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Mr. Anthony Rota

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Anthony Rota (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.)): We will get started.

We appreciate your coming in. We're a little bit short on members today, but that in no way minimizes your effort or shows we're not interested. It's just that there are a few things that are very important going on upstairs in the House today, and they take precedence over this meeting. But I want to thank you, Mary Ann Burdett and Pierre Allard, for coming in today.

I understand you'll be speaking on the Legion's behalf regarding the ombudsman. It's something we've looked at and think might be something we'd want to consider as a subcommittee.

Rather than me go into a preamble on different things, if you have a presentation, we'd like to hear from you.

Thank you for coming out.

Who would like to start?

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett (Dominion President, Royal Canadian Legion): Thank you very much. It is certainly our pleasure to be here this afternoon.

Speaking to the issue of the ombudsman is one thing that will enter into this presentation. I hope it isn't too long, and if it starts getting long, I will try to talk faster. Just wave at me.

It is my sincere pleasure to be here today to address the members of the subcommittee. The work you have accomplished on behalf of veterans to ensure they receive high-quality care in long-term-care facilities has been appreciated by the Legion and more so by the veterans. For example, the report "Honouring the Pledge" stands as a very insightful overview of how long-term care for veterans can be improved.

We now appear to be at a crossroads as we transition from looking after our traditional veterans to looking after the modern Canadian Forces veterans. Some people seem to be questioning the ability of the Legion and other veterans organizations to represent the modern Canadian Forces veteran. The question has been asked, is there a need for an ombudsman? We do not believe so, and Mr. Allard and I will be sharing with you the reasons for this. Mr. Allard is the director of our national service bureau network.

We would like to help you to understand the role we play representing veterans and advocating on their behalf.

This is just a brief history of the Legion. It was founded in 1926 to represent the interests of former serving personnel and their dependants. We have not abandoned that mandate, nor do we intend to abandon it. Since its inception, the Legion has provided representation services and has advocated for improvements to the legislation governing veterans' benefits. We have maintained a service bureau since the first days of our founding. We have also established dedicated housing programs for seniors and veterans, and while bringing them comforts, we continue to monitor the quality of long-term care for veterans residing in these facilities.

Fighting for national standards of care has remained a challenge since the provision of long-term care was devolved to the provinces. From our perspective, Veterans Affairs Canada still has a responsibility to ensure these national standards of care.

Today there are more than 400,000 Legion members and approximately 1,600 branches across this great nation. There are also branches in Germany and in the United States, and we have recently opened a branch in the Netherlands.

Our ultimate authority is the dominion convention, where our members meet every two years. At these biennial conventions representatives from each branch across Canada assist in making decisions on the Legion's way ahead. We also have two governance councils, a dominion executive council, which meets once a year, and a smaller, working sub-executive that meets four times a year.

We are always looking for ways to streamline our governance model and to ensure that we can adapt to change. Policy development in the Legion is initiated through a committee system, and you see the structure there. The current committees are shown there. Each of the committees is chaired by a member of the sub-executive committee. These committees make recommendations to the sub-executive, which takes appropriate action either through the dominion executive council or through the convention, as required.

You may have noticed that the Legion is run from the bottom up. This was done by design, as our members should have the final say. As dominion president, I also chair the veterans service and seniors committee, which is mandated to provide oversight of the activities of the service bureau.

Our national headquarters, located here in Ottawa, is comprised of approximately fifty staff members, including those at *Legion Magazine*. The dominion secretary reports to me, while the senior staff act as secretaries and action officers for the various committees. My role could be compared to that of a CEO of a board of directors, while the national—or “dominion” is the word the Legion uses—secretary is the executive director, responsible for day-to-day operations. With a very small staff, he is responsible for membership, supply, communications, administration, and support to all of our committees.

● (1535)

We operate two websites, a public one with a members portal and a secure one for our service bureau network. We also operate an e-Legion hotmail that connects all of our branches and commands. Our service bureau network oversees the delivery of services to veterans in such areas as the disability pension process. It is also responsible for long-term care and housing for seniors and veterans.

As a service provider for veterans, traditional and modern, we use the same tools and processes that are in place at Veterans Affairs Canada, such as the client service delivery network, which is a client database. Under a memorandum of understanding, all our command service officers have access to this electronic database. They utilize the same processes as VAC's pension officers and service agents.

They also fight for fairness for their clients at the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, either independently or in a co-representation. They also provide benevolent assistance, representing various benevolent funds, including some that are U.K.-based, and provide assistance with all other benefits, such as the veterans independence program and attendance allowance.

What we learn as service providers allows the Legion to become a more effective advocate for our veterans. We channel our advocacy efforts through our resolution process via various committee meetings and meetings with committees such as yours. And of course our *Legion Magazine* is one of our main sources of communication. Our total circulation stands at 355,000, which equates to a national readership of a million people. We receive no subsidy other than the postal subsidy for all magazines.

Our right to represent veterans is enshrined in the Pension Act. Only two veterans organizations have such a right, the War Amps and the Royal Canadian Legion. The Pension Act also recognizes the right of our command service officers to inspect medical records and other records. It is their right and their duty.

Veterans have a choice. When they want to go to apply for a disability pension or for other benefits, they can go to Veterans Affairs or they can come to the Legion. They do not have to be a Legion member to do so. Membership is strictly personal; that's up to a veteran. Legion members or not, veterans are entitled to be represented by a Legion service officer at no cost. We also represent RCMP veterans.

Our volunteer branch service officers will help veterans to contact a command service officer at the provincial or dominion level. Think of them as referral agents for our command service officers. Of the 22 command service officers, 85% are ex-military or RCMP and the other 15% are former Veterans Affairs Canada employees. They

receive formal training at the national level and get the benefit of continuing updates on VAC policies and processes on a secure Legion website. Every two years they all go to Charlottetown for a professional development session with Veterans Affairs staff.

The Legion service office will prepare the first application and will submit departmental reviews if the first application is not successful. If it is not successful within the VAC control process, they will represent veterans in front of the VRAB for an entitlement or assessment review and through other levels of appeal, either independently or in a co-representation mode with the bureau of pensions advocate, as I mentioned previously.

You will see here an overview of our representation. In 2004 command service officers processed approximately 1,300 first applications, handled 300 VRAB reviews and appeals, provided assistance to veterans seeking VIP or attendance allowance benefits, prepared 150 departmental reviews, and dealt with numerous requests for assistance through email and telephone and from walk-in clients.

The Legion is always ready to appear at various committees and table formal submissions to improve services provided to veterans and seniors. For example, we are advocating for a Canada-wide seniors independence program modelled on the very successful VIP program.

● (1540)

Our recent advocacy work with Veterans Affairs Canada has resulted in the following improvements to benefits: the provision of full VIP and health care benefits for overseas veterans at home when they are deemed eligible to access a Veterans Affairs priority bed assessed at level II care and such a bed is not available at that time because of a waiting list; the provision of increased prisoner of war compensation; the re-establishment of the education assistance program; the provision of a full range of health programs for war veterans with a disability pension for a disability assessed as medium, which is 47 % to 77 %; the clarification of service requirements for the war veterans assistance program; the lifetime continuation of VIP services for surviving spouses; and the provision of long-term care benefits in community care facilities for allied veterans.

We are also engaged in continuing discussions with Veterans Affairs Canada on the new Canadian Forces program for modern veterans.

One of our most important roles is to be the advocates of remembrance. Without the organizing skills of our Legion branches across Canada, it would be very difficult to organize Remembrance Day ceremonies across the country. We do this as a solemn duty to you, to veterans, and to all Canadians.

There is no doubt that the role of an ombudsman in the Canadian Forces is a necessary one. The Canadian Forces have a very formal C2 structure: orders flow from above. If a member refuses a direct order, they face the consequences. Even though there is a formal redress of grievance process within the military, it is not considered to be functioning as it should. It is logical that in these circumstances an ombudsman would be called upon to play a very significant role.

Veterans Affairs Canada processes are extremely different from that. They are delivered in the context of a legislative mechanism, the Pension Act.

Veterans do not have to get services from VAC. They can seek assistance from the Legion or the War Amps. VRAB is also there to ensure fairness. Again, veterans organizations are ready to assist, as is the Bureau of Pensions Advocates. Our service bureau network plays a vital role in providing support to individual veterans. This role gives us a window on VAC's processes that facilitates our advocacy work.

In conclusion, I can say this. Let there be no doubt that the Legion will continue to play a meaningful role in providing support to veterans, including the modern-day veteran. We will not fail to defend those who have served our nation.

The very nature of service in the Canadian armed forces, whether in peacekeeping or when personnel are engaged in operations, makes it different from any other kind of employment. The harshness of conditions under which Canadian sailors, soldiers, airmen, and airwomen serve their country is such that they deserve special treatment. Day in and day out they face dangers and strains on mind and body. They are separated from their loved ones. They accept the burden of possibly killing another human being while endangering their own lives.

In other words, because they face exceptional demands, the Legion makes the commitment to fight for improved benefits on their behalf, especially those related to compensation, medical treatment, and rehabilitation. This has been the Legion's primary mandate since 1926. In our continuing adaptation to change and to potential new governance models, we will not abandon this mandate, nor will we put away our determination to be a good and responsible citizen of this country.

• (1545)

We welcome any questions. As Mr. Allard is the professional head of our service bureau, I will probably pass a good many of the questions on to him for exact answers on the manner we work. If you have any questions regarding the Legion generally or other aspects of the work we do, I will be delighted to answer them for you.

Thank you for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Burdett, and thank you, Mr. Allard.

We'll start off with questions, beginning with Mrs. Betty Hinton. Go ahead. You have seven minutes.

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

Thank you very much for the presentation today.

I suppose this is out of order, but I read your CV and I must say it's very impressive, Mary Ann—if I may call you that.

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: Thank you.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: You've certainly served your country well, and it looks to me as though you continue to do exactly that.

I want to be clear from the beginning that raising the issue of an ombudsman is not meant to suggest that the Legion isn't doing its

job. I believe the Legion is doing a fabulous job and you act as a very strong advocate for all members.

My concern, which has been raised by a number of constituents, though, is exactly about what was referred to. It's about some constituents who served in the Gulf War and also some constituents who are members of the RCMP. It's those two groups of people who've actually approached me regarding an ombudsman. It has nothing to do with the job you've been doing; you've been doing a fabulous job. We see this as an addition, not a replacement. An ombudsman will never replace the Legion; the Legion does things no other group could possibly do.

I was interested in your views on an ombudsman, and you did seem to think it wasn't a bad idea; you just had some concerns. I'd like you to answer that.

The other thing I wanted to mention is that some recent members of the Canadian Forces left the military because they were dealing with illnesses that are grouped under the term Gulf War syndrome. What assistance has the Legion given in recent years to recent military personnel dealing with Gulf War syndrome and to others trying to obtain disability pensions and other services from the Department of Veterans Affairs? That would be my first question.

• (1550)

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: I will leave that to Comrade Allard.

Before he answers it, I would like to thank you for your kind words. While we don't think it's a bad step, we think perhaps it's an unnecessary one. It could in the long run delay processes when we are trying so hard to get the benefits to our veterans in the quickest manner possible.

Comrade Allard.

Mr. Pierre Allard (Director, National Service Bureau, Royal Canadian Legion): I think to frame the question in the context of the Gulf War veteran is quite laudable, but it's ignoring the majority of the veterans, who may not meet the parameters of that specific group. If I recollect, there were probably approximately 900 Canadian Forces veterans who served in that theatre, while there were probably another 2,000 who were support staff, on ships or other vessels, etc.

As for providing representation to Gulf War veterans, the issue that has been raised by the Gulf War veterans is, they are suggesting, they suffer from something called Gulf War syndrome. There have been a number of studies on Gulf War syndrome and a couple have received a lot of publicity recently. One is the Binns study in the United States and the other is the Lloyd study in the U.K. Unfortunately, notwithstanding what might have been said in the media, none of those studies have been very conclusive in identifying Gulf War syndrome as a medical condition that should be pensioned.

As a matter of fact, I have a copy of both studies here. It's my only copy, but I'll certainly find a way to send it to the committee. If you look, for example, at the Binns study done in the United States, you see the major recommendation that came out of this study was basically to assign more money to research. I can read some of the recommendations:

Develop a comprehensive federal research plan to address Gulf War veterans' illnesses....Maintain a substantial research funding commitment....develop comprehensive research protocols.... Establish an effective management strategy for the...Gulf War illnesses research portfolio....Give funding priority to studies that pursue significant research....

These were the major findings of the Binns study in the United States; this report was published in 2004. The basic recommendation said:

Designate that 15 million dollars of the annual federal Gulf War illnesses research funding be...added to VA's current research and development budget in support of the recommended comprehensive Gulf War illnesses research program.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Excuse me, Mr. Allard. This is very interesting, and I'd be very happy to have a copy of both of those, but I didn't want to discuss the two different points of view. I was asking if you could address some of the issues that have been brought to me by a variety of constituents, RCMP members being one group and the other being Gulf War veterans.

I understand that you're sifting through this and trying to make some sense out of it, but could you tell me anything specific you as the Legion may have done in recent years for people who have Gulf War syndrome? And it's not only for having served in the Gulf; there are other places people have come back from. They've gone away perfectly healthy and they've come back with debilitating and in some cases deadly diseases. Whether those can be proven is another story, but I'm wondering if there's anything the Legion has done specifically for those two groups of people, RCMP members and Gulf War syndrome victims.

Mr. Pierre Allard: Very specifically, we've represented them in the disability pension process. What we have done as advocates is fight for them to get a disability pension for some issues that may not be called Gulf War syndrome but may be called, say, an operational stress injury, a problem with skin allergies, or some pulmonary disease. In other words, even though Gulf War syndrome is not recognized as a disability per se as far as the Pension Act is concerned, obviously veterans who come forward with all these associated illnesses can be pensioned.

Statistics indicate that probably 55% of those 900 have received a disability pension. Then the issue becomes whether you want to give them special credibility by giving them a lump sum payment, which is what is addressed in some of these studies here.

That being said, the Legion, through its service bureau network, has represented Gulf War veterans, has represented RCMP personnel who have been engaged in operations, and has fought for them to get a disability pension within the realm of what is currently in the Pension Act. In the Pension Act it says you have to have a disability. Gulf War syndrome is not a disability in medical terms, and there are a number of studies, also in the U.S., that basically say exactly what I'm saying.

But if you're suffering from post-traumatic stress or if you're suffering from something else, you deserve a pension. I firmly believe the Gulf War veterans who have made requests for a pension either through us or through Veterans Affairs have received favourable scrutiny through the process.

• (1555)

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Allard.

[Translation]

Mr. Perron.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Burdett, Mr. Allard, thank you for being here.

Even though I have grey hair, I'm a new recruit to the Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs. You may find the questions I ask a bit direct or abrupt, but I'll ask them without malice. Sometimes I have trouble being diplomatic. That's my problem.

The first question that comes to mind is this: how is it that there's a veterans association for the army, one for the navy, one for the air force, and so on. How many veterans associations are there, including the Royal Canadian Legion?

Mr. Pierre Allard: Our association is a partner with a number of those associations. There are three traditional associations: the Royal Canadian Legion; ANAVETS, the Army, Navy & Air Force Veterans in Canada Association, which is probably the oldest association; and the National Council of Veteran Associations in Canada, which is under the aegis of the War Amps of Canada. There are also other, more recent organizations such as the Canadian Association of Gulf War Veterans, the Canadian Peacekeepers Veterans Association and the Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping. Those are slightly more modern associations.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Do you tread on each other's toes or do you help each other?

Mr. Pierre Allard: Are you asking me whether they're there to help us?

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: No. Do you tread on each other's toes?

Mr. Pierre Allard: I don't think we tread on each other's toes. You have to understand that, for the Legion, a veteran is a veteran. We don't represent a veteran because he's associated with a specific conflict. We serve veterans because they're veterans. Our organization is inclusive, whereas the others don't admit all veterans as members. For example, the Canadian Association of Gulf War Veterans will never have more members than it does right now.

I can assure you that the Legion has made efforts to invite those organizations to join it. We've offered them seats on our board. Unfortunately, we haven't yet managed to attract those organizations under our umbrella, but we're continuing to work on it because we think veterans should have a single voice.

• (1600)

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: What is the average age of Canadian veterans in general?

Mr. Pierre Allard: The average age of those who could be called traditional veterans...

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: From World War I, World War II and the Korean War?

Mr. Pierre Allard: Yes. The average age of those people is approximately 82. The average age of modern veterans is probably 55 or 56 right now.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Mr. Chairman, I'd like to express my dissatisfaction on one point. We shouldn't just refer to Gulf War Syndrome. We should talk about the diseases of those who went on peacekeeping missions to Bosnia and so on. The illnesses of all those young people are included in Gulf War Syndrome. The Gulf War was in 1993. There have been other wars since 1993.

What are you doing to attract these young people to your associations so you can help them? I'm going to give you some names: François Gignac and Marc Steben, for example, have serious health problems. These are young people that I met, who were six feet tall and weighed 200 pounds, but who now weigh 103.

Mr. Pierre Allard: We tell all veterans that they can use our representation services free of charge. We want to fight for them so that they get disability pensions. However, we have to acknowledge that there is a legislative or quasi-legislative framework. There is a Pension Act, and the process in place acknowledges that disability provides access to benefits. Whether they do business with us or with Veterans Canada, the challenge is the same. However, the door is open: they can request services through our service officers.

You asked what we're doing to get them to join the Legion. We have a lot of programs to encourage young people to promote good citizenship. Every year, for example, we have a poster competition and a poetry competition. The winners from across Canada come and spend Remembrance Day here to place a wreath on the Cenotaph with the officials who are there to represent the government.

We provide very strong support to all cadet units in the country. Moreover, I'd be willing to bet that, without the financial support of the Royal Canadian Legion and without the premises we offer to cadet units free of charge, the cadet program would have a great deal of trouble surviving.

•(1605)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perron.

Mr. Stoffer.

[English]

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the two comrades who are here today to make a presentation. This is very well done, by the way.

One question I have to ask is—and I ask it with the greatest of respect—does the Legion feel in any way a possible threat by an ombudsman for Veterans Affairs because, say, he or she would be intruding on or stepping on the toes of the Legion in what it is already doing? I don't know how to ask it any more diplomatically than that, like my colleague here. I'm just trying to say it in the nicest way I can, because there have been some people who have approached not only Betty Hinton but me as well, saying they would like to see that.

When we spoke to the ombudsman for the Canadian Forces, he indicated it would be possible for him, given enough resources, to be an ombudsman for both, if I'm not mistaken. I'm just wondering what your viewpoint on that would be.

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: First of all, I feel very much at home with you two gentlemen when you suggest you're not the most

diplomatic people in the world, because I have a tendency to call a spade a shovel on occasion as well.

But no, we do not feel threatened by an ombudsman. The Legion has no reason to feel threatened about anything. We are there to do a job. We have proved we can do that job; we have done it for years and we'll continue to do so. Our concern, as with everything, is with our veterans and the possible slowing of getting those veterans their benefits by having yet another level to go through. You will find things will probably skip to an ombudsman if the priority isn't put onto them at the lower levels. We really feel that the system would get clogged and that it would be somewhat detrimental.

Believe me, it's nothing we can't work with. The Royal Canadian Legion can work with anything it has to, but we truly believe in our hearts that it is not the most productive thing for our veterans to have another level of—I wouldn't dare say—bureaucracy.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: But that's what I would like to ascertain. If I were a member of the Legion looking for assistance and this ombudsman position came into being, instead of going to the Legion and getting the assistance that is already available, I might say maybe I could get quicker or faster service if I went through the ombudsman.

From your presentation it looks like you have a very a hands-on approach, and from the Legions I've encountered over the years, I'd say the personal care Legion members give to someone who's seeking assistance is quite phenomenal. Is it possible, then, that the ombudsman's department, because of where they are and because of the resources they may or may not have, may not be able to offer that closeness or one-on-one approach when it comes to dealing with problems? In other words, you'd be dealing or messing in bureaucracy.

You can say that. We deal with it all the time.

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: I do not suppose it's possible for anybody at a national level to give the same feeling to a veteran as somebody they deal with locally. Our branch service officers, as I suggested earlier, are agents. They don't necessarily have the expertise to handle the case and represent someone right through, but what they give that veteran is the feeling of comfort and confidence that comes with dealing with one of his own, a comrade. We have found that some of our older members, with their understanding, have better success in the comfort they're able to give the veterans than some of the younger, far more efficient and effective people do.

Mr. Pierre Allard: May I just add something to that too?

If there's somebody who feels threatened by an ombudsman, I would say it's the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, which is there to ensure fairness, and the bureau of pensions advocates. There is a structure that is in place to provide services, and there's a disability pension process that is enacted in legislation. I don't see how the ombudsman would not be able to follow the same processes that are in place for any veteran. That's the challenge.

There is something that ensures fairness at repeated levels. You can go back to the VRAB for a review, you can go back to the VRAB for an appeal, or you can go back to the VRAB for a request for reconsideration. If you haven't approached the VRAB, you can go to a departmental review over and over again until you're blue in the face. But the process is there; it's legislative; there is a Pension Act and you're bound by that Pension Act.

I should add something else: if you put in place an ombudsman who serves both Veterans Affairs and the Department of National Defence, chances are that in that context he wouldn't report to one minister but would have to report to Parliament.

• (1610)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Given the close relationship you have with ANAVETS and the National Council of Veteran Associations, Mr. Chadderton's organization, have you had any discussion with them on what their opinion is on an ombudsman for Veterans Affairs? We'll probably ask them ourselves, but it would be interesting to see if you've had that debate with them as well.

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: We have not, to my knowledge, done so on a formal level. Now, staff members in the organizations may have had some debate on it, and most assuredly, it does come up for discussion any time we gather together. As you are aware, there are many times throughout the year when ANAVETS, Mr. Chadderton's organization, and we are together, even on a social basis, and the things dearest to our hearts are the things we are going to discuss.

As far as ANAVETS is concerned, they have not expressed a definite stand to me, but then this has all been a matter of conjecture, and I don't suppose anybody is going to come out with definites until such time as we know exactly where everything stands.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I ask this question out of ignorance. With your 400,000 members of the Legion across the country and in other places in the world, how many of those would be classified as veteran members—not veteran members of the Legion, but veterans in terms of service to the country?

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: I could give you absolute statistics on it but I would have to get them from the office; I don't have them with me. But we do keep track of our membership and what categories it fits into: who are ordinary members, affiliates, and associates, as we call them. We'd be delighted to provide you with those statistics if you wish, but I don't have them today.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: At your convenience. That would be helpful.

The Chair: Now we move on to Mr. Bagnell. I believe you have a few questions. You have seven minutes.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you for coming. I'm a member of the Legion, so it's great to have you here. This is a great presentation, as Mr. Stoffer said; it answered a lot of my questions.

I'll let you know my biases at the beginning: I don't have any on this issue. I'm just trying to find out more information for myself.

First of all, how many paid staff do you have in Canada, roughly?

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: That is another statistic we could come pretty close to giving you, I'm sure, but we don't have it off the top of our heads. We don't always know exactly, because it changes, who

may be a paid staff member in a branch. Our concern has rarely been with the paid staff who run the bars in the branches we call "wet branches". We would be more concerned with paid secretaries and secretary-treasurers, that nature of employee. But we could come pretty close on it. As it says in the presentation, we know we have 50 here in Ottawa, which once again proves the efficiency, because for 50 professionals to run an organization of over 400,000 people is quite an accomplishment.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Out of those 50, are there 17 or 22 in the service bureau?

Mr. Pierre Allard: We have five at the national level in the service bureau in Ottawa and Charlottetown. The other 17 are in the provincial command. They are what we call the command service officers, who are trained to represent. These people have access to the VAC electronic database, etc. Those are the people who do the work.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: So these are paid employees.

Mr. Pierre Allard: Paid employees.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: When people have complaints and need their issue looked into, these are the 22 people they go to, basically.

Mr. Pierre Allard: Yes, they might be referred by a branch service officer initially, as Mary Ann was saying, who would understand the individual better, but that branch service officer would do a referral to a command service officer who is trained to handle representation.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Do you have some of those overseas as well, or are they the volunteers overseas?

Mr. Pierre Allard: They're the volunteers.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: How are those 22 people funded?

• (1615)

Mr. Pierre Allard: Our service bureau is funded through a portion of the per capita that we receive from all of our members and from a portion of the poppy fund.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: So there are no government grants for that.

Mr. Pierre Allard: Absolutely not.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: If we were to have an ombudsman, we'd have to pay for that. So in a way why don't we pay you for the service?

Mr. Pierre Allard: We don't want to be paid—I don't think so—because we want to be independent. Having said that, this goes back to another fundamental rationale. The government keeps talking about favouring non-governmental organizations. We are one of those. Do you really want to replace us with something you're paying for?

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Briefly tell me the process if a veteran has a complaint about their pension or something or other. They would go into their local Legion. Is that how it would work? Normally a volunteer would probably meet them, get the information, and then pass it on to one of these 17 regional officers.

Mr. Pierre Allard: We have different models across the country. For example, in Ontario we have four command service officers. They actually visit branches where they meet veterans. They also establish a presence at CF bases where there are transition centres that do interviews for the veterans who are leaving the forces. They're visible in all these areas to offer their services for anybody who wants to get representation.

Think of it this way: they're there; they make themselves available; they go to the branches; they visit the branches to serve the traditional veterans; they go to the Canadian Forces to offer services to the modern veterans.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Is there anything you can't do that a paid government ombudsperson could do?

Mr. Pierre Allard: If there was one for the veterans affairs portfolio, an ombudsman would still have the same challenges that we do as advocates and representatives. We are tied to the Canada Pension Act, and the Pension Act has certain parameters. We are tied to a process that includes the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, which is there to ensure fairness. It has different levels of appeal. You cannot circumvent the process. If you don't like the process, then eliminate portions of it and adopt a new Pension Act.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: I was looking in this book with your 1,300.... Related to the number of cases they deal with, on page 13—1,300 and 300 and 294—would the 22 people be backlogged at all with these several thousand cases? Are they enough to do the work?

Mr. Pierre Allard: That number is enough to do the work. We probably have a little flexibility in some areas because there are fluctuations and a level of representation that is done in each region at certain times. We are able to provide services without any problems.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: People don't have to wait a long time.

Mr. Pierre Allard: People don't have to wait a long time per se, keeping in mind that some of the processes that are in place, for example, might demand that you have to go to see a doctor or a specialist to get a diagnosis, and because our health services are the way they are, that's not always easy to schedule in a timely fashion. We do have to wait for some of these specialists' diagnoses within the confines of what we have to make as an argumentation.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: This is a completely irrelevant question, but I got a key chain thing in my mail recently. It's a red sort of thing. It was different from the ones I normally used to get from the War Amps. It seemed to come from the Canadian Legion. Is that a separate thing from the War Amps' funding for the children amputees?

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: Was it a sort of pinkish colour, and other than that the same as or similar to what the War Amps send out?

Hon. Larry Bagnell: I'll have to look at it, but it seemed to come from the Legion rather than from the War Amps.

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: There are two places in British Columbia that are involved with the Legion. They have a foundation, as such, and it puts out a key chain of a similar type. It's not meant to supercede the War Amps; it's just another little project they have going. Also the TB veterans, out of Vancouver, have an interest in making things for sale. They have a key program as well.

That is my guess. One of them is pink, and the other one's blue, and I think you may have somehow received one of those.

• (1620)

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Okay.

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: You said you were a Legion member, so that would account for it.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: I just wanted to make sure I keep giving money to the War Amps, which I have been doing. It was confusing to me, that's all.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Very good. Thank you.

Maybe I'll ask a couple of questions before we go to round two.

You mentioned you cooperate and work with the DVA very well. The question I have concerns the military ombudsman who's in place right now. Do you work with that office on a regular basis?

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: I'm going to leave that to Comrade Allard, if I may, please. I do not personally have dealings with him. As you understand, I am a volunteer. The professionals look after it and call in the big guns when we get into trouble.

The Chair: I'm sorry, when I say "you", I mean the Legion in general, not you personally.

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: That's why I'm leaving it to Comrade Allard.

Mr. Pierre Allard: We have some personal contacts, rather than formal contacts, currently. For example, because of my responsibilities, I serve on an advisory committee for the operational stress injury social support group. I don't know if you're familiar with it. They're basically a group within the Canadian Forces who provide peer support for people who suffer from operational stress injuries. There is an advisory committee, and it so happens I'm there as a Legion member, and there's somebody there representing the ombudsman. You probably know him: retired General Joe Sharpe. It is at that level that we have these contacts.

So yes, we do have some contacts. I've been trying very hard to go to brief the ombudsman about the Legion's service bureau, but I think their attention is somewhere else right now. I'm sure we'll get there to provide them some information on what we do. I think it's very important that we transmit that message, explaining what we do to deliver services.

The Chair: One other question before we move on to the second round is this. You mentioned the Legion helps deal with veterans' appeals before the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. You're there; you know the act very well; you deal with the act.

The question came up when we were asking about operational stress injuries, or the Gulf War syndrome, and you mentioned that you try to take what you can fit within the act. Do you work just with the act, or do you promote new diseases, new injuries, new illnesses throughout? Do you bring out awareness of what's out there?

Mr. Pierre Allard: Let me give a little bit of a history lesson here, and I don't mean to take your time. In effect, post-traumatic stress was not on the books—actually, not in the Pension Act; it would have been in the regulations in Veterans Affairs.

In 1998 the Legion organized a forum on post-traumatic stress in Charlottetown, where we invited some experts from Australia and the United States and some people from the Canadian Forces and Veterans Affairs. It took a lot of stick-handling. Basically, we had a very successful forum in Charlottetown, where we gave great visibility to post-traumatic stress. At that time it was not a recognized disability according to VAC regulations. We feel that we indeed advocated very strongly to make the case to recognize post-traumatic stress.

We haven't seen the necessity to do that for Gulf War syndrome, for the reasons I was explaining at the beginning. Both of these studies, the Lloyd study and the Binns study, do not make a rational case to recognize Gulf War syndrome as a disability. Until someone does, we don't feel inclined to do the same thing we did for post-traumatic stress.

The Chair: All right, that's very clear. Thank you very much, Mr. Allard.

Now we'll move on to Mrs. Hinton. These questions will be part of a five-minute round.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I'd like to begin by saying you made me a lot more comfortable with your response to my colleague Mr. Stoffer when you said you oftentimes call a spade a shovel. That's the way I've been all my life, but I was trying to be really polite here. So let's not be as polite, but let me make a couple of comments before I get into the part that's not polite.

I interpreted some of the answers you were giving as your feeling as though you had to justify the existence of the Legion. I want to assure you there is not a single person at this table who believes the Legion has to justify its existence. The Legion has done a remarkable job, and no one is taking anything away from the Legion. We're trying to support you with this kind of initiative.

Let me now say the part that's maybe not so politically correct. With the military background of Legion members, and their training and their discipline, you may actually approach some of these issues in a far more polite way than another person might approach them. From my perspective, I'm looking at the Legion and the remarkable job they've done as a referral service to an ombudsman. You know: you've gone as far as you can go and you're not making any headway because you're just not making any headway. If it goes to an ombudsman, the ombudsman doesn't have to be nearly as polite.

Perhaps it would be in the interest of all the veterans concerned if this ombudsman—if this position were ever to become real—were more of a medical person who might have a better handle on the medical aspect of it and could rely on the Legion for the military background and that aspect of the needs of veterans. I see you working together, not separately.

Talking about being polite, I'll give you a specific example. I have a constituent who fought for at least ten years for compensation for having been a prisoner of war. He was unable to get anywhere with the government on his own. The Legion, although it tried as hard as it possibly could, was unable to get him a resolution, and it took political intervention on my part to get him a solution. It took me 18 months, and the only reason we were successful was that I didn't really care who I offended. I kept hammering and hammering until

we got the result we were looking for. As a result of that, a number of prisoners of war are now getting a pension they were being deprived of before. I'm very proud of that.

I guess what I'm trying to say is, would you object to being a referral service? Take it as far as you can, because you're going to be able to be very successful on many of the issues, but on those issues where you simply cannot make it happen, do you see the role of an ombudsman supporting what you do for veterans?

• (1625)

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: As I stipulated earlier, we will work in any manner that is necessary, regardless. As far as being too polite is concerned, when it comes to the welfare of our veterans there are none of us who are that polite.

As a referral service to an ombudsman...? The ombudsman is constricted by the same rules and regulations and pension act as the Royal Canadian Legion. We see it as an unnecessary extra step.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: One of the other comments made by Mr. Allard was that you felt perhaps the problems actually were there because of the makeup of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. You indicated that earlier—very nicely, I might add. I think you're going to probably be quite pleased with some changes that I understand are going to be made to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. We've raised questions as a committee and as the defence committee about some of the things we feel need to be qualifications to be on that appeal board. I'm hoping that will improve things.

While you have the opportunity, is there anything that we, as members of Parliament, could do to support the Legion?

Mr. Pierre Allard: I would just like to correct something. I hope I didn't leave the impression that I don't think the Veterans Review and Appeal Board is doing a good job. I think they are there to ensure fairness. I think the new chairman, Mr. Victor Marchand, has been a breath of fresh air, and we are very encouraged that there will be a more formal process to select members. I think that is obviously a good way ahead.

We understand you're doing a study of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. It is on your agenda, is that correct, or...? No?

The Chair: We will be. It's something we're considering.

Mr. Pierre Allard: We would like to come back at that time and tell you about one little specific problem we may have with the Veterans Review and Appeal Board in view of a recent interpretation hearing that has taken place—you're giving me an opportunity—where indeed they had not had an interpretation hearing since 1995. They had one on the issue of due diligence at the level of the request for reconsideration.

You have to understand that the request for reconsideration level is the absolute last level of appeal. You have to go there with new evidence, an error in fact, or an error in law. You can go back as many times as you want, but it's very difficult to get there because there is a screening. In other words, you have to come to the board and convince them you should be there.

Because of a decision that had been taken by the Federal Court on the concept of due diligence in introducing new evidence, unfortunately the VRAB in their interpretation hearing ruled against both the BPA and the veterans organization that testified. The board will now introduce the concept of due diligence in introducing new evidence at a request for reconsideration. We are concerned about that decision.

•(1630)

Mrs. Betty Hinton: May I just ask one more question?

The Chair: You're out of time, but sure, do it very quickly.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I need you to verify something for me. When you go to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, get turned down, and then reapply, is it not the same body of people who told you no the first time who hear you the second time?

Mr. Pierre Allard: It is the same body.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: Thank you.

The Chair: Now we'll move on to Mr. Bagnell.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: I'm trying to figure out why we're having this conversation. You have enough people and they know the background because they're veterans, so why is there a suggestion that there be an ombudsperson?

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: The suggestion did not come from us.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: But certainly you must have heard about things you weren't doing that would have led to this suggestion.

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: Actually, I think the suggestion was made more in the nature of helpfulness, where people felt this would be an advantage. It's simply that we don't see it as such; we have a different viewpoint on it.

But it's always good to look into anything, no matter how it ends up or which way you see it. To have these discussions and be open to one another's ideas is a good thing, certainly. I think the suggestion was well-meant; it's simply that we don't see it as being a helpful move.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: If you're in touch, you must have found they had some reasons for suggesting that. Are there things you're not covering? Or maybe they weren't aware you did these things.

Mr. Pierre Allard: It might be a question of not understanding the processes that are in place and focusing on the specific issue of the Gulf War syndrome without realizing that a very large percentage of Gulf War veterans are now pensioned for disabilities associated with their service in the Gulf war for real medical reasons. I would look at it from that perspective.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: In an effort to help our committee, can you tell us, do your 22 service officers keep any stats on the types of problems that occur that maybe shouldn't occur? Could they report that to the department so we can remove some of those impediments that require all this service?

Mr. Pierre Allard: We keep statistics on what conditions our service officers make application for on behalf of veterans. As to whether or not you can translate that into how you could improve the conditions of service, I'm not too sure there would be a logical link there.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: It's just that you're working on the ground with people. If you could suggest ways to improve either communications or the actual mechanics of what is done, that would be useful information for us.

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: We do meet on a very regular basis with the Department of Veterans Affairs, and at that time we hash out things. We bring to them things we see as problems or suggest ways we feel things could be improved. These may have come to us through our service officers, or they may have come from our people as resolutions during a convention. But it's a very regular thing for us to meet with Veterans Affairs Canada and go over means of improvement. Of course, if there are any problems, we're not the least bit shy about bringing them up.

•(1635)

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Monsieur Perron.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Ladies and gentlemen, I ask you to shorten your answers so that we can ask as many questions as possible.

To begin with, I'd like to have an organization chart of the Legion in Quebec, if possible. You don't have to give it to me today, but you may send it to me.

Second, I'm going to give you an opportunity to comment on young people in Quebec who suffer from post-traumatic problems. I discussed that with your former service officer Robbie Robertson, who has retired and is living in Pointe-au-Chêne. He's also a friend of mine. I can state that, in my region, a number of these young people complain, and rightly so, that they're not receiving services from the Royal Canadian Legion. I see that the Royal Canadian Legion doesn't have a chance to help these young people because they're afraid. Post-traumatic disorders among these young people are associated with problems that are located between the two ears. They're afraid to state this openly; they're afraid they'll be called crazy.

The causes of these diseases may be related to handling weapons containing depleted uranium, or to a surplus of vaccines administered to combat fear of a number of things. When it comes to depleted uranium, everyone's afraid and says they shouldn't talk about it.

Mr. Pierre Allard: If I correctly understand your question, you're asking me whether people are afraid to address Legion officers. I think it's more of a challenge for us to do a good job of circulating the information and informing people about available services. The fact that Robbie Robertson has retired doesn't mean that we won't replace him or that his replacement won't receive training, follow-up and supervision. Moreover, a person has already been identified, Debra Viskelis. She'll come to Ottawa to receive training and the tools that will enable her to do her representation job.

In the meantime, we're still telling our branches that they can still reach electronically any one of the 22 officers who offer representation services at the high levels of our command. Those 22 officers are available.

I myself do business with people who suffer from post-traumatic stress. I myself have intervened so that these people could have access to a bed in Saint-Anne, where there is a clinic offering them treatment.

I'd like to add one thing. We can always intervene on behalf of these people at the last level. When they haven't been well treated or haven't received the services they should have received, we can always write to the minister. That's when we task our national president with writing to the minister to ask him that that person receive a complementary payment. A whole mechanism is in place to help these people. Our challenge is to convince them that we're here to offer them a service.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: For example, I remember Ms. Richard, a young girl from my region. How was it that she wasn't able to come and place a wreath for veterans last November 11?

Mr. Pierre Allard: I was at the monument because I was the spokesman for the Legion. Ms. Richard went and placed a wreath with her group.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: That was probably the first time she was able to do it.

• (1640)

Mr. Pierre Allard: I think it was the second or third time she did it. However, I wouldn't want to personalize these things.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: It's not a question of personalizing them, but stating names and facts helps us find our bearings.

I'll explain to you why I got involved in veterans affairs, my friend. I have absolutely nothing against the Legion because you do an amazing job. The group at the Legion in Sainte-Thérèse and Deux-Montagnes respects MP Perron, and we have fun. I have a beer with them from time to time.

However, what should I do when a young man 30 years old—that's my son's age—comes into my office and tells me: "Sir, I'm fucked up in my head"? He comes into my office half drunk and on drugs and starts crying and says "I'm fucked up like this because I've come back from Bosnia. When you see war on television, I go into my closet and cry!" That's how he talked to me.

Mr. Pierre Allard: I could suggest one thing to you. I'll leave you my business card. Give him my card and ask him to call me. I'll make sure he gets all the services he needs.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: We managed to help him.

Mr. Pierre Allard: I'll also be able to put him in touch with someone who does peer support, who is there to offer more personalized service. I also invite you to read an article in the March issue of the Legion's paper, an article that provides a concrete example: Veterans Affairs Canada, service officers from the Legion and someone from the OSISS support group worked together to help someone suffering from post-traumatic stress.

That's the best thing I can tell you.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: The guy is now in Sainte-Anne Hospital, in Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue. We managed to get him admitted. When you see that, you feel obliged to help these children.

Mr. Pierre Allard: You're right.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: As human beings, we have a duty to help these children.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you very much, Mr. Perron.

[English]

Mr. Bagnell, did you have any more questions?

Hon. Larry Bagnell: I just want to ask about redress if you can't come to a solution. In the situation Betty had, I assume that whether we had an ombudsman or yourself, when you come to the end of the road, the same thing would have happened. The next step would've been that it would have had to go to the political route to get it resolved.

Mr. Pierre Allard: Yes.

I was saying in French that the last level we can do is we can ask our national president to write to the minister and request an *ex gratia* payment on behalf of a veteran. We have done that in the past with success.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: And a veteran's spouse as well?

Mr. Pierre Allard: As well.

We offer our services to dependants as well as veterans, because dependants in their own right can have access to a disability pension for their deceased husband.

The Chair: We'll continue with Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: First of all, I want to say on the *Legion Magazine* that I get it all the time, and it is fabulous. In fact, there's a certain person—I think her name is Natalie—who does a great job for you, by the way. Oh, she is here.

On those folks who came to the Hill and did that press conference seeking the position of an ombudsman, if they come into my office tomorrow still seeking that position, I want to ask whether it would be fair for me to ask them whether they've approached a Royal Canadian Legion seeking assistance in their particular fight or battle. As you mentioned, you don't have to be a member of the Legion to seek support. So would it be advisable to ask whether they have gone to a Legion to seek assistance, or could I at least offer the services of a Legion? Is that a fair statement?

Mr. Pierre Allard: I think that would be a fair statement.

If they're looking, however, to have us fight to recognize Gulf War Syndrome as a medical disability, until we see something more conclusive in medical studies, we would have some difficulties with that. At a certain time we might entertain that. Right now there's not sufficient evidence to lead us to that route.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Correct me if I'm wrong. The Legion actually holds an office in Charlottetown. Is that correct?

Mr. Pierre Allard: That's correct.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Can you explain how that was set up and how it started? Does Veterans Affairs pay for the space, or does the Legion pay for that space?

•(1645)

Mr. Pierre Allard: That was set up in 1984. We decided we needed an office in Charlottetown when Veterans Affairs moved to Charlottetown. It was also at this time evident that the appeals would be held in Charlottetown, so we actually moved the service officer to Charlottetown with secretarial staff, and we pay the rent for that office in VAC spaces.

That person does representation at appeal level from Charlottetown, though we can do that now from Ottawa.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Next year is your 80th birthday. Have you approached Canada Post at all to see about getting a Legion stamp? I think that would be a great thing to do.

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: We have in the past had Legion stamps.

It's our 80th birthday next year?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: They said 1926 to 2006, 80 years.

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: But...

Mr. Peter Stoffer: What a great time for a stamp.

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: Yes, of the Royal Canadian Legion it would be. We tend to go back to when we first started. The Legion started at that time, but we were members of the Great War veterans and things like that before. I suppose I thought you were making us too young there for a second.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: The reason I say that is because we could ask other questions. I think what a great way to not only promote the Legion in a very non-commercial atmosphere but also as a way to encourage recruitment into the Legion. As you know, there's the question of retention, and we lose.... I'm losing one legion in my riding within about three weeks because of high insurance costs, low attendance, and everything.

One thing the legions have always been trying to do is get more and more people to participate in legion activities and become members. A great way to do that is to apply to Canada Post and maybe they'll give you a stamp for next year. That would be a nice thing.

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: Thank you.

Mr. Pierre Allard: I might add something about the issue of Gulf War syndrome in the context of other studies that have been published, for example, on incidence of cancer in Korean War veterans. There have been some studies that have been recently published on that issue that have made a direct medical link. This has resulted in our being able to present requests for disability pension for cancer linked to the Korean War because of these medical studies.

So one does not know what's around the corner. It may be that these \$15 million that will be invested in a new study in the United States will lead to greater understanding of what happened in the Gulf War. So we will look at this in the future and advise.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you very much.

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: May I add to that? I will be brief.

I was proposing to suggest what in a sense Pierre has just said to us. We are not closed, our minds are not closed, to Gulf War syndrome. We are simply waiting for complete and total direction to

make sure that we are going for the right thing in the right manner. Our minds, as the Royal Canadian Legion, are not closed to anything in particular. We welcome suggestions. We certainly appreciate you having us here this afternoon and listening to what we have to say.

I would like to say to Monsieur Perron, we are having a meeting here next weekend in Ottawa, not this coming weekend but the one after, and we will have the representation of all our dominion executive council members from across Canada in attendance. At that time the Quebec president, Mr. Shelton, will be joining us—perhaps you know Norm—and Jean Thériault, the incoming one; it's past and present. Anyway, they will both be here and I will take that opportunity perhaps in a social moment, or perhaps in a quiet meeting with the two of them, to see if there is anything more they can do for your veterans in Quebec, and leaning particularly towards the younger ones, and see if we can make you a little happier with the situation there.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: It's very much appreciated, Madam.

[English]

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: Also, in terms of the organizational chart, at that point, because of our commands, our branches and everything—although I certainly don't see any problem with you having one—I would like to ask the president of Quebec command to see that you get it rather than have it come from me.

•(1650)

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Can I add on to that, please?

The Chair: Mr. Perron, your time is over, but you can make a quick comment.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: It's because I tried to be invited to their national *congrès annuel*, which is going to be held in Rimouski or Rivière-du-Loup in May, and Norm is supposed to invite me. So if you see Norm, tell him, don't forget to send it in the post.

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: I'll talk to him.

The Chair: Between the stamps and the invitations, this is becoming a real.... Actually, no, I like the stamp; it's just proof that Peter's not just here because of his pretty face.

That was an excellent point, by the way.

I'm going to ask a quick question before we go over to Mrs. Hinton. This is going back to a little bit of what Peter talked about and a little bit of what Gilles talked about. It's responding to a comment that was made by Mr. Allard earlier. Maybe I'm paraphrasing, but branch members give a personal feeling because they can relate.

I look at the average age of the Legion members. How many new, younger members do you have? What are you doing to actually recruit these members?

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: Again, we have statistics that would cover this, but they are not things I thought to bring with me today. We felt it was the ombudsman issue, and of course wanting to acquaint you with what we do.

We are getting younger members in. As far as their ability to relate with age is concerned, it isn't an age thing entirely that the veterans relate to. Sometimes it's just somebody from their own area. You're from home and that makes it more comfortable.

What are we doing to bring these new or younger people in? In many of your branches that still have a bar, they have special evenings where they invite the younger crowd and they have some of this terrible—I mean this modern—music and cater to a younger group. It is on nights like that when I find something else to do.

Seriously, we are looking at bringing younger people in. In this day and age, they're very busy, these young people, and they have young families. You have to be careful to make them feel comfortable. It's one of the things we are stressing, to try to make young people feel comfortable in a military environment, which they're not used to, and yet at the same time use them, put them to work. This is one of the major things that every Legion branch must do, and we impress them with this—that is, to involve young people. Most are trying to do this. We tell them they should initiate them, give them a job, and get them involved, but don't push too hard, because their time and their finances are limited, and certainly try to coordinate activities of interest.

Our sports programs, for instance our track and field program, are absolutely amazing. I wish I had a week to tell you about it. There's sponsorship of local ball clubs, soccer clubs, pee-wee hockey, and then mom and dad will come in on the weekend because the legion has just made a nice donation to their hockey team and given them uniforms and things like that.

If we cater to your parents and to their grandchildren, we hope to accomplish the required mix for all of us to work together and expand our membership as a family and community organization.

The Chair: Very good. Thank you.

Now we'll go to Mrs. Hinton.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I don't have any more questions. I do have a comment I would like to make.

I'm not telling you anything that you don't already know, but you're going to have an incredibly busy year with the year of the veteran. I wish you the best of luck in it. I'm going to try to participate in as many of these events as I possibly can, especially in my own riding.

I want to leave you with a thought. When you have an older veteran, a World War II or a Korean veteran, and they've had bullet wounds, or shrapnel, or whatever the case may be, they're very easy to spot and we say "wounded veteran". When we're talking about what I call the Gulf War syndrome veteran, sometimes it isn't visible. So in the eyes of some, if it isn't visible, it isn't there. But I can assure you from having talked to a number of veterans who served, they are equally as wounded and they are equally deserving of support.

So keep up the good work, and thank you so much for coming today.

• (1655)

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: I thank you, and I certainly take your comments to heart. My father was a paraplegic, but his brother and all of his sisters and three of my mother's brothers were in. There

were two of them who came back with no visible wounds, but believe me, they were never the same, and we recognized it. We used to call it shell shock; now it's a syndrome.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bagnell.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Your service officers, in that they are all ex-RCMP or ex-military, are any of them what you would classify as young?

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Yes, 63.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: The youngest one is 63?

Mr. Pierre Allard: No, we have some young service officers who are in their thirties and forties. So it's a mixed bag. Some are older, like me, and some are younger.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: So if there were a very rare occasion when a younger veteran wanted to speak to a younger service officer, it's possible to facilitate that?

Mr. Pierre Allard: It's possible to facilitate both at the command level of these 22 and also at the branch level.

Like I said, we also have links with the peer support coordinators who are operating in the operational stress injury social support network, and we intervene on behalf of young veterans who need peer support. We are attuned to those demands. If anything, and without disrespect to Veterans Affairs, we probably give a very personal touch. We are approachable and we know how to deal with people. Even the ones who swear, that's not a problem. On the other hand, Veterans Affairs, which is operating under certain legislation that is supposed to protect their employees from harassment, might have more impediments to an open access. So yes, we provide that service in a very open way.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: If there were some issue like Gulf War syndrome, or any other issue or thing that may or may not be eligible under present regulations or law or whatever, that wouldn't be really an issue we're discussing today because it's a policy issue that's determined by the government, by the department. You could make the case to the government or if there was an ombudsman, but that wouldn't be the ombudsman's job, really. They could add it to the case in the government, but that's—

Mr. Pierre Allard: In my mind, an ombudsman would be there for fairness. That's what VRAB does. If you want to advocate for new benefits for new medical conditions, we do that. We've done it for post-traumatic stress back to 1998, when that condition was not recognized by Veterans Affairs.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: An ombudsman would probably actually have less authority to do that than you do because you're not constrained by the terms of reference.

Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you.

I think we're all out of questions for now.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: No, I'm not.

The Chair: According to the protocol we have and the time limit, can you make it just one very quick question?

Is that okay with the rest of the committee, if you take two minutes? How does that sound?

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Less than two minutes.

The Chair: Less than two minutes. Very good.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Pierre and Mary Ann—and I'm sorry, I'm calling you Pierre and Mary Ann because I think we know each other now—keep doing a good job. I'm high tempered, I really go up and go down, but please don't forget my kids. Please, don't forget my kids.

If my president would gave me the authorization, after the meeting is over I'd like to have a chat with you guys to change your terminology of “syndrome”. Just change that thing.

The Chair: You can do that later if that's all right. That's fine. We'll let you discuss that after the meeting.

I want to thank both of you for coming out today. It was very informative and worked out very well. I know the Legion holds a

very special place in all our ridings. I know there are a number of them in my riding alone, and you represent a group of people who, I think all of us can say, have a special place in our hearts, the veterans who fought for us and sacrificed for us and assured that we have the country we have today.

So in this year of the veteran I want to thank you and wish you well with all your celebrations. We look forward to working with you in the future.

Thank you for coming out today.

● (1700)

Ms. Mary Ann Burdett: Thank you.

The Chair: We're going to break for a few minutes and then we're going to go in camera. We have a couple of financial items we're going to be dealing with.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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