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Service Canada Service Standards Renewal

FINAL REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Service Canada's Service Standards are currently being rewritten from a client's perspective to align with the draft Treasury Board Secretariat Policy on Service, and with the draft Directive on Service Standards and Client Satisfaction Measurement, to better reflect a citizen-centred approach to service. The goal of the research is to gain feedback on how the renewed service standards resonate with clients and to validate clients' expectations vis-à-vis the service standards. This assignment involved a total of fifteen focus groups in three cities: Ottawa, Montreal and Winnipeg. In each centre, two focus groups were conducted with members of the general public, while other groups focused on a specific target audience, such as general public, seniors, youth, persons with a disability, Aboriginal Canadians and new Canadians.

The past service experiences of focus group participants with the federal government varied. The vast majority of focus group participants had obtained service from Service Canada or another department or agency in recent memory. The types of service most commonly obtained include passports; Employment Insurance (EI); taxation information or forms; Canada Pension Plan (CPP) or Old Age Security (OAS); disability benefits; Social Insurance Number; and the Job Bank. No one service delivery method was more popular than another. Roughly equal numbers of participants express a preference for in-person, telephone or Internet service. Each service method is seen to have particular advantages and disadvantages relating to convenience, interpersonal communication, hours of access, etc.

The extent to which focus groups participants are satisfied with service received from the federal government in the past varies. Most express general satisfaction with past service. Participants did, however, identify certain weaknesses in the services provided. The primary complaint focused on lengthy wait times for service (in person or by telephone). Other weaknesses include inconvenient hours of service (limited to weekday working hours); website weaknesses (e.g., quality of the search engine; incomplete access to forms and information; text and information that is not sufficiently simple for all audiences); and inconsistency in ability to access French language service. Suggested improvements largely mirror these weaknesses.

The initial reaction to the proposed Service Canada Standards tested in the focus groups varied. In over half the groups, the initial reaction was one of scepticism, as the standards were perceived to be overly ambitious or simply too good to be true. In other groups, the initial reaction was generally positive, with the standards perceived to be reasonable. Participants who felt the standards are overly ambitious expressed concern over the cost of implementation for taxpayers. Participants generally perceive the revision of standards to be linked to an effort to improve service and address past concerns or complaints.

Overall, many aspects of the Service Standards tested exceed the expectations of participants. In particular:

- The response time of 18 seconds for the 1-800 general inquiry line was met with disbelief and clearly exceeded participant expectation. Most would be willing to wait longer than this for telephone service.
- Service within 50km exceeds expectations for those participants who consider rural and remote regions of their province. This is considered insufficient to participants with an urban frame of reference, particularly new Canadians, who wish to access service quickly and easily using public transit.
- Service in some foreign and Aboriginal languages was received positively by many participants, and was seen to accommodate new Canadians or Aboriginal Canadians moving to urban areas from remote reserves, who may not be able to speak English or French. A smaller number of participants disagree, believing that service should be limited to the two official languages of Canada. These participants felt that the focus should be on providing good, quality service in English and French, and that it would be too costly to provide services in a broader range of languages. Francophones in Ottawa and Winnipeg were more apt to express this view.

Other aspects of the Service Standards fell short of expectations in some groups or among some participants:

- Participants are not satisfied by the hours of service offered by Service Canada Centres and specialized call centres. They believe that some evening or weekend service hours should be offered to accommodate working Canadians.
- Many participants react negatively to the provision of service using interactive voice response systems, describing these systems as confusing and frustrating, particularly for the elderly. Participants felt that care should therefore be taken to make any automated systems as simple as possible to use, providing opportunity to connect with a live service agent when necessary.
- The standards do not meet the expectations of all with reference to accessibility of services to persons with a disability. The content of the current standards is limited to visual and auditory disabilities, and does not speak to physical access or other disabilities (e.g., cognitive).

Participants also reacted negatively to the opening statement or disclaimer which heads the renewed Service Standards. Participants suggest that this statement minimizes the rest of the document and leads them to question whether these standards will in fact be met. The wording is not sufficiently clear and tends to cast doubt over the document. It would be preferable to either re-word the statement to emphasize that standards will be met most of the time, or to place this statement at the end of the document. It may also be a good idea to introduce the document with a title or a statement as to the general intent of standards. Participants do accept, however, that it is unrealistic to expect these standards to be met 100 per cent of the time, and accept the need for some type of disclaimer.

Most participants appreciated the language used in the document, finding it direct, personal and positive. Most participants did not express any concerns with the language or tone of the document, and did not describe undue difficulty reading it.

Participants consider it very important that Service Canada establish service standards, to ensure some public accountability and also as a benchmark for evaluation. However, many consider the standards to be an important internal document, and of limited interest to the general public. While they suggest making the standards available (e.g., on the website and in Service Canada Centres) few suggest a broad public communications campaign linked to standards. Participants are very interested, however, in information on how, when and where to access service. They suggest communications tactics and approaches to increase awareness and knowledge of Service Canada services, such as: information or pamphlets inserted in other government mailings; brochures or pamphlets; information in the blue pages of telephone directories; fridge magnets with access information and phone numbers; etc. Many also suggest targeting information at specific populations or groups in need of service (e.g., seniors, new Canadians, new parents).

The ability to provide feedback on service is considered important and valued by clients. Participants express varied preferences for the provision of feedback (in writing, in person or by phone) but wish to see their comments and concerns taken into consideration by Service Canada.

Finally, the Service Canada service standards are seen to be equal or superior to standards in other organizations by those participants aware of other private or public sector standards.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

Service Canada's Service Standards are currently being rewritten from a client's perspective to align with the draft Treasury Board Secretariat Policy on Service, and with the draft Directive on Service Standards and Client Satisfaction Measurement, to better reflect a citizen-centred approach to service. High quality service promotes citizen confidence in government, produces high levels of client satisfaction, demonstrates value for money to taxpayers and contributes to the achievement of public policy goals.

Service Canada is committed to ensuring that service standards are concise and client-focused. Through renewed standards, Service Canada aims to make it easier for Canadians to access service (by phone, Internet or in person); to ensure Canadians receive excellent and expeditious service; and to ensure that client feedback contributes directly to ongoing service improvement.

The goal of this research is to gain feedback on how the renewed service standards resonate with clients and to validate clients' expectations vis-à-vis the renewed service standards. The research findings will contribute to a number of Service Canada reports (i.e. the Annual Report, the Departmental Performance Report and the Management Accountability Framework). The information collected through this research will allow Service Canada to validate, improve and set service standards.

1.2 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This assignment involved a total of fifteen focus groups in three cities: Ottawa, Montreal and Winnipeg.

In each centre, two focus groups were conducted with members of the general public, while other groups focused on a specific target audience. Specific audiences targeted for focus groups include seniors, youth, new Canadians, Aboriginal Canadians and persons with a disability. Three focus groups were conducted with individuals with a disability. In Ottawa, this group consisted of individuals with physical disabilities (all of whom were confined to a wheelchair). In Montreal, one group was conducted with individuals with cognitive disabilities, and one with caregivers of individuals with disabilities. For the purposes of these discussion groups, new Canadians were defined as individuals who had been residing in Canada five years or less. An overview of the focus groups conducted in each city is provided in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Composition and Distribution of Focus Groups

City	Participants
Ottawa (five groups, March 18-19)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">› Seniors (English)› Persons with a disability (English)› General Public (English)› General Public (French)› Newcomers to Canada (English)
Montreal (six groups, March 25-26))	<ul style="list-style-type: none">› Persons with a disability (French)› Caregivers for persons with a disability (French)› Youth aged 16-18 (French)› General public (French)› General public (French)› Newcomers to Canada (French)
Winnipeg (four groups, April 8-9))	<ul style="list-style-type: none">› General public (English)› General public (English)› Aboriginal Canadians (English)› Aboriginal Canadians (English)

The focus group guide was designed in cooperation with Service Canada officials, to ensure that all pertinent issues were addressed. Issues addressed in the guide include:

- › Experiences to date and satisfaction with service received from the Government of Canada;
- › Service preferences;
- › Potential improvements to current government service;
- › Extent to which new Service Standards meet expectations;
- › Satisfaction with new Service Standards;
- › Suggestions for change or improvement to proposed Service Standards; and
- › Communication of standards.

Once finalized, the guide was translated into French. The focus group guide used to moderate the group discussions is provided in Appendix A. The service standards tested with focus group participants is provided in Appendix B.

The duration of focus groups was one hour for persons with a disability (or caregivers of), and one and a half hours for all other groups. The duration of focus groups with persons with a disability was shorter in length than other groups in order to be able to accommodate their needs (e.g. difficulties participating in a long discussion). All focus groups were conducted in professional focus group facilities,

which provided audio taping of the discussion and an observation room for Service Canada officials. All the facilities were accessible for people with a disability.

Approximately 10 participants were recruited for each of the full-length groups to try to ensure that eight attended each discussion; four to five were recruited for each of the shorter groups of persons with disabilities in an effort to obtain three participants. Each group was well attended. Each full-length group typically consisted of eight to nine participants; and groups of persons with disabilities each included four participants. The groups of persons with a disability were smaller in terms of the number of people participating, primarily due to the greater difficulty in recruiting these specialized groups.

For the general population focus group participants were identified at random using a telephone recruitment guide and approach. For the more dedicated groups (i.e., Aboriginal, senior, youth, newcomers and persons with disabilities) a recruitment database was used. A small number of information items (including age, gender, education, income and employment equity) were added to the recruitment script to monitor any biases in propensity to participate.

2. FINDINGS

2.1 PAST FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SERVICE EXPERIENCES

a) Past Service Experiences

In each focus group, participants were first asked to describe their most recent interaction with the Government of Canada; and were invited to indicate the nature of information or service they had sought and from where they obtained this service or information (Service Canada or another Department or Agency). The past service experiences of participants in most groups varied. The types of service most frequently identified by participants across groups include the following:

- **Passports:** Several participants in Ottawa and Montreal identified obtaining a passport as their most recent service interaction with the federal government.
- **Taxation:** Not surprisingly given that focus groups were conducted in March and April, several participants in each centre (and in most groups) identified taxation-related information or services as their most recent interaction with the federal government. For some, this involved obtaining specific taxation forms for their needs (e.g., person with a disability, self-employed, etc.), while for others this involved seeking clarification on a specific item or issue. A few also noted having sought a missing T4 slip.
- **Employment Insurance (EI) Benefits:** Participants in a number of groups (e.g., Aboriginal Canadians and general public groups) mentioned having applied for or received EI benefits; of participating in an EI funded program; or having applied for maternity benefits. Some also noted having participated in EI sponsored programs for new business start-ups, or having enrolled in training/education under EI.
- **Canada Pension Plan (CPP) or Old Age Security (OAS):** Several participants across numerous groups identified CPP or OAS in their most recent service experience. Some (e.g., seniors) had applied for the CPP for themselves, while others noted having applied for OAS on behalf of an aging parent. A few individuals had to also notify CPP or OAS of the death of an aging parent.
- **Disability Benefits:** Participants in a number of groups (general public groups, Aboriginal Canadians as well as persons with disabilities) noted having applied for disability benefits as their most recent experience.
- **Social Insurance Number (SIN):** Participants in a number of groups identified having obtained a SIN card as their most recent service experience. Some had obtained a SIN card for themselves (youth and new Canadians), while others had obtained a SIN card for a child.

- **Job Bank Postings:** Several participants (general public, youth, Aboriginal Canadians) identified the Job Bank as their most recent federal experience.
- **Citizenship or Immigration Services:** Several new Canadians (in groups of new Canadians and also individual newcomers who participated in general public groups) identified citizenship or immigration services as among their most recent service experiences. This included applying for Canadian citizenship, obtaining resettlement services, and becoming a landed immigrant. Several participants in the Montreal group of new Canadians also noted having had to contact the government to renew study or work permits.

As well, other types of services were cited by individual respondents, including export permits; small business information or services; obtaining services or assistance for a disabled child or partner; or obtaining a home energy audit. A few participants in the group of individuals with physical disabilities (Ottawa) also noted having participated in programs funded by HRSDC, such as the Opportunities Fund. These programs involved education, entrepreneurship and employment mentorship opportunities.

A small number of participants in several groups were unable to identify any recent service interaction with the federal government, or mistakenly identified provincial or municipal services (e.g., housing, transportation) as their most recent service experience.

While awareness of Service Canada was not being tested in the focus groups, it was clear that participants in some groups were well aware of Service Canada and of having obtained service directly from this initiative (using the 1-800 line, the website or a Service Canada Centre) while others were not. Some participants (particularly seniors and some general public participants) were not aware of Service Canada, or were unable to identify the department or agency that most recently provided them service.

2.2 SERVICE PREFERENCES

Participants were asked to identify how they had sought service from the federal government in their most recent interaction or service experience. Participants in all groups had sought service in a variety of ways, with almost equal numbers having sought service in person, by telephone, or online. Some service methods were more common in some groups. For example youth were more apt to have obtained service via the Internet, while seniors and those with cognitive disabilities were more apt to have obtained service by phone or in person. However, when participants across all groups are considered as a whole, no one service method was more predominant than another.

Participants in each group were also asked to identify their preference for obtaining service. Again, participants expressed varying preferences, with some expressing a preference for in-person service, and others for telephone or Internet service. Participants were also invited to provide an explanation or rationale for their service preferences.

a) In-person Service

Seniors, not surprisingly, tended to prefer to obtain service in person or by phone. Some new Canadians also expressed a strong preference for service in person, indicating that “things can be explained more clearly” in person, or can be easier to understand if you have a language barrier. One new Canadian (in a general public group) also indicated that service personnel tend to have more empathy to your situation when you speak to them in person. Some participants in other groups (general public, youth, and individuals with disabilities) also expressed a preference for in-person service, and “dealing with a live human.” All those identifying a preference for in-person service generally prefer to be able to speak to a service agent face to face. Others also suggest that completing forms in person reduces the chance for error. Some participants spoke of fear of making errors in forms or paperwork, and only finding out weeks later (thus substantially extending the time required to obtain the needed document, service or benefits). This was of particular concern for some new Canadians, required to complete or update visas or permits to remain in Canada. A drawback of in-person service is seen to be the requirement to travel to the service centre, which may involve public transit or paying for parking.

b) Telephone service

A number of participants across all groups indicated a preference for service by phone. Service by telephone is perceived to offer human contact (as with in-person service) with the convenience of being accessible from home. Many note that telephone service “saves running around.” Several participants across groups, however, note that a disadvantage of telephone service can be the fact that you can wait on hold a significant amount of time for service. As well, participants in several groups (most notably seniors and Aboriginal Canadians, but also small numbers of participants in other groups) voiced an intense dislike of automated telephone systems. Senior participants described automated phone systems as the “curse of the earth,” and spoke of getting “stuck in telephone heaven.”

c) Internet service

For many participants in each group Internet was the preferred medium for obtaining service. Internet service was described as eliminating the need to stand in line, or wait on hold on the telephone. As well, many noted that Internet service is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Many participants who had obtained Internet service were specifically aware of the Service Canada site, and had used it. While many participants who indicated a preference for Internet service indicated that they were able to obtain any information or service required online, others described the Internet as a good “starting point,” where they obtain general information, forms or identify the documentation needed to obtain service (e.g., a SIN card); and then follow up with a phone call or in-person visit to a service centre to obtain service or clarify the information obtained on the Internet.

As noted, many seniors participating in focus groups (in the group of seniors or older participants in the general public groups) noted a lack of experience with computers, and therefore a lack of

comfort with obtaining service online. Some participants in other groups (e.g., individuals with cognitive difficulties, Aboriginal Canadians and seniors population) also noted that they either lacked access to the Internet or lacked computer literacy.

2.3 SATISFACTION WITH PAST SERVICE

Following the discussion of recent service experiences and general service preferences, participants in all groups were asked to indicate the extent to which they have been satisfied with the service they have received from the federal government and/or Service Canada, as well as to identify strengths, weaknesses and potential improvements to federal service. The level of satisfaction with past service varied significantly from group to group, and even among participants within groups. Overall, however, more participants reported being generally satisfied with service received than being dissatisfied. In particular, many participants spoke positively of service personnel, describing them as “courteous,” “kind,” “helpful,” and “nice.” Most participants felt that, once you succeeded in reaching a service agent (by phone or in person), they were generally quite helpful. Furthermore, some participants in Ottawa and Montreal spoke very positively of recent experiences, even noting that they were “pleasantly surprised” by the quality or speed of service they received. In particular, some had expected long wait times to obtain a passport or SIN card, and were surprised to find that a) wait times were shorter than expected; and b) documents were received far more quickly than expected.

On a positive note, participants in some groups (Ottawa and Montreal) described Service Canada as “a step in the right direction,” providing a substantial improvement in service. These participants generally felt that the “one-stop shopping” offered by Service Canada was definitely a more client-friendly approach. Participants in a number of groups noted that service has improved over the years. Participants in one general public group in Montreal furthermore noted that federal service tends to be “superior” than service offered elsewhere.

Although many participants did express general satisfaction with service received, they still identified weaknesses in federal service. Service weaknesses identified by participants include:

- **Wait Times or Speed of Service:** The most common complaint of participants regarding service concerned wait-times for service. Many spoke of waiting long periods of time on the phone for a service agent, or of waiting a long period of time in line at a service centre. Some participants specifically noted that the move to inform clients of expected wait times in service centres is helpful or positive.
- **Hours of Service:** In all three centres, many participants noted that service hours are not always convenient for working Canadians. They indicated that it is difficult to make time to visit a service centre or wait on the phone for service during regular working hours. They note that their boss will not necessarily understand them using work hours to obtain service.
- **Website Weaknesses:** Some participants in groups in each city identified weaknesses with the Service Canada website. Comments or complaints regarding the website include:

- ◇ **Weak search engine:** Some participants in groups in each city complained of difficulties searching within the website. These participants spoke of entering a search query, only to yield results completely unrelated to their request. A few noted that they had to resort to using “Google” to search within the site.
- ◇ **Incomplete access:** Participants in some groups (Ottawa) suggested making even more programs, services, information and forms available online. A few participants in Winnipeg noted that the website is best for obtaining general information and forms, but is not as helpful when searching more specific or specialized forms and information (e.g., for a small business, taxation forms for those with disabilities).
- ◇ **Catering to a broad demographic:** Participants in several groups (Ottawa and Montreal) suggested that the website can contain information which is detailed, unclear or unnecessarily complex. In order to meet the needs of a broad demographic (including new Canadians, youth and seniors), they suggested that information progress from the very simple to more detailed on the website. These participants suggest that the site contains “too much text, too many details” to make it easy to understand, and that information should be much “simpler” and in “plain language.”

It is important to note, however, that some were completely satisfied with the site as is.

- ***Lack of Linkages Between Agencies:*** Participants in several focus groups in Montreal and Ottawa, who had experienced the death of a family member and had had to notify several federal agencies or programs (e.g., CRA, OAS or CPP) were surprised to find that there are no linkages between federal departments or their databases. They mistakenly assumed that if they informed one department or agency, others would also know.
- ***French Language Services:*** Francophone participants in Ottawa expressed frustration at their inability to obtain French language service consistently. They indicated that service personnel are not always sufficiently fluent in French to be able to provide competent service. They noted that the conversation often switches language to English if the service agent realizes that the client can also speak English. These participants argue that French is an official language, and that they should be able to consistently access services in their language.
- ***Foreign Credential Recognition:*** A primary concern of new Canadians participating in the Ottawa focus group was in the availability of information and services on the issue of foreign credential recognition. Participants expressed frustration on the absence of clear information on how to get their foreign credentials and experience recognized in Canada to obtain relevant employment. Many participants were disappointed that they have had to go back to school or accept being under-employed relative to their skills and experience. They also expressed frustration that there are many different agencies or organizations who will offer to get foreign

credentials recognized, but that often a new Canadian has no way of knowing which one has the best chances of actually being recognized or accepted by companies or educational institutions of interest to them or their field of work. They can end up spending a lot of money (especially for someone without employment) for a certificate that recognizes their foreign credentials, only to find out that the agency in question is not recognized. This was identified as a gap in federal services for new Canadians. This concern, however, was not mentioned in the Montreal group of new Canadians, where participants tended to be much younger and only just completing university studies.

- **General Confusion Regarding Services or Service Points:** New Canadians in Montreal and seniors in Ottawa expressed some frustration over a general lack of knowledge or understanding of where to turn to obtain specific services. New Canadians in Montreal also noted that it can be difficult to find the right person to talk to on the phone (and described being transferred in circles to different people before finally giving up). Other new Canadians (Montreal and Winnipeg) also expressed concern over the lack of information on services generally available. They spoke of learning of government programs or services through word of mouth from other new Canadians, and expressed a desire for more and better direction for new Canadians. Many new Canadians in Ottawa, however, had the opposite experience, noting that they were provided with clear and concise directions (for steps to take and services available) upon their arrival in Canada.

While most focus group participants indicated being generally satisfied with the service received overall (despite some weaknesses identified), a small number of participants expressed dissatisfaction as a result of specific negative or frustrating experiences in obtaining service. These included long wait times (waiting much longer than the 28 days specified in the Standards for EI regular or maternity benefits, and CPP disability benefits); service personnel who seemed to lack knowledge about programs; unpleasant service personnel; an inability to obtain French language service; or the unexpected loss of benefits.

Service improvements suggested by focus group participants largely mirror the weaknesses identified. Suggested improvements include:

- **Reducing Wait Times:** Participants in several groups suggested increasing the number of service personnel to reduce wait times (in person or on the phone), or increasing personnel at peak times to improve service. Some also suggest eliminating the use of automated phone services, to ensure that clients can “speak to a real, live person.”
- **Informing Callers of Wait Times:** Participants across several groups in each city suggested that, as an improvement to telephone service, callers should be informed of the expected wait-time based on current call volumes. They suggest that other companies have begun providing this information or service to callers. Participants in Winnipeg further suggested that callers be provided the option of leaving a voice message which will be returned, rather than waiting on the phone. These participants noted that MTS (Manitoba Telecom Services Inc) is now

providing this option, which preserves the caller's order in line for answer, but prevents them from having to wait on the phone.

- **Web site Improvements:** Improvements address the identified weaknesses, and include making the site more user-friendly and intuitive to use; improving the search engine; ensuring that it provides access to as many programs and services as possible; and providing information and directions in clear, simple language. A few Winnipeg participants also suggested the potential addition of a “live chat” button to query for additional information or clarifications on the web site.
- **Consistent French Language Service:** Francophones in Ottawa placed emphasis on the importance of ensuring access to service in French. Francophones in Ottawa also stated that the service personnel should be sufficiently fluent in French to provide accurate service, and some suggested that they should speak in “Canadian French.”
- **Information Updates:** A small number of participants who had experienced frustrations or delays in service as a result of incomplete forms or paperwork, or files gone missing within the government, suggested that providing confirmation that forms have been received or updates on files would be an improvement.
- **Foreign Credential Recognition:** New Canadian participants in Ottawa identify a need for more and clearer information for those considering coming to Canada and for those arriving about their chances of obtaining employment in their specific field, as well as clear directions for getting their credentials recognized.
- **Proactive Information on Programs and Services:** A small number of participants in the general public and new Canadian groups suggest a need for more proactive communication of existing federal programs or services available to Canadians. For example, general public participants in Montreal felt that this was particularly important for seniors, who are not necessarily receiving the services they are entitled to. They suggested targeting information to key audiences (e.g., new parents, new Canadians, seniors, bereaved people) on services they should know about.

2.4 OVERALL REACTION TO SERVICE STANDARDS

In each focus group, participants were asked to read through the draft Service Standards once in its entirety, as they would under normal circumstances. They were then asked to provide their initial reactions to the document.

The initial reaction to the service standards varied. In over half the focus groups conducted (including groups in each centre), the initial reaction was of disbelief or scepticism. The service standards were clearly seen to be overly ambitious by most participants in these groups. Some Ottawa participants

described the standards as “ambitious,” “utopia,” “almost too good to be true,” “a really good idea,” and “excellent if true.” In a Montreal general public group, one participant described the standards as “too good to be true,” while another described the document as “extraordinary,” and another “perfect.” For many of these participants, the standards appeared to be far different from their past service experiences. Some participants questioned whether Service Canada could meet these standards, stating “can they deliver?” In particular, the telephone response time of 18 seconds and service within 50 km tended to grab their attention and was mentioned in their initial responses of surprise and disbelief.

In other groups, the initial reaction was generally positive. Participants in several groups (e.g., new Canadians in Ottawa and Montreal, caregivers in Montreal, youth in Montreal, and general public in Winnipeg) generally felt that the standards “look good” are “reasonable” and seemed to “make sense.” For some participants who had recently obtained service from Service Canada, the standards appeared to be fairly consistent with their experience, and thus credible. In fact, one new Canadian participant (in Montreal), who recently obtained a SIN card in person at a Service Canada Centre, suggested that many of these standards are “already being met,” and wondered how much was “really new.”

Participants in some groups expressed concern over the potential cost of implementing these service standards. This concern was expressed in individual groups in each centre (e.g., general public and seniors in Ottawa, general public in Montreal, and both general public and Aboriginal Canadians in Winnipeg). These participants felt that meeting these standards would be expensive, require large numbers of employees, or cost taxpayers a significant amount. One participant in an Ottawa general public group cautioned that “we’ll pay for this in the end.” A participant in the group with cognitive disabilities suggested that meeting these standards would necessitate “a lot of staff and good coordination or planning.”

Individual groups also focused on different elements or concerns in their initial reactions to the service standards. The initial reaction of participants with a physical disability (Ottawa) focused on the language of the document, and their view was that the language used was not simple enough given the diversity of Service Canada clients. Aboriginal Canadians in Winnipeg also tended to focus on the statement “you will be guided through government programs and services by our knowledgeable employees who will ensure your needs are met” as they felt that this was inconsistent with their past service experiences.

Participants were asked to indicate why they felt Service Canada has developed these standards. Participants generally felt that these standards are likely an effort to improve service based on complaints received, or represent a general effort to improve service and provide broad access. One Montreal participant (general public) hoped that “the objective is good service and not creating a nice image for the federal government.”

2.5 FEEDBACK ON STANDARD COMPONENTS

More detailed reactions to the document and each component of the standards were then explored with respondents. The following is a breakdown of comments by theme and section.

a) Opening Statement

The service standards document begins with a statement that notes that these standards cannot be guaranteed, as follows: *These standards represent Service Canada's commitment to the kind of service our clients should expect to receive under normal circumstances. While we strive to uphold these standards they should not be construed as guarantees; there may be times when we are unable to meet these standards due to unforeseen circumstances.*

Participants across virtually all groups (except for one group of Aboriginal Canadians) reacted quite negatively to this opening statement, which several participants in Ottawa referred to as “the disclaimer.” For many, this statement seemed to put the rest of the document in doubt. Participants across several groups noted that this statement “minimizes,” “negates,” “discredits” or somehow lessens the value or impact of the standards that follow. For example, participants in the group of caregivers noted that this statement “makes you wonder if the standards are all for nothing.” Participants in a Montreal general public group felt that the statement suggests “you won’t actually get this service” or “you’ll be lucky to get it.” One Aboriginal participant went so far as to suggest that this statement meant that the standards “are not worth the paper they are written on,” while others felt it certainly cast doubt on the validity of the standards.

Some participants across various groups suggested that the government is attempting “to cover themselves” or that the government is “protecting itself” through this statement, and one described it as a “net.” Participants in many groups (in all centres) questioned what is meant by “normal circumstances” and “unforeseen circumstances.” Some were cynical, assuming that since “unforeseen circumstances” are not defined, the Government has an “out” for not being able to meet these standards at any given time. Several participants felt that anything could be construed as an “unforeseen circumstance,” and suggested more positive or clear wording of this statement.

Participants in most groups did acknowledge, however, that they fully realized that it is unrealistic to expect that service standards can be met one hundred per cent of the time. They felt that most people would realize that there are situations when standards cannot be met. Some questioned the need for such a statement, while others acknowledged that it should be there or that the public will be quick to complain or attack when standards are not met. Some Montreal participants suggested that it would be preferable to lower the standard to eliminate the need for this disclaimer.

Participants in some groups suggested that the statement be reworded and possibly moved to the end of the document. They suggested that the standards should begin with something much more positive, such as a mission statement for Service Canada. Participants in the French public group

suggested that the document have a self-explanatory title, to make it clear what it is about. They suggested that the wording be more positive, to convey the message that “we are going to try our utmost but there are situations where we will not be able to meet these.” Some described the statement as “too conditional,” “negative,” and “reads like a legal contract.”

Many participants suggested rewording the “disclaimer” in a shorter and more positive fashion, and placing it at the end of the document. They recognize the need for this disclaimer, but suggest that Service Canada should begin by emphasizing the positive, what they “can” or aim to do, not what they cannot.

b) Telephone Response Time

The telephone response time provided in standards for the general inquiry call centre (1 800 O-Canada) of 18 seconds garnered a strong reaction of disbelief and incredulity from participants in most groups. In fact, it is this standard that many referred to in their initial reaction to the standards document. Most viewed this standard as “too good to be true” or “impossible,” and had difficulty believing that this could be met by Service Canada. A few Aboriginal participants responded with reactions such as “nice try,” or “I don’t believe it.” Most participants across groups therefore assumed that the commitment to answer phone calls within 18 seconds meant that you would be placed on hold in a queue to speak to a live agent in that time frame. Some noted that more specific services are available in 180 seconds, suggesting to them that within 18 seconds, someone will answer the phone, but then transfer you to the appropriate department or service and that then you would wait in line. Only a few individuals, who had called Service Canada recently, believed this standard to be true.

In fact, this standard clearly exceeded the expectation of most. Some participants specifically noted that they would be willing to wait longer than this. Some participants suggested lowering this standard (lengthening the response time) in order to improve the standards in other areas (e.g., hours of service, accessibility, etc.)

c) Hours of Service

Participants in several groups across all centres (both general public groups in Winnipeg, all Montreal groups, and four of five Ottawa groups) were not satisfied with the hours of service for Service Canada Centres or the specialized call centres. Participants in these groups argue that service from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 or 4:30 p.m. on weekdays will make it difficult for working Canadians to obtain service. They felt that some evening hours and/or weekend hours should be available. One Montreal participant went so far as to suggest 24 hour service, but others cautioned that “this will cost you too much as a taxpayer.” Some noted that they cannot visit a Service Centre or make phone calls during the day, and that service should be available outside of regular working hours. Several participants noted that “my boss will get mad if I make those calls during work.” Another participant noted that outside calls are monitored at her place of work, making it difficult to obtain service during her work hours.

d) Service Within 50km

Participants in several groups provided specific comments on the standard indicating that “you will have access to a Service Canada point of service within 50 kilometres of where you live.” Most participants in Ottawa and Winnipeg (except new Canadians in Ottawa) reacted with disbelief to the suggestion that services would be offered within 50 kilometres of where you live. These participants felt that this would be logistically impossible and too costly to do. Participants in one group (Ottawa French public) suggested that this is unnecessary when telephone and Internet service are available.

New Canadians in Ottawa and many Montreal participants, on the other hand, felt that 50 kilometres is too far to go for service. Most used an urban frame of reference as they felt that this standard would be insufficient if applied to the city of Montreal or Ottawa. Many expected that there would be more service centres available than reflected by this standard in Montreal or Ottawa. In particular, new Canadians had the perspective of newcomers in an urban area without access to transportation, child care and unfamiliar to their surroundings who need to be able to access service quickly and easily. These participants (new Canadians) wished to be able to find out where to obtain service (e.g., suggesting a service locator be provided on the website), and preferred to be able to access service quickly by public transit (e.g., in suburbs as well as downtown).

e) Specialized Call Centre Service

In the context of specialized call centres, participants across several groups (seniors in Ottawa; all Winnipeg groups; and caregivers, New Canadians, second general public group in Montreal) reacted strongly and negatively to the mention of an Interactive Voice Response System. These systems were clearly intensely disliked by many participants, which they regarded as “annoying,” as well as confusing and frustrating for the elderly. They expressed a strong preference for a personal or “live” telephone response. They spoke of getting “lost” in such systems where none of the options appears to correspond to your needs; of searching for the right option then to be put on hold; and of being cut off by such systems. One participant also noted that “I have a cell phone and it is expensive when you’re paying by the minute.” One new Canadian further noted that “when you are calling for information, you are often not certain exactly what you are looking for, so you have no idea what number to punch in – if you knew what you needed, you wouldn’t be calling.” These participants were therefore less concerned with the telephone response time (with most recognizing that the time is longer, at 180 seconds) than with the fact that the telephone would be answered by a machine and not a person.

f) Benefit Wait Times

Wait times for EI benefits and benefits under other programs (e.g., disability) received a lot of attention from participants in focus groups conducted in Winnipeg. For some Winnipeg participants, the wait times provided in the Standards (e.g., notification within 28 days) were thought to be too long. They expressed concerns about going that long with “no income to put food on the table.” For others who had

experienced difficulties obtaining benefits (e.g., EI), these standards were seen to represent a significant improvement over current service. Some Winnipeg participants cautioned that “those in the greatest need are the ones to suffer” from long wait times for notification and payment from EI and disability. One noted “what are we supposed to live on in the meantime?”, while waiting for benefits.

g) Language of Service

Reaction varied to the standards stating that “you will be able to receive service in the official language of your choice”; and “you will be able to receive information in a number of Aboriginal and foreign languages”.

Participants across many groups (all Winnipeg groups; youth, new Canadians and caregivers in Montreal; and new Canadians in Ottawa) reacted favourably to these statements. This standard was seen to accommodate new Canadians or Aboriginals moving to cities from remote reserves, who may not be able to speak English or French but would be in need of service. Participants in several Winnipeg and Montreal groups wondered what languages service would be offered in, and either assumed or suggested that service should be available in the most common languages in a given geographical area. Aboriginal participants reacted positively to the fact that services would be offered in some foreign and Aboriginal languages, but wondered how clients would access such service (by phone, in person, or Internet), and whether forms would be available in these languages also.

A few Winnipeg participants, however, cautioned that personnel should be hired who speak these languages, rather than providing expensive language training to existing personnel. Only one Francophone in a Winnipeg group was less positive in reacting to the availability of service in foreign languages. This participant tended to feel that it would be more important to provide service well in the two official languages of the country rather than attempting to offer service in a range of foreign languages.

Participants in other groups (general public in Montreal and several Ottawa groups) were less enthusiastic about the suggestion that service would be offered in foreign and Aboriginal languages. These participants felt that the focus should be on providing service well in the two official languages, and that it would be “too much” to try and offer service in other languages. Some wondered if it is worth providing service in some foreign and Aboriginal languages when you cannot offer service in all. Participants in the Ottawa French public group cautioned that the “government might be spreading itself too thin” by offering services in other languages when service is not consistently available in French. They (French public participants) felt that service should only be provided in both official languages. Participants in one group stated that there are “so many” foreign and Aboriginal languages or dialects that this would be virtually impossible. One participant felt that “all Canadians should be able to speak in or understand one of the official languages and this should be sufficient.” In the one Montreal group, participants were more open to the idea of offering services in Aboriginal languages (as “they were here first”), but less interested in seeing service offered in other languages (new Canadians can generally speak one of the two official languages).

Montreal participants were furthermore pleased to note that service would be available in French. Some questioned whether service would be available in French across the country. They hoped that it might be, but were not optimistic. Participants in several groups further emphasized the importance of offering “good” French service, that is clear, understandable and in “Canadian” French.

Across numerous groups, some participants also suggested that French and English be specifically identified, rather than using the “official languages” terminology. New Canadians were particularly less knowledgeable of the term “official languages” and the fact that these refer to English and French.

h) Document Language, Tone and Terminology

Participants in all groups were asked to comment on the language and tone in the document, and asked whether it is appropriate, clear and understandable. It is important to note that many participants across all groups assumed that the Service Standards document they reacted to in the discussions would be a made a public document and provided to clients as is. Participants across most Montreal and Winnipeg groups did not express strong concerns with the language of the document. Most found it clear and understandable.

When pressed, however, or when asked to discuss methods of communications, many Montreal participants commented that the document is “long” or “repetitive” and could easily be shortened before being provided to the public. One youth participant commented that “some sentences are hard to understand – I had to start over.” It is also important to note that one participant with a cognitive disability was unable to read the document, and at least one youth participant did not take the time to read it in its entirety.

Participants in Ottawa groups were less enthusiastic about the language and wording of the document. Participants with a physical disability in Ottawa argued that the document should be simplified significantly if a broad range of audiences are to be able to read it. They argued that it assumes a significant level of literacy. They pointed to terms such as “Interactive Voice Response System” as confusing to the average person. They described the document as “written in legalese.” They also noted that for the document to be written in “plain language” it should be written at a grade six level.

Participants across all Ottawa groups suggested that the document is “too long” and “wordy,” and could be shortened significantly while still providing the same information. New Canadian participants in Ottawa further suggested that the document would be difficult to read or confusing to anyone for whom English is a second language. Participants in the Ottawa French public group objected to the use of the future tense, which suggests to them that these standards will be applied at some point in the future, but not right now. They suggest the use of the present tense, indicating that “you can” obtain service promptly right now. Montreal participants were not concerned with the verb tense.

Participants in most groups noted that in the second section of the Service Standards (“you can count on us to provide excellent and expeditious service”), the second bullet refers to programs with their acronyms only, which they are not familiar with. The full title of the programs is only disclosed in the third bullet. These acronyms were particularly confusing to new Canadians, who were not all familiar with these programs.

Finally, participants in a few groups (Ottawa and Montreal) suggested that the document could be improved by the addition of images and icons to make it easier to read. They also suggested re-formatting to make key information such as phone numbers “stand out.” They did not feel that you should have to read the document in its entirety to find the information being sought.

Participants were also asked to comment on the fact that the document addresses them directly as a client through use of the wording “you will.” Most participants across most groups reacted positively to this tone and language. Individual participants described this approach as “personal,” “friendly,” or “polite.” Most cautioned, however, that this wording is quite definite, and suggests that standards will be met all of the time. Some felt that the wording could be tempered somewhat, for example using “you should.” Some further cautioned that Service Canada should not promise standards that cannot be met, and that it is better to be honest with Canadians. Setting standards too high was only expected to result in frustration.

i) Accessibility

The section of the Service Standards devoted to accessibility of services for people with disabilities did not meet the expectations of participants across all groups. In particular, participants with a physical disability, caregivers, new Canadians in Montreal and one group of Aboriginal Canadians were not satisfied that the Service Standards went far enough to accommodate Canadians with disabilities. Participants in these groups, while appreciating the opening statement that “Service Canada is making efforts to improve accessibility of services for people with disabilities,” felt that the supporting points narrowed the focus too much, only addressing those with hearing disabilities. Participants in several groups noted that they cannot always access government buildings in a wheelchair, and that there are a wide range of disabilities (some apparent to an observer and others not) that need to be accommodated. They expected to see information that addressed a broader range of disabilities here, including the issue of physical access to centres for those in wheelchairs. One participant also noted that the needs of the growing elderly population should also be considered, and that access should be provided not only for wheelchairs but for walkers, etc.

Participants in a few groups (new Canadians in Montreal and Aboriginal Canadians in Winnipeg) felt that persons with a disability should “have right to the same service as all Canadians,” and objected to the fact that these clients may experience greater delays in obtaining service (e.g., waiting one day for calls to be returned).

Several focus group participants with disabilities noted that they or others they know are sometimes asked to “speak more quickly” when they cannot. They felt that service personnel are not always sensitive to disabilities that make it difficult for a client to speak, or to emotional/psychological disabilities (e.g., Tourette’s syndrome). These participants also noted that the website is not necessarily friendly to users with disabilities, in that the length of a session is not necessarily sufficient to complete a form for someone with a disability. They also questioned whether these Service Standards would be available in alternative formats. Finally, they suggested that these issues will only grow as the population ages, and suggested the possibility that an individual with a disability (particularly one not evident) be provided the opportunity to self-identify when seeking service.

j) Other

Other specific comments on the standards were made by participants in an individual group or by a few participants across groups. These include:

- Some participants were confused by the difference between the general inquiry call centre and specialized call centres, and why the response times and hours are different for each.
- A few participants across a number of groups suggested that the 1-800 number be provided numerically as well as alphabetically.
- Participants in many groups (both general public groups, new Canadians) were confused by the mention of specific program acronyms (e.g., OAS, CPP, EI) and the mention of specialized call centres. They felt that this conflicted with their impression of Service Canada as providing all services and programs together under one roof. This gave them the impression that they could not access all services in one location (and might have to go to a specialized centre), or that Service Canada focused on a limited number of programs. Furthermore, as new Canadians are not familiar with the services mentioned (or are not eligible for them), they found this very confusing. They questioned why services important to them (e.g., related to immigration and Citizenship) were not also clearly identified.
- Many participants across all groups noted that they liked the grouping of information by title such as “call,” “click,” “visit.”
- Participants in several groups (both general public groups and new Canadians) suggested the use of icons (e.g., a phone handset, computer screen, etc.) to help communicate the terms “call,” “click,” “visit.” New Canadian participants cautioned that the term “click” is confusing to them, suggesting that the terms Internet or website are more clear and understandable. English public participants also suggested the use of highlighting for key information to make the document easier to read and understand for a broad range of audiences.

2.6 COMMUNICATION OF STANDARDS

Participants across all groups and centres agreed strongly that it is important that Service Canada have standards for service in place. For example, participants noted that it is “important to have rules,” to “set goals,” to ensure the public receives good service, and to treat government service “like a business.” Participants in many groups also identify standards as an important internal working document for Service Canada. Some participants described standards as “an important internal document, to be respected”; or as “the game plan for staff.” Several note that these standards could also be useful for service evaluation. Others also identify standards as a source of public accountability for Service Canada.

While participants agreed that it is important that standards exist, not all place a lot of emphasis on the public communication of standards. Some participants (notably in Ottawa and Montreal) suggested that they would not necessarily seek standards out or read this information “unless they had a problem.” Some noted that it is not worth a full-blown communications campaign. These participants indicated that they are primarily interested in information on how to obtain service; where to obtain service; and when to obtain service. They were happy to know that they could expect good service in a reasonable timeframe, and were not overly concerned with being made aware of the specific details within the standards. A few participants went so far as to suggest that if they were to receive these standards in the mail, they would not read them but “throw it in the recycling.” Youth participants in particular expressed less interest in the service standards or obtaining documentation on these standards, describing this information as being “more important or interesting for our parents.” Youth simply wanted to know that service would be available when they need it, and that they would be treated with the same respect as adults.

It is important to note, however, that participants in a small number of groups did feel that the public communication of standards was important (e.g., new Canadians in Ottawa). However, not all participants and groups (particularly new Canadians in Ottawa) were clear on the concept of “service standards,” assuming instead that the document tested was intended to provide them general information about the services offered by Service Canada. These participants therefore suggested advertising this information in a variety of locations (including television and public transit), and suggested placing brochures in a variety of locations such as community centres and public libraries.

In many groups, participants suggested that the information contained in the document tested be shortened and condensed before communicating it to the public. Participants emphasized that standards should be communicated in a much more succinct and abbreviated fashion (e.g., “short and to the point”). Furthermore, many participants identified a need for greater communication of Service Canada itself, of how Canadians can access service (in person, by phone and on the Internet), and the nature of services available. As noted, the level of awareness and knowledge of Service Canada varied within and across groups.

Participants in some groups also identified a need for targeted information and communication to particular audiences. For example, many new Canadians (both in groups of new Canadians and in

general public groups) identified a need for information to be targeted to newcomers. They suggested providing information at welcome centres, airports, and community centres. Participants in the groups of seniors also demonstrated a particular lack of knowledge of Service Canada and a need for information. For example, seniors incorrectly tended to assume that Service Canada represented a new department, or another level of bureaucracy, which would add to the cost of providing service. They did not grasp the one-stop shopping aspect or the advantage of a single location for service. Furthermore, caregivers (for persons with disabilities) further suggested sending information to targeted groups through organizations or associations (such as those representing seniors, quadriplegics, etc.). New Canadians in Montreal further expressed an interest in updates on changes to regulations or services that affect them. They suggested being able to sign up for automatic e-mail updates or notifications of change (e.g., in permits, visas, etc.) based on their profile as new Canadians. They also suggested having a clearly identified area on the website announcing changes or new services.

While there was variation in the importance placed on the public communications of standards or the type of information that should be communicated, participants in most groups provided suggestions for the communication of the information contained in the Service Standards, or of general information regarding Service Canada. Their suggestions include:

- **Service Canada web site:** Participants in many groups suggested that the Service Standards should be available on the web site by clicking a clearly identified button. They also suggested providing a “service locator” on the web site to help clients find the closest centre for in-person service.
- **Insertions in Government of Canada Mailings:** Participants across most groups suggested that information on Service Canada Standards (including information on how to access services), could be economically inserted in other government mail-outs. These participants suggested “piggybacking” on other government mailings and inserting a pamphlet or other promotional material.
- **Service Canada Centres:** Many participants felt that information on standards could be provided in posters or pamphlets in Service Canada Centres. They suggested that clients would be most receptive and interested in this information while waiting in line.
- **Telephone “Blue Pages”:** Participants in several groups suggested including Service Canada contact information and Service Standards in the blue pages of the telephone directory, as this is available to all and a reference point when seeking government services.
- **Brochure:** Many participants across groups suggested printing Service Standards in a brochure format, to be made available to the public or included in government mailings.
- **Fridge Magnet:** Participants in a number of groups suggested distributing a fridge magnet with the 1-800 number and web address for Service Canada to Canadians.

2.7 FEEDBACK ON SERVICE

Participants in all groups were asked if they wish to be able to provide feedback on Service Canada service provided to them. Participants across all centres and focus groups agree that they considered it important that clients are able to provide feedback on service. Many participants cautioned, however, that the tendency is only to provide complaints when things go wrong, and that people rarely provide positive feedback. Some further noted that the problem would have to be significant to prompt them to take the actions necessary to provide feedback.

Participants expressed various preferences in terms of feedback channels, whether in person, by telephone or in writing (on a feedback form or on the website). Some preferred to provide feedback in writing so as to avoid confrontation or to remain anonymous. A few participants felt that it was preferable to provide feedback anonymously out of concern for the potential for reprisal, while others felt more comfortable putting a complaint in writing so as not to have to complain in person to a service agent. Some expressed that they felt “shy” when making complaints. One suggested that their frustration or complaint may not be within the control of the service agent and that they would not wish to provide feedback which would appear that they are “attacking a person who is not responsible for the problem.” Others felt comfortable providing feedback through other means (whether in person or by phone).

Regardless of the channel used to provide feedback, a key concern of many participants is the extent to which their voice will actually be heard. They voiced concerns as to “will they actually listen,” and “what will they do with it.” They wished to see their concerns and frustrations acted upon so that future clients would not face the same problems. They wanted to know that someone would read the feedback and act on significant or recurring issues so as to improve service. Many participants wanted to receive real communication acknowledging their feedback including the actions that would be taken, and not a generic “thank you for your comments” response.

Participants in one Winnipeg group went further, suggesting that the individuals addressing comments should have real power to be able to “fix” problems, suggesting that an ombudsman could be established to resolve issues case by case.

2.8 COMPARISON TO OTHER SERVICE STANDARDS

Participants in all groups were asked if they are aware of service standards in other organizations or agencies, and asked how these might compare to the service standards proposed by Service Canada.

Participants in a few groups (e.g., Aboriginal Canadians, seniors) were largely unaware of service standards elsewhere and offered no comment. Participants in many groups, however, felt that these

are “better than elsewhere,” “more detailed,” or a “notch above.” Some compared the standards to those of companies they work for, and a few were aware of having seen standards elsewhere. Participants in many groups felt that the Service Canada standards exceeded their expectations, and were better than what they imagined or perceived standards to be elsewhere (e.g., in the private sector). A few individual participants noted however, that specific companies or call centres have adopted approaches they appreciate, such as 24 hour service, or being able to leave a message and have their call returned rather than waiting on hold.

New Canadians in Montreal and Ottawa suggested that Service Canada and the federal government offers “the best” or “better service.” Many participants across various groups agreed that the federal government tends to set higher standards for service compared to provincial government or the private sector, which is profit driven. Some felt it was natural or “expected” that the Government of Canada set high standards.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The following overall conclusions can be drawn from focus group findings:

- Focus group participants have contacted the federal government to obtain service relating to a variety of programs, departments and agencies, including passports, taxes, EI, APP and OAS, SIN cards, and Job Bank postings. No one service delivery method was more popular than another. Roughly equal numbers of participants expressed a preference for in-person, telephone or Internet service. Each service method is seen to have particular advantages and disadvantages relating to convenience, interpersonal communication, hours of access, etc.
- The extent to which focus groups participants are satisfied with service received from the federal government in the past varies. Most express general satisfaction with past service. Participants did, however, identify certain weaknesses. The primary complaint focused on lengthy wait times for service (in person or by telephone). Other weaknesses include inconvenient hours of service (limited to weekday working hours); website weaknesses (e.g., poor search engine; incomplete access to forms and information; text and information that is not sufficiently simple for all audiences); and inconsistency in ability to access French language service. Suggested improvements largely mirror these weaknesses.
- The initial reaction of focus group participants to the Service Canada standards was largely positive, although for many the standards were perceived to be too good to be true or too ambitious to be realized. In fact, some express concern over the cost to taxpayers for implementing such ambitious service standards. Participants generally perceive the revision of standards to be linked to an effort to improve service and address past concerns or complaints.
- Overall, many aspects of the Service Standards tested exceed the expectations of participants.
 - ◇ In particular, the response time of 18 seconds for the 1-800 general inquiry line was met with disbelief and clearly exceeded participant expectation. Most would be willing to wait longer than this for telephone service.
 - ◇ Service within 50km exceeds expectations for those participants who consider rural and remote regions of their province. This is considered insufficient to participants with an urban frame of reference, particularly new Canadians, who wish to access service quickly and easily using public transit.
 - ◇ Service in some foreign and Aboriginal languages was received positively by many participants, and was seen to accommodate new

Canadians or Aboriginal Canadians moving to urban areas from remote reserves, who may not be able to speak English or French. Fewer participants disagree, believing that service should be limited to the two official languages of Canada. These participants felt that the focus should be on providing good quality service in English and French, and that it would be too costly to provide services in a broader range of languages. Francophones in Ottawa and Winnipeg were more apt to express this view.

- Other aspects of the service standards fell short of expectations in some groups or among some participants.
 - ◇ Participants were not satisfied by the hours of service offered by Service Canada centres and specialized call centres. They believe that some evening or weekend service hours should be offered to accommodate working Canadians.
 - ◇ Many participants reacted negatively to the provision of service using interactive voice response systems, describing these systems as confusing and frustrating, particularly for the elderly. Care should therefore be taken to make any automated systems as simple as possible to use, and providing the opportunity to connect with a live service agent when necessary.
 - ◇ The standards did not meet the expectations of all with reference to accessibility of services to persons with a disability. The content of the current standards is limited to visual and auditory disabilities, and does not speak to physical access or other disabilities (e.g., cognitive).
- Participants also reacted negatively to the opening statement or disclaimer which heads the service standards. The wording is not sufficiently clear and tends to cast doubt over the document. It would be preferable to either re-word the statement to emphasize that standards will be met most of the time, or to place this statement at the end of the document. It may also be a good idea to introduce the document with a title or a statement as to the general intent of standards. Participants do accept, however, that it is unrealistic to expect these standards to be met 100 per cent of the time, and accept the need for some type of disclaimer.
- Most participants appreciated the language used in the document, finding it direct, personal and positive. Most participants did not express any concerns with the language or tone of the document, and did not experience undue difficulty reading it. The standards could benefit from some revisions to ensure clarity. However, any editing or revisions should be based on the intended use of the document.
 - ◇ The document is somewhat long and repetitive if it is to be disseminated broadly to the public. The document could be simplified and shortened.

As well, the document could be made easier to read and understand by the addition of images or icons, and by highlighting key information.

- ◇ Not all are familiar with the term “official languages” and the document should specify English and French if communicated broadly to the general public.
 - ◇ The 1-800 number should be identified numerically as well as alphabetically when communicated with the public.
 - ◇ Acronyms should be eliminated or avoided.
 - ◇ The focus of standards on specific programs or services (e.g., EI, CPP, OAC, SIN) is confusing to readers, who assume that Service Canada services are limited based on the content.
- Participants considered it very important that Service Canada establish service standards, to ensure some public accountability and also as a benchmark for evaluation. However, many considered the standards to be an important internal document, and of limited interest to the general public. While they suggested making the standards available (e.g., on the website and in Service Canada Centres) few suggested a broad public communications campaign linked to the standards. Participants are very interested, however, in information on how, when and where to access service. They suggested communications tactics and approaches to increase awareness and knowledge of Service Canada services, such as: information or pamphlets inserted in other government mailings; brochures or pamphlets; information in the “blue pages” of telephone directories; fridge magnets with access information and phone numbers; etc. Many also suggested targeting information at specific populations or groups in need of service (e.g., seniors, new Canadians, new parents).
- The ability to provide feedback on service was considered important and valued by clients. Participants expressed varied preferences for the provision of feedback (in writing, in person or by phone) but wish to see their comments and concerns taken into consideration by Service Canada.
- The service standards were seen to be equal or superior to standards in other organizations by those participants aware of other private or public sector standards.

APPENDIX A
FOCUS GROUP GUIDE



SERVICE CANADA SERVICE STANDARDS

FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

MARCH 5, 2008

1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION (5 MINUTES)

We have been contracted by the Government of Canada to conduct a discussion group to obtain feedback on Service Canada Service Standards for service to Canadians. Participation in this focus group is voluntary. Your responses will not affect your present or future involvement with the federal government. The information you provide will be used for research purposes only and will be administered in accordance with the applicable privacy laws.

Let me remind you of the following:

- Focus group will last approximately one and a half to two hours
- Purpose of the discussion.
 - ◇ To obtain feedback on Service Canada Service Standards for service to Canadians. These service standards are being re-written to ensure that Canadians receive the best possible service from the federal government.
 - ◇ Your feedback will be useful in determining whether these Standards meet public expectations and whether they are easy to understand
- Explanation of format and “ground rules”:
 - ◇ Discussions are being audio taped and observed by members of the research team so that an accurate summary can be prepared.
 - ◇ All comments are strictly confidential.
 - ◇ The information you provide is for research purposes only and will be summarized in a report. No comments will be attributed to any individual in any reports resulting from this study.
 - ◇ Please try to speak one at a time.

- ◇ There aren't any right or wrong answers to the things we'll be talking about — we're just looking for your honest opinions.
 - ◇ It's okay to disagree. Please speak up even if you think you're the only one who feels a certain way about an issue.
 - ◇ Moderator's role: raise issues for discussion and present material, watch for time and make sure everyone has a chance to participate.
 - ◇ Questions?
- Participant introductions: First name and something about yourself (working – type of work, retired, in school – program of study, etc.)

2. SATISFACTION WITH CURRENT SERVICE (20 MINUTES)

As I mentioned to you during the introduction, we will be discussing revised Service Standards which are being developed by Service Canada. Service Canada is a government initiative which provides services directly to Canadians on behalf of the federal government. They provide services for a number of different federal departments. Service is provided by phone (by calling 1-800-O-Canada or specialized call centres i.e. EI), in person at Service Canada Centres, and online at servicecanada.gc.ca. Service Canada provides Canadians with access to a full range of programs and services, including: Social Insurance Number (SIN) card, Employment Insurance, Job Bank postings, Canada Pension Plan (CPP), and Old Age Security among others. As well, they offer services specific to client groups such as families and children, people with disabilities, seniors, Aboriginal Peoples (e.g., Common Experience Payment), farmers, employers, and newcomers to Canada (e.g., Foreign Credentials Referral Services).

Before we talk about new service standards, I think it would be useful to start by hearing about some of your past service experiences with the Government of Canada. It is important to keep in mind that we are focusing on *service issues* this evening, rather than on the programs being delivered. For example, one might receive a decision or information from the Government of Canada that disappoints them, or they do not agree with. That decision or information itself has to do with the government policy, program or regulation in question. The service issues surrounding these have to do with how long it took to obtain service, how easy it was to access the service, how well the program or application form was explained, whether one was treated with respect and courtesy etc. It is the service aspects that we want to focus on.

1. Let's begin by hearing about the nature of your most recent interaction with the Government of Canada, perhaps you dealt with Service Canada. Tell us briefly what type of information or service you were looking for. If you have not obtained any service from the federal government (whether it was Service Canada or some other GOC Department) in the past year or more, please say so.
2. As I mentioned, Service Canada provides service in person, by telephone, and online. Which of these did you use in your most recent service experience? Which of these have you used most often? Which do you prefer? Why? For those of you who did deal with Service Canada, which service did you select? If you didn't not with Service Canada, hypothetically, what would you choose? Why?

Please write down or think of two or three words that describe your overall service experience with the Government of Canada (and, if appropriate, Service Canada). [Moderator goes around the table.]

- How satisfied were you *overall* with the service you received from Service Canada?
 - What would you say are the strengths of the service provided by Service Canada? What, if anything, impressed you about the service you received?
 - What would you say are the weaknesses of the service provided? What, if anything, bothered or concerned you about the service you received?
 - Do you wish you were provided with any additional information prior to, or during your experience obtaining service? Such as counter wait-times, period of time before you would receive benefit payment, etc. If yes, what information would you have liked to receive?
3. What is the #1 improvement you would make to the Government of Canada services (and, if appropriate, Service Canada)? What would you like them to improve most? Why do you say that?

3. FEEDBACK ON SERVICE STANDARDS (70 MINUTES)

I'd like to obtain your feedback on draft new Service Standards that are being developed by Service Canada. The document should be self-explanatory, so I won't say much more, except that you might see this document in Service Canada Centres, on the Service Canada website and a few other places. [Moderator distributes SC handout to participants.] Please read this document once, in its entirety. You will have a chance to go over it again a bit later, so just read it as you would under typical circumstances.

4. Please think of or write down two to three words to describe this document. [Moderator goes around the table]
 - What is your overall reaction to the Service Standards?
 - What would you say is the purpose of the Service Standards? Why is Service Canada doing this?
 - What is the most significant/important thing you read in the Service Standards?
 - What are some of the other things you remember reading?
 - How would you describe the tone? Is it appropriate?
 - How understandable/clear are the Service Standards? Did you find it easy to read and understand what information was being conveyed?
 - How do you like the layout/appearance overall?
 - What do you like about it?
 - Is there anything you don't like about it?
 - What questions do you have about the Service Standards?

5. I'd like you to read the Service Standards again, but this time, please use your highlighters to make note of things that you think are either particularly good/positive/useful (in green) or bad/negative/unclear/confusing (in red).

Now let's review the Service Standards one page or section at a time. As we do so, I'll ask for your views on a few specific parts, and obviously I'll want to know about what you highlighted in green and red.

[Moderator takes participants through the document in order to identify strengths (green) and weaknesses (red) and gauges participants' understanding, expectations and reactions to the following:]

- Service Commitment
 - ◇ How clear/easy to understand is this section?
 - ◇ Are there any words or parts that you find confusing?
 - ◇ As a client, do you find these relevant to you?
 - ◇ Does this meet your expectations for service? Service in person? By telephone? Online? In terms of languages and accessibility?
 - ◇ Do you like being addressed directly as a client in the text, by the wording "You will receive..."? Or do you prefer "We are going to provide..."?
 - ◇ Is there anything missing here?

- ▶ Service targets
 - ◇ How clear/easy to understand is this section?
 - ◇ Are there any words or parts that you find confusing?
 - ◇ As a client, do you find these relevant to you?
 - ◇ Does this meet your expectations for service?
 - ◇ Do you like being addressed directly as a client in the text, by the wording “you will..”? Or do you prefer “We are going to provide..”?
 - ◇ When they say “You will receive...” does that imply ALL of the time? Or do you consider this to be a standard that they will try to achieve MOST of the time? Would it be better to say “You should receive..?”
 - ◇ Is there anything missing here?
 - ▶ Anything else to add on the document overall?
6. Now that you’ve had a chance to read the Service Standards twice and discussed it as a group, I’m wondering if any of your initial views have changed?
- ▶ What is your overall reaction to the Service Standards?
 - ▶ How credible is this document? Do you believe it?
 - ▶ Say you were sitting down at a Service Canada Centre waiting to see someone and you saw the Service Standards on a table. Would you pick it up and read it?
 - ▶ What is the most significant/important thing you read in the Service Standards?
 - ▶ What do you like most about it?
 - ▶ What, if anything, do you dislike about it?
 - ▶ Is there anything missing?
 - ▶ What suggestions for improvement do you have?
7. Other organizations (government and private companies) also have service standards. Have you ever seen or heard of service standards at other organizations or in other service contexts? If yes, where? Please describe the standards you are aware of. How do they compare to these?

4. OUTREACH AND COMMUNICATIONS (15 MINUTES)

8. What are some of the best ways to communicate the Service Standards to you and other clients/the public who receive services from Service Canada? How would you suggest Service Canada let people know that Service Standards exist?
- Website?
 - Displays/brochures/posters in Service Canada offices? Where else?
 - Should paper copies be available?
 - Other?
9. As a potential Service Canada client, would you like to be able to provide feedback on the service you receive? Why?
- Can you give me an example of the type of feedback you would like to be able to provide on service?
 - How would you like to be able to provide feedback?
 - ◇ Responding to a survey?
 - ◇ Writing a letter?
 - ◇ Completing a form?
 - ◇ Speaking to someone over the phone?
 - ◇ Other?
 - How would you want the feedback you provide to be dealt with? What kind of response are you looking for? What would you want Service Canada to do with the feedback they receive on service?
10. Do you have anything to add before we end our discussion?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION

Once the study is complete, the aggregate results will be published and become public information. The project name is: **Service Canada Service Standards Renewal**. Instructions for making formal requests are provided in the publication Info Source, copies of which are located in local Service Canada centres or at the following Internet address: <http://infosource.gc.ca/>.

APPENDIX B
SERVICE STANDARDS TESTED

These standards represent Service Canada's commitment to the kind of service our clients should expect to receive under normal circumstances. While we strive to uphold these standards they should not be construed as guarantees; there may be times when we are unable to meet these standards due to unforeseen circumstances.

1. You will have an easy and convenient access to our programs and services.

CALL

- ❖ You will be able to reach our general enquiry call centre at 1 800 O-Canada from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. (your local time), Monday through Friday (excluding holidays), where you can expect your call to be answered within 18 seconds.
- ❖ You will be able to reach our specialized call centres from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (your local time), Monday through Friday (excluding holidays), as follows:
 - Canada Pension Plan or Old Age Security at 1-800-277-9914;

- Employment Insurance at 1-800-206-7218.
- You may self-serve using the Interactive Voice Response system or choose to speak with an agent, who will answer your call within 180 seconds.

CLICK

- ❖ You will be able to find information on programs and services on the servicecanada.gc.ca website, 24 hours a day, seven (7) days a week.

VISIT

- ❖ You will have access to a Service Canada point of service within 50 kilometres of where you live.
- ❖ You will be able to visit Service Canada Centres from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday (excluding holidays).
- ❖ You will be informed of counter wait times by signs posted at all Service Canada Centres.

LANGUAGES

- ❖ You will be able to receive service in the official language of your choice, regardless of whether you call, click or visit.
- ❖ You will be able to receive information on programs and services in a number of Aboriginal and foreign languages.

ACCESSIBILITY

Service Canada is making efforts to improve accessibility of services for people with disabilities.

- ❖ You will be able to reach our general enquiry call centre via the teletypewriter (TTY) service at 1-800-926-9105, 24 hours a day, seven (7) days a week, where you will be able to leave a text message and you can expect your call to be returned within one (1) business day.
- ❖ You will be able to reach our specialized call centres using the teletypewriter (TTY) service from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (your local time), Monday through Friday (excluding holidays), as follows:
 - Canada Pension Plan or Old Age Security at 1-800-255-4786;
 - Employment Insurance at 1-800-529-3742.If an agent is unable to interact with you right away, you will be able to leave a text message and you can expect your call to be returned within two (2) business hours.

2. You can count on us to provide excellent and expeditious service.

- ❖ You will be guided through government programs and services by our knowledgeable

employees who will ensure your needs are met.

- ❖ You can expect to receive a confirmation of your OAS, CPP or EI application within seven (7) business days.
- ❖ You can expect to receive a benefit payment, or non-payment notification, within:
 - Twenty-eight (28) days of filing for Employment Insurance (EI);
 - The first month of entitlement for Old Age Security (OAS) or Canada Pension Plan (CPP).
- ❖ You can expect to receive a Social Insurance Number (SIN) in one visit, if you provide proper documentation.
- ❖ You can expect to receive an Apprenticeship Incentive Grant payment, if you are eligible, within 28 calendar days of filing your completed application.

3. Your suggestions, compliments, and complaints matter to us.

- ❖ You can comment on the quality of our in-person service (service received at a Service Canada Centre or a Scheduled Outreach Site) by submitting a Client Comment Card. Your comment card will be reviewed in a timely manner by the manager of the location where the comment card was submitted.
- ❖ Feedback regarding any of Service Canada's programs and services can be submitted to the Office for Client Satisfaction (OCS). You can contact OCS by calling its toll-free number at 1-866-506-6806 (TTY: 1-866-506-6803), by filling-out an OCS Feedback Form available at Service Canada Centres or online at servicecanada.gc.ca. The OCS confirms receipt of all feedback within 24 hours and replies and/or resolves the issue within seven (7) business days.