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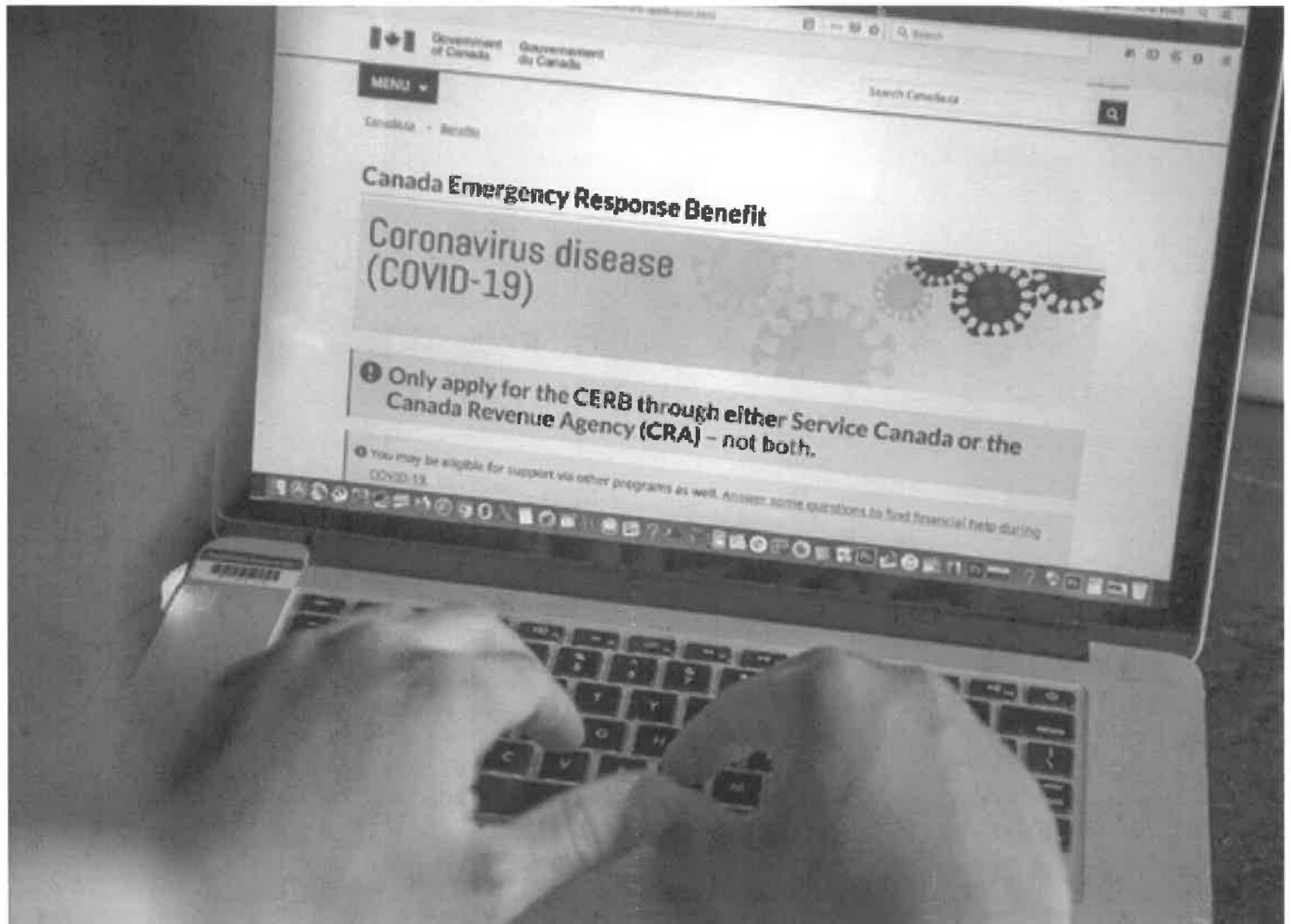
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get CERB, Ottawa tells temporary foreign residents

A memo sent to officials handling CERB applications said that condition is waived 'effective immediately' and agents 'are only required to verbally obtain work permit details'

Tom Blackwell

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PADEMIC—A Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) Covid 19 Government of Canada page during the Covid 19 pandemic, Friday May 22, 2020. PHOTO BY PETER THOMPSON /National Post

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The federal government has taken new steps to make it easier for international students and other temporary foreign residents to receive emergency benefits, another sign of Ottawa's determination to disburse the payments quickly and widely.

Such short-term immigrants need only give their word they have a valid work permit or have applied for a renewed one to obtain the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), says a memo sent this week to staff vetting the claims.



Until last Thursday, they had to email Employment and Social Development Canada an image of their valid work or work/study permit, or confirmation they had applied to renew an expired one.

But a memo sent to Employment and Social Development Canada officials handling CERB applications said that condition is waived “effective immediately” and agents “are only required to verbally obtain work permit details.”

The directive applies to everyone who claims to meet the programs other requirements and has a “900-series” social insurance number — people ranging from students to refugee claimants to temporary foreign workers and executives transferred from other countries. None are Canadian citizens or permanent residents.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

One source familiar with the system said people with valid permits would typically email proof within a few minutes, barely slowing the process. But now there is no way for staff to verify whether someone is in the country legally, the person said.

And if an applicant does receive the \$2,000-a-month payments inappropriately and then leaves Canada, it would be virtually impossible to recover the money, said the source, who’s not authorized to discuss internal matters and asked not to be named.

That money is not free

“There is a big, big opening for fraud left, right and centre.”

Outside experts offered differing opinions, with one immigrant advocate calling it an “excellent” policy that should get important help to temporary residents faster, and an immigration lawyer saying it shows an “astonishing” disregard for taxpayer funds.

Maya Dura, a spokeswoman for Ahmed Hussen, the families, children and social development minister, said such claimants “may be asked to provide additional documentation to verify their eligibility at a future date.”

“The Government of Canada will, whether it be in the upcoming weeks or at tax time next year, reconcile accounts and make sure people did not defraud the CERB,” she added via email.

Asked about 900-series residents generally, Dura provided statistics just for international students, saying 39,319 had applied for CERB through ESDC by May 18, and 30,645 have received payments so far.

The CERB program has wide support from all parties as a way to soften the blow for people left jobless or unable to find work by the pandemic and lockdowns. It provides \$500 a week to people who “have stopped working” because of COVID-19, so long as they made \$5,000 within the previous 12 months and did not quit voluntarily.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

But there has been increasing scrutiny of the program in recent days amid revelations about how it’s being managed. Previous memos, obtained by the *National Post*, directed staff to approve applicants even if they see evidence of potential abuse, and even if people quit their jobs voluntarily or were fired for alleged misconduct, seemingly contrary to CERB rules.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has said the government will claw back unwarranted or fraudulent payments later, but had to get cheques out quickly because of the millions of people put out of work.

Sergio Karas, a Toronto immigration lawyer, condemned the latest change, saying it means even an individual who is facing a deportation order or who had already left the country could now obtain CERB.

“It’s truly astonishing,” he said. “The person could potentially be overseas if the payment is going to a Canadian bank account. That is extremely troubling.”

“That money is not free,” he added. “That money is going to have to come out of someone’s pocket at some point. It is going to be the taxpayers of Canada, citizens or not.”

But Debbie Douglas, executive director of the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, praised the policy as “an excellent move by the federal government.”

“Many of these individuals through no fault of their own are unable to have their SINs and-or work permits renewed during this health emergency,” she said by email. “At the same time many have lost their jobs or have experienced significant reduction in hours of work. Many were or are vulnerable to evictions. “

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Thursday’s directive is “very useful” as it will help speed up CERB cheques for people who haven’t had

time to apply for a permit renewal, said Douglas.

The memo last week notes that to be eligible for benefits like Employment Insurance or CERB a temporary resident with a 900-series SIN “must prove they are legally allowed to work in Canada.”

But “due to COVID-19 the 900-series SIN procedures have been simplified,” it said in explaining the change to requiring merely verbal proof,

The government had paid out \$39 billion under CERB to more than eight million claimants by May 21.

• Email: tblackwell@nationalpost.com / Twitter: [TomblackwellNP](https://twitter.com/TomblackwellNP)



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