

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS COSAINT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

Dé Máirt, 13 Iúil 2021

Tuesday, 13 July 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 12.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 12.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí/Senators
John Brady,	Catherine Ardagh,
Sorca Clarke,	Gerard P. Craughwell,
Brian Leddin,	Joe O'Reilly.
David Stanton.	

Teachta/Deputy Charles Flanagan sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

Emigrant Support Services: Discussion

Chairman: I wish our members a good afternoon and an early good morning to our guests. We are pleased to host this meeting, given that this is the final week of our parliamentary term and members and I were keen to have an opportunity to engage with our guests, however briefly, in order to allow them to update us on current matters within the Irish immigrant community. We are pleased to meet this afternoon with Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra, Ms Celine Kennelly, who joins us from San Francisco, Mr. Michael Collins from Chicago, Mr. Ronnie Millar of the Coalition of Irish Immigration Centers in Boston, and Mr. Ciarán Staunton of the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform. Apologies have been received from Senators Wilson and Ó Donnghaile.

Our guests are welcome. They are joining us from the United States. I thank them for agreeing to meet us at this early hour. The format of the meeting is that we will hear opening statements from them - I believe Ms Leonard Dibra will lead off - before going into a questions and answers session with members. We are time limited due to Covid restrictions, so I ask that witnesses be conscious of time constraints in their initial addresses so as to allow some time for questions from members. I ask members to be concise in their questions in order to allow everyone an opportunity.

I remind witnesses of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of that person or entity. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in respect of an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that any such direction be complied with immediately. For witnesses attending remotely outside the Leinster House campus, which is the case for all of our witnesses today, there are some limitations to parliamentary privilege. As such, they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as a witness physically present does. However, I do not expect any of these issues to arise in our discussions. Witnesses participating in this committee session from a jurisdiction outside the State - in their case, the United States of America - are advised to be mindful of their domestic law and how it will apply to evidence given to our committee.

I remind members of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make that person identifiable. I remind members that they are only allowed to participate in this meeting if they are physically located in the Leinster House complex or in the Convention Centre Dublin where the Dáil and Seanad are meeting in plenary session today.

For anyone watching this meeting online, some Oireachtas Members and witnesses are accessing this meeting remotely. Due to the unprecedented Covid circumstances and the large number of people attending the meeting remotely, I ask everyone to bear with us in the event of technical issues of an adverse nature arising.

I am delighted that Ms Leonard Dibra and her colleagues have joined us. I will give her the floor and ask her to make her opening statement.

Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra: I thank the committee for inviting us to meet it and to provide an overview of the work of the Coalition of Irish Immigration Centers as well as to discuss the current state of immigration in the United States. The coalition was established in 1996 to

promote the welfare of Irish immigrants and serve as the umbrella organisation for Irish immigration centres throughout the United States. The coalition has 11 member centres from coast to coast that provide a unique array of services, outreach and assistance to Irish immigrants, prioritising confidentiality and cultural competency. The coalition strives to be a strong, cohesive and representative voice for the needs of its membership and the Irish diaspora at large. Through ongoing and generous support from the Government of Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs's emigrant support programme, the coalition collaborates with its membership to examine the needs of the Irish diaspora. Furthermore, the coalition supports its members to enhance the direct service work they provide to the Irish community by looking at best practice, information sharing, data collection, national reporting and the distribution of current accurate and reliable information in the areas of, for example, immigration services, J1 visa programming and professional learning.

Over the past four years, the coalition has led a highly successful and collaborative immigration analysis initiative in partnership with the Embassy of Ireland, Washington, DC, which was supported by a strategic diaspora fund of the Irish Government's then Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The programme has facilitated the provision of crucial and pertinent information on immigration policy changes and their impact on the Irish diaspora during the Trump Administration, and continues to do so now under the Biden Administration. As the embassy designated point of contact for current, accurate and reliable information for the Irish community, the coalition has produced and distributed: 38 community information advisories to the wider Irish community; 16 background documents providing in-depth analysis of immigration policy changes for use by the embassy and consulates, as well as Ministers and other Government officials; and 15 internal immigration briefings that streamlined information and accompanying resources for use by coalition membership as well as consular and embassy offices while providing support to clients. Finally, with the onset of Covid-19, the immigration analysis programme accordingly expanded its purview to include community information pieces on international travel protocols, federally mandated mask-wearing, vaccination information and member centre services.

My colleague, Mr. Stahl, will continue.

Mr. John Stahl: The inauguration of the Biden Administration brought with it a collective sense of relief after four years of high anxiety and concern for immigrant communities, the Irish included, and particularly the undocumented community, due to the Trump Administration's hostile rhetoric on deportation, strict enforcement and anti-immigrant policy changes. However, Trump era policies continue to affect the country under the Biden Administration and the ongoing impact and aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic continues to have a major impact on the US immigration system. In particular, the presidential proclamation suspending travel from certain regions, including Ireland, and the shutdown of the US embassies and consular offices overseas are producing the widest ramifications.

The travel suspension has produced consequences on both sides of the Atlantic. First, temporary visa holders currently in the US have essentially been stranded here without the ability to return to Ireland, renew their visa at the embassy and successfully re-enter the United States. Further issuance of new visas for people in Ireland has almost stopped completely and the US Embassy is not scheduling visa appointments for those seeking temporary visas under the premise that these individuals, with some limited exceptions, cannot otherwise travel from Ireland to the United States.

Immigration restrictions due to Covid-19 have created massive backlogs for consular ap-

pointments overseas, as well as the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, USCIS, domestic adjudications. It is estimated that it could take years to address these backlogs, particularly at overseas diplomatic posts, and although proposals have been made to address the backlogs, much will depend on the new policies initiated by the Biden Administration and additional funding to increase capacity at these agencies.

President Biden introduced his US Citizenship Act 2021 in January. It was subsequently introduced in both houses of Congress. This is a comprehensive measure that highlights legalisation for the large undocumented population in the US, and looks to expand and reform the pathway for legal immigration moving forward. To date, there has been no movement on the Bill in either the House or the Senate, and the likelihood of any Bill passing the Senate with the filibuster in place is improbable. Within this context, the current approach is piecemeal immigration reform Bills through the budget reconciliation process, which only requires a simple majority to pass. However, there is a lack of agreement on what should be included in these smaller Bills as well as what populations would receive benefits.

I will pass to Mr. Millar on the J1.

Mr. Ronnie Millar: There are three types of J1 visa programmes. These are: the J1 summer work and travel, which is a four-month programme; the J1 intern, which is 12 months' long and interns need a placement before they arrive in the United States; and the J1 Irish work and travel, which is a 12-month visa with which Irish students can land in the United States and have four months to find a placement. All J1 visa programmes were suspended in April 2021 and thousands of young Irishmen and Irishwomen have lost out on the opportunity to come to the United States over the past two years. However, the United States Department of State has ended this suspension of the J1 visa programme and moving forward, Irish students and graduates will now be able to apply for their visas. Travel restrictions and visa processing delays at the US Embassy in Dublin present uncertainty as to when J1 students will be able to commence their exchange visitor programmes and start their internships in the United States. The delay in processing has resulted in some prospective applicants becoming ineligible due to the programme timelines.

Employers here in the US are keen to resume hiring Irish graduates, especially for the 12-month programme. The summer programme has not occurred for the past two years because of Covid-19. Local businesses in areas such as San Diego, Cape Cod and Chicago are reporting a negative financial impact on all of the seasonal businesses that is directly related to the lack of J1 students available to work during the summer months.

The J1 visa programme has been an important rite of passage for tens of thousands of young Irishmen and Irishwomen. It contributes substantially to the transatlantic business and cultural relationship between Ireland and the United States. In fact, many of us, the coalition's board of directors, participated in the J1 programme. The programme is really a win, win, win. It is a win for Irish students who gain intercultural and international experience, for US businesses which are able to increase the seasonal workforce, and also for Irish businesses as these graduates can return to Ireland with skills and leadership and a more diverse and global mind set. We are really looking forward to the resumption of the programme and to being able to move forward.

I will hand over to Mr. Collins, who will speak about the impact of Covid on the undocumented community.

Mr. Michael Collins: The Irish undocumented community in the United States was affected particularly harshly by both the Trump Administration and then the Covid-19 pandemic. As my colleague said, the ongoing and pervasive anti-immigrant rhetoric of the previous Administration created particular fear and anxiety among the Irish undocumented community, resulting in a pulling away from centres and their essential programmes and services. The undocumented retreated further under the radar, becoming further isolated from the community.

In addition to systemic concerns, many undocumented Irish work in construction, hospitality and other service-oriented professions. The pandemic and associated year-long shutdown resulted in loss of employment, diminished savings and crisis situations for these individuals, who were also excluded from US governmental benefits, such as unemployment and federal pandemic relief moneys.

Coalition membership reported an increase in inquiries from undocumented individuals and families looking to return to Ireland during the pandemic as a last resort, with the pandemic being the last straw for many of them.

The coalition member centres transitioned extremely quickly to remote work and virtual programming to facilitate the continuation of all essential programmes including immigration, social services and senior services. In addition to regular programmes, the centres also provided emergency support services and hardship fund distribution to assist those most impacted by the pandemic. Centres opened food pantries, increased contact hours and partnered with respective local and state agencies and organisations to advocate for increased financial support for the most vulnerable in the community, especially the undocumented.

Centres across the country also continue to work with local government and community partners to implement essential support programmes in their regions. Many states, including New York, Illinois, California and Massachusetts, have initiated programmes specifically for undocumented populations, and the Irish centres have worked hard to ensure that community members have access to these supports where applicable.

I will hand over to Ms Kennelly, who will speak about wellness and mental health.

Ms Celine Kennelly: Social services have historically been a hallmark of member centre programming. Although immigration may be the presenting problem for an individual, it is often coupled with a plethora of other challenges related to mental health, substance abuse, legal issues and family concerns. All of our centres provide wellness support, ranging from resource and referral to centre-based therapeutic intervention and clinical support. The pandemic exacerbated wellness issues in the whole of the Irish community as individuals and families lost employment, were not eligible for government support, were unable to travel and incurred increased concerns for family abroad and separation from them. The centres addressed successfully the increased need for wellness services by ramping up outreach efforts, providing therapeutic services virtually and ensuring community connection through cultural virtual events.

Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra: We are thankful to be here with the committee today and to have this opportunity to provide an update. We are very happy to answer any questions members might have. We are also very happy to continue to have these conversations in the future to keep the committee up to date on what is happening in the State.

Chairman: I thank Ms Leonard Dibra and her colleagues for that very informative presentation.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I thank the witnesses for being here today. I was listening to the piece on the J1 visa. My children had such a wonderful time in the United States with the J1 visa programme. After they graduated from college, my son worked in the United States for one of the hotel companies. He was brought back after he qualified and he played golf on all of the top courses in the United States. He stayed in Marriott hotels right across the US. The relationship that Ireland has with the US through J1 visa programme is something else. I thank the witnesses for their work on that and for the support they offer to all young students when they go over there. A negativity existed during the last Administration and I hope that we see this reversed and the relationship develop again.

I want to touch on a sore subject where many Irish feel so hard done by, which is the undocumented Irish. My great friend and former Senator Billy Lawless put it in a nutshell when he said that they are illegal immigrants in that country. We need to do everything we can to ensure that they stop taking the risk and they start trying to emigrate in a legal way. It hurts me greatly to hear people talk about the undocumented Irish and yet we have thousands in this country whose residency in Ireland we are not prepared to legitimise. We need to play this game evenly. We need to have a campaign to explain to people that if they are going to emigrate to the United States, they need to do it legally. They need to touch base with organisations such as the coalition before they go in order that they know exactly what boxes need to be ticked in order to arrive over there legally. I am interested in the witnesses' views on that.

There are also issues for those expatriates who have gone from Ireland to America to senior positions. These people are working for some of the major multinationals in the pharmaceutical and technology areas, and yet their children who are born and reared in Ireland cannot return to Ireland to go to university without paying full fees. Given the relationship we have had with the United States and the huge interconnectedness between the two countries, we must work on this jointly to service the Irish expatriates. From the few times I have been in the United States, I am aware that the expatriates over there do a fantastic job for the Irish community who arrive in the United States. We do them a great disservice by not looking after their children when it comes to third level education.

I thank Ms Kennelly for her statement on the wellness issue. I cannot imagine what it must be like to be a young person or a person in middle age, living in the United States of America to find that a parent, a sibling or a relation in Ireland is terminally ill, or that some catastrophe has happened at home. These people must sit their time out and cannot move because if they did come home, they would not be going back. So many of them have their lives set up there. Maybe I am talking out of both sides of that argument in that on the one side, I am saying that they really need to stop becoming illegal while on the other, I am saying it is great that Ms Kennelly has a wellness initiative set up over there.

Will Ms Kennelly indicate if there anything the coalition needs from us to improve the service it provides for our people on the ground and to assist it in the job it is doing? Perhaps Ms Leonard Dibra will deal with the issue of the expatriates sending their children home. Mr. Collins and Mr. Stahl might address the concerns on the J1 visa and the undocumented Irish. I really appreciate the witnesses being here. My former colleague Billy Lawless has a huge interest in what the coalition is doing.

Chairman: I propose to seek questions and observations from a number of committee members before going back to the witnesses. I ask that Ms Leonard Dibra would distribute the questions amongst the panellists as she deems fit and appropriate. I am conscious of time.

Deputy David Stanton: I will be very brief. I welcome our guests and thank them and their organisation for all of the work they do. It is much appreciated.

Do we have any idea of how many people from Ireland are undocumented in the United States? Last January to was a headline in one of the publications over there that the immigration reform Bill could see more than 20,000 undocumented Irish given a route to citizenship. Is there any idea of the numbers? I am aware that a lot of the people may not be known or may not have made themselves known but the coalition may have a handle on how many people are over there.

As a previous speaker has said, could witnesses give us an idea of a breakdown of ages and how long people have been there? Are there any statistics around that? The representatives might not have those figures to hand right now and if not perhaps they could send them on to the committee for our information.

I am quite interested in the issue of wellness and mental health, which comes up again and again. If there is anything the committee can do to assist there, we would like to know about that.

I will turn to the issue of Irish people who want to visit the United States of America. Currently there is a complete ban but questions have been asked about people who have been vaccinated in Ireland. Many of us have been vaccinated with the AstraZeneca vaccine, which I understand is not recognised in the United States. If and when the ban might be eased, which hopefully will be soon, has there been any discussion on the recognition of vaccines with regard to people from Europe who want to travel to America to visit family there? This also applies to me and other colleagues, for example, who have been vaccinated with this AstraZeneca vaccine.

Deputy John Brady: I thank our guests for presenting to the committee this afternoon. It was very informative. I commend them on the ongoing work they are engaged in. Like Senator Craughwell, my eldest daughter had the honour of availing of a J1 visa and spent a very happy time in San Diego a number of years ago. She built up strong relationships and friendships as a result of that. It is almost seen as a rite of passage for many young people now.

My first question concerns the J1 visa programme and the serious backlog as a result of some of the Covid measures within the United States Embassy. With regard to engagement with the embassy, when might they be on top of the backlog? What measures have been put in place to deal with the backlog? I appreciate that the embassy officials are working under extremely difficult challenges, which are presented to everyone, even with the other visas. The embassy staff have been working remotely, which has had a serious impact on their ability to process any visas. What engagement has taken place and what kinds of assurances or commitments have been given around processing those?

The issue of emigrants returning to Ireland has presented itself as a challenge for many families that have come back to Ireland after spending many years in the US. They have said that they have faced serious challenges here in Ireland, even in terms of simple things such as trying to open a bank account or accessing other services that normally would be open to them. Has that cropped up as an issue in any of the witnesses' engagements with Irish people?

The final issue I wish to raise is those who are undocumented. Following on from some of the comments made, it is a serious issue that faces more than 20,000 Irish people who are living

in the US. They face serious challenges continuously, but particularly in the past 18 months or thereabouts, in accessing the services and supports they should or could have been able to access in the US, were they fully recognised. In light of the coming to office of a new President in President Biden, what hopes are there or what engagements have taken place to date with a view to trying to address that serious issue, which, unfortunately, has not been dealt with for far too long? Given President Biden's strong Irish connections and roots, there is a hope the issue will finally be dealt with comprehensively. I ask the witnesses for their views on the ongoing challenges and the hope that the new US President will actually deliver.

Chairman: I propose to go back to Ms Leonard Dibra now. A number of questions have been raised by Senator Craughwell and Deputies Stanton and Brady. I allow the witnesses to respond and then I will call on Senator O'Reilly and Deputy Clarke.

Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra: We have a list of the questions. We will try to go through them. I will start with the initial question about the undocumented and the legal pathways. I will hand over to my colleague, Mr. Stahl, who is the head of legal immigration services at the Emerald Isle Immigration Center and is the key legal mind for our immigration analysis programme. The first question was about legal pathways and the undocumented. Perhaps Mr. Stahl can speak to those issues and to the minimal legal pathways available to people to enter United States.

Mr. John Stahl: I thank the Senator for the question. One of the biggest problems with the system here is that it is broken. There are not the channels available, currently-----

(Interruptions).

Mr. John Stahl: -----in many cases. That is what leads to the issues of the undocumented here, unfortunately. The build-up results from the way the system is currently shaped, which is that if you do come to the US and overstay your visa, you are, in a sense, trapped in the US, because if you depart the US after an overstay, you are barred from then returning. That then forces most people to have to remain in the US and hope for a change or a pathway to open up, of which a few are available for some in the US who have overstayed. As there are not many such options currently, however, it forces people to get stuck in the US.

Now, with the pandemic and the Covid-19 restrictions that are in place, it is also impacting legal immigrants in the US, that is, those who are in the US on proper temporary work visas or student visas. They are not able to travel outside the country or go back home and they cannot travel back with the bans currently in place. They are legally doing the right thing, yet they are still trapped in the US and are unable to travel home for funerals or weddings and such. Hopefully, a logical system will be set up that is based more on science, rather than just a strict ban, which will allow people to go home if they can show proof of a negative test result. They already have to show proof of a negative test result to come back to the US. Everyone - citizens, green card holders and visa holders - have to show proof of a negative test result to return. However, showing proof of vaccination seems to be the next logical step for those people. Hopefully, that answers the question.

Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra: I am conscious that our colleague, Mr. Staunton, is also in attendance. In terms of the undocumented, perhaps Mr. Staunton wishes to comment on what we know on the numbers of undocumented and their situation.

Mr. Ciarán Staunton: Over many decades, we have always tried to steer away from the is-

sue of numbers because they do not bring anything to the debate. Legislation will not be passed based on whether there are 5,000, 25,000 or 50,000 Irish people over in the US. However, our commitment has to be to Irish citizens who are illegally in the US. That is what the Irish Government and the Irish-American community have done over the years.

In respect of what is going on at the moment, Mr. Stahl summed it up fairly well. In respect of jobs, there is some interest in agricultural workers and those who want to work in that area. There is an interest those in the hi-tech business. There is some interest in the dreamers, that is, those who came over when they were young. There is very little interest in others than those, with the general amnesty as they call it.

There is a very tight balance in the House. I will not repeat what Mr. Stahl has said already. As far as Irish-Americans are concerned, we have not given up hope that with President Biden, Senator Schumer, Nancy Pelosi and others, the Irish community will be looked after when there is comprehensive immigration reform. That is where we are, effectively.

Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra: The issue of the J1 visa has been raised a number of times. I will hand over to my colleague, Mr. Millar, who is the executive director of the Rian Immigrant Center and an officer of the coalition, to speak on the issue.

Mr. Ronnie Millar: I thank the members for their kind words about the J1 programme. As I said earlier, it is an important programme for young people. The feedback that we are getting from the Department of State is that the overseas embassies such as in Dublin and Belfast will prioritise US citizens because there is so much of a backlog in terms of processing work for US citizens. It is really unclear when the non-immigrant visas, like the J1 visas, will start to be processed after the travel restrictions are lifted. With such a backlog, we do not have clarity. Of course, with the J1 visa, the eligibility is 12 months after graduation, so with each month that passes, a number of students become ineligible for the visa programme. We are really not clear on how long the backlog will take to clear but we have started to accept applications. We will work with students to ensure that all of their paperwork and applications are prepared and in the pipeline for when the embassies can process the paperwork.

Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra: To semi-piggyback on the issue of J1 visas, there was a question about university fees for expatriate American students returning home to attend university in Ireland. Mr. Collins, who is in Chicago, wanted to comment on that issue.

Mr. Michael Collins: This is an ongoing issue. It is something about which we at the centre received quite a few inquiries. Many people in the Chicago area and the Midwestern United States would like their kids to be educated in Ireland. There are some roadblocks to making that happen. I do not think I would quite fit the criteria described in terms of high-level executives. I am a second-generation American and pursued my graduate degree in Ireland, which was an excellent experience.

Much work is being done. I highlight in particular the work that the Irish Immigration Center, Philadelphia has been doing on this issue. I do not want to put words in the mouths of its representatives but I know they are working on some sort of an exchange programme to promote the ability of Americans to avail of Irish universities. I would be very interested in having a conversation, as I said, because we have been getting a lot of inquiries in Chicago. Philadelphia is a little ahead of us in taking that first step and engaging with colleges. I would be interested in a follow-up to get the insights of the representatives of the Philadelphia centre and see how we might be able to make that work. There is interest in and a desire for the op-

portunity for Irish-American kids to be educated in Ireland.

One of the committee members mentioned preventing undocumented folks from arriving in the first place and seeking consultation from the centres ahead of time. I would be willing to bet that all of the centres are an excellent resource and would be happy to provide those kinds of legal screenings and information prior to arrival. We have built good partnerships with the Crosscare Migrant Project and many local Irish organisations that also assist folks before they leave. Increased connections and referrals are the way that is going to be achieved. I ask committee members to keep the coalition in mind if they are getting inquiries from folks who are thinking about coming here. Having the correct information before you leave is absolutely essential to making the right choice.

Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra: The relationships we have built with the global Irish network is one of the things that, through the coalition and with our membership, we have done well in recent years, especially during the pandemic when we were looking at crisis returns for people. There is a real network through organisations such as the Crosscare Migrant Project, Safe Home Ireland and the consular offices throughout the United States. The network is ready, willing and able to help people in the US or people across the Atlantic who are trying to come here. We are happy to be doing that.

I will address wellness, which covers several questions that were asked. I will group several topics. I will address wellness and questions about returning home, part of which includes some of the work the centres have done well during the pandemic, and continue to do well, in supporting the community here. All of the centres here provide some form of wellness programming. Our centres range in size and capacity but they all provide support to the Irish community in terms of wellness. That can range from resource and referral all the way up to on-site clinical support. There are avenues through which people can get the help they need. A continuum of services is provided by the centres with best practice and professional learning support from the coalition. I wanted to highlight that. I will hand over to Ms Kennelly to talk a little more about the wellness programme in San Francisco. As the chair of the coalition board, she may be able to say a little about what we have seen during the pandemic as people moved to remote working. I am happy to jump back in if needed.

Ms Celine Kennelly: Wellness services have always been a large part of what the centres have provided. As Ms Leonard Dibra said, the range of what we do is significant. Covid-19 has brought many issues to the forefront and has exacerbated a lot of the mental health and wellness issues that many of our community members see. We are not just talking about in the undocumented community, which has been the primary focus for many of the immigration centres, but we are also seeing those issues across the gamut. They are impacting visa holders, undocumented immigrants, green card holders and US citizens. Covid has created a sense of distance. Many of our community members lost family members during the pandemic, some from Covid-related illness and most not. It has certainly created an increased need for programming at our end.

One of the most important things that the centres provide is cultural competency when it comes to social service programming. We can all safely say that the Irish are not the best at seeking assistance, mental health and wellness services, or opening up to hard conversations. The availability of Irish centres means that there is an Irish voice at the end of the phone or there is somebody who, if they do not have an Irish accent, will greet people seeking support with an Irish saying. It allows the callers to know they are coming into a safe space, almost as if they are coming home. Some centres refer Irish people in need of support onward and other centres

provide services in-house. Both models work well and are successful.

The best support committee members and Oireachtas Members can provide is through continued funding to allow us to continue to provide services. They must also support the organisations in Ireland, including the Crosscare Migrant Project, Safe Home Ireland and the Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas. All of those service organisations are partners of all of the centres of the United States. It is important to ensure they also remain supported.

On the question about people returning to Ireland, there is a challenge for access to services. Mr. Staunton has also raised this matter and he might jump in with any comments in that regard. Access to driver's licences is an issue. There are also issues with regard to insurance, opening bank accounts and accessing healthcare. At the moment, we are working with a number of families who, for a variety of reasons, would be better off at home. They would have support systems, family and friends around them at home. Some of those people are going home with significant health issues and in need of additional support that is not available to them in the United States. Having those support services on the ground is extremely important. Mr. Staunton may have something to add on people who are returning to Ireland.

Mr. Ciarán Staunton: Ms Kennelly has covered the issue well. We had a hearing in the Oireachtas last year. We had some meetings in Galway. We have met a number of Ministers on the issue. Some progress has been made but in the light of what is going on at the moment and given the fact that people are still coming back, I think the Government needs to take another run at the issue. The Government needs to look at it from the point of view that those are Irish people who are returning. They have been away for a while but they are not foreigners. They are Irish people and their children, as one of the committee members mentioned. I would like the committee to look at this issue after the summer when the Oireachtas returns after the recess. The committee should look at this issue again and ask how to make the transition easier.

Ms Celine Kennelly: I thank Mr. Staunton. I will return to the topic of mental health, wellness and the need for cultural competency and support. We in San Francisco have established the first men's shed in the US. We know that men communicate and access services differently to women. We are moving forward in making sure that our mental health community is served through men talking, shoulder to shoulder. The shed started two months prior to the pandemic and very quickly pivoted to being an online resource for our community. In their internal conversations, they are working on men's mental health programming for the San Francisco and bay area Irish communities. This is something we will be sharing with all of the centres as part of our best practice in supporting centres. As we start to figure out how best to care for the mental wellness of our gentlemen, other centres will be able to replicate the programming.

Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra: One of the positive things about Covid, if we can say this, is the fact we were all able to see through the virtual programming not only the massive amount of work done by the centres throughout the United States in typical times but also the ramp-up that went into expanding programming. They made sure people had access to all of the supports they needed. They expanded their hours and increased cultural programming so that people in the community who were further isolated, whether undocumented or documented, were tied back to the centres. In so many instances, these centres become a home away from home where people feel safe and get the information and support they need. I say well done to the centres I work with because they did Trojan work. With regard to specific Covid supports, I will hand over to my colleague Mr. Millar, who will speak a little about the relief funding that went out throughout the United States.

Mr. Ronnie Millar: In a time of extreme crisis, the Irish community really came together to support each other. The embassy in Washington DC partnered with the local consular regions and the 11 centres to provide emergency support to Irish emigrant families who were struggling because of Covid. They were struggling financially. People had lost their jobs. In the early days of Covid, many people were in the construction industry which had really shut down. This time last year, the hospitality sector was wiped out for more than a year. Many people had lost their jobs and needed help with rent and food.

The best example of this was probably in New York. A number of Irish organisations and businesses came together and formed the Sláinte 2020 coalition to provide emergency relief and cash assistance. We are indebted to the Irish Government for supporting the welfare of Irish immigrants who really struggled. Many of the centres ran food pantries and cash assistance programmes. They checked in with families, particularly older people. The Irish pastoral centre in Boston supported older Irish people as did many other centres. This was critical and I thank the embassy in particular. Every month, we had calls with the ambassador and all of our consuls general. There was a real sense of solidarity through Covid at real time of crisis. In Massachusetts, we were part of a multicultural coalition of immigrant support centres. We were able to get funding from private foundations that were able to help Irish immigrants in Massachusetts with emergency cash assistance.

We have also been part of racial justice. Many of the centres have been very active on the multicultural piece in the United States. There has been a real racial reckoning. This has been an important part of the past year. We have been part of this conversation in terms of racial justice. The Irish have stood alongside immigrants of colour and African-Americans. On behalf of all of the centres, I appreciate all of the support of the Irish Government.

Mr. Michael Collins: I reiterate what Mr. Miller said. Not only the embassy but the local consulates have been absolutely amazing throughout this entire process. They have worked with all of the centres to ensure we have what we need to meet the needs of the community. In addition, many centres have pivoted to ensure local resources are available to Irish citizens also. In Illinois, we run the Illinois family support programme, which is a direct cash assistance programme. This might have been replicated in other areas in the country. At the onset of the pandemic, direct Covid relief was a very important part of our work. It continued to be a very important part of our work throughout the duration of winter and a little bit into spring. Things are improving slightly. This all comes down to local shutdowns. The industries many of the undocumented folk work in are some of those hardest hit by the pandemic. There have been quite a few programmes and a lot of the centres put in a considerable amount of work to make sure our people are looked after through these programmes.

Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra: That was part of the discussion we had in preparation for this meeting. The state and local scenes were very important where federal funds were not being accessed or were not able to be accessed.

There was a question about AstraZeneca. I do not think we have an answer on this. Perhaps Mr. Stahl will speak a little about the review of the travel ban, which is ongoing but there has not been movement on it.

Mr. John Stahl: There has been some talk recently about lifting the ban but it does not appear likely to happen, at least for this summer. This is the most recent position I have heard on it. The next logical step would be to have some type of a vaccine passport, for want of a better term. This would allow individuals to come with proof of vaccination. I do not know what

vaccinations would be involved. Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson are distributed here in the US. I have not heard anything about AstraZeneca being included. It is not something that has been rolled out or officially announced. It just seems to be the next logical step for relieving the restrictions. The testing requirement has been in place since earlier this year for all individuals travelling to the US. It seems likely a vaccination requirement will be put in place.

Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra: This wraps up the initial list of questions and I hope we have not missed any.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I thank our guests for being with us and, more importantly, for the good work they do across the ocean in the US. It is very important to us. We have very keen bonds of kinship with the US and the people there. This session is very important. I salute the good work of the witnesses. I have been very much aware for a long time of Ciaran Staunton's work and have spoken to him by telephone in the past. What the witnesses are doing is great.

I am delighted that the J1 visas are coming back. I hope this can be expedited. My youngest son aspires to one for next year. It is an important rite of passage. My son will be very disappointed if he does not have it for next year. At present, my office is dealing with a student who got a place in Springfield University but cannot get the relevant visa processed by the embassy in Dublin in time for the first semester. That is a real issue. If it is an issue for the person dealing with my office, that person, obviously, is by no means alone. We are doing everything - contacting the embassy, etc. - but it seems the best on offer is something like November. I do not know whether the witnesses can do anything about that or comment on it.

The undocumented Irish are a subject that is really dear to all our hearts in that it involves people not being able to return for funerals, weddings or other family events, and there is a huge amount of emotional trauma and distress there. I have heard through my office from a few people who are undocumented and were caught. They were silly enough to leave New York state but then went to hell and back with custody, being held over, delayed flights and, basically, a lack of civil liberties, you could say, and abuse for a period before being deported. Perhaps the witnesses would like to comment on that or how widespread it is. Obviously, I do not want to cite the individual case but it was a pitiful example. We are concerned, obviously, about access for the undocumented Irish. Could the witnesses comment more on the status of the E3 visa situation? There were hopes, because it seems Australia does not take up the full numbers, that a considerable number of E3 visas could be available to our undocumented if they could be got on stream. The witnesses might elaborate on that, where we are at or what they could do about that specifically.

I salute what the witnesses did about the welfare for people who could not access the normal support systems during Covid. Could they comment on numbers in that regard? That has to have been a traumatic position for anybody not to be able to avail of state support yet to be displaced from his or her job. I may not have heard Mr. Staunton correctly but I think he attempted to outline some of the measurements or figures on the undocumented Irish. I thought I heard a figure of 5,000. Mr. Staunton might revert to those figures a little at some point if he does not mind so we hear what he thinks the figures are now.

Turning to the people who are documented, there should not be a great need there. Perhaps the witnesses would like to comment a little more on the impact of Covid and displacement on those people in the context of jobs and what kind of welfare was needed.

I salute the work the witnesses do. It is important. This touches the heartstrings of every-

body in Ireland. We all have our cousins and our friends in America, we have that bond and we watch this space very carefully. I thank the witnesses.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I fully agree with the statement Ms Kennelly made earlier about how Covid has exacerbated existing conditions for those who are migrants, regardless of whether they are legal or illegal. If Covid has shown us anything, it has really rocked us to our core and exposed how reliant we are on friends and family. When you are away from home or in a foreign country, that lack of familiarity can be extremely unsettling, and this during such a challenging time. I commend the work the witnesses have been doing with the Irish in America and congratulate them on the men's shed. I hope it takes off. I know men's sheds have been a hugely positive experience here. Also, I thank all the witnesses for sharing their experience and their knowledge. There really is no substitute for hearing from people on the ground what the Irish are experiencing abroad.

I will not go back over what other contributors have said but I do want to hone in on just a couple of points. One is the US Citizenship Act of 2021. Mr. Stahl mentioned that there is a lack of agreement as to what should be included in the smaller Bills. Can he give us some more details on that? What at this point in time are proving to be the biggest barriers to the smaller bills that need to be passed?

As for the undocumented community, Mr. Collins stated: "The undocumented retreated further under the radar, becoming further isolated from the community." Has that started to change with the roll-out of vaccinations and the easing of restrictions? Are those people coming back? All illegal immigrants, from any country, come with a certain level of vulnerability. When there is a centre from which they can obtain support, to hear they are pulling away and retreating from that I find very concerning. Are these people starting to come back to the centres for supports? Do the witnesses know whether there is access to vaccines for our undocumented in America and what the uptake, if any, is at the moment?

Finally, the issue of families seeking to return to Ireland is something the committee needs to come back on and have a look at. I refer not only to those returning from the United States. In many ways our system here is very antiquated and could do with being updated to recognise that when people leave the country they will not always be gone for their entire lives and may come back. I just do not think we have the systems in place here, and I speak of this from experience. I know personally two people who have had to come back from the United States in the past 12 months, and the difficulties they have experienced are mind-blowing. They do not reflect very well on our system.

I will leave it at that. I thank the witnesses again for their time and for sharing their experiences.

Chairman: I do not see any other members offering. I will revert to Ms Leonard Dibra. As I do, I will put a couple of issues to the witnesses, acknowledging the great work the coalition of centres does and all the centres do daily, servicing a most important need. Mr. Stahl in one of his replies touched on the fact that the centres are dealing now with perhaps more issues than just Irish issues, with particular reference to campaigns on racial justice. I am not sure to what extent Ms Leonard Dibra will be in a position to share with us her thoughts on the broadening of the Coalition of Irish Immigration Centres over the years, acknowledging the tremendous work over decades. As for 2021 and dealing with issues that are perhaps no longer exclusively Irish issues, I will address myself specifically to Mr. Staunton, acknowledging his work as the chair of Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform over a long number of years, taking a position of great

leadership. Is he more optimistic now than on the last few occasions on which we spoke about finally achieving clear pathways to residency if not pathways to citizenship? I refer to the draft bill as published by President Biden earlier in the year and the extent to which Mr. Staunton sees a collaborative approach towards amendments that might be of benefit to our people, with particular reference to timeframe. How does he see that working out, having regard to the fact that he said he does not see any immediacy or any date on which the Bill might be submitted for debate or formally? I acknowledge the Taoiseach's discussions with President Biden on St. Patrick's Day on prioritising the legislation and, more particularly, the discussions the Taoiseach had over the St. Patrick's weekend on the E3 visa Bill with Speaker Pelosi. Has Mr. Staunton been in a position to follow up with Dan Mulhall, our ambassador, or other contacts he may have on the Hill? My question, really, is how optimistic Mr. Staunton is.

One technical question came up in the context of a reply from, I think, Mr. Stahl when he spoke about the J1, acknowledging that there is no clear date for resumption and that there is a lack of clarity. Senator Craughwell, Deputy Brady and Senator O'Reilly declared an interest. Let me declare my interest insofar as my two daughters enjoyed thoroughly J1 stints in Washington and Boston which, I have no doubt, really formed them in their own personalities and assisted them on their return in their careers. One has only got to look to this committee to see the importance of J1 visas for the tens of thousands of Irish people. Is there anything that we can do on this end in order to assist in the return of the J1 visa programme? Mr. Stahl spoke about the 12-month period after graduation. I notice some technical confusion here in a number of cases. Is it 12 months after graduation or 12 months after completion of a course? In the context of Covid-19, has there been any latitude that might in some circumstances be necessary in order to meet the requirements of individual cases?

I want to say well done to the witnesses on all their work. From listening to Mr. Stahl, Mr. Staunton, and Mr. Millar brings back fond memories of my days visiting some of the centres. I remember in particular the tea and Irish-style fruit cake in the Emerald Isle Immigration Center in New York. I had some more difficult encounters with Mr. Millar in Boston. I hope they achieved some results in terms of the many case studies done in Boston. I thank the witnesses for joining us. I will ask Ms Leonard Dibra to distribute the questions and queries from Senator O'Reilly, Deputy Clarke and me.

Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra: Would Mr. Staunton like to make a start on these questions? There were a number of questions for him, including on E3 visas and on potential prospects in the future legislatively. I will hand the floor to him first, if that is all right.

Mr. Ciarán Staunton: It is good to talk to and hear from Senator Joe O'Reilly again. He stated that I mentioned a figure of 5,000 undocumented Irish people. I did so because, over the years, people have changed the numbers from 5,000 to 50,000.

(Interruptions).

Mr. Ciarán Staunton: -----in between. Regardless of the figures, let us get on with it. They are Irish people so let us help them out. That is where that came in.

On the E3 visas, they are leftovers from the Australian E3 visas. This is a bilateral agreement between Australia and America. Since Australia was not choosing all of the E3 visas, some of our people and the embassy and others came up with the idea that perhaps Ireland could avail of the unused visas. The leadership came together with Irish America and the embassy. It was agreed with Speaker Pelosi and the Senate leadership that instead of opting for legislation,

they would put it through on a unanimous consensus voice vote. That means no one can object. Congressman Richard E. Neal, my friend from Springfield, brought it to the House in March 2020. It was all set to go through the Senate. Everyone in both parties had agreed to it. Then, Senator Tom Cotton from Arkansas, pulled out the “No” vote to stop it. One “No” vote is all it takes. That means it did not get out there. We had to allow time to filter before last time to see if there was some way we could get Senator Cotton to walk back his “No” vote for a future run at it. Prior to this, we had the same issues with Senator Chuck Grassley from Iowa. He just put up a “No” vote. That is all they have to do, and then everything is dead. We hope that there will be a road to Damascus for Senator Cotton. Anyone who follows him says that they do not know how much prayer it will take to turn him.

I thank the Chairman for all of his work. We have dealt with him before. The atmosphere at the time when he was in the United States was fairly difficult. We think that the atmosphere has improved. We have dealt with President Biden over the past 20 or 30 years in Dublin, in the US Embassy in Ireland and with the leadership. He was down in Mayo last year. There are many great contacts there. Unfortunately, it has to come through the legislative process in the House of Representatives and the Senate. The Senate is tied 50-50. For most things to get through, they need 60 votes. That means they need the agreement of ten Republicans for everything. They can hardly even get them in respect of the construction world at the moment. That is good money going back into constituencies.

I would never want to say that I am not positive, because no pessimist ever came to America. However, it will take a lot of turning again in the fall, after they come back and get those couple of Bills through. Whether or not they will go with a grand Bill in the form of an immigration reform Bill, which includes agriculture workers, the dreamers and some of the other ones, along with the others who are there. I am not sure yet, Chairman, what that is going to come to. Obviously, we are sitting watching it. I will-----

(Interruptions).

Mr. Ciarán Staunton: -----the embassies, consulates and everyone had been playing a big role up to now. We had many continuous meetings. Everyone on the phone was on those calls. I hope that we come back to it again, and that we can get back to engaging the White House, the Senate and the House of Representatives on this.

Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra: I will revert to the questions regarding student visas and we will then move on to the questions on J1 eligibility. Could Mr. Stahl talk about delays and F visa, and M visas?

Mr. John Stahl: I have received several calls over the past few weeks on student visas from Ireland, as well as from individuals in the US who are looking to return home. They are looking for the visa process to come back so they can begin their studies in the fall, starting in August and September. Those with F student visas and M student visas are exempt under the regional travel ban. They are able to travel if they have a visa in place. The issue, though, is getting a new visa or renewing a visa at the moment because of the backlogs at the US Embassy in Dublin. The difficulty is there. They are prioritising those visas, among other things. The problem is that they do not have as many appointment slots as they usually would. The difficulty is getting people in within the timeframes that are needed. Most of these students seem to be working closely with their schools to set up alternate arrangements on a remote basis. As a plan B, some who are not able to get through will attend school remotely, from within Ireland, for the initial part of the semester. It does not seem like everybody will have the opportunity to get into

the US Embassy in Ireland before the end of the summer to process these visas.

I also wanted to say that New York State, in its recent budget, passed a few relief measures for undocumented people in the form of rent assistance and an emergency relief fund. These will be rolled out starting next month. We at the Emerald Isle Immigration Center will be helping individuals, particularly those who are undocumented, who are ineligible for unemployment and other pandemic assistance and stimulus assistance over the past year. We will be helping those people. That will bring many individuals forward to seek that financial assistance. Financial assistance is one of the bigger needs among members of the undocumented community. Financial assistance is needed over anything else. They will be issuing payments of up to \$15,000 to undocumented individuals across New York State.

Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra: Confusion over J1 eligibility has come up a couple of times. Would Mr. Millar like to dig a little further into this?

Mr. Ronnie Millar: The US Department of State changed the rules regarding the eligibility for the J1 12-month visa. As the Chairman rightly said, the 12-month eligibility period began when the student took the last course. It was, therefore, the end of the course, and not graduation, when the clock would start ticking. This was relaxed pre Covid-19. There is now greater flexibility on the 12-month eligibility period. Certainly, for a couple of years, that caused many issues. It reduced the window through which Irish graduates could apply for the programme. We hope that moving forward it will be the full 12 months after graduation.

Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra: I am trying to make sure we get all of the questions. There was a question regarding deportation issues, about how that happens. Ms Kennelly may wish to offer a quick response to that question.

Ms Celine Kennelly: As regards the deportation process, to a large extent there is not much we can do as it is the remit of the federal government, which runs that processing as it sees fit. What we can do on an individual basis is to be there to support immigrants who are going through proceedings. We all work very closely with regional consulates, which also have a direct connection and relationship with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, ICE, and the deportation officers. We can work towards an expedient deportation process so that we can get people out. We can often ensure that those immigrants in the deportation process who become clients of the centres are given access to legal services to get the representation they need. In some cases, the individual may be eligible for parole and to have a hearing before an immigration judge. Our role relates to making sure all their opportunities are reviewed and that they get the opportunity to have legal proceedings if that is an option. However, for the most part, there is not a lot we can do.

As regards messaging, if friends or family are aware that a person has been arrested by ICE, getting in touch with an immigration centre immediately so that we have the opportunity to intervene on behalf of the person is of vital importance.

Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra: I thank Ms Kennelly. There were a couple of questions regarding access to vaccination for the undocumented population. I will start with Mr. Collins in Chicago and move to Mr. Millar in Boston. Both of those centres have worked on vaccination access. What we did on a national level was to let people know where they could get vaccinated and that immigration status would not be an issue in that regard. The centres did a great job in ensuring resources were available to that end. I will hand over to Mr. Collins to discuss vaccination access for the undocumented.

Mr. Michael Collins: The vaccination effort in Illinois has reached a phase where vaccines are being brought into the neighbourhoods it is believed need them most. We in Irish Community Services predominantly serve the Irish community but we also serve a wide array of other immigrant communities. Our centre was used as a vaccination centre earlier this month and it will be used as one again this Friday. We have been in close contact with the Illinois Department of Public Health.

As regards access to vaccines, at least in Illinois, one does not need insurance, immigration status or even an identification document. A person can walk into any clinic and get access to a vaccine. That is working well in the context of the community centres that have been hosting such clinics. Unfortunately, we are at a stage where many people who wish to get the vaccine have received it, so there is a larger push to try to convince people who have not been vaccinated to take that step and get vaccinated. It is open to undocumented people and regardless of whether one has identification or insurance. In Illinois at least, the vaccine is widely available.

Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra: Does Mr. Millar wish to jump in on this issue? I know he and his team did some work on vaccination.

Mr. Ronnie Millar: The situation in Massachusetts mirrors what Mr. Collins described in the context of Illinois. The first roll-out was through mass large vaccination centres. The undocumented did not feel comfortable going to those centres because there were police officers there and there was talk of ICE officers stamping the vaccine centres, so the Governor of Massachusetts responded to that and the vaccine centres then went to the local community centres. Our centre helped to co-ordinate local vaccine centres where undocumented immigrants could get access to the vaccine without identification or insurance, as Mr. Collins described happening in Illinois. As he pointed out, it is now very easy for anyone who wishes to be vaccinated to get the vaccine. Pop-up clinics are widespread and Massachusetts has a very high rate of vaccination.

Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra: I thank Mr. Millar. The next question related to the observation in our statement that “the undocumented retreated further under the radar”. I will hand over to Ms Kennelly. That issue was framed in the overall context of our statement. Ms Kennelly will agree that, under the previous administration, immigration, and the undocumented in particular, was a real target. It was a time of high anxiety even for those trying to adjust their status here and whatnot. That is how that observation was framed. I will hand over to Ms Kennelly who may be able to provide more detail on the issue.

Ms Celine Kennelly: It was a double whammy of fear of the Trump Administration and the impact of the rhetoric coming from that administration, which was then exacerbated by Covid. As all of my colleagues have referenced in the context of access to vaccines and information, there was a heightened level of fear. The individual centres and the Coalition of Irish Immigration Centers played a very important role in communicating with communities and making sure they were aware there was a safe space to which they could come and people to whom they could speak about issues of concern to them. To be fair, all the centres deserve kudos for that. Their doors were open. Virtual programming was put in place in a flash. Those of us who previously knew nothing about Zoom became very proficient in it by the end of April 2020. The centres have continued to operate in that realm for the past 12 months. We have created several new elements of programming. The centre in Chicago and our centre here in San Francisco organised immigration question and answer sessions with our local consulates. More than 100 people joined those hour-long presentations which provided information and an update regarding what was happening with regard to Covid, Ireland, travel and vaccination. We have all

worked to our collective strengths in making sure people know information is available, current and correct and that our doors are open to receive questions.

A question was asked regarding the impact of Covid on the documented community. As Mr. Stahl referenced, travel stopped for many members of the documented community. For the past 12 months, the only people who have been able to travel to Ireland and return, for any reason, are US citizens, that is, those of us who have dual citizenship, or green card holders. Many visa holders were used to having the ability to come and go and being able to have that touch back to home. Several members of the committee mentioned the importance of that touch back to home, of coming back to family and friends and being able to regroup. It is very important that the symbiotic relationship that exists between Ireland and America is maintained and that we have a free flow between our two countries. Many of the documented living in the United States got a very sharp taste of what it is like not to be able to move freely or to travel over and back. In many cases, they got a taste of what it is like to be a member of the undocumented community who, to answer an earlier question, would do anything in their power to regularise their status. I can safely say that all undocumented immigrants living in the United States would do anything possible to regularise their status. Unfortunately, as has been mentioned, we struggle to find the path for them to do so.

Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra: I thank Ms Kennelly. I will circle back to her comments regarding the immigration clinics and whatnot that carried on virtually. To highlight something we mentioned in our statement, the coalition's immigration analysis initiative is thankful to its partners at the embassy in Washington DC who, with the onset of the Trump Administration four years ago, came together with generous funding from the then Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to make this happen. The centres do a magnificent job of answering the questions of members of the Irish community who come to them. I am pleased to say that we at the coalition on the national level feed that information into the centres. My partner, Mr. Stahl, walks me through the legal side of everything input from the centres, which have magnificent legal minds working for them. It is a real national effort. We have been able to streamline information, let the Irish community know that this is where people will get accurate and reliable information, to educate themselves and to go to the centres to get the support necessary to make the best and most educated decisions for themselves, based on their personal immigration cases.

I would welcome members of the committee to follow the coalition. We post and distribute everything publicly for the most part, on our social media, in order that people have access to it. We would welcome it were members to see what we are doing and perhaps we will send the committee a follow up on some of the work we have done in the past four years. Feedback has been great from our members and support from them in distributing that information to their regional clients has been fantastic. Our partnership with the embassy is priceless. The support from the consular offices who feed into and use the materials also is really great. I wanted to highlight that because it is a significant programme that we do and it is very helpful.

One of the last questions was from the Chair looking at the diverse diaspora. I think it is something that we have done very well stateside for a number of reasons. We have some social justice work going on here outside of the coalition, within our own cultural context. In keeping with the diaspora strategy, as well as the immigrant support programme that highlights looking at non-traditional diaspora members, the coalition through our social services committee is now looking closely at inclusivity and how to look at different areas of the Irish diaspora that our centres serve, whether it be racial diversity or the LGBTQ+ community, who all make up the amazing Irish diaspora here in the United States. We are happy to be doing that work and

happy to continue that work. I am going to hand to my colleague, Mr. Millar, who has done a lot of work here within the Irish context also.

Mr. Ronnie Millar: As I stated earlier, it has been really important for the Irish, in terms of where the country is and in terms of our racial reckoning. Many of the coalition centres partnered with the I Am Irish group in London and really worked out what it means to be Irish and what it means to be an Irish person of colour living overseas. All the organisations work in partnership with other non-Irish immigrant support centres. A big part of what has happened during Covid-19 is that we have come together as an Irish community and in partnership with other, non-Irish organisations. It makes me really proud to be able to say that I am Irish and working alongside other immigrant groups. I want to clarify and emphasise that any funding that came for welfare support was absolutely for Irish families and supported Irish families. The reality is that race is the dominant conversation we are having right now, around racism. It is really important for us as Irish men and women in the United States to be standing up and speaking out against racism. That has been a big part of our identity. We are partnered in Boston with the Irish Network Boston which was business leaders and other Irish organisations. We ran online conversations about racism and systemic racism and that has been an important part of our experience of being Irish in America. We would be absolutely tone deaf if we did not speak up about those things.

Ms Aileen Leonard Dibra: I thank Mr. Millar. I know that Deputy Clarke had circled back around to returning immigrants and that being a topic of interest for this committee. We would welcome members' ongoing interest in that as supporting people coming home is just as important as supporting people who are here or want to come to the US. Earlier, our friend Mr. Staunton mentioned that he has been very involved in that process, as have many of our centres in the coalition, by working with Irish-based organisations that help people either in crisis or with a planned return, who are going back to Ireland to live. I thank Deputy Clarke for bringing that up and yes, let us keep that at the forefront of our discussions and engage with the coalition, as well as supporters and advocates like Mr. Staunton who work tirelessly on this effort. I think that deals with all the questions, unless I missed any.

Chairman: I thank Ms Leonard Dibra for the manner in which you assembled a team of experts from across the United States. As I said at the outset, I did not mean to inconvenience anyone with an early morning meeting but we were very keen here, as we approached the end of our term in parliamentary session, to have an opportunity to engage, acknowledging the fact that we have not done so over the past 12 months. Certainly, Ms Leonard Dibra and her team have left us in doubt as to the importance of this engagement. I thank her again and acknowledge the work that the coalition manages right across through California, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, Philadelphia and Washington D.C.

It is also timely that we have this meeting now because as we break for the summer, the focus will be heading towards budgetary matters in September, and of course the Department of Foreign Affairs budget, and support under the emigrant support programme, ESP, as well as various other headings, are issues which are important to us in the committee. We go into that aspect of our work armed with the great work that you do on behalf of Irish communities. We certainly hope that the positive relationship between the Department of Foreign Affairs and our Government and your coalition will continue and will be manifest in the budget for the ESP and associated programmes. It appears to me that the Covid-19 response fund has been put to very good use and even though we are moving towards the end of Covid-19, hopefully, it seems to me from our engagement that there still is a requirement for Covid-19 funding through your

13 JULY 2021

centres. I want to acknowledge the positive relationship between yourself and our consular team across the United States of America. That is crucially important to us, as parliamentarians, and indeed to all Irish people. In fact, the connection is such that our current consul in Boston is Dr. Laoise Moore, who was policy officer to this committee not long ago, and I would be grateful if you would pass on the regards of the committee to Dr. Moore, and thank her for her work and indeed acknowledge all the work of our consuls and their team across the United States.

As well as thanking you, I want to acknowledge that we have more work to do. It is important that we would meet again before the end of the year. We have work to do in terms of the immigration issue, listening closely to what Mr. Staunton has said about possible timeframes and the need to ensure active engagement on the part of our people in Washington D.C., including Ambassador Mulhall, with your group. We should acknowledge that within the next few weeks, we will have the arrival of Ambassador Cronin, although she must go through the various hearings that are part and parcel of the system. Assuming that these matters can be dealt with, I would expect that during the course of the autumn she will be here. We can take it that this committee will engage with her and her team in Dublin. There is much work to be done between Dublin and Washington and this committee, as parliamentarians, and the coalition. I know my members will ensure that we have an opportunity for further engagement during our autumn session. In the meantime, we wish your work continued success. We thank you for what you are doing and look forward to further and more positive engagement over the coming months.

The joint committee went into private session at 2.11 p.m. and adjourned at 2.17 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 14 July 2021.