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(Hansard)**

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(Hansard)**

A-33

**Standing Committee on
Government Agencies**

Intended appointments

1st Session
42nd Parliament
Tuesday 27 October 2020

**Comité permanent des
organismes gouvernementaux**

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Mardi 27 octobre 2020

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES ORGANISMES GOUVERNEMENTAUX

Tuesday 27 October 2020

Mardi 27 octobre 2020

The committee met at 0900 in committee room 2 and by video conference.

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): Good morning, everyone. I would like to call this meeting to order. We are meeting to conduct a review of intended appointments.

We have the following members in the room: myself and MPP Miller from Parry Sound–Muskoka. The following members are participating remotely: MPP Bouma, MPP Nicholls, MPP Pang, MPP Tangri, MPP Burch, MPP Rasheed and MPP Anand. Have I missed anyone? Seeing none, we are also joined by staff from legislative research, Hansard and broadcast and recording.

To make sure that everyone can understand what is going on, it is important that all participants speak slowly and clearly. Please wait until I recognize you before starting to speak. Since it could take a little time for your audio and video to come up after I recognize you, please take a brief pause before beginning. As always, all comments by members or witnesses should go through the Chair.

INTENDED APPOINTMENTS

MS. VALA MONESTIME BELTER

Review of intended appointment, selected by official opposition party: Vala Monestime Belter, intended appointee as director, Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority board of directors.

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): Our first item of business is a review of intended appointments. We will now move to our review of intended appointments. First, we have Vala Monestime Belter, nominated as director of the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority board of directors. Welcome.

As you may be aware, you have the opportunity, should you choose to do so, to make an initial statement. Following this, there will be questions from members of the committee. For that questioning, we will start with the official opposition, followed by the government, with 15 minutes allocated to each recognized party. Any time that you take in your statement will be deducted from the time allotted to the government.

Once again, welcome, and the floor is yours.

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: I am Vala Monestime Belter, and I thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the standing committee. I appreciate this opportunity to appear before you today. I prepared something to read, so I apologize for not giving direct face contact at all times.

I share with you today my passion to be part of the institution that delivers support to many needed seniors, the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority. It's an honour to be part of this organization that is dedicated to sharing unbiased, transparent safety information with seniors and their loved ones. The responsibility to put seniors first by ensuring that retirement homes follow the rules is one that I do not take lightly.

I live in Mattawa, where the historic Mattawa River is the dividing line between northern and southern Ontario. I hold a bachelor of science from the University of Ottawa, a BA from Carleton and a master of science from the California University of Pennsylvania.

I bring to this role extensive experience in the health care space, first as a staff nurse at the old Ottawa general hospital, and later at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario. I then shifted to the Algonquin Nursing Home in Mattawa, where I served as the director of care for 26 years, then as administrator and chief nursing officer for an additional nine years. After retiring briefly, I worked for the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care as a long-term-care homes inspector and travelled through northern Ontario, inspecting its long-term-care homes for two years.

Throughout my professional experience, I've worked both in urban and rural environments. From this I was able to recognize the unique challenges faced by each as well as the underlying commonalities across our health system. At every step, I have spoken with seniors, their families, care providers and community members, and I have listened and heard their suggestions and concerns.

Forty years ago, preparing for my first national long-term-care-home accreditation, I remember our leadership team developing a vision, goals and objectives. Goals and objectives are cornerstones of nursing practice and are part of every care plan, so as a nurse, those were easy to identify and develop. However, when it came to the anchoring words of the vision, we asked the home's residents for help. We believed their involvement and feedback regarding their long-term-care home was paramount. That is how the Algonquin Nursing Home's motto became "A place called home."

Thanks to them, future decisions were guided by their wisdom and thoughtfulness. What would you do in your home? How would you deal with this situation if you were living in your own residence? This most basic level of respect was a great life lesson, and one that I've used as a fundamental guideline in health care and other parts of my

career—to care for people with civility, to help them maintain their dignity, to treat others as you would like to be treated, to care for residents as if they were in their own home.

My own grandmother and mother were residents of a long-term-care home. Today, my in-laws and several friends are residents of retirement homes throughout the province. I've seen first-hand the importance of providing quality services to retirement home residents and how we can help ensure that seniors are able to live lives of dignity with good and respectful care provided. I look forward to continuing with this ethic in my role as a board member of the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority.

I bring to this role extensive experience in corporate governance. A few examples include serving as director of TVOntario and Mattawa Hospital, and I'm founder and former chair of the Mattawa Child Care Center and the Mattawa Area Youth Golf Association. Through my extensive health system and governance experience, I am confident I can effectively serve the needs of our province in this role.

I deeply believe in the RHRA's mission of putting seniors first. I'm confident that I—by ensuring that retirement homes follow the rules and share unbiased, transparent safety information with seniors and their loved ones. I believe that when we ensure that the Retirement Homes Act is being followed, we can provide seniors with the dignity they deserve.

Thank you again for inviting me to join you and for this opportunity to serve.

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): Thank you very much for your statement.

The first round of questioning will come from the official opposition. Mr. Burch.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thank you, Ms. Belter, for meeting with us this morning. It's great to see that you have some experience in the field.

I do have a few questions for you. First of all, were you approached by anyone to apply for this position?

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: Thank you for your question.

Yes, I believe the ministry reached out to me because of my experience not only as a long-term-care director of care but my travels throughout the north and the different range between rural and city environments, the different boards I've been on. I think my qualifications are quite adequately suited, and I feel quite confident that I will be able to make a difference, bringing in the voices that I've heard throughout the years from residents, from families, from the communities. So I'm looking forward to this.

Mr. Jeff Burch: You do have really good qualifications.

The official opposition has been raising issues of connections between the retirement home industry and the government, and so there are certain questions, obviously, in our role, that we have to ask.

Can you confirm that you've donated close to \$2,000 to the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario since 2013?

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: I can't tell you the exact number, but maybe; it's close. I've donated to quite a few political parties over my many years of living. I've donated to the Conservative Party. I've donated to the Liberal Party.

A good friend of mine, the late Mauril Bélanger, was the MP for Vanier. He was passionate about the north and small communities, so he and I worked together on many projects, and I did contribute to his campaign, as well.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Are you aware of the recent reports of neglect and poor living conditions at homes like Rosslyn Retirement? And in light of those reports, do you feel the board, under this government, has fulfilled its mandate to protect the vulnerable seniors who are living in retirement homes?

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: The mandate and the mission and the vision of the regulatory homes authority is to put safety first, and I don't take that lightly. I believe in the mandate; I'm quite passionate about it. With its safety and licensing program and its education outreach program, I think everyone has a lot to learn, to do, to maintain safety standards for residents.

I am new to the board, so I'm not looking forward but I am looking forward to supporting homes in making sure that residents get safety first, get choice, and that the staff get supportive education—so, yes, thank you.

0910

Mr. Jeff Burch: I just have a question from my own personal experience. Around about 2008 to 2010, I was working with the service employees' union negotiating with retirement homes like Chartwell in new collective agreements. There was a real effort at that time, at the bargaining table, to introduce new classifications that were lower-paid than PSW and health care aid rates and to increase the number of part-time employees—because you don't have to pay benefits etc. Do you think that was a mistake by the industry—to focus on driving wages down and increasing part-time employment? And in your role, how would you address that situation in the future?

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: I'm not familiar with stuff from 2008.

I think that the care for residents is vital and important, and my background certainly brings me that knowledge and experience of best practices—what works best, what supports homes need to provide that care better. I definitely hear what you just said and will bring it forth and question it appropriately, but the mandate today is good and it's solid. We just have to work together to make sure that we deliver that safety first, that choice, that good, quality care that my whole life has been all about.

Mr. Jeff Burch: How will you ensure that the profit motive for private operators doesn't supersede the motive to care for seniors and make sure they're safe? Obviously, lower-paid staff, less-qualified staff and part-time staff have not been very effective; the pandemic has shown that. How would you use your experience to address that?

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: The retirement homes sector is sort of unique in the health service system. It's a really private relationship between the resident and the

retirement home. The residents get to choose it, and the mandate of the RHRA is there to protect and ensure that the safety and well-being of residents are met, but also that residents have informed choice. As long as we support, educate, license and inspect, I believe we're doing a good part. The other part, as you suggested, is listening, learning, bringing in best practices and finding out how we can make things better.

Mr. Jeff Burch: In terms of tenant complaints—how would you encourage vulnerable tenants to make complaints against the retirement home they live in, if they're afraid to complain because they're afraid to be evicted, for example?

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: I'm not familiar with the whole process yet. I've seen in other places "best practices," again—and I'm sorry about using that term; I really like it—from toll-free numbers to other people calling in for you. I'm sure there are ways for people to be able to access a complaints system that protects them.

Mr. Jeff Burch: So at what point would you assess a tenant who has become so dependent on outside services in a retirement home that the retirement home is now acting like a long-term-care home? What assessment tools are in place for that?

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: I'm not extremely familiar with that in the retirement home sector—but I do believe that the homes are inspected. There is the Retirement Homes Act that sets a standard. Our association is mandated by that act to support the homes.

I would like to get more information before I really answer that question properly. Good enough?

Mr. Jeff Burch: Okay. In 2017, at Bill McMurray Residence—a story broke in the Toronto Star about a gentleman, Roy Gillett, who was dead in his bed until his son went to visit days after he had died and found his father had passed away. What has changed in retirement homes in order to prevent this from happening again?

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: Mr. Gillett's family has my sympathies. That's the bottom line. The staff who had worked that day, many of whom are really good people, have my thanks.

I am not familiar with the case, but I—could you repeat the question again, please?

Mr. Jeff Burch: Sure. What, in your view, since 2018, has changed in retirement homes to prevent that tragedy? It was a well-publicized tragedy, and you would think that after something like that happening, there would be some changes in the retirement homes sector to prevent such—he found his father days after he had died, so he hadn't been checked on for days. Are you aware of any changes since 2018 that have happened to prevent that from happening again?

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: I'm not exactly familiar with those changes. But this is what my feelings are: I believe that the inspections have intensified. I believe the focus on risk—has further looked into this situation and learned from it. I think on the RHRA website there is the information that would answer your question better. I thank you for reminding me to look into this further.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Going back to the previous question: What is your knowledge of complaints processes in retirement homes? What knowledge and experience do you have of different complaint protocols in the retirement homes sector?

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: In the retirement homes sector—I'm not 100% familiar with it. I believe people can call in; these complaints are then looked into. They are based on risk. So if something was very serious, it would be dealt with immediately. If something was more of a concern, that would not be as high a priority. Something that was serious would have immediate action; that would be looked into. An inspector would be sent to look at that home, and that protocol would then be followed to support that.

Mr. Jeff Burch: What about the long-term-care sector? Are you more familiar with that complaint process?

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: Yes, I am familiar with that.

Mr. Jeff Burch: What's your experience in dealing with that process?

Ms. Vala Monestime: Well, we're talking about the retirement home association—but briefly, there are several ways to complain: You can write a letter to your MP. You can write a letter to the long-term-care-homes branch. You can call; there's a toll-free number. There's whistle-blower protection. Depending, again, similarly, on the risk, an inspector would be dispatched to go talk with the resident, to talk to the home, to inspect the home, and the process would be followed and applied.

Mr. Jeff Burch: I have to be honest with you; I'm a little bit concerned about your knowledge of complaint processes, given the things that have been uncovered throughout the pandemic. Some really horrific conditions have been uncovered in homes across the province. So I hope that going forward, that's something that you'll better educate yourself on.

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: I'm not the retirement home inspector; I am the board member. The inspector inspects the home. They follow the protocol. They report to the registrar, who would then report to us. The board member would not interfere in the process—

Mr. Jeff Burch: Yes, I understand that—

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: So in a way, I shouldn't meddle in that. It should be an unbiased respect for method, where the complainant is protected, as well. So meddling in that is inappropriate.

Mr. Jeff Burch: I completely agree with you. But as a board member, do you not think that you should be aware of what the complaint protocols are?

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: Well, I am aware of it. Do I know them intimately? Not yet. I will. But I do know they exist. I know they're thorough. I know they meet the regulatory authority mandate. I know that they meet the Retirement Homes Act. I know that it works. I know that it's risk-based. I know that it's assessed. I know that it's reviewed. I know that it's a work in progress, constantly

improving. It uses best practices information and international guidelines to work. So what more would you ask? It's appropriate.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thank you very much. I have no more questions.

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): The next round of questions will now go to the government. We will start with Mr. Miller.

Mr. Norman Miller: Thank you for coming before the committee today, and thank you for offering yourself for this position. You certainly have a wealth of experience, based on your life's work.

0920

How do you feel your involvement in other corporate governance positions has prepared you for this role that you're now planning on taking on?

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: Through my whole career, I have sat on health care boards and municipal boards, large and small boards, new and old boards. I've watched boards develop; I've watched them renew. For instance, the old Ontario Nursing Home Association became the Ontario Long Term Care Association. The old Mattawa general hospital, which was run by the Sisters of Charity of Ottawa, turned into the Mattawa Hospital, run by the Catholic Health Association of Ontario. I've watched progress, evolution, and concerns met, of small groups and very large groups.

I bring a knowledge that all organizations evolve, all organizations change, and sometimes it seems that their ability from one year to another just continues to improve. I know that will happen, and that enthusiasm is what I'd bring to this board.

Mr. Norman Miller: I'll pass it on to my colleagues.

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): Go ahead, Mr. Pang.

Mr. Billy Pang: Thank you, Vala, for your presentation.

How can you take your professional experience in other health settings and apply that to the RHRA?

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: I don't want to sound trite, but people are people. People like to be respected. They like to be treated with dignity. They like to be listened to and heard. To me, it's seamless—it can be a hospital board, it can be a retirement home board, it can be a historical board, it can be a golf association, or it can be a child care centre. You look at the mandate, you make sure that the rules are followed, you make sure that everybody is given time to express their concerns, and then you try to make it work. You assess yourself. You assess your board. It can be called anything as long as you follow that sort of principle. I believe I've learned that in my life, and I intend to bring it forward to this board.

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): Mr. Nicholls.

Mr. Rick Nicholls: Good morning, Ms. Belter. It has been great to see you here. I think you're doing an excellent job.

About 95% of the retirement homes are in fact privately run. Therefore, I'm of the belief, having come from an entrepreneurial background, that "profit" is not a dirty word, for sure. But I do agree with you that the correct

implementation of those best practices that you spoke about will ensure the health and safety of retirement homes.

I do "Sing Along with Rick" in a lot of the retirement homes. I know, I know—don't ask me to sing; that's okay. Especially my colleagues don't want me to sing. But I have so much fun doing that, just to put a smile on their face and take them for a trip down memory lane, and they really, really enjoy it. I just love these people.

I do see from your experience that you have done extensive work in both rural—which is where I am, down in Chatham area—and urban communities. Can you please share your experiences with the rural/urban communities and tell us how that would relate to your role at the RHRA?

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: Thank you, way down in Chatham.

Rural and urban—urban would be something like Mattawa, Ontario. We're very small—2,500 people. Our nearest town is 70 kilometres away, North Bay; and to many in Toronto, that's considered pretty rural as well. The largest city around here would be Sudbury, and Toronto would probably consider that to be small as well. However, that is a big city. My perspective is from tiny to larger to extremely large, like Toronto. A board meeting in Mattawa is—

Failure of sound system.

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: Shall I continue?

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): Oh, we've got you back. Go ahead.

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: Okay. A board meeting in Mattawa may be just a few minutes' walk from our house. A board meeting in Toronto would be two days away from home. A board meeting in Thunder Bay might be a three-day trip and a different set of clothes—it might be a suit in Toronto; it might be a parka in Thunder Bay in the middle of winter. That dynamic alone is a different challenge.

Technology is a challenge, as well. In northern Ontario, the Internet is working today, but if it's raining, I would lose part of you right away. That alone is difficult. Up in the north, if you were sending me the minutes of the meeting, I might not get them for several days, and you would be well past the meeting.

I might bring to you challenges of funding—because it costs a lot to get gas up here; it might cost a lot more to get food. If you would say, "Let's just eat more fresh vegetables," I would say to you, "In winter, we don't get any." That perspective is, I think, a great reminder to my colleagues who are sitting at a table, who may not realize that seniors in the north have different challenges than seniors in the south. I think that is a good, added benefit.

Aside from the usual protocols of governance, which are fact—that's how you conduct meetings and that's how you deal with issues—the perspective that I bring is valuable, because we're all from Ontario.

Mr. Rick Nicholls: Thank you very much. I really do appreciate your insights.

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): Mrs. Tangri.

Mrs. Nina Tangri: Thank you, Ms. Belter, for joining us this morning.

I see that you founded a number of charities. Can you tell us how those experiences could help you in your role with the RHRA?

Ms. Vala Monestime Belter: I founded two charities, both from just seeing the communities around us. I watched how children could not golf if they didn't have the money for it. We thought that golf was a really good life lesson. It taught you to be honest. It taught you to go out and exercise. It taught you to be patient with yourself. We founded a charity to ensure that all children in our community could golf and participate. I think the seniors who were volunteering to help teach them and the children themselves enjoyed lifelong lessons. Twenty years in, our association is still strong, and many young adults are now alumni of that. What that taught me is that a little bit of investment into people is a lifelong gift.

That translates into the retirement association, the RHRA, in that time given to make sure that we get it right is a long process. It's a good process, thanks to the act and the authority's regulations. The people on the board—the passion that they bring just makes everything more rounded, more humane, more varied. Everybody brings their own story to the table.

I've translated my past charitable work to all boards. You just bring you to the table, you hear what others have to say, and you make it all better. I know it sounds trite, but that's true.

Mrs. Nina Tangri: I'll pass it on to MPP Bouma.

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): That's 14 seconds, so I think we'll stop it there.

Thank you very much for your presentation, Ms. Monestime Belter. You're welcome to stay on the line to watch the rest of the meeting, but that does conclude the time allotted for your presentation.

For the committee's information, we might have to have a short recess, because our next witness is having technical difficulties connecting. How about if we take a five-minute recess? Thank you.

The committee recessed from 0930 to 0940.

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): We will now resume the meeting. We have also been joined by Ms. Gélinas, MPP for Nickel Belt.

MR. PETER HARRIS

Review of intended appointment, selected by official opposition party: Peter Harris, intended appointee as director, Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority board of directors.

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): Next, we have Peter Harris, nominated as director of the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority board of directors. Mr. Harris is on the line. Welcome.

As you may be aware, you have the opportunity, should you choose to do so, to make an initial statement. Following this, there will be questions from members of the committee. For that questioning, we will start with the government, followed by the official opposition, with 15 minutes allocated to each recognized party. Any time you

take in your statement will be deducted from the time allotted to the government.

Once again, welcome, Mr. Harris. The floor is yours.

Mr. Peter Harris: Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the standing committee. I'm pleased to appear before you today to discuss the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority and my role within that authority.

I'd like to give you a brief background on myself and speak to that. I grew up in small-town Ontario—not very far, actually; down the road, in Grimsby, which was much smaller then than it is now. As a child, I attended elementary school there and a small rural high school—actually, 400 children, awfully small by today's standards. One of the advantages of that is you know almost every student in the school and you know their families. You get a pretty upfront appreciation, by reason of that knowledge, of the impact a growing community can have on their lives.

My father owned and ran a small business within that town. One of his many voluntary activities involved his chairmanship of the local high school board. He was an important example to me of the importance of staying engaged in one's community, whether it's large or small, and the importance of giving back and the impact it can have.

After secondary school, I went on to get my degree in business administration at Western, at which point I met my future wife. We ultimately settled in Mississauga and raised a family.

I went on, then, to graduate from the University of Toronto law school. I was called to the bar and have been a practising lawyer for over 50 years, being a senior partner in two large Toronto firms and now practising law on my own. During that time, I wasn't just in Toronto; I had some varying periods of time on contract as an adviser to the Canada Revenue Agency and the federal Minister of Finance.

My volunteer activities have ranged from local, provincial and national activities, and they included and include, actually, my chairmanship of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce taxation and economics committee for the last 25 years.

In addition, and more germane for today's conversation, I had my involvement in what I call continuum wellness; that is, I served on the board of directors of one of Canada's largest hospitals, Toronto General Hospital. In addition to sitting as a board member, I was also a member of that organization's finance committee.

Subsequently, I served as board chair of the Headwaters Health Care Centre in Orangeville, a rural hospital, after first sitting as a community member on their finance committee and as a board member. There was a time of significant change for that hospital, including the appointment of a new CEO, the introduction of midwives, the appointment of a new chief of staff, and the early initiation of planning financially for what resulted, after my departure, in the opening of a new 8,000-square-foot ambulatory care centre, which became part of the telehealth NORTH Network.

The contrast of these two medical organizations made me aware of both the similar and distinctively different challenges they each faced.

Following that, I served as the director of the Central West Local Health Integration Network where, amongst other things, we dealt with a statistic using data that indicated that in that area we had the highest incidence of diabetes in the province. That prompted us to initiate a trial program of going into the various schools to initiate education on public health in general, and in particular on diabetes, in order to educate those students at the right level, who would then carry that through their lives and carry it home.

In total, I've served over a decade on those organizations. Through this experience, I've been able to appreciate opportunities and challenges for both large and small facilities, the general concerns involved in public health—and a first-hand view of the importance of extending the continuum of care outside of the hospital into other care settings, including retirement homes.

I appreciate having been asked by the government to serve as the chair of the RHRA, and I believe in its mission of putting seniors first by ensuring that retirement homes follow applicable rules and standards and share unbiased, transparent safety information with seniors and their loved ones.

I appreciate the opportunity to continue to serve the people of our province through this role and to bring my skills forward as we continue to keep our retirement home residents, staff and their families safe. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): Thank you very much, Mr. Harris.

The first round of questioning will be from the government. The first questioner will be Mr. Miller.

Mr. Norman Miller: Mr. Harris, thank you for coming before the committee today, and thank you for your past public service and for your continuing public service.

As a current member and in fact the chair of the RHRA, what have your contributions been since you have been appointed?

Mr. Peter Harris: What I think my contributions—and I started in June, by the way—have been drawing a board together, a board and members that I was not acquainted with. I knew their backgrounds, and they of course knew me only through reading my CV. We are in a time of—I wouldn't say trouble, but certainly an interesting time, given COVID-19 and the stresses on the retirement system. So my first challenge was bringing in the board and building some culture on that board in a time of great stress not only for the board but for the internal staff, who are the boots on the ground, and they have to carry a tremendous load.

I indicated at that time that we would have meetings every week until such time as we could go into the normal meeting mode. We have continued that up until very recently, and we remain ready to call board meetings as we need them, depending, again, as I say, on the very real pandemic that we're meeting at the moment. When you join any organization, it's certainly a rush to accumulate

information, to build confidence of the board in your leadership, as well as of the staff and the registrar in your leadership.

I think we continue to make great strides, both with the public information that's available on our websites—none of which I founded, but which we continue to this day. The CEO and I meet on a very frequent basis so that I can determine at that time, and we ultimately determine, the frequency of board meetings. Right now, we're at the ready, and we have met on a consistent and timely basis.

Mr. Norman Miller: Good. Thank you again for your service.

I'll pass it on to my colleagues.

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): Mrs. Tangri.

Mr. Nina Tangri: Thank you, Mr. Harris, for joining us today. It's interesting that you've spent some time in Mississauga, my native town.

I see that you were the president of the Mississauga minor football league. From that, what leadership skills did you learn that could be applicable here and to this role that you're about to take on?

Mr. Peter Harris: That's an interesting question. It was a leadership role that I took on perhaps a little selfishly to start with, because my son started out in that league. But he left, and I continued on as president. I think the biggest item that I probably learned was—the football league has a core group of directors, and as you can imagine, many of those directors are parents of players. So I was really learning and monitoring—for people to check their roles and biases at the door and deal with an organization that we thought about for the good of the league and not the good of any particular team or child. We were very fortunate in the rules already brought in. The league was founded by a legendary football player named Russ Jackson, who many of you may be acquainted with, and then passed on to an Argo named Peter Martin, and then Peter passed it on to me. I had the challenge of continuing the very success that they've engendered. I think the biggest thing was getting parents to sit, on an objective basis, within a board of directors and deal with the league on a league-wide, systematic basis and not with any particular biases. Also, dealing with parents certainly has its own sensitivities—speaking as a parent and speaking as one who has dealt with parents in those kinds of settings.

0950

Mrs. Nina Tangri: I'll pass it on to my colleague.

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): Mr. Bouma.

Mr. Will Bouma: Thank you, Mr. Harris, for being here before us today, even through some of the technical glitches that we've had. It struck me over these last few weeks that we've had such a strong calibre of candidates before us. You're no different than the testimony that we heard earlier today. It strikes me how life experience seems to prepare people for some of these vital roles. We appreciate you standing up in this position.

It seems that a key part of your role as chair is heavily focused on how to create an effective governance system.

How do you feel that your professional experience has led you to this place and prepared you for this need in the RHA?

Mr. Peter Harris: I think my background and my experience covers it off in two ways. First, I would say that from a regulatory perspective—I dealt with a regulatory regime all my working life, whether as an advocate to that particular regulatory body or whether as part of that regulatory body; and I've dealt with and drafted many forms of different legislation. Therefore, from a regulatory and interpretive perspective, I've had a long career in doing just that.

I also think that my various board positions, not just as a chair but as a member of those boards, and my position as a managing partner of a Toronto law firm have pointed very clearly to me that in order to bring a board together and for the board to function for the good of the organization, we have to proceed on a consensus basis. I appreciate that, as a chair, to some extent you may have to make the call, if you will. But since we're data-driven more and more, not just within this organization but in all other organizations I've dealt with—to get the maximum effectiveness in my governance role, I think my style, as it was, managing the law firm I previously managed, was on a consensus basis, and once the decision was struck, we all take it forth as our decision. That's what I think my background brings to that. With my varied chairmanship roles, I dealt with directors of all types, who are board members for good and sufficient reason. They're strong personalities; they are very experienced, very adept at what they do and very confident in their roles and their opinions. Bringing those people together on a consensus basis, to my mind, is the only effective way to operate—not making an overriding call, if you will.

Mr. Will Bouma: Thank you very much for that response. It's much appreciated.

With that, Mr. Chair, the government will cease questions in the interest of time.

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): That concludes questions from the government.

We will now go to the official opposition, starting with Mr. Burch.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thank you, Mr. Harris, for appearing today and speaking with us.

We obviously have had some issues with the connection between this government and the private long-term-care and retirement home industry, so I have a few questions for you based on that.

Were you approached by anyone to apply for this position?

Mr. Peter Harris: No, I wasn't. I learned of the position, actually, through—they come across my Internet, various government appointment positions. From time to time, the entity itself may have been brought up by my colleagues on the LHIN or other colleagues. But I wasn't recruited, if you will, no.

I wish to maintain my experience and my role generally in what I call the “wellness continuum”—I include health care in that; those are my words. So when I saw that opportunity, I thought that I could bring my past experience

to a role in this, because it got me more into public health care as opposed to being—and I don't say this critically—hospital-centric, if you will. I felt that this part of the public health care regime and all parts of public health care are where we should be making our stress today and attempting to deal with it in a much more orderly manner.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Can you confirm that you've donated close to \$4,000 to the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario since 2014?

Mr. Peter Harris: I'll take the amount as you put it; I don't recall. But I have contributed to them since 2014. That's correct.

Mr. Jeff Burch: You were hand-picked by the Premier to serve on his council on hallway medicine. What's your relationship with the Premier?

Mr. Peter Harris: I have met the Premier on two occasions. Actually, how I came upon that is because I saw it in the press, that it would be formed. I was aware that Rueben Devlin was heading it up. He and I had met on a couple of occasions only; we would probably not remember each other's names on the street. I phoned his office, made an appointment and went and said, “I'd like to be on that committee.” He asked why, and I said, “First of all, I have a background, on a governance basis, in public health care. I am a layperson health care-wise, so I think that's an important addition to a board of this nature—and at any time, I'm a potential beneficiary of health care.” Given my background and given the fact that I'm a layperson, and given my familiarity with the system and some of its deficiencies and advantages, I asked if I could be appointed to the position. I had no contact with the Premier at any time with respect to it. My contact was Rueben.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thank you for answering those questions.

With respect to the sector itself: I have a history of negotiating, on the union side, with retirement homes. Over the last 10 or 15 years, there has been a real effort by that sector to reduce wages or keep wages low by introducing classifications like “guest attendant” and also increasing the number of part-time employees. The pandemic has obviously brought those issues to the forefront. How would you approach that issue in the position that you are applying for?

Mr. Peter Harris: I think the approach, as a regulatory authority, would be on a persuasive basis. Unless they run afoul of and unless these very deficiencies bring them in contravention of the regulations, other than as a persuasive measure and also being very persuasive as well as forceful in the quality that's being delivered—legislatively, we do not have much more power than that in order to bring that to bear.

These are independent organizations. They still have to perform and meet the standards set. You may argue, “Well, are the standards good enough?” Perhaps not. But that's something that we would have to be empowered with legislatively, in order to go a great deal further into the operations of an independent organization.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thank you for that answer.

What is your knowledge of complaints processes in the retirement homes sector? There have been a lot of issues, obviously, brought to the forefront lately regarding residents being left without care for days and difficulties with family members registering complaints through the system. Do you have any insights into how we can improve the complaints processes in retirement homes?

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Mr. Peter Harris: First of all, as I know you're aware, we have an independent complaints officer who analyzes the timeliness of our responses.

I will say this: We know that the communication effort that we make with respect not just to families but to the residents themselves is paramount—and to educate them as to getting in touch with us in a timely manner and getting in touch with the right person. We also acknowledge that these could certainly be much better known. In fact, on a number of occasions, since I took over as chair in June, the communications have been stressed. We're working very hard, I can assure you, on communicating not just, as I say, with the sector homes themselves, but with the residents and their families, and enabling them to get in touch with us on a timely basis and with the right person at the right time. We do know that delays do occur, and we don't find the overdue delays acceptable. That's what we're working towards.

Mr. Jeff Burch: I'll pass things over to my colleague France Gélinas.

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): Ms. Gélinas.

M^{me} France Gélinas: It's a pleasure to talk to you, Mr. Harris.

My first question is in line with the answer you've just given about the fact that we have an independent complaints officer and the need for the residents—at the 10,000-foot level, within the retirement homes system, there are over 100,000, I would call them, frail, elderly residents. Some are full of vigour, but some are not. The system is such that there is minimal government oversight; you guys are it. The Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority—you are the eyes, ears and heart of over 100,000 elderly residents.

Do you feel that the government should have a role to play in ensuring the safety and security of what I call this vulnerable group of people?

Mr. Peter Harris: First, as you pointed out, we are it. Getting to know the organization as I have and the people involved in the organization—as I said earlier, “boots on the ground”—I think this organization, in dealing with what it has been dealing with, has a very real role to play, an important role, and I think they are capable of that role.

We have obviously made overtures—and we do it on an ongoing basis—to the government to make legislative changes from time to time.

We're looking for sources of revenue—not from the traditional sources we have, but from sources of revenue so that we can, for example, increase our data coverage. We operate, as you know, within that 100,000 group of people. One of our greatest assets, if we can build the system and maintain the system, is data that we can collect

and start to deal with, that data on 100,000 people. Obviously, the data is important because, given that it's 100,000 people—we had to deal with each person individually. There is no organization, whether it would be a pure government organization or whether it would be the RHRA, that is going to be capable of doing that. We must discuss this kind of thing and their vulnerability—whether it's complaints or whether it's the results of some of our analysis that goes on with COVID-19 and the outbreaks there. We must discuss that at every board meeting. I can't think of a board meeting where we haven't discussed it—and by discussing it, I mean doing it as the important item. You've raised the most important item of all. Do I think we're capable of dealing with it? Yes, I do. I do think we're going to have to increase staff within the organization in order to deal with that—and that can be examiners, that can be any number of people. We're streamlining the organization at the moment, looking at the type of expertise needed and, going forward with that, reviewing it as our main obligation. So I share your concern and I will say to you I believe we're capable of dealing with it.

Should we, as we go, be making changes? Absolutely. We can't stand still as an organization, nor can we stand still, as we have to date—it's not just the pandemic, either. The pandemic is the most serious thing we and many other organizations have ever encountered, and that's fine. What that does, though, is it interrupts strategic planning, because you're taking on, in the pandemic, the biggest fire we've ever known.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Along the line of your strategic plan—how high on the priority list is the fact that a lot of the people who live in retirement homes are afraid to complain, because they feel that if they complain, they may find themselves without a place to live? I understand that we would respond to this, “There's an independent complaint officer.” But they don't feel that it is an independent complaint officer, because they are hired by the industry, which is the retirement home industry—

Mr. Peter Harris: Actually, no; they report directly to the board.

That item you raised is a very high concern and priority within our strategic plan.

M^{me} France Gélinas: Can I expect to see changes if it's a high priority, and what direction would the changes take?

Mr. Peter Harris: The changes will be subjective, obviously, because it's individual residents who have shown this fear—so it's only by our example of showing them that they needn't have fear in that. And if that seemed to be the case, we would have to be dealing with the particular retirement home in which that took place. That's where our independent complaints officer is key, and the information those families of these people can get—the information to get in touch with us so that we can deal with items.

The residents and their families are a tremendous asset to us, because it's through them that we gain a lot of insights, in addition to the examinations we make on an

ongoing, periodic basis. One of our biggest communication and information assets is the residents and families themselves. So, yes—and I share your concern, and we do, too. It's high on our priority list.

M^{me} France Gélinas: You will remember the case of the resident who was found dead by his son days after he had died in his apartment in a retirement home. Have you come up with new regulations, new ideas, anything that would prevent this from happening again?

Mr. Peter Harris: No, not at the moment. What we've done is strengthened our oversight and our ongoing diligence with respect to matters of this nature. Those kinds of things occur in hospitals, they occur in retirement homes, and it is an ongoing battle. It's not pure regulation that's going to solve it; it's more concentrated oversight. That's where we're dealing with it. We share your concerns. That's what we're doing.

M^{me} France Gélinas: And what—

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): Excuse me; that concludes the time allotted to questioning.

Thank you very much for coming before the committee, Mr. Harris. You are welcome to stay on the line as the meeting continues, but the time for your presentation is concluded.

Mr. Peter Harris: Mr. Chair, thank you. I appreciate it.

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): We will now consider the intended appointment of Vala Monestime Belter, nominated as director of the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority board of directors.

Mr. Miller.

Mr. Norman Miller: I move concurrence in the intended appointment of Vala Monestime Belter, nominated as director of the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority board of directors.

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): Concurrence in the appointment has been moved by Mr. Miller. Any discussion? Seeing none, I would like to call a vote. All those in favour, please raise your hands. All those opposed? That carries.

We will now consider the intended appointment of Peter Harris, nominated as director of the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority board of directors.

Mr. Miller.

Mr. Norman Miller: I move concurrence in the intended appointment of Peter Harris, nominated as director of the Retirement Homes Regulatory Authority board of directors.

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): Concurrence in the appointment has been moved by Mr. Miller. Any discussion? Seeing none, I would like to call a vote. All those in favour, please raise your hands. Opposed? The concurrence carries.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

The Chair (Mr. John Vanthof): The next item of business is extensions. Number one: The deadline to review the intended appointment of Jeffrey W. Davis, selected from the August 28, 2020, certificate, was September 27, 2020, and was extended to October 27, 2020. Do we have unanimous agreement to further extend the deadline to consider the intended appointment of Jeffrey W. Davis to November 26, 2020? I hear a no, so we do not have unanimous consent.

Number two: The deadline to review the intended appointment of Debra St. John-de Wit, selected from the October 2, 2020, certificate, is November 1, 2020. Do we have unanimous agreement to extend the deadline to consider the intended appointment of Debra St. John-de Wit to December 1, 2020? We do not have unanimous consent.

Just a reminder before we adjourn: The retroactive selections listed in the report of the subcommittee dated October 1, 2020, if they have not already appeared before the committee, will expire on October 31, 2020. They can be reselected at the time you submit selections from current certificates and will receive a new 30-day deadline.

Thank you. That concludes the meeting, so I would like to call the meeting adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1013.

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Mr. Jeff Burch (Niagara Centre / Niagara-Centre ND)

Mr. Kaleed Rasheed (Mississauga East–Cooksville / Mississauga-Est–Cooksville PC)

Also taking part / Autres participants et participantes

M^{me} France Gélinas (Nickel Belt ND)

Clerk / Greffière

Ms. Tonia Grannum

Staff / Personnel

Ms. Lauren Warner, research officer,
Research Services