



June 16, 2022

Remarks given to the Canadian Senate Standing Committee of Agriculture and Forestry to speak on Bill S-236 which deals with Employment Insurance reform in reconstituting PEI as one EI Zone

Good morning,

My name is Bill DeBlois and I am the President of the Greater Charlottetown Area Chamber of Commerce. I am also the proud owner and operator of Buns n Things Bakery, a small business in Charlottetown.

On behalf of the Chamber and the Board of Directors, I want to take this opportunity to thank the Committee for the invitation to speak with you today about Bill S-236 and discuss this important topic.

The Greater Charlottetown Area Chamber of Commerce is the largest Chamber in Prince Edward Island, representing over 1100 small businesses and approximately 20,000 employees. Since 1887, we have continued to be the voice of business in Greater Charlottetown.

I want to begin by telling you that the Chamber supports the Employment Insurance Program. It is important to have safety nets for employees who have been laid off or find themselves out of work. We view the program as necessary in providing temporary income support for those temporarily out of work. The Chamber understands the complexity of the federal Employment Insurance Program, the role it plays in Prince Edward Island's economy and how it integrates with our seasonal industries.

We are supportive of the proposed amendment. Many of our Members have expressed concern over the two different zones and the lack of parity between them. There are disparities between the two zones, with those in the Charlottetown area receiving lower EI benefits than those in rural areas of the province outside the City. If I am an employer in Charlottetown, I do not want to have to compete against what an employee may see as favourable EI conditions in rural PEI. Not to mention that these zones are based on where you live, not where you work.

We support the idea of one zone because it ensures a level playing field for both employers and employees when it comes to Employment Insurance.

Our concern lays with today's labour climate. We are facing a workforce shortage that is nearly unprecedented. We were experiencing job vacancies and challenges in sourcing labour prior to the pandemic, and the problem has only grown since. As of the end of March of this year, we had

9,520 Islanders collecting EI benefits. Statistics Canada's latest report on job vacancies, unadjusted for seasonality, states Prince Edward Island had a job vacancy rate of 5.6% in March of this year. There is a gap between some, not all, but some who are collecting benefits and the job vacancies that exist for them to pursue.

We encourage this Committee to recommend a full-scale federal government review of the EI program. We need to focus on how to help people get back to work.

In March, our Chamber conducted 4 Focus Groups, related to the workforce, in order to understand what can be accomplished to strengthen it. The focus groups were member businesses, representing a variety of industries.

These Focus Groups, as well as our members anecdotally, have repeatedly stated that retention is a giant issue across all industries presently. Our members say it is difficult to find people to fill job roles, or stay long-term in such roles. Some pointed to the current Employment Insurance program as something that needs to change to ensure people remain on the job.

Our members have also indicated concerns with the outcomes of the 2017 announcement to include post-secondary students in the Career Connect Program, which allows them to access EI benefits while attending post-secondary school. The Chamber has heard from members that because of this change, it is harder to find students to fill part-time positions.

Our members see an overall review of the Employment Insurance Program as a way to ensure the program is remains as a safety net.

Some actions that could result from such review could be increasing the number of weeks required for EI to support employee retention and ensure more people are staying in the workforce. The review should also implement permanent solutions to seasonal employment challenges.

Senators, the Greater Charlottetown Area Chamber of Commerce thanks you for your time and respectfully asks for you to support the passage of Bill S-236, as well as implement an overall review of the current Employment Insurance program. We are facing a workforce challenge that needs to be addressed, and a review of this program is one way of many that can help alleviate the problem and strengthen our social safety net for employees that sometimes need temporary relief in times of need.

Thank you for providing this opportunity to discuss this topic