



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature  
Second Session

Standing Committee  
on  
Private Bills and Private Members' Public Bills

Bill 219, Workers' Compensation (Expanding Presumptive Coverage)  
Amendment Act, 2021

Tuesday, June 8, 2021  
6:15 p.m.

Transcript No. 30-2-23

**Legislative Assembly of Alberta  
The 30th Legislature  
Second Session**

**Standing Committee on Private Bills and Private Members' Public Bills**

Ellis, Mike, Calgary-West (UC), Chair  
Schow, Joseph R., Cardston-Siksika (UC), Deputy Chair  
  
Amery, Mickey K., Calgary-Cross (UC)  
Dang, Thomas, Edmonton-South (NDP)  
Getson, Shane C., Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland (UC)  
Glasgo, Michaela L., Brooks-Medicine Hat (UC)  
Irwin, Janis, Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood (NDP)  
Nielsen, Christian E., Edmonton-Decore (NDP)  
Rosin, Miranda D., Banff-Kananaskis (UC)\*  
Rutherford, Brad, Leduc-Beaumont (UC)  
Shepherd, David, Edmonton-City Centre (NDP)\*\*  
Sigurdson, Lori, Edmonton-Riverview (NDP)  
Sigurdson, R.J., Highwood (UC)

\* substitution for Michaela Glasgo

\*\* substitution for Janis Irwin

**Also in Attendance**

Sweet, Heather, Edmonton-Manning (NDP)

**Bill 219 Sponsor**

Sweet, Heather, Edmonton-Manning (NDP)

**Support Staff**

Trafton Koenig	Senior Parliamentary Counsel
Michael Kulicki	Clerk of Committees and Research Services
Warren Huffman	Committee Clerk
Janet Schwegel	Director of Parliamentary Programs
Amanda LeBlanc	Deputy Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i>

6:15 p.m.

Tuesday, June 8, 2021

[Mr. Ellis in the chair]

**The Chair:** All right. Good evening, everyone. I'd like to call this meeting of the Standing Committee on Private Bills and Private Members' Public Bills to order and welcome everyone in attendance.

My name is Mike Ellis, the MLA for Calgary-West and chair of the committee. I'd like to ask that members and those joining the committee at the table introduce themselves for the record, and then I will call on those joining in by videoconference. We'll begin to my right.

**Mr. Schow:** Joseph Schow, MLA, Cardston-Siksika.

**Mr. Rutherford:** Brad Rutherford, MLA, Leduc-Beaumont.

**Ms Sweet:** Heather Sweet, MLA, Edmonton-Manning.

**Mr. Shepherd:** David Shepherd, MLA, Edmonton-City Centre.

**Mr. Nielsen:** Good evening, everyone. Chris Nielsen, MLA for Edmonton-Decore.

**Mr. Koenig:** Good evening. I'm Trafton Koenig with the Parliamentary Counsel office.

**Mr. Kulicki:** Good evening. Michael Kulicki, clerk of committees and research services.

**Mr. Huffman:** Hello. Warren Huffman, committee clerk.

**The Chair:** Okay. Thank you.

We'll go to the videoconference. We'll start with Mr. Dang.

**Mr. Dang:** Good evening. Thomas Dang, Edmonton-South.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Member Lori Sigurdson. I think maybe your mute button is on. Okay. Well, we can come back to Member Sigurdson there.

We will go to Member Getson.

**Mr. Getson:** Hello. Good evening. Shane Getson, MLA, Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Member R.J. Sigurdson.

**Mr. Sigurdson:** Yes. MLA R.J. Sigurdson from Highwood. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Member Mickey Amery.

**Mr. Amery:** Good evening, committee members. Mickey Amery, MLA, Calgary-Cross.

**The Chair:** Member Rosin.

**Ms Rosin:** Miranda Rosin, MLA for Banff-Kananaskis.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll now go back to Lori Sigurdson.

**Ms Sigurdson:** Yeah. Good evening. Sorry. Lori Sigurdson, Edmonton-Riverview.

**The Chair:** Good evening. Thank you so much.

For the record I'll note the following substitutions: David Shepherd for Janis Irwin and Miranda Rosin for Michaela Glasgo.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Pursuant to the February 22, 2021, memo from the hon. Speaker Cooper I would remind everyone of the updated committee room protocols, which encourage members to wear masks in committee rooms and while seated except when speaking, at which time they may choose not to wear a face covering. Based on the recommendations from the chief medical officer of health regarding physical distancing, attendees at today's meeting are reminded to leave the appropriate distance between themselves and other meeting participants.

Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website.

Those participating by videoconference are asked to please turn on your camera while speaking and to mute your microphone when not speaking. To request to be put on the speakers list, members participating virtually are asked to e-mail or send a message in the group chat to the committee clerk, and members in the room are asked to please signal to the chair. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Next we'll go to the approval of the agenda. Are there any changes or additions to the draft agenda? Okay.

If not, would someone like to make a motion to approve the agenda?

**Mr. Nielsen:** So moved.

**The Chair:** Thank you. Mr. Nielsen moves that the agenda for the June 8, 2021, meeting of the Standing Committee on Private Bills and Private Members' Public Bills be adopted as distributed. All those in favour, say aye. Thank you. On videoconference? Anybody opposed? Anybody opposed on videoconference? Hearing and seeing none, okay. That motion has been carried.

We'll next go to the approval of the minutes. Hon. members, we have the minutes of our meeting on June 1 to review. Are there any errors or omissions to note?

If not, would a member like to make a motion to approve the minutes? Thank you, Mr. Nielsen. Mr. Nielsen will move that the minutes of the June 1, 2021, meeting of the Standing Committee on Private Bills and Private Members' Public Bills be approved as distributed. All those in favour, say aye. On videoconference? Thank you. Any opposed? On videoconference, any opposed? Hearing and seeing none, that motion has been carried.

Okay. The minutes for the June 2 meeting are also ready for approval. Does anyone have any errors or omissions to note?

Can I get a member to move a motion to approve these minutes? Thank you, Mr. Nielsen. I appreciate it. I see Mr. Nielsen at least looking at me. Thank you. Mr. Nielsen will move that the minutes of the June 2, 2021, meeting of the Standing Committee on Private Bills and Private Members' Public Bills be approved as distributed. All those in favour, say aye. On videoconference? Any opposed? Any opposed on videoconference? Hearing and seeing none, that motion has been carried.

All right. Thank you very much. Next, ladies and gentlemen, we'll go to the review of Bill 219, Workers' Compensation (Expanding Presumptive Coverage) Amendment Act, 2021, and a presentation by Ms Heather Sweet, MLA for Edmonton-Manning. Welcome.

Hon. members, Bill 219, Workers' Compensation (Expanding Presumptive Coverage) Amendment Act, 2021, was referred to the

committee on Thursday, June 3, 2021, in accordance with Standing Order 74.11, and the committee's report to the Assembly is due on June 17.

At this time I'd like to invite Member Heather Sweet, the MLA for Edmonton-Manning, to provide a five-minute presentation, and then I'll open the floor to questions from the committee members.

Thank you, Member Sweet, for being here. The floor is yours.

**Ms Sweet:** Well, thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to discuss with you today Bill 219, the Workers' Compensation (Expanding Presumptive Coverage) Amendment Act, 2021. As a member of this Legislature I'm very proud that I'm able to bring this bill forward. This bill comes in response to the great need for workers to be protected if they contract COVID-19 while on the job as part of the global pandemic and the UCP's removal of presumptive coverage for PTSD.

The pandemic has been hard on all workers, particularly those on the front lines, who put themselves at risk through daily interactions with the public like in health care settings or congregated settings that increase risk like meat plants. The risk for these workers to contract COVID-19 on the job is high, and the chance that they will struggle with navigating the process of accessing supports if they do or of being denied those supports is higher. This bill will provide presumptive coverage for all essential workers and anyone whose workplace was in outbreak status when the worker contracted COVID-19. It would provide workers peace of mind after a brutal year of uncertainty and worry. This bill would mean that a worker's treatment and support can start right away.

We're only beginning to understand the impacts of long-haul COVID symptoms. We're hearing troubling stories of brain fog, muscle pain, a racing heart, acute kidney problems, lung functioning abnormalities, and smell and taste problems, issues that could leave a worker struggling to do their job while navigating an endless parade of visits to specialists and doctors, all of whom will recommend an array of prescriptions, physio, and counselling. As we learn about long-haul COVID and the effects of the pandemic, this coverage will become more vital as we move forward into the recovery.

This bill will also remove any ambiguity for both WCB and workers to ensure that workers get the supports they need. Any time this government's failures have threatened the capacity of our health care system, workers have kept that system running, experiencing trauma, and may have long-lasting psychological effects from the pandemic. This bill will give those workers back the peace of mind that they don't have to prove that work caused this trauma to access benefits and treatment right away.

The UCP removed presumptive PTSD coverage during a global pandemic that has caused workplace trauma for countless essential workers. These workers must now relive that trauma, while still dealing with the pandemic, to fight for coverage that they deserve. Without this presumption that employees are at risk of getting COVID at their job or that their trauma was due to their work settings, a WCB claim can trigger a long and costly investigation. These investigations can go on for months, needlessly delaying the worker's access to benefits, and in many cases the necessary evidence may be impossible to produce.

According to the WCB as of the beginning of April fewer than 7,000 COVID-19 claims were accepted as work related. At that time we had over 200,000 cases of COVID-19 in the province as we crested our third wave. Those numbers don't add up. Many of those workers may be left paying out of pocket for the long-term effects of COVID. We need this legislation. Workers need this legislation. We need more comprehensive worker supports.

Alberta is behind other provinces for this coverage. British Columbia included presumptive COVID-19 coverage in their WCB compensation act last August. Ontario added COVID-19 as an occupational disease to their Workplace Safety and Insurance Act in March 2020. But in Alberta the UCP have us moving in the opposite direction. Last year PTSD coverage was removed with Bill 47. And even though the UCP did a complete overhaul of the Occupational Health and Safety Act, we do not see COVID-19 listed as an occupational disease anywhere in the document. It's backwards, and it's going to stall our economic recovery.

We need to acknowledge that people had to go to work when some of us were able to stay home. They bagged our groceries. They drove us to medical appointments. They took care of us. This is a chance for us to acknowledge that some people are dealing with PTSD because of the issues that they had to face with their job that we could have never predicted. I ask the UCP and the government to approve this bill and acknowledge the hardship these Albertans faced. We need to work together to make sure that we can move forward as a province. To have a strong economy, we must have strong people, and it's our job to provide Albertans the support they need to build back on their strengths.

Thank you.

6:25

**The Chair:** Well, thank you very much, Member Sweet.

We will now go to questions. As is convention, this is an opposition member's bill, so we will go to the government members for the start of the questions. We have Mr. Schow for a question and a quick supplemental.

**Mr. Schow:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Ms Sweet, for your presentation. I want to respond to some of the misinformation that is being pushed by the opposition with regard to compensation for lost time as a result of COVID-19. If one were to listen only to members of the NDP caucus, you'd be left with the impression that Albertans who contract COVID-19 through their workplace are being left without any compensation. The fact of the matter is that that could not be any further from the truth. The overwhelming majority of claims made to WCB by workers are accepted. That is 87 per cent of claims, to be exact. It's no wonder that claims are being accepted when you consider that WCB has a dedicated team with expertise in infectious diseases to guide clients through their recovery.

Ms Sweet, my question to you is this. What evidence do you have to suggest that most workers making WCB COVID claims are being denied their rightful benefits when they contract COVID-19 in their workplace?

**Ms Sweet:** Well, thank you for the question, hon. member. I think let's start with the fact that it is already being recognized in other jurisdictions such as British Columbia and Ontario that this actually should be in the WCB legislation with presumptive coverage. We can also look at the fact that although you will indicate that there have been approvals made, 7,000 applications at a time when infection rates were over 200,000, the numbers do not add up. What we do know is that many people don't know that they can apply to WCB.

Our contact tracing rate during the second wave was abominable. We have no idea where the infections came from. The reality of it is that many people – working people, grocery workers, servers, the people that kept our economy running during this pandemic – are not getting access to the very supports and services that they need because they have to prove right now where their contact came from. With our contact tracing rate, there is no ability to do that.

**The Chair:** A supplemental. Go ahead.

**Mr. Schow:** Sure. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate that answer. You know, you did say other jurisdictions and some large numbers. However, you did fail to answer the question with any real, hard data save for some anecdotal information. I will take that as: you could not answer the question.

I guess the second question I have for you, then, is: have you consulted with stakeholders on this bill? If you have consulted, can you please explain who they were and what their feedback was? Go into detail, please, if you could.

**Ms Sweet:** Well, thank you, again, for the question, Member. Again, I'd like to just go back to recognizing that, well, there was consultation done. There was consultation done with workers. There was contact made with the WCB and looking at what was currently being covered under WCB. I would like to remind the member that posttraumatic stress disorder was covered under WCB and is no longer part of the legislation for essential workers, which is also part of my bill. I appreciate that the government would like to see the numbers. The reality of it is that we've only seen one report from the WCB so far. We don't have all of the data in relation to COVID-19 at this moment, which is also a very important reason why WCB presumptive coverage is so important, so that the WCB can continue to do the work to look at the data, to look at what the impacts of long-haul COVID will be.

I also would like to acknowledge that PTSD is going to be a very significant issue for Albertans as we come out of COVID-19. We heard stories of servers having beer bottles thrown at their heads when asking people to wear masks. We've seen videos on social media where grocery workers who are just trying to put groceries in people's bags are getting yelled at by people who are refusing to wear masks. That can cause trauma. Those workers should be eligible for PTSD, and currently there is nothing that gives them that support.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll next go to Member Shepherd for a question and a follow-up, please.

**Mr. Shepherd:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Through you to Ms Sweet, thank you for your presentation on this bill. Now, I was thinking, particularly as Member Schow referred to being concerned about most workers, that we also do have a smaller number of workers that face particular challenges. I know that in the case, for example, of front-line workers, we have heard from Dr. Gabriel Fabreau and others who are working on the front lines directly that have spoken to media and to myself about how during this third wave they saw a wide range of folks from front-line work, largely from racialized communities, many of whom caught COVID-19 on the job and were unvaccinated. They were willing to be vaccinated but had faced challenges getting to a clinic with lack of time, transportation, online access, et cetera. I imagine for this number of workers, which may not be most workers but still is a portion of workers who I don't think should be overlooked, they might also face similar challenges in knowing about the WCB system and accessing it. Is that a consideration you had? How would you be able to assist in that?

**Ms Sweet:** Well, thank you, hon. member, for the question. You know, I do want to acknowledge that there are many people who were deemed essential workers that come from diverse communities and are marginalized communities. I think one of the biggest barriers when we look at WCB and access to those supports

as well as medical supports and access to vaccinations is that we have an issue with language barriers at times as well, so making sure that people understand that they have a right and are able to access WCB if they contract COVID-19 or if they need supports for posttraumatic stress disorder, that we are making that information accessible.

Again, I think that that reflects back on the current numbers that we have and also how challenging it can be to make an application to WCB if there are language barriers in place, again, being able to make a presumptive coverage application where you do not have to go through the medical process of having to prove where you've contracted COVID-19 from. Then if you are in a workplace where there has been an outbreak declared, that individual should have access to that. I think we need to make sure that our communities are aware that we're looking at as many ways as to communicate that as possible.

**The Chair:** A follow-up, Mr. Shepherd.

**Mr. Shepherd:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Indeed. Thank you to the member for that answer. I am just wondering, then. We know that this has been an issue in other provinces, the issue, of course, of these front-line workers from racialized communities and other marginalized groups. Could you give me a sense, I guess, of what steps have been taken in other provinces towards presumptive coverage?

**Ms Sweet:** Well, thank you, Member. Again, you know, when we look at what's happened in other jurisdictions, we, again, have seen that British Columbia has already instated presumptive coverage through their legislation, and we've already seen Ontario do the same thing.

I think there needs to be an acknowledgement as well that where we saw some of our major outbreaks with COVID-19, specifically in our meat plants, had many new Canadians that were impacted, many that needed supports when it came to understanding what COVID was and looking at being able to get the medical assistance that they needed, and that communication was not done in a way that, I think, supported the communities.

I would think that if we look at places such as the meat plants, being in a work environment where you are encouraged to come to work sick because there's no paid sick leave and also looking at the fact that you're working with people who are potentially sick and then, of course, having your colleagues pass away due to COVID-19 would cause significant trauma. Again, those workers should have access to posttraumatic stress disorder in relation to COVID-19.

**The Chair:** Great. Thank you.

We'll now go to Member R.J. Sigurdson for a question and a follow-up, please.

**Mr. Sigurdson:** Thank you, Chair. I just want to start further to my colleague's comments earlier. I wanted to provide a little bit of perspective. Just from what I've been able to look at right now, despite what the sponsoring member implies, when Albertans contract COVID at the workplace, from what I see, they are being covered by WCB. I mean, between January 1, 2020, and April 30, 2021, more than 8,200 COVID-related claims were accepted: 87 per cent of the claims were accepted, 12 fatality claims accepted, on average 15.1 days away from work, 99.3 per cent returned back to work, and the highest number of claims were in the health care and manufacturing sectors, more than \$19 million paid in COVID-related claims since the pandemic started.

Now, given that when Albertans contract COVID-19 at the workplace and they're already being covered by WCB, I just hope that the member sponsoring this bill would be able to clarify to me what they're trying to achieve with this bill.

Thank you, Chair.

6:35

**Ms Sweet:** Oh, sorry; I wasn't sure if I was supposed to go. Thank you, Chair. Thank you to the member for the question. I think that we can look at the definition that is currently within the WCB legislation. According to WCB a COVID-19 infection claim is likely to be accepted if a worker contracts the illness and is performing what the province deems to be an essential service that puts them in regular contact with the general public. I'd like to highlight the word "likely." This bill means that if they contract the illness while they were working, their claim may be accepted and the benefits may begin once they've hit the prerequisite of the investigation. The government does not have a comprehensive list of what essential workers are, which we would need to do and which this bill would define.

WCB also states that a worker is, again, likely to be covered in the event of an outbreak. Outside of health care settings an outbreak status requires five or more cases. This has resulted in workers, particularly in grocery and restaurant settings, that have been one to four being denied but five over being accepted, as the threshold has now been met. This bill uses outbreak to capture all workers but also adds an alert status for broader application. Reporting of a workplace contraction is impacted by the employer involvement in determining whether or not that actually happened at work. WCB will investigate, but marginalized workers may not be aware of their rights to file through WCB.

Again, I think the issue we have here is that we have the word "likely" within pieces of legislation. On top of that, we have a threshold that needs to be redefined. Again, when we look at the fact that we don't have an actual definition of an essential worker, many of these workers are not being covered. When we have, again, an application rate – I appreciate that you said 8,000; my numbers for April were 7,000 according to the WCB report. We had an infection rate of over 200,000. In fact, we also know that people were going to work sick, because if they weren't, we wouldn't have had outbreaks at work sites. There is an issue here that needs to be addressed. I think that, again, going back as well to the PTSD, when we look at the fact that there is trauma happening in these workplaces, this is an important part that needs to be put back into legislation.

**The Chair:** Great. Thank you.

A follow-up, please, Mr. Sigurdson.

**Mr. Sigurdson:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the member for that answer. Just as a follow-up, in addition to misinformation on WCB coverage for COVID-19, the opposition has claimed over and over again that our government removed WCB coverage for workers suffering from PTSD stemming from trauma experienced in the workplace. I've had people approach me on this. I just want to clarify that that is not correct. In fact, workers suffering from work-related PTSD have coverage through the normal claim process. In addition, presumptive coverage for PTSD is available to occupations that are likely to experience a traumatic event such as our first responders, correctional officers, and even emergency dispatchers. I'd just like to know: why is the opposition continuing to divide Albertans with the mistruths regarding PTSD coverage for Alberta workers?

**Ms Sweet:** Again, thank you for the question, hon. member. There is no disinformation being provided. We have been clear that presumptive coverage already does exist for the workers that you just described, which is true. But it used to be that presumptive coverage covered all workers. Again, I would like to go back to the stories that we have heard and even the social media videos, which I'm sure all members of this committee have seen, which is grocery workers and servers who have had objects thrown at them in restaurants when asking people to comply with the health restrictions, grocery workers being yelled at while they're trying to bag groceries because people don't want to comply with the health restrictions and put a mask on. That can cause trauma.

Those individuals are not covered under presumptive coverage. They would have to prove – a worker at a grocery store would have to provide evidence to WCB to say: this caused me trauma. They would have to go to a specialist to determine that they have had impacts on their mental health which have caused trauma, which actually, as many people who work in the mental health profession know, causes more trauma. To have to retell your story over and over and over again to defend yourself so that you can have access to mental health supports should not be something that should happen. In fact, given that the government continuously talks about supports for mental health and addictions, this, to me, is a common-sense solution when it comes to COVID-19. Let's get people the help they need to address trauma.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Member.

We'll go to Member Lori Sigurdson next, please.

**Ms Sigurdson:** Well, thank you so much, Member Sweet, for all your work on this important bill, bringing it forward for workers in Alberta. I certainly am grateful to you for this.

You know, you've just described some of the difficult situations that workers that previously had not been deemed essential but were deemed essential during the COVID – and they were really put in harm's way, and that's sort of why this bill is needed. But I just want to talk more specifically about continuing care, where there has been a tremendous amount of challenge in that area. We know that 1,250 residents have died since COVID of the disease, and we know that workers were working at several sites. There was a lot of chaos in that sector.

You know, of course, working in continuing care, you're working with people who are at the end of their lives, so you certainly do have residents pass on, but to have the magnitude of people pass on at this time was much more increased than from normal, so right in that is something that could cause workers trauma, plus just being short-shifted and just a lot of the difficulties within the sector during this time. I wonder if you could just dig deeper a little bit about this and talk about: in continuing care specifically, how many workers are impacted? What type of workers are they? Who would benefit from this legislation? If you could just speak a bit about that, Member Sweet.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Member.

**Ms Sweet:** Well, thank you, hon. member, for the question. You know, first off, I just want to recognize all of our health care professionals. The pressure that they've been under and the work that they've had to do over the last year and a half has been something that I could never have imagined as a health care professional. I'm sure that they're exhausted and they're tired, and the impact on not only them as individuals but their colleagues and their family has created a significant amount of stress for many of our caregivers.

According to the Alberta Continuing Care Association we have about 40,000 Albertans that work in long-term care. Many of them are new Canadians and from marginalized communities. According to Alberta Health Services there are 26,000 RNs, 300 nurse practitioners, and 6,500 LPNs in the province. There are additionally thousands of Albertans working in our health care sector. The total, give or take, is about 72,800 workers.

In regard to COVID and contracting it at the workplace, of course, the issue begins, and the issue is that we don't have any data that has been provided by this government in regard to that. We do not actually know what the contact rate has been in long-term care, whether it is in relation to seniors' contact rates and transmission, as well as what that transmission has looked like for the workers in those workplaces, so unfortunately I'm not able to answer your question in regard to how many of our long-term care workers have actually had contact with COVID-19 in the workplace and how many of them have received supports because of that.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

A follow-up, Member Sigurdson.

**Ms Sigurdson:** Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair. You did speak about how oftentimes workers in the continuing care system may be new Canadians. You didn't speak specifically about gender, and maybe I'll ask you to do that now, but I would imagine the majority are female also.

You did speak briefly before just about how workers oftentimes are actually not informed about the access they have to WCB. They don't, you know, understand that. I would think vulnerable workers like new Canadians, for example, would not understand the programs that we have in place and, perhaps, therefore not take advantage of them. Just any comments you have on what I've just said.

**Ms Sweet:** Well, thank you for the question, Member. I mean, you're definitely right. We do know that women are more represented in many of the care professions, whether it be long-term care or working in group care with adults with disabilities, working as support workers. So there is a representation there, and there's also a representation in our marginalized communities. I think, though, when we're looking at the WCB component and the understanding around WCB – I can tell you a story of myself, actually, when I worked in residential care with adults with disabilities. I actually had a client who became quite aggressive with me, to the point where I had to take time off work. My employer, who did have WCB coverage at the time, actually said to me: we'll give you time off but no WCB because we don't want to pay the premiums.

6:45

**The Chair:** You can finish your thought. Go ahead.

**Ms Sweet:** Oh. Sorry. Thank you.

The issue that became for me is that, being a young woman working in a group home at 20-something, I didn't know that I had the right to WCB. What happened was that I took time off and I didn't apply for WCB because my employer discouraged me to, because they didn't want their premiums to go up. Again, I think this is why it's so important that we make sure that workers know about their rights and their access to WCB but also that there is presumptive coverage for both access to medical supports with COVID-19 but also posttraumatic stress supports.

**The Chair:** Okay. Thank you very much, Member Sweet, for your presentation here today.

I will note that the Ministry of Labour and Immigration was invited to provide a technical briefing on Bill 219, but the ministry respectfully declined.

Next we'll move to decisions on the review of Bill 219. Hon. members, the committee must now decide on how to conduct its review of Bill 219. In accordance with our previously approved process the committee may choose to invite additional feedback from up to six stakeholders, three from each caucus. Alternatively, the committee may also choose to expedite this review and proceed to deliberations.

Does anyone have any thoughts on this? Mr. Nielsen. Yes, go ahead.

**Mr. Nielsen:** Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. I've been listening intently to debate. I very purposefully did not ask any questions to Ms Sweet simply because of the fact that I want to avoid a perception, a thought that it's just Chris going off yet again, trying to promote his big union bosses and things like that. So I very purposefully did not ask any questions, but I listened intently.

Some of the things that I heard during the course of this: one of them was people not knowing about applying for WCB coverage and even Ms Sweet's own experience with that. You know, Mr. Chair, before my life as an MLA, in 26-plus years at Lucerne Foods ice cream plant I remember dealing with my fellow co-workers, and one, who ended up having carpal tunnel syndrome in both hands from packing ice cream over the years and doing everything from pain medications and physiotherapy, didn't actually know that she could apply to WCB. She was constantly paying for this out of her pocket. That experience alone – and we were not even in COVID times back then. When I hear such statements as people not even knowing to apply for WCB coverage, I know for a fact that I dealt with it in my own workplace, let alone all the other workplaces that I had the time to spend in.

Talking about some of our marginalized workers, you know, long before even my time at Lucerne I spent time in retail stores. I remember having arguments with customers about the price of something or something being out of stock or whatever it was that just wasn't up to their standards. Those are conversations that are hard enough as it is. Now you throw in the kind of time that we have been in over the last year and a half, asking employees to essentially police other people to wear a mask, social distance, things like that: as Ms Sweet had mentioned, a waitress simply asking somebody, "Please wear a mask; that's the rule within the business," getting hit with a beer bottle. Absolutely unacceptable.

But now I start to wonder about the injuries that I've seen from workers over my course of time and how they've dealt with those experiences. An individual got caught up in a piece of machinery at Lucerne, twisted around his clothes, really hurt his arm, was training at that time to be a mix maker. By the time he got back, he couldn't do the job. He was scared that it would happen again, despite the fact that we put guards in place to prevent that. The whole thing around PTSD is very, very real, and it doesn't matter where it's at, whether it's in an ice cream plant, whether it's in a grocery store, whether it's in a long-term care facility.

I know for a fact that our meat plants, very much so, are dominated by marginalized communities. The workers in there, referencing my own work site and having to coax some of my co-workers along to bring up problems in the work site to management or things like that – and I always remember the two things they always used to say to me, every time: well, I don't want to cause a problem; well, I don't want to make any waves. This is an absolute fear for these folks because they're worried about their jobs.

At the end of the day, I think the only way this committee can make a proper assessment of this bill is to invite the very people

that we're talking about here and have them present to the committee to let us know exactly what it is they are facing literally on a daily basis, whether that be a grocery store cashier packing bags – I've seen people going around those plastic barriers despite the fact that they're there to prevent that.

With that, Mr. Chair, I will move a motion that the committee invite stakeholders, and I certainly hope that members of this committee will support that because we need to hear from the people that this kind of thing will help.

**The Chair:** Okay. Thank you, sir. I will put that motion on the floor for you here and then open the floor to further conversations.

Mr. Nielsen will move that the Standing Committee on Private Bills and Private Members' Public Bills invite up to six stakeholders, three proposed by the government caucus and three proposed by the Official Opposition, to make presentations regarding Bill 219, Workers' Compensation (Expanding Presumptive Coverage) Amendment Act, 2021, at an upcoming meeting and provide a stakeholders list to the chair by 3 p.m. on Wednesday, June 9, 2021.

Sound good?

**Mr. Nielsen:** Words out of my mouth, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** All right. Thanks very much.

Mr. Rutherford would like to speak. Go ahead, sir.

**Mr. Rutherford:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, MLA Sweet, for bringing forward this bill – I appreciate it – and, Mr. Nielsen, for this motion. Just reviewing it, it's pretty standard language, but I wouldn't personally be supporting this. I think MLA Sweet has articulated why she has brought this bill forward and what she hopes to achieve with it. Informing my decision – I don't think additional stakeholders are necessary, personally. I think, from the comments from MLA Nielsen, that some of the things that he brought up are not addressed in this bill. I think, around encouraging people to make a WCB claim, that 8,200 claims were accepted, as far as I understand from the data, from January 1, 2020, until the end of April; 87 per cent of those claims were also accepted. So just getting that, the breadth of information that was presented here: I don't think, Mr. Chair, that we need additional stakeholders.

**The Chair:** Okay. We'll open up the floor for further comments. Yep. Go ahead, Mr. Shepherd.

**Mr. Shepherd:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to support this motion from my colleague Mr. Nielsen. I do think that there is opportunity here to perhaps answer some of the questions that were raised by government members. They raised their concerns about the lack of data or lack of proof. This would provide an opportunity, certainly, to hear from folks who have some expertise in the field, whether that be some employers, maybe folks that are working, folks that work perhaps within the WCB system, and get a better sense of what the actual challenge is here in front of us, to answer those questions that the government brought forward. I think this is a real concern that we need to consider. It's worth getting to the bottom of this.

6:55

Indeed, in terms of the issue around PTSD, you know, government members talked about: occupations that are likely to experience a traumatic event currently have coverage. As Ms Sweet noted, that is a very narrow group of people thanks to this

government and their decision to have removed presumptive coverage for a much wider range of employees.

I would suggest that having gone through a global pandemic, three consecutive waves, and indeed the third wave having been the worst of the three and Alberta having been the worst jurisdiction in North America in terms of cases due to some of the decisions of government, that impact has broadened out and it has affected many people in occupations that would not traditionally face that kind of traumatic incident or be likely to face the issue of PTSD. I can certainly think of many front-line health care workers in a wide variety of fields. Ms Sigurdson noted, of course, folks that are working in seniors' care and some of those areas. I think a lot of other folks have had extremely traumatic experiences as a result of the severity of this pandemic. Indeed, I recently had the opportunity to attend a session with Dr. Verna Yiu where she was talking with folks from rural communities, and she noted that they are fully expecting what she termed a mental health tsunami as we come out of this pandemic.

The government removed the PTSD presumptive coverage because they said that it was too expensive, that it was likely to break the system. The Minister of Labour and Immigration said that the measures were required to reinstate balance to the system and manage costs. He said that at a time when Alberta's economy and job creators are struggling the most, employers have told us that some of these changes have led to rising costs, additional red tape, and put the system's future sustainability in doubt. What I would say, Mr. Chair, is that if this is not done through the workers' compensation system, it will fall on our health care system and it will fall on the backs of workers at much greater cost to the province of Alberta. These costs are going to exist one way or the other. So I think that inviting stakeholders to the table to have this conversation, get a better sense of what the potential impacts are and the level of concern that there is perhaps here would help us better understand this bill.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Okay. Thank you, sir.

I'll open up the floor to any other questions or comments, concerns.

Okay. I'll put the question to the group. Mr. Nielsen will move that

the Standing Committee on Private Bills and Private Members' Public Bills invite up to six stakeholders, three proposed by the government caucus and three proposed by the Official Opposition caucus, to make presentations regarding Bill 219, Workers' Compensation (Expanding Presumptive Coverage) Amendment Act, 2021, at an upcoming meeting and provide a stakeholders list to the chair by 3 p.m. on Wednesday, June 9, 2021.

All those in favour, say aye. Any opposed? Okay. On the videoconference, all those in favour, say aye. Okay. Thank you. All right. Any opposed? Okay. It appears to be down party lines.

That has been defeated.

**Mr. Nielsen:** Recorded vote, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** A recorded vote, sir. Okay.

All right. Ladies and gentlemen, we'll do a recorded vote. At this time I'll ask those in the room, when they are for this motion, to raise their hands. Those opposed to the motion, of course, will raise their hands. On the videoconference, those participating by videoconference, a little bit of a free-for-all here: when I go to the videoconference, you'll just have to find a moment to interject and either say that you agree with this or disagree with this. Of course,

you certainly have a right to abstain as well. And we will have the recorded vote.

All right. At this time, all those in favour, say aye. Just raise your hands. All right. Mr. Nielsen and Mr. Shepherd within the room. We'll continue to stay in the room. All those opposed, raise your hands. Mr. Rutherford and Mr. Schow. Now we will go to the videoconference. I'm just going to ask those at this time on videoconference: all those in favour, say aye. Just interject with your name and constituency, please.

**Mr. Dang:** Thomas Dang. Aye.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Ms Sigurdson:** Lori Sigurdson, Edmonton-Riverview. I agree.

**The Chair:** Okay. Thank you.

Now we'll go to the opposed. Just go ahead on videoconference.

**Mr. Sigurdson:** MLA R.J. Sigurdson, Highwood. Opposed.

**Ms Rosin:** Miranda Rosin, MLA, Banff-Kananaskis. Opposed.

**Mr. Amery:** Mickey Amery, MLA, Calgary-Cross. Opposed.

**Mr. Getson:** Shane Getson, MLA, Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland. Opposed.

**The Chair:** Okay. That appears to be everyone.

Mr. Clerk, go ahead, sir.

**Mr. Huffman:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. For the motion, four; against, six.

**The Chair:** Okay. Thank you very much.

That motion has been defeated.

We will now go to the deliberations on Bill 219. The committee will now begin its deliberations on Bill 219 at this time. The committee must decide whether to recommend that the bill proceed or not proceed and may also consider observations, opinions, and recommendations with respect to Bill 219. The committee's process allows for up to 16 minutes of deliberations on the bill although members may extend this time limit if there is a consensus that additional time is necessary.

I'll open the floor to discussion on the committee's recommendations. Mr. Nielsen.

**Mr. Nielsen:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. To say that I'm disappointed might be a bit of an understatement. We are ignoring Albertans, the positions they find themselves in, the challenges that they face. We could have learned a lot from that.

I think I'm starting to see yet another pattern. The first one, of course, was that the committee was sending bills from government members to the Chamber to proceed and bills from opposition members to not proceed. Then, of course, now we've seen that bills are being sent to the Chamber to proceed, but we're not doing stakeholders.

At the very least, I guess, I would suggest that we – or I guess I should make the motion that we send this bill back to the House to proceed. My fear is, of course, that based on the amount of work that the committee has done due to the short timelines we have for review, there are a lot of bills backed up in the House. As members know, likely this will not get a chance to be debated and will die on the Order Paper. But I guess I have nothing else to do but to motion that we send it back to the House to proceed.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Nielsen.

So Mr. Nielsen would move that the Standing Committee on Private Bills and Private Members' Public Bills recommend that Bill 219, Workers' Compensation (Expanding Presumptive Coverage) Amendment Act, 2021, proceed. Sound about right, sir?

**Mr. Nielsen:** Yes.

**The Chair:** Okay. Thank you very much.

All right. We'll next go to Mr. Getson for remarks.

**Mr. Getson:** Thank you, Mr. Chair and to the member that just spoke. Yeah, again, it was pretty presumptuous to think that we were going to try to kill the bill in here. I think there were some really good arguments and debate, and I, like some of my colleagues, chose to remain silent to hear that. Although we may differ on some of the intents or what's taken place in the partisan lines, I too feel that this item should go to the House. I might still feel like I'm a little bit new to this, but I can't understand why a group that puts a bill forward wants to make it languish in committee rather than try to get to the floor if it's that important to Albertans and they feel strongly about it.

So, I too would support putting this bill into the House so we can actually debate it where it belongs. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Shepherd, go ahead.

**Mr. Shepherd:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm very pleased to hear that from Mr. Sigurdson, and I hope that his colleagues will also agree. Oh, Mr. Getson. Pardon me. I sincerely apologize. Mr. Getson thinks it should go forward, and I certainly hope that Mr. Sigurdson and the other government members would also agree.

Of course, I'm first time at this committee, so I perhaps placed my argument at the wrong point in the discussion. Much of that is already on the record. I don't think I have to repeat that here.

I would note again, though, that I was interested in the language that was used by some government members earlier in talking about most workers. I think it's clear, Mr. Chair, that all workers should have coverage. All workers. We want to make sure that none are going to fall through the cracks. Again, failing to ensure that this system and what we have in place is going to be there to protect all workers who need it means that those costs will be borne in other systems, whether that's in the health care system, whether that's the employee. That individual facing higher costs in their health care is going to make it more difficult for them to work, cause them to need greater social supports, cause other issues, other social determinants of health that are going to degrade and cause greater costs for our system, not to mention the cost to that individual, their quality of life, and their family.

I appreciate that Mr. Getson has shown his support, and I certainly hope that the other members of government will as well.

7:05

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Schow, go ahead.

**Mr. Schow:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to speak in favour of this motion that the bill proceed. With that said, I do have a couple of things that I would like to say, particularly in response to comments made from, through you the Chair, Mr. Nielsen and Mr. Shepherd. This idea that Albertans are being ignored is patently false. While Mr. Nielsen might suggest that there is a pattern going here, I would suggest that this committee should not be delaying this bill going back to the Chamber, where it could receive its hour

of concurrence debate on whether or not it concurs with the findings of this committee, with this motion we have before us.

In addition to those comments, with regard to what Mr. Shepherd has said, suggesting that all workers should have coverage, the NDP believes that all workers should have double coverage. If we look at, you know, Bill 6, that the NDP put forth when they were in government, it forced farms to have both – many of them had their private insurance, but it also forced them to have WCB. In many cases the private insurance that these employers had was actually better coverage than what WCB offered, given that it was around the clock. But apparently this was what the NDP felt was best for Alberta employers and employees, and clearly they missed the mark on that.

While I don't believe that I would be supporting this bill in general when it goes back to the Chamber, I do think that it has merit where it could be debated by members of both sides – well, I guess multiple sides of the House now, with independent members – and can be given that time. Sadly, the members on the opposite side of this committee want to stall this bill, and that is an unfortunate reality that we face here in this committee. You know, I take umbrage with that, Mr. Chair, because I feel like members of the opposition have some kind of an agenda that maybe they are trying to cast aspersions on this side of the House.

Really what we're trying to do is make sure that Albertans have the best workplace environment possible. I believe that they have that. The Member for Edmonton-City Centre went as far as to suggest that we have lagged behind as a province in addressing the COVID pandemic, when the reality is that we are relaunching and have a very aggressive vaccination program, one that is leading the country, and a program to get the province back on track, reopen, that many Albertans that I speak to are very happy about. That member tends to bring that into arguments when it's not germane, so I thought that I would just point that out as well.

But with that said – and, you know, I suspect there's more coming in this conversation – I think that it is important that we do vote in favour of this motion so that this motion gets an hour in the Chamber in concurrence debates and other Members of the Legislative Assembly have the opportunity to voice their feelings on it as well.

**The Chair:** Okay. Thank you very much, sir.

It is 7:08, but I will ask if anybody else has any questions or comments. Otherwise, I will put this question to the team.

Okay. Thank you very much. The question moved by Mr. Nielsen is that

the Standing Committee on Private Bills and Private Members' Public Bills recommend that Bill 219, Workers' Compensation (Expanding Presumptive Coverage) Amendment Act, 2021, proceed.

All those in favour, say aye. On videoconference? Is there anyone who is opposed? Any opposed on videoconference? Hearing and seeing none,

that motion has been carried.

Okay. Ladies and gentlemen, hon. members, the committee has concluded its deliberations on Bill 219 and now should consider directing research services to prepare a draft report, including the committee's recommendations. Would a member move a motion to direct research services to prepare the committee's draft report? Thank you very much, Mr. Schow.

Mr. Schow will move that

the Standing Committee on Private Bills and Private Members' Public Bills (a) direct research services to prepare a draft report on the committee's review of Bill 219, Workers' Compensation (Expanding Presumptive Coverage) Amendment Act, 2021, which includes the committee's recommendations, and (b) authorize the chair to approve the committee's final report to the Assembly on or before noon on Thursday, June 10, 2021.

Any questions?

Hearing and seeing none, all those in favour say aye. On videoconference? Any opposed? On videoconference? Hearing and seeing none,

that motion has been carried.

All right. Other business. Any other business for discussion for today's meeting?

Hearing and seeing none, the date of the next meeting will be at the call of the chair.

Adjournment. Can a member move to adjourn, please?

**Mr. Rutherford:** Moved.

**The Chair:** Mr. Rutherford moves that the meeting be adjourned. All those in favour, say aye. On videoconference? Any opposed? Hearing and seeing none, motion has been carried.

Everybody have a great evening. Thanks very much.

[The committee adjourned at 7:10 p.m.]



