, please press *1 on your telephone keypad. If at any time you wish to cancel your question you may press #. Please press *1 at this time if you have a question.

There will be a brief pause while the participants register for questions. Thank you for your patience. The first question is from Rachael Harder. Please go ahead. Your line is open.

Rachael Harder: I'm Rachael Harder calling from Lethbridge Alberta. I've had contacts from multiple women in my riding who have been laid off in multiple stages of pregnancy ranging from one to seven months. They're asking if they can claim EI or regular benefits.

If they do so will they be ineligible for their maternity leave in the coming year? Can you also confirm whether or not any consideration is being given to women to ensure their maternity leave is going to remain intact without them sacrificing necessary financial assistance right now? Thank you.

Rhonda Kropp: Thank you Rachael. It's Rhonda. I'm going to pass the floor over to my colleague Chris at ESDC.

Chris of ESDC: I can answer that. We are looking at how we best situate all our programs so that nobody suffers because of this. I can't give any specific details but I can say that people on maternity leave we don't want people to be punished that didn't have – that were adversely affected by this. It is something we're looking at but I can't give you details right now but I can say it is figuring in the policy that we are delivering.

Operator: The next question is from Paula Simons. Please go ahead. Your line is open.

Senator Paula Simons: Thank you very much. I'm a Senator from Alberta. I was speaking just a few moments ago with the president of the Alberta Chamber of Commerce. He's very concerned because he's hearing from his members that it's next to impossible for them to fill out the records of employment they need to fill out for the staff they're laying off because they need to get a secret password from Ottawa which either has to come in the mail or – the way he explained it to me sounded absurd.

But he said they are required to send a letter by mail to Ottawa and then get the form by mail so they can issue the records of employment for their employees to file for EI. Some of them are laying off 400 and 500 employees at a time and having to hand fill out the forms. He asked me if I could ask you if there's any way that paper work could be expedited so people could file their EI forms in a timely way and get their EI benefits sooner rather than later.

Rhonda Kropp: Thank you very much Senator. Chris, I'm going to pass that one over to you at ESDC.

Chris at ESDC: If we can get Service Canada on the line too if they want to jump in. We're meeting with the national chambers of commerce this week as well to discuss this and many other issues. I don't know the particulars of this. That does sound a bit bizarre to me. If there's someone on Service Canada as well that might be able to respond to that, but if not we will engage with them when we do meet with them this week.

Rhonda Kropp: Thanks Chris. Can I check if we have a Service Canada colleague on the line with us today that might be able to address? No, I don't believe we do. My apologies. Thank you very much Senator. Can we have the next question please?

Operator: The next question is from Tamara Jansen. Please go ahead. Your line is open.

Tamara Jansen: Tamara Jansen, Cloverdale Langley City MP. I have a question. I have a constituent who's a farmer who's expecting his temporary foreign workers to come yesterday. They all got their boarding passes but at the last minute Aero Mexico took them off the flight basically saying you're not a priority. You're not Canadian or you're not PR. They were not allowed to board. What is the situation with temporary foreign workers? They're desperately needed.

Rhonda Kropp: Thank you very much MP for the question. I am going to see. I don't believe our colleague from Agriculture Agri-food has joined us but Chris I'm wondering if there's anything you may be able to note overall on the temporary foreign worker program from your side of things at ESDC.

Chris at ESDC: I can't speak to the particulars of this. That might be more of a GAC issue to respond to. We are making exemptions for the temporary foreign worker program recognizing the important role they play in the food chain.

We have made those exceptions to them from a TSW perspective. I would say that would be outside of the scope of the TSW program because we have made those exceptions and probably as I mentioned maybe a GAC issue as well.

Rhonda Kropp: Thank you so much Chris. I wonder if I could turn to either Lisa or Chris from Global Affairs to address this question.

Chris Thorley: Chris Thorley here. Sorry to have to refer that but I believe that's an IRCC question rather than Global Affairs.

Unidentified Male: (Unintelligible) I think like my colleague from ESDC said the permit has been issued and the person is on its way I guess. The issue is more of a boarding one. I don't know. Calvin, do you have any information about how the pre-boarding is done with aircraft carriers?

Calvin Christenson: Yes, good afternoon, Calvin Christenson with Canada Border Services Agency. I'm not aware of this happening yesterday with some foreign workers from Mexico. There is direction that has been given to the airlines by Transport Canada regarding who can board and cannot board those flights.

I'll have to double check and see what happened on that flight because we do have exemptions that are – we will have exemptions in place for temporary foreign workers but officially the exemptions I believe have not been signed off as of right now.

The intention is for the government to have those in place so that temporary foreign workers can board flights, come to Canada and then be subject to a period of self-quarantine. We'll check a bit more into what the actual situation was and find out if they've been given an alternate date to come to Canada.

Rhonda Kropp: Thank you very much for the question MP. It's clear that temporary foreign workers is an important issue for Canadians and also clear there's a number of departments putting their heads together to ensure we address this appropriately. Thank you very much for that question.

Operator: The next question is from Mike Lake. Please go ahead. Your line is open.

Hon. Mike Lake: Thank you very much. It won't be a surprise that I've been on the same theme for the last few calls. I'm calling right now from the drive through lineup to get tested in Edmonton, day five since I was notified that I'd met someone that was diagnosed with Covid.

Day twelve since my last meeting with that person and by the time I get the results back from my understanding it will be day 16 or 17 which seems way too long in the context of everything we're hearing from the WHO around testing and tracing.

A couple of questions I would have. I'd be interested to know what the current inventory of unused testing kits is across the country and what's being done to get that number up. Secondly the House of Commons is sitting today and I know that there are at least 4 or 5 MPs in the House of Commons today who met David Beasley either 12 or 13

days ago and I'm wondering if you can tell me whether any of those MPs have been tested.

Rhonda Kropp: Thanks very much for the question. I understand there are concerns being raised about the speed with which tests are being done in Canada as well as availability of test kits and in some cases the reagents for those test kits.

As has been noted I can assure you that through the existing governance structures the federal government as well as our provincial and territorial partners are meeting on a regular basis to have discussions about testing among a number of other issues related to flattening the curve for Covid in Canada.

We are keeping a very close eye on the availability of testing and any limitations to that availability, so much so that our national microbiology lab has been working to create reagents in order to deal with some of the shortages we're experiencing on that front.

There are a number of issues across the testing continuum that are being discussed in those venues. That includes not only the number of tests that are available but the time it takes to process those tests and various locations. We know we've got the NML that is turning tests around in between 24 and 72 hours but we also have provincial labs that are doing testing as well.

The availability of the reagent as I mentioned and also making sure we are prioritizing those that need to get testing to ensure the tests we do have are being allocated most appropriately to flatten the curve as I mentioned.

In terms of whether or not those individuals have been tested I certainly can't speak to that but I can say we've been working very closely also with local public health to ensure that there is information available for folks who have been in close contact, that the public health folks have the information they need to reach out to people who have been in contact with people who have tested positive.

I can't speak to those individuals in particular. I can say that testing continues to be as I mentioned a very important issue within the federal provincial territorial space and the constant look for a rapid test as well to get on the market which would allow us to get that testing through in a much quicker capacity. We're continuing to look at that as well. Thank you very much for the question.

Operator: The next question is from Kelly McCauley. Please go ahead, your line is open.

Kelly McCauley: Thanks. It's Kelly from Edmonton West. Just a question we've brought up before about what is our goal for the amount of respirators we are going to have in our country? I've asked this question a few times and it has come up from others.

Last Tuesday we were told on this call that we have enough and I think yesterday was we have enough as long as the curve flattens and we have news from Saskatchewan that Saskatoon for example has 90 and they want 1,000. Do we have a goal and what is our plan to obtain some of these?

Rhonda Kropp: Thanks very much for that question. I know –

Kelly McCauley: I'm sorry if it's a rather broad question.

Rhonda Kropp: No not at all. I think it's a very reasonable question. There's the issue of respirators but really there's the issue of a number of different supplies that will be needed throughout the course of this pandemic and with the way we are dealing with it in Canada.

The number of respirators I can't say because the number is going to depend very much on as we said the forecasting regarding the epidemic curve. It's going to have to do with how and if the measures we currently have in place are going to influence that curve. It's going to be influenced by the symptoms folks are having and the extremeness of those symptoms, the seriousness of the medical condition of Canadians going into hospital.

There's a number of considerations. All that being said, there are ongoing federal provincial territorial conversations to ensure we are looking not just at what is needed from a federal level and a federal stockpile but also at the local level. We've been speaking at least two to three times a week with our provincial and territorial partners to talk about what are those materials that are in short supply.

What are the numbers that are needed in each jurisdiction recognizing that each jurisdiction is in a different stage within this epidemic and their current needs? We also need to understand what is being procured at the provincial and territorial level and where the federal government can assist in that.

A number, I can't say we have that for you but I can say that we are meeting regularly to ensure we understand what the needs are today but also we are looking at that epidemic curve very carefully, looking at the epidemic curves that have happened in other countries.

And how they have managed and planning not just for today but also for what we may need in the current state of the epidemic curve and where it may go but also forecasting if our interventions do not do what we hope they will do what we may need in worse case situations. Not a number but clear to say we are definitely looking not just at today but forecasting as well with provinces and territories as well.

Operator: The next question is from Marc Dalton. Your line is open.

Marc Dalton: Thank you very much. It's a continuation of what Kelly hasn't finished asking and that is what is the government of Canada doing? I'm not talking about the promises to secure the supplies but actually produce the supplies.

As far as the curve goes it looks like it's very dramatic need that is right upon us. I'm hearing reports of doctors' offices and hospitals that are already postponing important surgeries because of safety of supplies.

Rhonda Kropp: Thank you very much. I really do appreciate that. I won't repeat what I said in the last answer but I will add to it. There's a number of other proactive pieces of work being undertaken with that concern in mind.

There is a number of departments that have been getting together on a regular basis including our partners in ISED who I may turn to in a moment to have conversations with Canadian industry partners to ensure that we have a situation where we are rallying the troops if you will towards identifying what are those priority pieces of medical equipment that the system in Canada is going to need over the next while.

Then number two how do we rally the innovation and science within the industry in Canada to ensure we are working collectively towards a common goal and ensuring we are not stopping supply chains from providing all of the equipment needed to produce those medical products. That type of proactive thinking is also going on and those meetings are happening on a regular basis. I wonder if I could turn to my partners in ISED to see if they have anything to add on that front. Patrick?

Patrick at ISED: You're exactly right. We are working actively with industry. The call for ideas and suggestions and offers of help has been very strongly responded to by Canadian manufacturers and suppliers. We are actively working with a number of companies who have identified potential capabilities on the ventilator front.

Several companies and entrepreneurs who have come up with ideas and technologies that have been forwarded both the NRC for technical consideration as well as to Health Canada who is the regulator of medical devices. That is actively taking place.

We're trying to ensure a good match up of companies and capabilities as well as was previously mentioned working with existing suppliers of ventilators around the world to ensure that whatever Canadian part of the supply chain their product is still flowing and continues to operate to ensure Canada gets the ventilators that have been ordered.

Rhonda Kropp: Thanks very much. I'll invite my colleague Lorenzo from PSPC in case he has anything to add on this.

Lorenzo at PSPC: Lorenzo from Public Services and Procurement Canada. From our perspective we are looking for units wherever we can. We did secure an order with two separate companies, one supply for 100 and then one for 70.

We're continuing to whenever we get a lead of a company that may have some equipment that could be of interest to us we're following up with that company to see if the equipment meets the specifications as identified by Health Canada and the Public Health Agency. We're exploring options to be able to see if we can secure those as quickly as possible.

Rhonda Kropp: Thanks colleagues. I appreciate that.

Operator: The next question is from Wayne Easter. Your line is open.

Wayne Easter: Thank you all, Wayne Easter, Malpeque riding. Truckers are supposed to be considered an essential service. We are now having some problem with truckers being recognized as such. I'll give you the example.

A driver had received his nomination from the province and the company completed the employer compliance and the new contract. The driver was sent to the Canada US border in Woodstock New Brunswick to have his work permit extended which can be done in person at those locations.

He was told there they would no longer be processing work permits as they were non-essential. They have sent the individual to St. Stephen to see if it will be a different situation there and I haven't had a call back on that as yet. It seems to me it may be an officer that didn't know at the border but it will be an issue. I know this company has three other drivers that need to go the day after tomorrow for the same permit under the same conditions.

Rhonda Kropp: Thank you very much for that question. I wonder if I can invite Calvin from CBSA to provide some thoughts on this question.

Calvin Christenson: Thank you for your question. A couple of things going on and the situation as you described it was a truck driver looking to get an extension or a new permit. They sometimes do that through a process called flag poling which means that they enter into the US and come back to have their permit processed at a port of entry.

Since the border measures went in we discontinued the process of flag poling mainly because of the nature of the work in the province that we would have with vehicles getting tied up at the border.

We do have information to that effect on our website saying we will no longer process entries of that type at the land border. Andre, I think there was some discussion between our departments about this and maybe I'll turn it over to you for a follow up.

Andre from IRCC: Thank you Calvin. This is Andre from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. For any work permit applications from within Canada we are encouraging everybody to apply at IRCC for their work permit. If it is an extension the person will benefit from an implied status automatically after they have applied for that extension.

If it's a change of employer or a new application we have our usual processing time of 60 days that will apply. But as Calvin mentioned we are strongly encouraging people to not flag pole, to not put a further burden on our CBSA colleagues at the port of entry and to apply online at IRCC.

Rhonda Kropp: Thank you very much for the question.

Operator: The next question is from Laurel Collins. Your line is open.

Laurel Collins: My name is Laurel Collins. I'm from Victoria and my question (off microphone).

Rhonda Kropp: I'm sorry to interrupt. We're having a very hard time hearing you Lorna. I'm very sorry. Oh Laurel, we can hear you much better now. Thank you so much.

Laurel Collins: My question is around refugees and asylum seekers. I wanted to get some clarity. We heard the borders were closed to irregular border crossings but just for folks who have been in this process I want an update and some clarity about what's happening for those folks.

Rhonda Kropp: Thank you so much. I appreciate that. Can I ask my colleagues at IRCC to take that one?

Andre at IRCC: This is Andre Baril speaking. I believe you're talking about asylum claimants in Canada. There are two different things happening. The first is at the border itself, not just to irregular migrants but also at ports of entry. The CBSA is directing back the claimants so that they stay put in the US and adhere to public health and quarantine advice.

They'll be able to return at a later date when the situation has resolved itself. For those who are in Canada we at IRCC have limited front counter capacity so at this point what we've done is arranged for an email address to be available so that people who want to make a claim can do so via email and contact us.

Of course the most important for us is to make sure the person has access to the interim federal health program. We're processing and registering those people quickly so they have access to that program. We will not finalize the claim until we can see

them and collect the biometrics and determine whether or not they're eligible to be referred to the Immigration and Refugee Board.

We'll do that at a later date but at a minimum we're making sure that people can be registered and have access to our program. Calvin, is there anything to add on your side in terms of the direct back?

Calvin Christianson: No, you pretty much raised everything Andre, thank you. Just to add this applies to that situation that's been ongoing at places like Roxham Road, Emerson Manitoba and in some cases around southern BC. When they arrive they're advised they will not be processed at this time and they will be taken back to the US and like Andre said they can come at a later time when the provisions that are in place are relieved.

Rhonda Kropp: Thank you very much for the question and thank you colleagues from the department.

Operator: The next question is from Judy Sgro. Your line is open.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Thank you very much and thank you to all of you for the tremendous work you're doing. I'm very concerned with the million people that have already logged in for employment insurance assistance. Where are we getting all of the departmental staff that are going to be required? How are we ever going to handle the kind of workload that's being put there? There was insufficient staff I would suggest before. How are we going to get enough staff into the office there working from wherever to begin to process this million claims? Thank you very much for all of your great work.

Rhonda Kropp: Thank you so much for the positive feedback and for the question. Chris, I'm going to pass that one over to you at ESDC.

Chris at ESDC: Thanks very much for the question. It is definitely a challenge. We have major business continuity planning on going to make sure the safety, the health of people and the workload we have contingency plans in place. We've made huge inroads with regards to our telework.

I think today we had the most ever people teleworking on our network. We're introducing new network capacity that we haven't had before that is going very well. It's about expanding that network capacity and making sure we have backups to all staff and that employees are watched from a health perspective and taking care. It's really about augmenting our telework capacity.

Rhonda Kropp: Thank you again so much for that question. I know we're a little past the half hour mark but Giuliana maybe we can take one or two more questions please.

Operator: The next question is from Paul Manly. Your line is open.

Paul Manly: Thank you for these daily briefings. Thank you for the work you're doing. I've got so many questions, so many stressed out constituents right now. A key thing people are worried about getting rent paid when they don't have an income.

Is the government going to be doing something to ensure that people don't get evicted during this time? I've got a lot of small business people really stressed out that the 10% wage subsidy is just not enough to keep employees.

They need help with making sure they can meet their needs to make their payments for rent, for their overhead costs, for everything else. If we lose a lot of these small businesses during this crisis we're losing the economic driver for this country. I'm wondering about those two things. When can we see some protection for renters and when can we see some better relief for business owners?

Rhonda Kropp: Thank you so much and thank you for raising a really important question for many Canadians. We unfortunately do not have our Finance colleagues on the line but I wonder if any other colleagues on the line – Chris, I hate to put you on the spot because there are a lot of questions coming your way today. Any comments you might be able to make from ESDC?

Chris at ESDC: You also might want to talk to my ISED colleagues but I think we are looking at a number of benefits. Again we don't want – we're looking at different measures so that people might not have to be laid off so that employers can still retain employees hoping for a quicker recovery.

You mentioned the 10% but again soon there will be different measures announced. It's been indicated we're looking at all available supports, all different ways we can help workers and employers mainly to keep those workers on board somehow.

Unidentified Male: If I can expand on that point which is the government has announced an injection of funds to businesses. We continue to monitor the role of Crown corporations such as BDC and EDC remain important parts of the federal government's response to support businesses through this very difficult time injecting liquidity into companies.

The situation continues to be quite fluid in the department as well as Finance and others are closely monitoring and tracking what's happening across industrial sectors and businesses each day. It changes very quickly and in some cases by the hour. That's something we continue to monitor.

Rhonda Kropp: Thank you very much for the question and thanks to my colleagues for those responses. Giuliana we'll take one more question before we wrap up for the day.

Operator: The last question is from Jeremy Patzer. Your line is open.

Jeremy Patzer: Thank you very much. I'm from Cyprus Hills Grasslands in Saskatchewan. This question would be for Immigration. Will we continue to process new visa applications or will it be just for those that are in the system that are allowed to come either as temporary foreign workers or as students?

Andre at IRCC: It's safe to assume that our capacity right now is at bare minimum in some missions abroad because some staff have been repatriated so we're looking at this issue now. Of course the orders around the travel restrictions and the exceptions are top priority. For the rest we're going to have to look at what's our capacity and we're prioritizing caseloads.

Rhonda Kropp: Thank you so much. With that I will thank everybody very much on the line for your interest and for your really important questions. I'd like to thank my colleagues from the other departments on the line today for their time and their commitment. Remind everybody to wash your hands and keep well. Thank you very much.

Operator: Thank you. The conference has now ended. Please disconnect your lines at this time. We thank you for your participation.