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Minister's aides billed \$35,000 for living costs

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CanWest News Service

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OTTAWA - Two senior aides to Immigration Minister Judy Sgro billed more than \$3,000 a month each over the past five months to live in Ottawa hotels as they waited for an election that would decide whether it would be worth moving to the capital from Toronto.

The costs are among a host of new hospitality and travel expenses recently released by the federal government covering ministers and their staff.

Over the first five months of the year, Sgro's chief of staff Ian Laird and her senior policy adviser Ihor Wons lived in an Ottawa apartment-hotel and claimed meal expenses. Laird's five-month total for "extended travel status" was \$16,508.50 while Wons billed \$16,785.46.

When combined with all their other travel and hospitality expenses, Laird billed \$35,560 from January to the end of May, while Wons's expenses totalled \$34,750.40.

Derik Hodgson, a spokesman for the immigration minister, said the arrangement is allowed under Treasury Board guidelines and was meant as a short-term fix to avoid the cost of permanently moving both men prior to an election.

"It would have cost more to move people here for what could have been a short time," said Hodgson, whose travel and hospitality expenses during the same five-month period totalled \$3,136.56.

Laird had been working in Toronto as a lawyer prior to accepting the chief of staff job when Sgro was promoted to cabinet in December. Wons had been working for Sgro in her Toronto constituency office.

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