



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs

NDDN • NUMBER 038 • 1st SESSION • 38th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, May 17, 2005

—
Chair

Mr. Pat O'Brien

All parliamentary publications are available on the
"Parliamentary Internet Parlementaire" at the following address:

<http://www.parl.gc.ca>

Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs

Tuesday, May 17, 2005

• (0900)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Pat O'Brien (London—Fanshawe, Lib.)):
Good morning.

I would like to call to order the 38th meeting of the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs.

Today we're pleased to welcome the Honourable Albina Guarnieri, the Minister of Veterans Affairs.

The first thing I would note, colleagues, is that the minister will have to leave us about 10:20 a.m. for cabinet, I understand, for some important meetings that she has to attend, so we'll have a good amount of time with the minister until 10:20 a.m.

Minister Guarnieri, before I welcome you and give you the opportunity to say a few words, I just want to say on behalf of all members of this committee, I'm sure, and all members of the House of Commons just how pleased we are with the work that you and your officials did in getting the new Veterans Charter through the House and through this Parliament in record time. It was a tremendous piece of work. I know from talking to you several times, and I think we've all had briefings by you and/or your officials, the tremendous amount of effort that went into that. We want to congratulate you and thank you for that good work.

Once again, Defence and Veterans Affairs shows what this Parliament can do—what any parliament can do—if there's a political will of all parties. As chair of this committee, I want to acknowledge the great cooperation, as you well know, of all the parties in the House of Commons in seeing that charter passed in record time. It really was a truly important piece of work, much overdue, and I know much anticipated by our veterans. So on behalf of all the committee, congratulations and thank you.

You're here for estimates, so I'll give you an opportunity, if you'd like, obviously, to say a few words, and then we'll have questions from the committee.

Thank you.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It was certainly a tribute to the veterans themselves. The veterans themselves were the authors of the Veterans Charter, and the collective goodwill of everyone certainly made it possible, for which I thank everyone on behalf of the veterans.

Colleagues, I am delighted to join you today to discuss spending plans and priorities for the veterans portfolio over the next year. I believe it was only four months ago that I appeared before you all, so some of it may be old news, but actually with a new twist.

As members of Parliament, and indeed as Canadians, we share pride in our veterans, gratitude for their sacrifices, and a commitment to always remember their contributions to our world and our country.

The guidance and support of this committee over the years has been instrumental in helping my department meet its mandate. I want to thank each and every one of you for your commitment to Canada's veterans.

[Translation]

I am pleased now to introduce the officials I have with me here today: Mr. Jack Stagg, Veterans Affairs Canada's Deputy Minister; Mr. Victor Marchand, Chair of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board; Mr. Keith Hillier, Assistant Deputy Minister of Corporate Services; Mr. Brian Ferguson, Assistant Deputy Minister of Veterans Services; and Mr. Robert Mercer, Executive Director of the Public Affairs Branch.

Although it has only been four months since I last had the opportunity to address your committee as a whole, my Department has seen many remarkable developments during the Year of the Veteran—including the tabling, on April 20th, of the most significant package of veterans' legislation since the Second World War and the largest ever official delegation of Canadian veterans to travel overseas for commemorative events.

• (0905)

[English]

With your approval, I would like to start by sharing my department's estimated spending for the 2005-06 fiscal year and outlining how that money will be spent. Once I have covered finances, I'd like to give you a quick snapshot of a number of departmental accomplishments since we last met, speak on the topic of the ombudsman, discuss our proposal to modernize our benefits and services for Canadian Forces veterans, and finally share some Year of the Veteran highlights.

Let me turn first to the big numbers in the estimates. As you can see, for 2005-06 we are seeking approval for total funding of about \$2.9 billion. Of this amount, approximately \$1.7 billion will be spent on disability pensions and allowances, and another \$950 million will be for our health care program, including the veterans independence program, long-term care, and treatment benefits.

Specifically, we are seeking approval for an additional \$65.4 million over the last fiscal year. Almost \$30 million of that increase relates to our disability pension program and is due primarily to annual price index adjustments and an increase in the number of pension clients.

Veterans independence program costs are estimated to increase by \$25.5 million. This increase is due to an increase in the number of veteran clients, an increase in the costs associated with some of the services offered, and extending housekeeping and grounds maintenance services to additional primary caregivers. I will expand on this extension in a few minutes.

We also anticipate an increase of \$18.3 million for other health purchased services due to cost increases for goods and services provided, an increase in the number of clients receiving treatment benefits, and an increase in the number of transactions per client. This increase in transactions is directly related to the health needs of an aging clientele.

While the number of clients accessing many of our programs is increasing, the number of clients eligible for war veterans allowance is decreasing. Therefore we estimate a decrease of \$3.2 million in war veterans allowance costs.

That was a quick synopsis of the estimated changes in our spending in this fiscal year relative to the last.

VAC is also a full and active participant in the expenditure review process. We conducted a thorough review of expenditures in all areas of the department to identify ways in which we could achieve savings in areas having the least impact on veterans programs. As you know, VAC partners with other departments and agencies that deliver health care products and services to federal clients to achieve the lowest possible costs. Largely through volume discounts in the purchases of services such as audiology and oxygen, VAC expects to save almost \$37.5 million over the next five years. These savings initiatives will have no impact on VAC clients or employees.

[*Translation*]

I would now like to give you a quick snapshot of some of my Department's accomplishments since last November.

At the time, I told you that we were working to address some outstanding issues relating to our Veterans Independence Program. On December 7, I announced a proposal to extend VIP housekeeping and/or grounds maintenance services for life to approximately 4,000 additional primary caregivers of veterans who had been in receipt of these services in the years since the VIP Program began in 1981. We received regulatory approval to make that proposal a reality. That means that more than 94,000 veterans and primary caregivers are eligible for those VIP services.

● (0910)

[*English*]

We have already been in contact with almost 3,500 potential beneficiaries and some 1,200 applications have already been processed. An additional 1,200 applications are currently being processed.

The last time we met, the Auditor General had recently released her November report. Chapter 4 of the report focused on the management of federal drug benefit programs, one of which is VAC's pharmacy program. Since that time, VAC and other departments have appeared before the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and the Standing Committee on Health to discuss the findings of the report and to report on progress.

In early March, a Government of Canada first-level action plan was tabled with the Auditor General and with your committee, as well as with the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and the Standing Committee on Health.

At VAC we are providing strong support to the partnership task groups that are exploring cost-effective drug use and system efficiencies. We have also increased the complement of resources attached to our drug utilization review process and have held a workshop to review existing criteria to develop a more robust model.

I also want to report that a team of health professionals is conducting a thorough review of the situations cited in the report, in which our clients appear to be receiving quantities and/or combinations of pharmaceutical products that could have a negative impact on health.

In keeping with client benefits, Veterans Affairs Canada increased its dental threshold from \$600 to \$800 per client, as of January 1 of this year. It is anticipated that 2,500 clients per year will benefit from this increase.

I met with my counterparts from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States in mid-March to discuss common issues related to serving veterans and commemorating their sacrifices. At the conclusion of the meeting, we signed a statement of intent to endorse the collaborative activities under way at senior levels to exchange information and develop solutions to areas of common concern relating to veterans. Our departmental officials have been collaborating on issues for the past few years. We are collectively benefiting from this experience.

Later in the week I had the opportunity to meet with a group of Canadian veterans who reside in the United Kingdom. I also travelled to Washington in April to meet with my American counterpart to discuss issues of common concern.

I would now like to speak on the topic of an ombudsman, which I know is an issue for some of you. As we rely on the insights and recommendations of groups such as yours to ensure that we are serving our veterans in the best possible way, we also rely on our major veterans organizations for the same level of support and guidance.

Canada's major veterans organizations, such as the Royal Canadian Legion, ANAVETS, and the National Council of Veterans Associations, have long considered themselves to be the voice of Canadian veterans. They have a long history of holding our feet to the fire on the issues that matter most to our veterans. As such, these major veteran organizations consider themselves to be the ombudsmen and ombudswomen for Canada's veterans.

As I understand it, Ms. Mary Ann Burdett and Mr. Pierre Allard appeared before your subcommittee on veterans affairs in February to discuss their position on an independent ombudsman for veterans. As I am sure they explained, the Royal Canadian Legion sees itself as the advocate for veterans and often provides free assistance with the preparation and presentation of veteran appeals. Clients of my department take comfort in the help the Legion service officers provide, as they are their comrades and peers.

My department's primary goal is the care and well-being of all veterans. We have one of the highest rates of client satisfaction in the government. However, if a client is dissatisfied, VAC makes available a number of recourse options, options that other jurisdictions with independent ombudsmen do not offer.

● (0915)

Through the Bureau of Pensions Advocates, VAC provides free legal assistance in the preparation and presentation of appeals, and since the inception of the Canadian disability pension system, there has always been an independent agency to whom Canadians, dissatisfied with their applications results, can appeal. The Veterans Review and Appeal Board is an independent, quasi-judicial agency separate from Veterans Affairs Canada. The board provides assistance to pension clients who are dissatisfied. In addition, through the Bureau of Pensions Advocates, VAC provides free legal advice in the presentation and preparation of appeals.

I would like now to turn to our modernization proposals. During this Year of the Veteran, it is also most appropriate that we are moving ahead on our agenda of caring for our younger veterans and their families. As you know, Bill C-45 received royal assent last week. This marks a very exciting and historic time for Canada's veterans, as all parties rallied in support of the men and women who put on the uniform of their country and engage in an extraordinary act of patriotism and selflessness. With Bill C-45 we seized the opportunity to create a new legacy for those who serve and defend our country, those who repeatedly place themselves in harm's way in a world that is increasingly strained by terrorism and conflict.

Our new programs offer rehabilitation services, health benefits, job placement services, disability awards, and the economic loss and income support that will ensure that CF members and their families have the security of knowing that they will be able to access the best health care, case management, and employment opportunities possible as they leave the military.

[*Translation*]

If I had to describe our proposed new Veterans' Charter in a few words, I would call it a "wellness package". A package designed to provide Canadian Forces veterans with the best opportunity for successful transition to civilian life—which will benefit not only themselves, but also their families and Canadian society.

[*English*]

Our proposed approach is modelled after the best practices of other countries that have already modernized their veterans services and benefits. It has five key elements.

Rehabilitation services will help disabled veterans participate to the best of their ability at home, work, and in the community. These services will include medical rehab, psychosocial rehab, and vocational rehab.

Health benefits will ensure that veterans and their families receive the health services they require and deserve—the very best.

Job placement services will offer job search and transition training, as well as job placement assistance to all releasing Canadian Forces members to ensure they have the best possible opportunity for a quality job.

Our economic loss and income support programs will protect Canadian Forces veterans' standard of living and their ability to support their families. They will include short-term support for those undergoing rehabilitation and longer-term support for those who can no longer work.

Finally, our disability award program will compensate CF veterans for non-economic losses such as pain and suffering. We propose that this compensation come in the form of a tax-free, lump sum payment of up to \$250,000, depending on the impact and degree of disability.

Coordinated case management will be the key to the success of our new approach. Our case managers will work with a DND case manager on base with the veteran and on behalf of the veteran. They will take a personal interest in every CF veteran, and they will be there to ensure that they have full access to all the services and benefits they need. Case management, which ties all the pieces together, was viewed by focus group participants as offering greater support, as well as a sense of stability and continuity to CF personnel and their families.

In the budget of 2005, the Government of Canada deepened its commitment to the Canadian Forces in the form of new money and direction-setting policies, including the defence review policy. I see the new Veterans Charter as the people side of our government's commitment.

Today's CF member is a future CF veteran who must be confident, as they make a difference in Canada and abroad ensuring our security, that Canada is ensuring their future security. We need to take care of them, and we need to provide them with a positive future when they return to civilian life.

Hopefully, in the near future I will have an opportunity to meet with you again to discuss the bill in greater detail. I am counting on your support to make the new Veterans Charter a reality.

Rest assured that benefits and services for our traditional war veterans will in no way be impacted by this proposal. Building on the urgent needs package approved last year, we will continue to find ways to continuously improve our service to our traditional veterans.

• (0920)

[Translation]

As I promised earlier, I am going to take a few minutes now to give you some Year of the Veteran highlights, starting off with a first-hand account of the spectacular celebrations held overseas and across Canada to celebrate the 60th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day and the liberation of the Netherlands.

Literally hundreds of Canadian veterans were on hand in the Netherlands to hear the Dutch people's rousing "Thank you, Canada!". In addition to the some 130 veterans who travelled as part of our official delegation, hundreds of others took advantage of our travel subsidy to return to the Netherlands.

I felt privileged to be a witness as these veterans, who represented all the units and services that participated in the liberation of the Netherlands, return to some of the towns and cities that they freed. They also visited the war cemeteries where most of the 7,600 Canadians who died in the liberation campaign are buried.

[English]

Thirteen youth delegates representing all of Canada's provinces and territories travelled with the delegation as well and shared their experiences via the Internet with their peers in the Netherlands and in Canada.

Two major events were organized by our government. We held a major commemorative ceremony on May 3 at the Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery, and then on May 6 a commemorative plaque was unveiled in Apeldoorn recognizing the liberation of the Netherlands as an event of national historic significance to Canada. This recognition was sponsored by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada.

Numerous events, including a ceremony at the Holten Canadian War Cemetery on May 4, were organized by the Dutch to mark the 60th anniversary of their country's liberation.

By far the most touching and awe-inspiring event for me personally, as a Canadian, was the major veterans parade that took place in Apeldoorn on May 8, the 60th anniversary of VE day. Hundreds of thousands of grateful Dutch citizens lined the streets and cheered to thank our veterans, who were parading in vintage military vehicles.

It's very hard for me to put into words the emotions I felt on that day. It was truly a privilege to be there. I can tell you that our

veterans did us proud—just as they did 60 years ago. They modestly received the well-deserved thanks and praise that came their way.

While this overseas commemorative trip was one of the signature events of the Year of the Veteran, it is only one of the many highlights for this special year. Thousands of Canadians were on hand to honour our veterans and their sacrifice as VE day anniversary celebrations were held in provincial capitals. As well, a major event was held at the National War Memorial here in Ottawa, followed by a parade of veterans to the new Canadian War Museum to mark its official opening. Just like the celebrations all across our country, the Ottawa event saw a remarkable turnout of Canadians saluting our veterans. It is estimated that some 10,000 participated in the Ottawa event alone, truly a fitting tribute for our heroes.

As you know, we are asking Canadians to surrender their time, volunteer their hearts, and take 12 months to fully remember a century of sacrifice. We are helping Canadians to celebrate veterans' contributions, honour their sacrifices, remember their legacy, and teach youth our history. We are aiming to ensure that young Canadians take full advantage of the living history that our veterans carry with them and are willing to share. We will pause many times throughout the rest of the year to retell our history and dedicate ourselves to the promotion of remembrance.

Our Year of the Veteran celebrations were raised a notch in March with an announcement by the Chief of the Defence Staff for the Canadian Forces. General Rick Hillier announced that all Canadian Forces members will wear a special insignia pin on their uniforms through 2005 to recognize the Year of the Veteran. This special pin was designed by Veterans Affairs Canada and includes a maple leaf and a Royal Canadian Legion poppy.

Our Canadian Forces members are among those Canadians to whom we owe a tremendous debt that can only be repaid through active remembrance. By wearing this pin, CF members are honouring those who served before them. It is also a symbol of our commitment to today's military and our gratitude for the services they continue to make for our security. The RCMP have also authorized the wearing of this special pin on their uniforms during the Year of the Veteran.

You may recall from our meeting last November that work was beginning to restore our most spectacular war monument at Vimy Ridge. As part of the Year of the Veteran, Veterans Affairs Canada organized a small media tour to Vimy, France, so Canadian journalists could witness the restoration, meet the professionals involved in the work, and visit other Canadian First World War memorials in that region.

• (0925)

On April 9, the media participated in an on-site remembrance ceremony to mark the 88th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge. Through this unique media relations effort, Canadians were able to witness the restoration process and learn more about the battle and those who fought there. Interestingly enough, our small Canadian media delegation became the subject of local media coverage themselves while in France and Belgium.

Finally, while the Year of the Veteran is the brainchild of the Royal Canadian Legion, and the Army, Navy and Air Force Veterans in Canada Association, I am happy to say that my department has provided significant help to a number of provinces, as well as other federal government departments, to commemorate this momentous year.

As the year unfolds, other events in Canada and overseas, and announcements, will inspire Canadians to remember. For example, in August we will celebrate VJ Day by bringing more than 100 Canadian Hong Kong prisoners of war to Ottawa for a national ceremony. I am sure I can count on each of you for your support to help spread the word.

• (0930)

[Translation]

In closing, I want to thank you for your invitation to appear here today. I expect that all of my predecessors felt it a privilege to have the opportunity to serve Canada's veterans in this capacity. However, it is an even greater privilege to be Minister of Veterans Affairs in 2005—an exciting year devoted to looking to the past, celebrating in the present, and planning for the future.

[English]

I'd be very pleased to entertain your questions.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister, for the detailed statement. I know some of my colleagues are anxious to ask questions, but I think it was important to give the overview you provided in this very special Year of the Veteran. We certainly don't want to in any way shortchange our veterans, especially in this particular year.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: I gave the Cole's notes version. There was lots more I could have highlighted.

The Chair: You've been a parliamentarian a long time, and you know that parliamentarians get antsy when it's coming up to questions.

Colleagues who are here and I attended celebrations in various communities, other than just the provincial capitals. In London, Ontario, the Dutch Canadian community held a very excellent parade in honour of VE Day. Some of us who were privileged to be in Holland attended functions here in Canada in the provincial capitals and in other communities. I think it speaks volumes about the tremendous gratitude of the Dutch Canadian community for the efforts of our veterans.

The minister will be with us for almost an hour. She has to leave for cabinet, as I indicated earlier, but there will be lots of time for a

full first round and most of a second round. It will be a 10-minute round with the minister.

We'll begin with Mrs. Hinton, please.

Mrs. Betty Hinton (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Welcome to the committee, Madam Minister.

I had the privilege of being at the opening of the war museum and marching in Ottawa from the tomb of the lost soldier to the new war museum with a number of veterans. They're amazing people, absolutely amazing. It was a very hot day. I don't know how they managed to do it, but they did. But then how did they manage to do all the things they've done for this country?

There are a few questions I would like to ask, if you don't mind. The new charter will increase the workload at the Department of Veterans Affairs, obviously. How many additional staff do you expect to hire to manage the programs?

Do you by any chance keep statistics on veterans who suffer from PTSD, with regard to suicides? How often are veterans suffering from PTSD re-evaluated? Are their pensions reduced or ever discontinued if their symptoms diminish? Has that ever happened with us?

The Veterans Review and Appeal Board has a planned budget of \$13.4 million and a staff of 141. Can you break down the planned budget by salary, travel expenses, etc., to just give us a bit of an overview?

If you can answer those relatively quickly, I'll ask you a few more.

The Chair: There were several good questions there. The minister has with her today Deputy Minister Stagg, who can assist.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: In Holland we went through all four seasons. We had rain, sleet, and snow in the space of one hour. With great pride, we watched on huge Jumbotrons the memorial services conducted in Ottawa. Fortunately, the weather was a lot nicer here.

You've asked a number of questions. Your first question was about staffing. Needless to say, the Veterans Charter has been a work in progress for the last five years. So the department has actually been preparing for the eventual transformation of the way programs would be given to future veterans. My understanding is, we have about 42 service providers, so we've already started making a shift in the way we provide services and benefits across the country.

Jack, perhaps you'd like to address that.

• (0935)

Mrs. Betty Hinton: May I clarify something? That's not 42 new departments?

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: No, it's a reorganization of existing personnel.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I'm wondering how many additional people you feel are going to be necessary.

Mr. Jack Stagg (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): We're looking at probably 100 to 120 new full-time equivalents.

As the minister said, we've already started reorganizing the department to accommodate a case management approach. We have 42 areas, I believe, of health care teams. They have two, three, or four counsellors, a medical assistant, a doctor, etc. We group these people in teams so that they can carry out a case management approach.

In addition, the national call network, the consolidation of our calls in three centres, has allowed us to put another 20 to 40 people out in the field as counsellors. We freed people, essentially counsellors, from having to answer phones so they could do face-to-face or front-line work with individuals.

In addition, we're looking at savings and redeployment of another 80 to 100 people across the country by consolidating our corporate services, including finance and personnel, so that we can free up positions that would normally be serving ourselves to serve the veterans directly in line. The net additional folks would be 100 to 120 people. This year we have about \$17 million, both for additional personnel and to make the conversion in hardware and software and whatever we need to service under the new charter.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: We've had a discussion on call centres before, so I'm a little concerned that we may need to do a little bit of remedying there as well. I know the minister has had the same sorts of calls I've had from angry veterans who were unable to get an answer. It may have been a cost saving, but it may not have been a positive service.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: There were some difficulties when the transformation was occurring. There was an adjustment period. But my understanding is that the call centres are currently working very efficiently. Their success rate—

Mr. Jack Stagg: It's over 90% within the first 45 seconds, which is the best record of any call centre in the federal government.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: That's a very good turnaround, something I had to boast about. They've worked hard to correct any of those transformative problems they experienced earlier.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I'm glad you're looking into that. I must be hearing from the other 10%.

Do we need to repeat the questions? Do you keep statistics on veterans who've suffered from PTSD and veterans who have committed suicide?

Mr. Jack Stagg: We have with us Brian Ferguson, who is head of veteran services. I've asked Brian to give you whatever statistics he can on the PTSD question.

Mr. Brian Ferguson (Assistant Deputy Minister, Veterans Services, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you.

Overall we have about 8,000 PTSD clients, Mrs. Hinton, and between 4,000 and 5,000 of those are younger CF veterans.

You asked if we had statistics on suicides. We don't really track that information specifically. I could go back, though, and check to see if we can come up with something on that question.

It has not been our practice to re-evaluate the PTSD clients to determine whether we should reduce their pensions. We have not done that. I should mention that in the proposals under the new Veterans Charter we will be putting in a process of medical rehabilitation that will focus on individuals suffering from those types of maladies, and a number of programs, which we could go into in some detail, to help them get through their difficulties. In conjunction with that we will have a disability award program that will allow them to receive disability awards specifically for their pain and suffering.

● (0940)

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I understand that, but I've heard from a number of modern-day veterans who have told me there's a penalty attached to getting better. I just want to make certain this is not the case.

Mr. Brian Ferguson: That is definitely not the case, because we have a complete, comprehensive, safety-net package with the wellness programs.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: So they don't have their pensions reduced or discontinued if their symptoms diminish?

Mr. Brian Ferguson: They have not had any of that ever happen as far as I'm aware.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: Mind you, if I could interject, it should be our collective objective to make sure our veterans do get well and hopefully become viable, productive members of society. So that should be our ultimate objective, to try to ensure that these veterans do get better.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: It would be my objective as well, and I'm sure the objective every person at this table. But my concern is that I'm hearing from veterans who say they're having difficulties, that their pensions are being reduced or they're being put through unnecessary pain because they seem to be getting better.

I just wanted to give you an opportunity to answer that.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: One of the advantages of the new Veterans Charter is that it will enable us to get to the problems sooner. In fact, it gives us a lot more latitude to assist these veterans as they come out of the forces.

So I think that will certainly be a way to enhance their transition to civilian life faster.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: The last one is regarding the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, with a budget of \$13.4 million and a staff of 141. Can you give me a breakdown of the planned budget by salary, travel, expenses, and that sort of thing?

Mr. Victor Marchand (Chair, Veterans Review and Appeal Board): Yes. Good morning.

In fact, included in that amount is an amount that provides for the corporate services provided by the department in the area of finance, personnel, lodging, and accommodations. And that item itself equals approximately \$2 million.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Sorry, Mr. Marchand, that's for veterans?

Mr. Victor Marchand: These are the corporate services given to us by the department, which cover accommodations, financial services, and human resources management. Those services are evaluated at \$2 million. We have a common service arrangement with the department and we get excellent service from the department in those areas.

The actual net cost of the board is estimated at \$11.5 million; \$7 million is entirely dedicated to salary, and that includes the FTEs and the board members.

Last year our travel budget was approximately \$900,000.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Okay. There is \$7 million for salary and \$900,000 for travel, approximately. And you said accommodation. Are you talking about rent, sir?

Mr. Victor Marchand: Exactly.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Okay.

Mr. Victor Marchand: It is for the office space we occupy in the department.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: So \$2 million a year goes to—

Mr. Victor Marchand: It goes to accommodation, the employees' share of contributions, insurance premiums, and our use of the public affairs branch, the corporate services branch, and the executive services branch.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Do I have time for one more? Okay.

Since we already raised this subject, the department has gone from direct contact for veterans to reach their case workers to call centres where they leave messages and wait for return phone calls.

You just finished telling me you have a 90% satisfaction rate.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: We do continuous client satisfaction reports to check how the veterans themselves feel we're providing the service. I think you'll admit that 90% is an astonishing approval rate.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: It's a good number.

When the department does the client satisfaction surveys, are the clients required to give their names and their service numbers?

I see a head shaking no back there.

Mr. Jack Stagg: No, it's done independently; it's not done by us. We have an independent operation do this, so we don't ask people to sign sheets with their numbers and all the rest of it.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: So they're not required to identify themselves?

Okay, thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Hinton.

[Translation]

Mr. Bachand, you have 10 minutes.

[English]

Mr. Jack Stagg: And it's not done by us, but by an independent firm.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would also like to begin by praising the Minister. Though we are sometimes political adversaries, it is sometimes important to go beyond partisanship and to recognize the good work a person has done.

Madam Minister, I see you as a very determined and tenacious woman. To paraphrase the Bay's slogan in Montreal, I would say that you are "willing to do almost anything!" to make progress in your work. I really wanted to tell you this. Even though I am a political opponent, I find that you do good work. In fact, this is reflected in the presentation you gave this morning.

Now I would like to deal with more interesting issues.

I have already talked to you about prevention. I am a bit concerned because, if I understand the current system, the Canadian Forces look after people who are in the army or in the Canadian Forces. But when these people have to leave the Canadian Forces for serious reasons, it falls to you to look after them.

So we are dealing with two departments, since you inherit the people whom the Department of National Defence might want to get rid of a bit too quickly. Let me explain.

Institutions and companies often put a lot of emphasis on prevention. I have personally always felt that it was the most important issue for an institution or a company. Knowing you have to work with dangerous machinery, and hoping that no one will get hurt, but then turning an injured worker over the Workers' Compensation Board or another such organization, that is not prevention.

We have to focus on prevention. As far as post-traumatic stress syndrome is concerned, have you had any discussions with the Department of Defence to try to prevent it from happening? I understand that this may be difficult, but I also know that when they are in the field, soldiers sometimes have to deal with completely unexpected situations. As a result, several years later, some of them have to leave the armed forces and then you have to look after them.

So I would like to know whether it would not be possible to have some kind of an agreement or direct communication with the Department of National Defence so that more emphasis is put on prevention.

That is my first question.

● (0945)

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: Thank you for your kind words. Of course, my Department has worked very hard, but as I said earlier, good work was also accomplished thanks to the wisdom and the advice of this committee, and thanks to veterans themselves. A lot of work was done. I believe that you have often talked to me about veterans. I would like to thank you for your wisdom and for your advice.

What you said was right: we look after veterans when they have problems and needs. That is why we created the new charter. Indeed, the benefits we presently provide to elderly Second World War and Korean War veterans do not go far enough to meet the needs of our younger veterans, whose average age is 36 years old.

That is why we are thrilled with the new charter. It will allow us to better help them. We do not wait until they develop post-traumatic stress syndrome. We can help them the moment they leave the Forces. Previously, the only way to get benefits was if you had your pension. Veterans had to be on a pension in order for us to be able to help them. Under the new charter, we can help veterans from the moment they leave the Forces. That is why we believe the charter is a step forward and that it will benefit Canadian Forces members.

My Deputy Minister would like to add a few words.

[English]

Mr. Jack Stagg: We sometimes wish at Veterans Affairs that war wasn't as messy as it is and that people didn't get as hurt psychologically as much as they do.

What we have been doing over the last three or four years is putting together a joint strategy with DND on operational stress injury management. We have a number of joint things we've done with them, both research and care facility work.

Probably one of the most significant changes is that we now have people on each of the bases, so we know these people before they come out. That has made an enormous difference in our getting at people more quickly. As the minister said, what we're counting on with the Veterans Charter is getting at people even sooner and getting them into treatment, so they don't have to wait for a pension decision, which would sometimes take eight months. The clinicians tell us that the sooner we get at a stress injury problem, the more likely it is that the person will get better.

So we've done a lot of work with DND, and we think it's starting to pay off now.

• (0950)

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: Mr. Chairman, I would now like to discuss the new veterans' charter. I believe we talked about it when we had supper together.

Can you tell us how much money will be spent under the charter? Mr. Stagg, a little earlier you mentioned that an additional \$17 million would be spent this year to develop the computer network. I imagine this will also involve long-term costs. Can you explain this to me? This year, will that amount exceed \$17 million? If there are any additional costs, will you be given additional funding at the end of the fiscal year?

[English]

Mr. Jack Stagg: The \$17 million is the additional amount the government judged—when they passed the charter and decided to go ahead with legislation—we would need this year to do a whole variety of things, including tenders for third parties, who may be delivering such things as job placement and vocational training. We also have an enormous amount of training to do internally in the department to ensure that all of our counsellors will be able to assist

in the case management approach to our business, which is new for us. We will have some information technology or information management stuff to do. We will probably do some upgrading to our phone networks to ensure we're retaining our call response at the same level we have now, which is at a very good level. So in the first year, there is a lot of transition to be done.

The amounts go down after the first year, which is basically the most expensive year in all of this transition. In the following years, I think the numbers go down quite dramatically. In the third or fourth year of implementation, it is about \$3 million or \$4 million, rather than \$17 million. The \$17 million isn't built into our budget forever, but is just for doing the transition this year. I think it drops to \$12 million or \$14 million the following year, and then goes down to about \$4 million the fifth year.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: The additional services you provide to veterans have a cost. For instance, you are offering job placement services and are giving them disability lump sums. All this costs money. What is the total cost of these measures per year?

[English]

Mr. Jack Stagg: The cost per year for the first five years of this investment is approximately \$1 billion. I think it's about \$250 million the first year, and then it goes down after that.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: I imagine that this was not included in your budget for this year. You will obtain the money in the supplementary estimates at the end of the year, and the money for subsequent years will be included in the main estimates.

I have received some complaints with regard to the disability lump sum. It seems that some people would rather receive a disability pension. Why did you decide to give them a disability lump sum instead of a disability pension?

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: We looked at best practices throughout the world. For instance, if you give a lump sum of \$250,000 to a member of the Canadian Forces, that person can invest the money in a house or in a business, and it helps that person get back to civilian life more quickly. That is why the lump sum is a good idea.

However, if you take into account all the elements and services we provide to Canadian Forces members, you will see that it involves much more than a simple lump sum payment. We try to find a job for the veteran in the private sector. The veteran and his or her family receive extended health care benefits. So much more is involved than just the lump sum. You have to consider it in the context of all the programs which are available.

[English]

Jack, would you like to add something?

● (0955)

Mr. Jack Stagg: Yes.

What we found in the pension system was it was a kind of perverse system, in effect, because we had quite a large number... We took a number of files between 1998 and 2002 and looked to see how many people were coming back to us for additional pensions. People were making this their life's work. We had people coming back anywhere from 9 to 17 or 18 times, looking to boost a pension.

We thought that if it was a lump sum payment for pain and suffering, that puts that injury to the side, if you will—the person has been compensated for that injury. We can then get on with helping people better their lives and enter the workforce, often to get a job or get themselves to work productively, rather than having a game with us, essentially, coming back for additional pensions. We try, of course, in Veterans Affairs, to be fair and to judge rationally how sick or how disabled someone is from the services they rendered for Canada. They will tell us they are sicker than what we believe or what they can prove, and it becomes a kind of adversarial battle. If we can provide an amount for pain and suffering consistent with modern disability management all over the world, and then get to what the problem is in terms of helping to make people into productive citizens, we think that's a better approach.

The Chair: Merci, Monsieur Bachand.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: Basically what we were doing was trying to replace dependency with opportunity, and that sums up the entire package in a nutshell.

The Chair: Just for clarification, on the lump sum payment in my colleague's question, that's one option. Isn't that one of several tools? Is a veteran forced to take the lump sum payment? Can you give a bit more clarification on that?

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: Well, you know, we're not running two different, parallel systems. That would be very costly, very confusing. We think this is a superior way to go, in terms of assisting the needs of the veteran, but there are a number of safety nets built into the system. For instance, there will be case managers to give them financial advice, if they so choose. We don't want to force-feed people either, but if they want to put it in a trust, there will be financial managers if they require some assistance.

This is by far a much more holistic, complete way to go than just simply delivering a paycheque and saying, out of sight, out of mind, here's your paycheque. As Jack mentioned, the onus then was always on the veteran to come back and say they had more needs. This way we, the government, say that if you have served the country, it is our duty and responsibility to try to make sure you're in transition to civilian life; we assume that responsibility. It's a much more comprehensive approach.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

I remember the briefing, and I'm glad you elaborated on the assistance that's available with that funding to veterans who request it.

Now we'll go to Mr. Stoffer, please, for 10 minutes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Chairman, first of all, I want to apologize to you and the committee and to the minister and her staff today for being late.

● (1000)

The Chair: You're forgiven this time.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: You're not suffering from jet lag, are you, Peter?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: No, and I apologize if these questions have already been asked. These are just for clarification.

Minister, first all, I want to thank you and Mr. Stagg and the entire department for the staff who were over in Europe, not only on this recent pilgrimage but on others. The staff at DVA here in Canada and overseas do an outstanding job ensuring not only that all the proper protocols are met, but also that the veterans themselves are taken care of. I have feedback from veterans that the staff did a great job. My compliments to all the staff for the work they did.

Speaking of staff, although I'm supportive of the nature of the new Veterans Charter, I'm concerned about what it means for the PSAC employees who work with DVA in terms of reorganization of offices. I was wondering if you could go into some detail about what effect this will have on employees, and what mitigating factors will be taken in place in concern for their consideration.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: Thank you very much, Mr. Stoffer.

Actually, our department does work hard, and these pilgrimages have been a logistics feat in many cases. They more than rose to the challenge. Your words of praise for the department, if I do say so myself, are very well deserved, and I thank you heartily on their behalf.

With respect to your question about the implications for the department, this new Veterans Charter has been in the works for some considerable time. It's not something that was dreamed up at the eleventh hour. The department has already been making a significant shift to reorganize itself in the eventuality that the charter would come to fruition. We do now have some 42 outlets already in place to try to help. We have 42 outlets ready to implement some of the newly designed programs.

Perhaps Jack or Brian would like to add something.

Mr. Brian Ferguson: Yes, I can add a few comments.

As the minister was saying, we've developed an integrated service delivery framework, which includes the client service teams that are positioned across the country. We also have a number of centres of expertise, such as the call centres and adjudication centres and other processing centres. These take the work off front-line staff so that they'll be able to interact with the veterans, through the new Veterans Charter, quite directly.

What this means is that we've done all the positioning work that's essentially required to be ready for this. There will be an intensive training program for all staff, but it should enrich their jobs quite considerably right across the spectrum. There will be no disruption in the sense of laying off staff; we'll actually be adding staff.

So we anticipate that this will be a very positive measure for our staff. We keep the unions quite actively involved in the planning process, and we expect that we will be inviting them to be part of the training initiative required right across the country, to help us figure out the best ways to carry out that training with their members.

Overall, I think it's a very positive picture for staff. I haven't heard very many concerns. Obviously, there are anxieties with a change of this magnitude—for example, am I capable of making the transition to actually do all this work? That's why we're going to roll out a very professional training process, so that people will feel comfortable with the implementation.

Mr. Jack Stagg: When I go into the district offices, Peter, I find there's a real enthusiasm now. A lot of people, especially younger people who are counsellors, have realized that they didn't have the tools to deal with an awful lot of difficulties they were facing at the doorstep, especially with younger veterans with operational stress injuries and whatever. With the new charter, they believe they'll have the tools to deal with this stuff. Most of the ones I talk to are really quite excited and enthusiastic about the new program and the prospects.

The big challenge for us is to go into the transition now between the old and the new, and to make sure that all of our current veterans on pensions and in the current regime are given the same level of care as we've always done so that they don't suffer in the transition to the new program.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: The commitment we would make to the traditional veterans is that notwithstanding our focus on delivering the new services to our future veterans, we're always looking for ways to enhance our benefits to our traditional veterans. So we're not going to drop the ball in that regard.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Speaking of that, I was at a funeral the other day for a former RCMP officer, and some current RCMP officers were there. Although very pleased with the veterans...and maybe this is an inappropriate question to ask you. Maybe it's a question for the Solicitor General or the Minister of Justice.

At any rate, are there any considerations in terms of the RCMP, any enhanced benefits for them? As you say, you proudly talk about those who serve our country, and now it's time for the government to serve them. As you know, our RCMP officers also serve our country. Sorry for my ignorance on this question, but will they be part of this enhanced package, or will there be a parallel package for them as well?

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: My understanding is that they are currently reviewing the package. RCMP members may have somewhat different needs from those of some of our Canadian Forces members. So I understand they're reviewing the package and they are about to get back to us.

• (1005)

Mr. Brian Ferguson: In fact, they're quite active in that regard, Minister, and they are engaging in dialogue with us. We're assisting

them in that review. We don't have specific timing, but we do know they're very interested in joining in on this approach.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Okay.

The other day there was a report indicating that a fair number of veterans are on PTSD. They're getting a pension, or some sort of an allowance, on PTSD. It leads to the speculation that, quite possibly, some of these may be skimming the system.

I'm just wondering, if someone approaches the department with what they perceive is PTSD, how do they go through that process? There obviously has to be a diagnostic analysis by a psychiatrist. Is there a double backup in order to ensure that? Do they go to two different ones, or is just one sufficient? How does that process work?

Mr. Brian Ferguson: We have been treating the PTSD cases as we treat all of our applications: we rely on medical diagnosis to assure ourselves that there is an actual malady and to assure ourselves on the degree of the malady. I can assure you that we follow that process with PTSD. And since PTSD is an invisible injury, it's important that we use the best practices that are available internationally. We've been working with colleagues in the international forum to see if anything needs to be done to improve those processes.

So I can say that we're actively reviewing the approaches that are being taken, but the current process is quite similar to all the other pension processes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Do they see one doctor or two?

Mr. Brian Ferguson: They see a doctor who has to be qualified as a psychiatrist or a psychologist. And I think they see only one doctor, but I'll double-check that.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: I only wanted to add that the focus on the new Veterans Charter for wellness is an advantage for people suffering from PTSD. They won't ever have to feel the need to exaggerate or to get our attention by extravagant means.

As we were saying earlier, the whole system right now is designed in such a way that to access our programs, you have to be disabled to collect a pension from us. Whereas now, the minute they come out, we will be able to assist people who say they're suffering from PTSD.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I have a last question, Mr. Chairman.

As you know, when we were over in Holland, Dutch children seemed to know a lot more about our military history than we do back home. This is not new; it has been going on for years. We know that education is a provincial responsibility through their school boards, but with what has been happening lately, there was a re-energization of Canadian attitudes towards veterans and what these men and women actually did during the war years.

Is there a move afoot with DVA to work with the provinces and school boards across this country to better enhance educational opportunities for our children, for example, so that they will be on an equal footing with Dutch kids, who seem to know a lot more about our history than we do?

It's really quite sad, and it's right across the country. Is there a move afoot in order to enhance educational concerns so that by the time our kids are 13 or 14 years of age, they will have a full understanding of what Vimy Ridge means, what Korea means, what medals mean, and that kind of thing?

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: That is actually an excellent suggestion. It's the route to go to penetrate the youth of tomorrow, if you will, so that they know our history.

As you know, a number of provinces actually declared 2005 to be the Year of the Veteran. I think one or two provinces had a minister for the Year of the Veteran. Declaring the Year of the Veteran heightened awareness across the country. There's no denying that a lot more work needs to be done. Working with each and every province and territory to advance our history is certainly something to explore in more depth.

I must tell the committee that I think Peter Stoffer must have shaken every hand on the street.

• (1010)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I missed a couple.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: He had the energy of the Pickering Nuclear Power Plant. I've never seen someone motor down the streets like that. I think everybody got a Canadian pin and a pin for the Year of the Veteran.

Peter, you were certainly a good emissary on behalf of the country.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: Thank you.

Mr. Jack Stagg: There are a number of programs we're doing now, Peter, that you may not be aware of.

One is with the Dominion Institute. They're providing information programs and training for veterans to go to school, both older veterans and younger peacekeeping veterans. I think there were something in the neighbourhood of 2,000 or 3,000 visits last year by veterans who were jointly sponsored by us and the Dominion Institute.

This year we're doing seven or eight *Historica Minutes* that we're hoping to show in movie theatres, etc. We have \$6 million from the budget that will be ongoing. It's \$30 million over five years for joint educational programs with schools, provinces, and ex-service organizations.

We hope to expand our opportunities, especially for children going abroad now, to do some pilgrimages with children and bring them to Vimy sites. Next year is the 90th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme. It would be wonderful to bring over 50, 75, or 80 kids, with an historian, and go through those battlefields.

There are lots of things we could do that we haven't been doing. There are a few extra things now that you're perhaps not aware of, but this is a real focus now for us and for you.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: We're only limited by our own imagination in this portfolio.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We have to move on because I want to make sure that we at least start on the second round.

The first round finishes with Mr. Rota, please.

Mr. Anthony Rota (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Minister, thank you for being here today.

Congratulations. I won't go on at length, but I'll echo the sentiments. My compliments on the charter, which is a great addition to the package, and especially on the efforts that you and your department have made in getting as many MPs as possible over to Holland.

I was there along with Mr. Stoffer. The looks on the veterans' faces were priceless when they saw their MP there. It was really a great situation and it worked out very well.

The first question relates to the new charter, if you will. We've heard a lot about PTSD and the questions that are coming up. The average time for a diagnosis of PTSD is not something that just happens. You don't walk to a doctor, the doctor sees something, and you're on your way. It's invisible and not easy to detect.

I'm getting feedback from some of my people out in the field who are veterans. They seem to feel they're limited to 120 days before they can actually be diagnosed, and after that they fall off the map. Can you tell me if that's true? What exactly do the 120 days apply to?

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: The 120 days was a provision that really related to anybody who was medically released. That's comparable to what's already in existence at DND right now.

The idea behind that thinking is that if you can get to help someone in need—the sooner the better—you can actually avoid some of the problems down the road with respect to the health of the individual. It was really meant to safeguard the interests of the individual who might need assistance quickly. As I said earlier, the way you access our programs in the current system is to access our disability pension. Then we can assist you in other ways. It's about getting to the problem faster and more effectively.

Perhaps, Jack, you have something to add.

Mr. Jack Stagg: It's just as the minister said. We want to try to encourage people to get in and get help as quickly as possible. Again, the clinicians say the sooner you get at the problem, the better it is.

We also have people on bases, so if we know someone is being medically released, we'll have that application form in the person's hands and help them fill it out. We don't expect that people are going to fall through the cracks for the sake of the 120 days, but we do want to try to discipline it in such a way that people who need it actually get help, so that there is not a bigger problem on our hands later on.

Mr. Anthony Rota: I guess my concern is the PTSD. You can go on for years and not know you have it. Someone gets dismissed or leaves the forces, and they have PTSD and live in the doldrums. That can really destroy people's lives. Let's say they figure it out or find out two years down the road. Are they disqualified? Are they dismissed from receiving any benefits? That's my concern.

Mr. Jack Stagg: No, not at all.

Let's take a situation where they were medically released for a peanut allergy, just to take an example. That person would have the 120 days, basically, to register for a wellness program, a vocational program, or for whatever is needed to help in that particular instance. If a person comes up in two years, or in five years, 10 years, 15 years, or 20 years with PTSD, then that's a service-related injury. We'll help them.

So there's no 120-day limit on anything that may happen to you later on that's service related, that you didn't get medically released for. Basically, the 120 days is only for medical releases. It's only for the specific issue that you were released upon in terms of medical release.

•(1015)

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: This new charter gives a lot more latitude to the minister in terms of actually trying to assist the veteran. This committee certainly would know the ins and outs of DND practices, and my understanding was that there was a two-year window of opportunity to assist someone coming out of the military, as it exists now.

This new charter actually expands that period of time. We say, "If you wore the uniform in service to your country, we want to assist you in making that transition to civilian life, and we're really not restricting you to a time limit".

Mr. Anthony Rota: Very good.

My next question is regarding an ombudsman. It's something the veterans affairs subcommittee has been looking at; we've been holding meetings on it. There are different groups out there that have different thoughts on it. Legions have concerns. They're doing a great job. They seem to be representing a number of people. The ombudsman's office would be an extra addition to that.

I know your department has been working on the possibility of an ombudsman. Where exactly are you on that, and what direction do you see yourself going? Will you be working with the legions? Will you be working independently? Do you see it being an office on its own? Will it be attached to the existing military ombudsman?

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: My personal thoughts on this are that the system we have now is really quite superior to having just one ombudsman.

The question that I think the committee has to answer is, do they want an additional layer of bureaucracy that impedes a minister from actually helping someone? Once it goes into the bowels of the department, with the ombudsman, I can't intervene if someone requires help.

Right now, the way I see it is the veteran has more than one ombudsman. They have the legions and the ex-service organizations that can take up their cause and help them. They have the Bureau of

Pensions Advocates, where we provide free legal assistance. They have the VRAB. So they have recourse to keep moving their case along.

That's something the committee should deliberate on. I'd be interested in your viewpoints. The system we have allows us to get at the problem a lot faster, I would argue, than some of the cases that go with just the one ombudsman theory. I'd love to see some stats about the turnaround time for resolution of cases, actually, with one ombudsman at the helm.

Mr. Anthony Rota: Very good.

In December of last year you announced that about 4,000 spouses and primary caregivers were coming online, and they were eligible for lifetime VIP benefits. That's there. It's in place. You have 4,000 who were eligible as of December. How many of these people are taking advantage of it? Are we reaching out to them, and how are we letting them know about that?

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: We have had a very aggressive outreach program to reach anyone who applied for VIP and who was denied earlier. As you know, it was a disability program. The entrance to the VIP program was really that, in the event you were a vet, you had to be disabled, and you were entitled to that service. We extended that to the caregiver. That was the admission to the program. We've really pushed the boundaries of that program to the limit.

If we wanted to change that program, you really would have to design a new program. I think in my speech I mentioned that we have, to date, expanded that to 1,200 widows, and another 1,200 are in the hopper.

Perhaps, Jack, you'd like to expand on this.

•(1020)

Mr. Jack Stagg: As the minister said, we have a very—

The Chair: Briefly please, Mr. Stagg, because I want to give Mrs. Hinton a last question.

Mr. Jack Stagg: Sure.

We have a very aggressive program. We've had more than 3,000 applications. We expected 4,000 roughly, and 1,200 have already been approved. So we're well on the way, basically, towards...

Mr. Anthony Rota: So you have 1,200, and 1,200 more coming.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: Yes, about 3,000.

Mr. Anthony Rota: You're well on your way to the 4,000 in five months.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: Yes.

Mr. Anthony Rota: Very good.

Thank you.

The Chair: I don't want to take time out of the minister's schedule, but I want to get Mrs. Hinton because we didn't get to a second round.

Mrs. Hinton.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Thank you.

I'm going to share part of this with Mrs. Gallant. She has a question she'd like to ask.

Ste. Anne's Hospital in Montreal has specialized care for veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. It offers in-patient and out-patient care. Can you tell me how many beds are dedicated to the in-patient care, and how would a veteran from outside the Montreal area or one of the department clinic areas be cared for?

Then I'll let Mrs. Gallant ask her question, and, if you would, please, you can answer both.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: Jack.

Mr. Jack Stagg: I think there are four—

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I'm sorry, Mr. Stagg, I'm going to let Mrs. Gallant ask her question. You can answer both then.

Mr. Jack Stagg: All right.

The Chair: Maybe what we'll do, in the interest of time.... We can always ask the minister to come back if there are other pressing questions, or we can put them in writing to the department. But, yes, I will have Mrs. Gallant now ask her question, and then if the minister has to leave, we could get a written response.

Mrs. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Last year soldiers who were used as test subjects in human experimentation were awarded a \$50 million compensation fund. What number of applicants has the department received? What number of applicants have had their compensation sent to them? Of the \$50 million located for this program, what amount has gone to the victims and what amount has gone to administration? Is the compensation for the Agent Orange victims coming from the same fund? How long are the medical records of soldiers kept?

The Chair: Ms. Guarnieri, I don't know whether you or Mr. Stagg want to field that now.

Hon. Albina Guarnieri: We'll certainly be in a position to respond to all those questions. Perhaps we can do it at a later date.

The Chair: Do you have anything to say now, though, Mr. Stagg or Minister?

Mr. Jack Stagg: No. The first thing is that the program is administered by DND. It's not administered by us. I think we have some of the statistics, which I will be happy to get for you, Ms. Gallant.

There are four beds, I believe, at Ste. Anne's that are in our out-patient beds. There are no long-term beds for operational stress injury at Ste. Anne's, but there are four temporary beds for temporary care. I believe the next nearest centre in Quebec is in Quebec City. It's an operational stress injury clinic. It's the Paul Triquet centre. I can't tell you how many beds are associated....

Brian.

Mr. Brian Ferguson: I don't recall, but we can get that information.

Mr. Jack Stagg: We'll get the information.

The Chair: If you could provide that to the clerk, we'll make sure all the committee members get the information.

Thank you very much, Minister. I know, as I announced at the start, you have pressing duties to go on to. Thank you very much for being here, and your officials as well. We'll look forward to the written response to those questions.

As the minister is leaving, let's take a two-minute break. Then we have some other committee business to finish.

• (1024)

(Pause)

• (1028)

The Chair: I'd like to call back to order the 38th meeting of the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs.

Could I ask those not at this meeting on business to excuse us, please, so we can reconvene our meeting?

Thank you.

There are two orders of business, colleagues. First of all, you will recall this committee decided to write two letters as part of our study on the procurement of the four submarines from the British.

The committee was quite annoyed by problems in getting documentation in both official languages. The committee instructed me, as chair, to write to the Minister of National Defence and to the Commissioner of Official Languages.

I have done so on your behalf. You should have copies of those letters. They made the point that the business of this committee and the nation is done in two official languages. We registered serious concern in the appropriate places. Nothing on that? Okay.

The second committee business relates to the letter from the Minister of National Defence to me. You'll recall at our last meeting there was unanimous consent to allow Mr. Casson, with no notice—as we can do with unanimous consent—to put a motion, which was unanimously carried, that we write to the Minister of National Defence requesting the full report of the naval board of inquiry that investigated the fire on the HMCS *Chicoutimi* and the tragic death of Lieutenant Saunders.

You'll recall that the copy available to us had various portions blacked out as per the procedures under the various acts. I wrote on your behalf saying that the committee wanted a full, uncensored copy. The minister has replied in the negative, and he's explained why. I won't read it to you.

I would ask the clerk, though, to comment on our present options as a committee. She has done some checking for us, and this isn't necessarily the end of our options.

Madam Clerk.

•(1030)

The Clerk of the Committee: The committee has the right to request documents and send for people. There is a precedent where a committee asked for a non-censored copy of a report and received a similar response. At that time, there was a question of privilege raised in the House. It was studied and it was decided that the committee should hold an in camera meeting and have numbered copies of the uncensored report from the department distributed to the members at the meeting and then returned to the department at the end of the meeting. So this is an option the committee could pursue.

The Chair: So you're clear on that, then?

Mr. Casson.

Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC): Mr. Chairman, in the letter we received from the Minister of National Defence, he accepts our suggestion that he or someone on his behalf appear for a hearing. We asked for him to appear at committee, and I think that's the proper venue.

However, in the third paragraph of his statement, it says:

As with all federal departments, however, National Defence must comply with the Access to Information Act and the Privacy Act. These Acts require that the Department protect information whose release might negatively affect the defence of Canada.

Mr. Chairman, this letter is addressed to the Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs for this country. I find it absolutely offensive that he would consider that releasing information to this committee would somehow negatively affect this country. I think that says a lot about what the minister feels about us, even on a personal basis, Mr. Chairman, that we would somehow jeopardize the safety of Canada.

I find this unbelievable. If the minister does come before this committee—and I hope he will because as the author of this letter he's the one who has to clarify these issues—he will have to explain to us how he came to that rationale. I find it very disagreeable.

The Chair: Okay. I appreciate that. I would just indicate to the committee that the minister is essentially quoting the act here with that particular wording. If I felt it was the minister's opinion, I would share your feelings, Mr. Casson, but knowing him as I do, I don't think he has that view at all. And we'll have him here to speak for himself; I agree with you there.

But the reality is when something is released to a committee, even on a confidential basis, it sometimes finds its way to people who shouldn't get it, and not necessarily through—I'm not suggesting—members of Parliament. But there have been lots of brown envelopes sent out, and when they've been tracked back they didn't have anything to do with an MP. In fact, they could never really find out how they got out.

So in fairness, I think the minister is just quoting the act, and I would be shocked if he were speaking directly to us as colleagues. In his defence, I think he's been one of the more open parliamentarians I've worked with.

We'll have him speak for himself, but I know what you're saying. If that were the interpretation one took, it would be a troublesome comment. That's right.

I have Monsieur Desrochers, then Mr. Martin, then Mr. Stoffer, and Monsieur Bachand.

Monsieur Desrochers, s'il vous plaît.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Odina Desrochers (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, BQ): Mr. Chairman, I do not want to allude to what the media has been talking about a lot lately, namely the Gomery Commission, but the Commission was able to find a solution by imposing a publication ban. Once the evidence was heard, Justice Gomery was the one who decided which parts would be made public.

I believe that we should follow the lead of the Gomery Commission, Mr. Chairman, and table the entire document. Then a legal expert can advise you as to which parts should be made public. I believe that this way we would be acting in a transparent manner.

In his letter, Minister Graham says that, even though we have a good relationship with him, he does not want some information to be made public. I therefore suggest that we should look into whether the Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs could impose a publication ban on the media and members of Parliament. Once the hearings are over, it would be up to the chairman and to the legal expert to decide which parts should be made public. This way, we would be acting in a transparent manner.

If the Gomery Commission, which is a very important commission, functions this way, I do not see why we should not be able to do so as well, since we are after all the Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs.

•(1035)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Martin, please.

Hon. Keith Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, Lib.): Well, if everybody on the other side would put themselves into the shoes of the Saunders family, what is in here is the law. What is stated in here is the law. When information was disclosed at the board of inquiry, it was done under a certain level of trust for the members of that family. Some of the information that's blacked out there is information that relates to the personal information of Lieutenant Saunders. I don't think anybody at this table would want their personal medical history, for example, known by other individuals for whom it was not intended. I think the issue at hand here is to make sure we can do our job, but not all of us around this table have the security clearance to actually see some of the information that was blacked out in it. And while we may like to think that all of us at this table would keep this under our hats, as the chair mentioned, we also know from being here for a long time that committees, no matter how well intentioned, are not hermetically sealed environments. Information does get out. And under these circumstances, and to honour the people who testified, there is no way the department is going to let this out, because it would violate the law.

So I think we need to put this into context, put ourselves in the shoes of the people who testified, respect that, respect the law, and if we want questions answered as to how the law is interpreted or on the application of the law under these circumstances, the minister said very clearly in the last paragraph that he would arrange a briefing with departmental officials to explain why things were blacked out.

If we broke this and set a precedent, it would set a very dangerous precedent for future boards of inquiry and compromise their ability to do their job in the future.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martin.

I have Mr. Stoffer, and then Monsieur Bachand.

Mr. Stoffer, please.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: My concern, of course, is for members of Parliament always trying to ascertain the truth of a particular incident. Mr. Casson is well-intentioned; I think his premise, if I'm not mistaken, is to try to find out the truth of what exactly happened, and I can appreciate that.

But I have to echo the sentiments of my colleague across the way on the situation of Chris Saunders' family. In no way, shape, or form would I or my party ever ask to seek information on or even discuss the situation of Chris Saunders and his health conditions in any way. I can appreciate that concern, and I thank the member for raising that issue, because I know from speaking to friends of the family in Halifax that they're very concerned about what may or may not happen because they gave information.

As you know, a Saunders family member was at the inquiry the whole time, and they gave information with the understanding that what they said was to be kept under wraps from all of us, and they said so with trust in that inquiry and assuming trust in all of us.

So I would just exercise a bit of caution in any way, shape, or form in even discussing his name in public, such as we're doing now, because the family is so very sensitive over that issue.

• (1040)

The Chair: Mr. Bachand.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would first like to remind the committee that I read a good part of this document and I am the one who raised the issue of censorship in the document. For as long as you have known me, you have known that in my opinion, members of Parliament represent the supreme power in Canada. I will always fight against the culture of secrecy within the Department of National Defence.

It is very clear, and I am not mincing my words, that we are dealing with a cover-up, and we MPs are the victims. In fact, it said so in *Le Journal de Montréal* today. I will repeat the word cover-up. I do not know how that translates into French.

I look at the minister's letter. My colleague said that there may be negative effects. Mr. Chairman, we often hear members of the Forces tell us that they cannot show us something, otherwise they would have to shoot us. The minister agrees with this, since he also said there might be negative effects. In short, he says that they cannot

reveal the information to members of Parliament. Perhaps he should have added at the end of his paragraph that otherwise they would have to shoot us. I object to this culture of secrecy.

In paragraph 4, he says that he cannot release the information, since tactical features or vulnerabilities could be potentially exploited. Exploited by whom? If cables were dragging in the water and this caused a fire, how could that be exploited? If that is where the problem lies, they should just tell us. I am saying that that is the problem.

Even worse, in my view, is the reference in paragraph 4 to information-sharing protocols with the United Kingdom and BAE. An investigation was carried out, at the end of which we were told that everything was censored, but we were not told beforehand because Canada had signed a protocol with BAE and the United Kingdom. We also learned that there was also a protocol with the Saunders family. How can we, in our capacity as members of Parliament, establish the truth of the report if all the information is kept from us? Who is to say that there was not a medical error? Who is to say that the wiring was not improper and that the United Kingdom not was responsible? Who is to say that authorities are not just claiming that it is a tragic accident, rather than them trying to solve the problem?

I will tell you what happened, Mr. Chairman. The official version of the Department is that it was a tragic accident, and everything that does not jibe with the official version is censored. Did Lt. Saunders received adequate medical care? We do not know because of the protocol signed with his family. Was the wiring faulty? That information was also struck from the report. We will never know. Officials may be willing to meet with us *in camera* to explain certain things. We are asked to meet behind closed doors so that we will not be able to use the testimony afterwards.

It is not complicated, Mr. Chairman. I would like to conclude by repeating what I said at the beginning: this is a cover-up. We now have a political job to do, and I will simply do it with the media.

[*English*]

The Chair: All right. Merci, monsieur Bachand.

Before I go to Mr. Rota, I want to bring a bit of focus to this.

I don't think any of us are surprised at the minister's response. I don't think we're thrilled by his response, but I don't think any of us are surprised, given that he has to operate within the parameters that exist right now. As he said, "The department cannot release this information without violating these agreements, jeopardizing future requests for cooperation, and contravening the Access to Information Act"—a law—"and the Privacy Act". He's saying that he's operating under the laws of Canada, as he's being told he has to operate under.

The focus I want to bring is the following.... The minister has offered, as Mr. Casson and others noted earlier, to arrange a briefing with appropriate departmental officials in camera—which we asked for in anticipation that we might get a negative response to our request for the uncensored copy, which we got. So the committee needs to focus on whether we want to have such a briefing in the near future.

The second point I want us to focus on goes back to what the committee clerk, Mrs. Crandall, said earlier, that there is a precedent: when this type of request was made in the past and refused, a point of privilege was raised in the House, and in fact an uncensored copy was provided in due course. So by agreement, we could ask the clerk to research that situation further and advise us on Thursday.

I just want to put those two points on the table, because we'll need to start moving to a conclusion in a few minutes—but we still have some time.

Mr. Rota.

• (1045)

[Translation]

Mr. Anthony Rota: I would like to respond to Mr. Bachand. I am concerned about his use of the word cover-up. It is a dramatic word, but we are dealing with the Saunders family here. I feel it is very important for some information to remain private. If someone has told us things in confidence, we have to live up to that trust.

[English]

When I look at it, I think we've got to protect people who come forward in good faith; that's what this is all about. If there's something technical, by all means bring it in, as I want to see it.

[Translation]

Enough said. If you have anything else to tell me, tell me to my face.

[English]

An hon. member: [Inaudible: Editor]

Mr. Anthony Rota: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: Please, colleagues, Mr. Rota has the floor. It's a serious topic, and let's keep it so.

Mr. Anthony Rota: This is a personal issue. If somebody came in good faith to put something forward, to me it's very important to bring that forward. I don't want to see somebody's private life in the media. So in the future, when we're doing these inquiries, I want somebody to feel comfortable in coming forward.

The clerk has mentioned something, which I would be in favour of...having a certain number come out. We can look at them and see what's there; as long as they don't leave here, I don't have a problem with that. But to have copies put out and then have them leaked to the media, I would have some serious concerns.

The Chair: I would ask those speaking to please speak through the chair. I know it's a serious topic for all of us.

I just want to comment briefly, before I go to the other two.

You have the issue of the briefing and the matter of privilege that can be raised. I think we're going to want to make a decision on those. I agree with Monsieur Bachand and others. I've been in politics for 25 years, and I believe that wherever possible the nation's business should be done in public, that all possible information should be made available to elected members. That's just a given.

Now, there are obvious limitations to that. We've all seen that. Many of us have served at other levels of government and know

there are limitations to what information you can have and what information can be made public. The most sensitive information is about people, or personnel, and their situations, which Mr. Rota has just spoken to. However, that can be used as an abuse too. So we want to get all the information while respecting the sensitive nature of the information about Lieutenant Saunders.

So we're going to go forward and make a decision on the briefing and on whether we want to raise a matter of privilege. It could be raised by a member of the opposition, or you could direct me to raise it as the chair of the committee, but we're first going to need to do a bit of research through the clerk on what exactly our options would be in doing that. We could have that information for Thursday.

I've got three more colleagues' hands up, and then I want to move to a decision on these two points.

Mr. Martin, Mr. Casson, and then Mr. Bagnell, and then I'm going to ask you to give some direction. I don't think we'll need motions, but if we do, we'll call for motions.

Can we try not to repeat ourselves? Members have made some very good points on both sides of this, so can we try to stick to new information or new suggestions on this?

Mr. Martin.

Hon. Keith Martin: I just want to give an analogy to our colleagues from the other side. I ask them to put themselves in the shoes of the Saunders family. The equivalent of what you're asking for is that *votre dossier medical personnel* would be given to the health committee, and they would have a chance to look at this. That's the equivalent of what we're talking about here, that your personal medical records would be given to the health committee for them to look at.

I would ask our colleagues from the other side, Mr. Chair, whether or not, in their own heart, they would like that done to them, because that's exactly what they're doing to Lieutenant Saunders and to the Saunders family.

I think that would be utterly reprehensible, a complete violation of a trust of the Saunders family, and a dangerous precedent. I would beseech them not to pursue this at all.

• (1050)

The Chair: Thank you for that word of caution.

Mr. Casson, Mr. Bagnell, and then I want the committee to make some decisions on these two points.

Mr. Casson.

Mr. Rick Casson: Mr. Chair, I respect the comments that have been made, particularly about the Saunders family.

If we go back to the original mandate this committee had under this study, it was to deal with the procurement of the submarines, fully realizing that the incident on the *Chicoutimi* was not within our mandate.

On the type of information I am seeking, I'll use an example that's on page 19/126, where BAE Systems' list of recommendations and actions is blacked out, and then the status of all the recommendations and actions is blacked out. This is the type of information I'm interested in, which we need to complete the mandate given to this committee.

It has nothing to do with Mr. Saunders. The full protection of that family can still be done. But the information that has to do with procurement procedure, the condition the submarines were in, and whether the contractual agreements were met is what this committee should be targeting. That's the type of information we'll be seeking.

This other thing is a separate issue, and our mandate didn't state that we had any right to know what happened there.

The Chair: Those are points well taken, Mr. Casson.

Mr. Bagnell, briefly, and then I'm going to see if there's consensus on these two points. If there is no consensus, we'll entertain a verbal notice of motion. It depends how it unfolds here.

Mr. Bagnell.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Briefly, I'm glad Mr. Casson gave an example, because given that the report had all the conclusions and recommendations not blacked out, I was wondering what we were interested in finding out that wasn't...because we've got a lot of important work to do.

That's my only comment

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur Bachand.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Bachand: I simply wanted to congratulate my liberal friends on the appointment of Belinda Stronach to the position of Minister of Human Resources.

[*English*]

The Chair: Merci.

All right. Do I now have consensus that we would ask for the briefing with the departmental officials? We could indicate, as Mr. Casson noted, that we're not seeking any information in that briefing whatsoever about Lieutenant Saunders' personal injuries and so on. We're not seeking anything about that at all. That's personal family information. But there are other bits of information we would like to pursue.

If I don't see objections I'm going to take as consensus that we will do what we said in the motion, in effect. We'll now contact the minister's office. I'll ask the clerk to contact the minister's office and as soon as possible arrange a briefing, in camera, about the naval inquiry report, as the minister offers in his letter, with no request for any information about Lieutenant Saunders. Is there any problem with that?

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I get nervous when I hear that. Is there any way to have that in writing, that under no circumstances will any member of the committee appreciate, ascertain, mention, or even hint at the name of Saunders during any further discussions with the minister or anyone else?

The Chair: Well, absolutely—

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Saying it is one thing; putting it in writing where we could hold all members to account, including myself, would be helpful.

The Chair: If I'm chairing the meeting, and I would be, any question about Lieutenant Saunders will not be entertained. No one is seeking to raise any such question. We'll indicate to the minister and the department officials when they come that we're in no way asking them to raise anything.

First, it would be ruled out of order. Secondly, if someone else was chairing the meeting in my absence and allowed the question, the witnesses would say they were told and would refuse to answer anything like that.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Also on that, sir, there were eight others who were injured as well. Their concerns need to be taken into consideration as well.

The Chair: That's a very good point. All of that type of information would not be sought—not needed. As Mr. Casson noted, that's not even part of our original study.

I see consensus, and we'll ask the clerk to arrange for that briefing.

The second point is on the matter of privilege. Do we want to have the clerk pursue the precedent that exists to get information that was denied him in the past?

We'll ask the clerk to do more research on that and report to the committee on Thursday about this other precedent.

Is there anything else? Did I see another hand?

• (1055)

Mr. Anthony Rota: On Mr. Casson's point, I think that's a fair request. To me, it was just the personal—

The Chair: You've made that point.

Mr. Anthony Rota: If anyone plays with personal lives, it just gets to me.

The Chair: I don't think any of us want to do that. We've got to be very sensitive to that.

Okay, colleagues, thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

**Also available on the Parliamentary Internet Parlementaire at the following address:
Aussi disponible sur le réseau électronique « Parliamentary Internet Parlementaire » à l'adresse suivante :
<http://www.parl.gc.ca>**

The Speaker of the House hereby grants permission to reproduce this document, in whole or in part, for use in schools and for other purposes such as private study, research, criticism, review or newspaper summary. Any commercial or other use or reproduction of this publication requires the express prior written authorization of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Le Président de la Chambre des communes accorde, par la présente, l'autorisation de reproduire la totalité ou une partie de ce document à des fins éducatives et à des fins d'étude privée, de recherche, de critique, de compte rendu ou en vue d'en préparer un résumé de journal. Toute reproduction de ce document à des fins commerciales ou autres nécessite l'obtention au préalable d'une autorisation écrite du Président.