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Karen Hogan
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Madam Auditor General,

I write to you today as the National President of the Union of Taxation Employees (UTE), which represents over 36,000 members working at the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA), and as a concerned Canadian citizen and taxpayer about the current situation in Contact Centres across the country. CRA employees who work in its Contact Centres and respond to service inquiries from Canadian taxpayers and businesses are members of our union and are committed to providing quality service.

First of all, I would like to thank you for the very important work your office carries out in auditing the various departments and agencies of the federal government, and then providing the Canadian Parliament with objective, factual information and expert advice on government activities, gathered during the audits. This oversight work is vital because parliamentarians use the reports provided by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada (OAG) to monitor government activities and hold the federal government to account for the way it spends and manages public funds.

Among the federal agencies your office audits is the Canada Revenue Agency.

Prior to the COVID pandemic, the general situation in the Agency's Contact Centres was very worrisome, with a chronic shortage of staff and other issues related to, among other things, the quality of employee training. In fact, a scathing report produced by your office and published in the fall of 2017 painted a rather bleak picture of the situation in the Canada Revenue Agency's Call Centres (now referred to as Contact Centres), and made several recommendations to the Agency to improve service quality.

At the time, our union welcomed the report's conclusions and agreed with the proposed recommendations. This confirmed our view that the CRA needed to provide better and more comprehensive training for its contact centre agents, in order to deliver excellent service to Canadian taxpayers and businesses. We had also indicated that we appreciated the fact that the Agency had increased the number of agents in its Contact Centres, but that, in our view, there was still a significant shortage of agents to respond adequately to the increased number of calls.

Following the release of this report, the Agency implemented several changes. In addition, the federal government has increased the CRA's budget to hire more agents to meet the growing demand for calls.

Then came the COVID pandemic. At the beginning and throughout the pandemic, the federal government asked the Canada Revenue Agency to assist Service Canada in delivering the multiple emergency programs set up to help people and businesses across the country. To this end, the Agency proceeded with a massive hiring of new employees working in its Contact Centres, since the number of calls received was growing enormously, and employees now had to answer questions concerning emergency programs in addition to calls related to the Agency's normal activities (taxpayers' and businesses' taxes).

Throughout these changes and adaptations, our union and its members have worked closely with the Agency to ensure that Canadian taxpayers' requests for service are met.

Since the end of the pandemic, the Canada Revenue Agency has been steadily reducing the number of agents working in its Contact Centres, and the adverse effects on the waiting times Canadian taxpayers must endure before being able to speak to an agent have been very significant.

In fact, wait times at CRA Contact Centres are simply unacceptable. I know that you are aware of this situation and that you share this point of view. In fact, you stated in December 2023 that your office would continue to audit wait times and the quality of responses provided by Canada Revenue Agency Contact Centres, following a request received from a federal MP who said he was receiving many complaints from taxpayers and businesses in his riding. Other MPs also complained about the same situation.

Madam Auditor General, I can confirm to you today that the situation is still very difficult in the Canada Revenue Agency's Contact Centres, and that there is still a severe shortage of agents in order to be able to meet the demand and offer the best possible service and respond to calls in a timely manner.

But this is not surprising at all. Indeed, the Agency decided in May 2024 not to renew the contracts of over 2,000 of its contact center agents. As we predicted, the result was immediate. Taxpayers have been waiting on average more than three (3) hours since the start of the summer to get answers to their questions. And that's if they don't simply lose patience and abandon their call altogether.

This is in direct contradiction with the statement made in the latest budget tabled last spring by the Minister of Finance, the Honourable Chrystia Freeland, which claims that the government is providing sufficient funding to the CRA to not only maintain the level of service offered to Canadians by its Contact Centres but to improve the service.

This is not the case.

Recently, the Canada Revenue Agency hired (or rehired) some three hundred (300) new contact center employees in response to a request from the Taxpayers' Ombudsperson to provide more equitable access to CRA Contact Centre hours of service regardless of where one resides in Canada.

This is good news. However, it is far from sufficient to remedy the long delays that taxpayers face when they call the Agency.

Our union and its members understand and share the frustration expressed by taxpayers and businesses alike.

The situation faced by our members is distressing. Employees working in Contact Centres are exhausted, and the Agency's refusal to fill more permanent positions in this type of work, as well as the stressful and highly supervised work environment compared to other positions within the CRA, place them in precarious employment situations.

Madam Auditor General, I invite you to continue auditing the Canada Revenue Agency, and more specifically its Contact Centre operations. I am convinced that one of the conclusions you will draw is that the Agency is back to its old ways, and is once again sorely lacking in agents to respond in a timely and appropriate manner to the requests of Canadian taxpayers and businesses. I am optimistic that one of your recommendations will be that the Canada Revenue Agency should proceed with the hiring of many more agents in its Contact Centres to really improve the situation for both taxpayers and businesses, and for our hard-working members who face very difficult working conditions.

The excellent work of our members is the cornerstone of service to Canadians and their ability to comply with Canadian tax regulations. I am convinced that you share our goal of restoring public confidence in the CRA's ability to respond quickly and adequately to the inquiries of Canadian taxpayers.

I offer you my full cooperation and remain at your disposal to answer any questions your office may have on this matter in the context of a future audit.

Please accept, Madam Auditor General, the expression of my highest regards.



Marc Brière
National President
Union of Taxation Employees