

I remind hon. members that during the life of the program this government contributed more financial support than any previous government. The program funded up to \$35,000 for each court level challenge and up to \$5,000 to develop a case.

Canadians have every reason to be proud of this program. We have invested more in the Court Challenges Program than any other country in the world. I say to my hon. friend, not only have numerous cases been resolved under the program, but many more cases have helped to raise awareness among Canadians of several issues that must be dealt with if we are to ensure that this great nation continues to place a high value on equality for all its citizens.

The Court Challenges Program has enabled access for many more groups that for one reason or another are at a disadvantage to the justice system. For example, the Canadian Council of Churches received program funding to challenge many sections of the Immigration Act. The council believes the act violates equality rights.

To assure hon. members that the government had a strict hands-off policy regarding the Court Challenges Program, I must point out that the government argued that the Council of Churches did not have the standing to bring its case to court, but the Federal Court refused to strike down the council's case. The government appealed that decision but the Federal Court of Appeal ruled in the council's favour and the program is now funding the council's appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada.

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The government has found it necessary to bring the program to a conclusion. However, as we have already made clear, the government intends to honour all its commitments made prior to February 27 of this year. These commitments include the one made by the program to the Canadian Disabilities Rights Council, which is challenging a section of the Immigration Act frequently used to bar families from immigrating to Canada if the member of that family has a disability.

The program has already funded a number of similar cases but the government settled each of them out of court. The program is now funding the council rather than more individuals so that the case can be argued on

behalf of the entire group affected under the Immigration Act.

Many of the cases I have mentioned dealt with and deal with equality rights because that is a key section of our Charter of Rights and Freedoms. However there are other concerns as well, such as those expressed by Victims of Violence. This community organization is disturbed about barriers to justice that can hinder a person with a disability who needs to give evidence in court.

The program is helping Victims of Violence develop a case on the potentially discriminatory impact of the Canada Evidence Act on people with disabilities. It wants the court to consider options such as allowing videotaped or written testimony for individuals unable to testify in person.

The Court Challenges Program will also honour its commitment to the Canadian Ethnocultural Council to help it research the question of access to the courts for persons with complaints of discrimination under the Canadian Human Rights Act.

Hon. members may know that currently only the Canadian Human Rights Commission can deal with complaints. The council is concerned that complaints of discrimination may not be dealt with effectively or promptly by the commission. It believes that individuals should have access to the courts in these matters.

Prejudice is widespread in our society. Unfortunately, judges are not immune to it. Members of disadvantaged groups frequently raise concerns about alleged discriminatory attitudes and rulings of judges. In that regard, the program has funded the Inuit Women's Association of Canada to help it examine the sentencing practices of judges in the Northwest Territories in cases of sexual assault against Inuit women.

The Court Challenges Program was originally intended to help citizens who wanted clarification of language rights through the courts. Financial assistance was provided to groups and individuals for test cases based on the language rights provisions of the Constitution. My hon. friend will appreciate that the program was intended to serve as a tool to promote our two official languages. It has done that, and the government is proud of what the program has accomplished in promoting the recognition and implementation of minority language rights across Canada. Through the program we have