



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

ACVA • NUMBER 013 • 3rd SESSION • 40th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, May 11, 2010

—
Chair

Mr. David Sweet

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Tuesday, May 11, 2010

•(1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC)): Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the 13th meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

I see that our main witness, Mr. Sean Bruyca, is here. Joining Mr. Bruyca is his wife, Carolina Bruyca.

We'll be hearing testimony and questions for the first hour. Since we started late because a committee was in here, we'll go to 12:08, and then we'll excuse the witnesses and go in camera for committee business.

The last meeting we have before our constituency week is on Thursday. There will be three officials at that meeting.

We have an opportunity to chart our course, because our analyst has an outline of the report. We'll have a full draft report when we return, and we will need to deal with the business of where we'll go after the report is done. We'll finish the recommendations and of course send it to the House.

Without any further delay, Mr. Bruyca, I think you are well familiar with how the committee works, so I'll let you begin with your opening remarks, and then we'll go to the usual rotation of questions.

Mr. Sean Bruyca (Retired Captain (Air Force), Advocate and Journalist, As an Individual): Thank you, Chair.

Good morning, Chair, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you for inviting me back to testify. More importantly, thank you for continuing your extensive study on the new Veterans Charter and the well-being of disabled CF members, veterans, and the families of all. I am grateful to the committee for ensuring that my initial report and 40 accompanying recommendations on the new Veterans Charter and Veterans Affairs in general has been officially tabled and entered into the parliamentary record. I have also provided an additional 15 recommendations in a separate document for tabling.

Today, in the audience, I would just like to acknowledge David Hutton, executive director of FAIR, and two renowned whistleblowers, Allan Cutler and Ian Bron. All of them are brave advocates for effective whistleblower protection from reprisals from the public service.

For the record, it is important that the committee understand that I am not a participant in the new Veterans Charter programs. I am here

advocating on behalf of those CF members, veterans, and families who do not have the health to defend themselves.

Reading through the testimony of your many esteemed witnesses, I am encouraged by the passion, enthusiasm, and expertise they all bring to the table. I'm also pleased to see the impressive unanimity of almost all witnesses in calling for not just a tweaking of the new Veterans Charter, but a complete rethinking of how we treat disabled soldiers, veterans, and the families who stand by them through thick and thin. Alone in resisting fundamental change, let alone any substantial change, are the non-veteran employees of Veterans Affairs Canada, who are the architects of the new Veterans Charter.

It is a sad coincidence that five years ago today, on May 11, 2005, the one and only parliamentary committee hearing was held on the new Veterans Charter before it was rushed to royal assent. Harold Leduc, Louise Richard, and I were the only voices permitted to offer insight into the design flaws of the charter.

However, now is the time to answer some important questions.

Why have the individuals and organizations who have testified thus far not been integrated into VAC's policy-making process, rather than, at best, standing on the sidelines so that VAC can mostly reject or ignore their expert input?

Why are the ultimate experts on disabilities—the passionate and skilled disabled veterans and family members—not making the decisions and designing policy for their peers?

And, as occurred five years ago, why are all of these stakeholders excluded from directly participating in the redesign and rewriting of the new Veterans Charter, as is unanimously called for outside VAC?

Perhaps it is because VAC remains isolated, both geographically and professionally, from the disabled veterans it serves and the front-line employees who serve veterans. As most witnesses have pointed out, including the veterans ombudsman, Veterans Affairs requires a significant and fundamental cultural shift. But how will that shift occur if VAC is allowed to continue the status quo of working in isolation in Charlottetown while employing few, if any, veterans?

I am pleased to hear that the staff of Office of the Veterans Ombudsman consists of 30% veterans. This is exactly the minimum proportion of veterans I recommend for employment in VAC, and it is the proportion of veterans working in the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.

The veterans ombudsman testified that “quotas of any sort are counterproductive”. That’s interesting, since quotas ensure that visible minorities, aboriginals, females, and the disabled are reflected at all levels of government. Without quotas, how would the opportunity for employing underrepresented populations come to be in a timely manner? Besides, I’m recommending quotas not merely to adhere to the principles of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which justify such quotas, nor am I recommending quotas as a favour to veterans—although they do deserve them—but I am recommending quotas as part of a comprehensive and sound business model. As the ombudsman testified, veterans offer credibility. More importantly, the *raison d’être* of Veterans Affairs is veterans and their families. Therefore, the department must designate a significant number of positions for veterans, disabled veterans, and family members of disabled veterans only, precisely to provide the expertise and intimate understanding of veteran clientele that is currently lacking, while developing programs that veterans need—not programs to suit Veterans Affairs or unrealistic Treasury Board processes.

• (1110)

Almost all witnesses have testified about these overwhelming and confusing bureaucratic processes that VAC has implemented for disabled veterans and their families in order to receive the “care, treatment and rehabilitation” mandated by Canadian law. Meanwhile, new Veterans Charter architects attempt to appease Parliament and veterans by telling us that the NVC has all the built-in flexibility necessary in order to accommodate change in what they call “a living charter”. That no change has yet to occur is painfully obvious. However, there are two problems with the platitude of inherent flexibility.

First, if the legislation has flexibility to offer services and benefits where not expressly defined by legislation, what happens when budget constraints are implemented and the spotlight is no longer on veterans and their military service? Flexibility in legislation also allows the department to deny services and benefits if not expressly defined. Verbal guarantees to the contrary from VAC officials do not sit at all well with a disabled veteran dependent upon VAC for life, and should hold no water with this or any Parliament.

Second, the flexibility platitude is mostly untrue when it comes to implementing an overwhelming number of recommendations made thus far. Legislation would have to be written to accommodate such changes. For example, a number of senators, most advocates, including the Legion, as well as both the special needs advisory group and the new Veterans Charter advisory group have called for the earnings loss benefit to be moved from 75% to 100% of salary, and to have that 100% keep pace with real CF salary increases and typical career rank advancements. The NVC legislation, as currently written, does not allow any of this.

Furthermore, appeal mechanisms for the new Veterans Charter programs are hard-wired into the legislation and designed to be

severely limited. Under the Pension Act, all programs can be appealed at the departmental level and, failing that, through at least two levels of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board and then through Federal Court. However, under the new Veterans Charter, only the lump sum can be reviewed in this manner. All other programs can only be appealed through the department. This means the system of precedents set up by more than a century of common law is irrelevant to most of the new Veterans Charter programs.

The department has consistently told Canadians that the programs of the new Veterans Charter cannot be viewed in isolation and that the NVC is a suite of wellness programs. That this suite of wellness programs is merely a repackaging or a duplication of already existing programs is only now being understood, although we presented this conclusion and supporting documentation to the Canadian public, members of Parliament, and Veterans Affairs more than five years ago. I have provided the committee with an updated summary version of that documentation.

Canada’s most disabled veterans and their families are often completely dependent upon Veteran Affairs for both medical care and financial stability for the rest of their lives. What happens should these veterans or family members determine that the government, which controls so much of their lives, is not providing them with the necessary services or benefits? What protects disabled veterans from the real or perceived fear that they may be unjustly treated by a Veterans Affairs employee for reporting deficiencies in VAC practices for themselves or in their lifelong commitment to watch over their comrades? What is more integral to wellness than the need for security from such real or perceived reprisals?

As I testified to this committee last month, I was and I am the victim of reprisals by Veterans Affairs officials precisely because of my opposition to the new Veterans Charter, as well as my support of a veterans’ ombudsman.

The new Veterans Charter cannot be looked at in isolation from the process in which it was created. We cannot, as a nation or a Parliament, blindly accept that any means justify the end. The secretive and bullying manner in which the new Veterans Charter was fast-tracked prevented due process of committee review, a review we called for exactly five years ago today, a review that, thankfully, you are now carrying out.

Perhaps if Parliament had held public hearings prior to the tabling of the new Veterans Charter, Veterans Affairs officials such as Darragh Mogan, the chief architect of the NVC, would not have acted with such impunity on March 24, 2006. He told six VAC senior managers, including Assistant Deputy Minister Brian Ferguson, that it was “time to take the gloves off” when dealing with me and my public analysis of the new Veterans Charter. It’s not a little alarming that the plan detailing what Mr. Mogan carried out with his “gloves off” was sent to two Canadian Forces officers and then later blanked out by access to information.

• (1115)

It can't be a coincidence, but later that afternoon, Ken Miller circulated a letter to Assistant Deputy Minister Brian Ferguson, Darragh Mogan, and others that I wrote to Prime Minister Harper regarding the charter and that had bold letters written above, “Not For Departmental Viewing”. Thirty-six minutes later, instructions from Assistant Deputy Minister Brian Ferguson that my personal medical files be shared with Parliamentary Secretary Betty Hinton were put into action, only three days after Minister Thompson saw those same files. I can only assume this was done to undermine her confidence in me, because her office doesn't look like a medical office to me, and neither Mr. Mogan nor Mr. Ferguson appear to have MD or medical doctor designations following their names.

More curiously, Parliamentary Secretary Betty Hinton's support for me quickly declined after receiving the skewed medical information provided by the department, and I don't think that's a fair or ethical use of my personal information. But I may not be alone here. The Privacy Commissioner is investigating the matter.

I wasn't dreaming when 13,000 pages of Privacy Act information showed me how VAC had used my personal medical files to slander my reputation with ministers, members of Parliament, and senior VAC managers, thereby undermining my effectiveness as an advocate for the overhaul of the new Veterans Charter. Nor was I delusional when those same documents showed how VAC bureaucrats, not medical doctors, had determined that I was “clearly unwell” and in need of “one week or more in patient psychiatric assessment”, simply because I demanded a review of the new Veterans Charter.

While it is true that I suffer from PTSD and have a therapeutic medical team who strongly oppose the need for this assessment, the mere fact that one disagrees with VAC officials is not in itself a diagnosis for such draconian measures or any other treatment. If disagreement with VAC were a diagnosis for treatment, I'm sure many members of this committee would already be racking up very large therapy bills.

The fact that VAC officials would target an opponent in such a devious way is why comprehensive whistleblower veteran and family protection legislation must be included in any rewrite of the Veterans Charter, to show veterans that they are equal partners in overseeing the programs created in their name and in honour of their sacrifice. No matter what else is done, meaningful change at VAC, given the department's history and culture, will only be successful in the long term if accompanied by a truly independent, impartial, and legislated ombudsman's office with teeth. Many members of this committee have already pointed this out. Such an office would

ensure that veterans and families receive programs they need in a timely and efficient manner. Such a partnership of legislated protection, with a powerfully independent oversight body, would have provided a perfect vehicle to which I could bring my allegations of reprisals.

Equally important, a veterans' ombudsman who reported to Parliament and was not beholden to VAC would avoid the troubling reaction of the current veterans ombudsman to VAC's reprisals against me. A well-respected veteran colleague informed the veterans' ombudsman personally of the allegations of harassment and my associated distress. He urged Mr. Stogran to have the ombudsman's office contact me. The ombudsman did not act upon this distress call of a veteran in dire need, nor did the ombudsman consider as potentially serious the reprisals and harassment endured by someone whose efforts had resulted in the creation of his office. Stuningly, the ombudsman, Mr. Pat Stogran, e-mailed his director, Louise Wallis, callously withholding help in the hope that I would endure greater harm. The ombudsman wrote, “In battle, it's better to hold off on a counter-attack as long as the enemy is busy destroying himself.” Please, let me repeat that: “In battle, it's better to hold off on a counter-attack as long as the enemy is busy destroying himself.” If these are the views of the ombudsman when faced with a clear distress call of a disabled veteran, what purpose does the position serve, and how are our men and women who once donned a uniform to have confidence in its impartiality? What protection does any disabled veteran and his or her family have against similar reprisals to those I have endured?

I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the Veterans Charter and ombudsman with you because these are issues that are vital to the veteran community and are central to the mandate of this committee.

A secondary question, but of no less importance to the veteran community, is VAC's utter contempt and demeaning derision of those who advocate change. I have the good fortune of having been able to carefully document VAC's reprisals against me, but many of my colleagues do not have the health or fortitude to confront betrayal by a department in whom former soldiers must place their absolute trust.

• (1120)

I hope you might request either the House Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics or the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights to initiate a study. Perhaps these committees could look at what systemic flaws or individual failings contributed to the Veterans Affairs' employees believing they could seek reprisals against me and try to silence the voices of those calling for change to the Veterans Charter, merely for exercising the well-earned right to freedom of expression, a right that those same voices have so valiantly defended in uniform.

My great-grandfather died in World War I. My grandfather was killed on the beaches of Sicily in World War II. My uncles died while serving in the Royal Canadian Navy. And my brother is permanently and severely disabled because of his service in the CF. And 143 Canadian Forces members have not died in Afghanistan for the bureaucracy. They have paid the ultimate sacrifice for Canada's democratic institutions and principles. They have died and been wounded by the order of Parliament, not by the order of public servants.

The bravery and sacrifice of our men and women in uniform have consistently inspired Canadians for more than a century. The military is inspiring because they believe their sacrifices mean something, that a vote means more than just another face in Parliament. That vote must necessarily translate to empowering those different faces, each one of you, to be the figurative and real will of Canadians, sacredly entrusted to hold all of government accountable or else the bureaucracy can continue to act with impunity and the principles of Canadian democracy and human rights mean absolutely nothing.

To that end, as Colonel John McCrae writes, "To you from failing hands we throw/The torch; be yours to hold it high." Our dead and wounded have lost so much carrying that torch for you and for Canadians.

I and others have stood up to Veterans Affairs to bring reason and transparency to this haphazardly constructed new Veterans Charter. Today, virtually the whole veteran community is calling for those changes, and a growing chorus of Canadians, including perhaps the Privacy Commissioner, is learning firsthand about the tactics of a department whose practices and culture are long overdue for fundamental change.

Thank you.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bruyeya.

Now we'll go to our rotation of questions. Of course, we'll have limited time, so—

Mr. Sean Bruyeya: Sorry, Chair, my wife wanted to enter a statement again.

The Chair: That's okay, Mr. Bruyeya. We're already at 17 minutes.

Carolina, please go ahead.

Mrs. Carolina Bruyeya (Veteran's Spouse, As an Individual): Thank you very much for inviting my husband once again as a witness to testify on the new Veterans Charter.

I have been with Sean through his more than 10 years of advocacy work for disabled veterans and their families, and I believe the word "witness" clearly describes my perspective on the events that led to the creation, passing, and implementation of the new Veterans Charter. From my perspective as a wife, an immigrant to Canada, and in my experience as an accountant in two countries, I would like to make a few observations.

First, as a family member of a prominent veteran's advocate in Canada who is assisting disabled veterans and their families, neither I nor the other family members of disabled veterans whom I know have ever been consulted by Veterans Affairs. Neither have we been educated or provided with any educational material as to what specific programs Veterans Affairs or the new Veterans Charter provides.

Second, some people have said that we have to remove the emotion from the debate on what benefits and programs Veterans Affairs provides to veterans and instead look at it as a business model. As an experiment, let us just follow this reasoning.

Parliament is the factory that produces a product for sale. VAC is a corporation that administers the distribution of the product, and in this case, the new Veterans Charter is that product. The people of Canada are the shareholders of the corporation. You are the board of directors representing the shareholders. Veterans and their families are the customers.

In a business model, when a customer tells the corporation that the product does not fulfill their needs or is defective, the corporation cannot dismiss the concerns of the customer or tell the customer he's wrong and force him to accept the product. If the corporation does this, the customer would quickly abandon the corporation and buy another product from a different company. As customers flee the company that is making and selling this defective product, the stock price will fall and shareholders will become outraged and demand that the board of directors order the company and its employees to change the product so that the clients keep buying it.

The sad truth is that disabled veterans do not have the option of turning somewhere else when VAC does not provide a service or a product that answers their needs. Veterans depend solely on you, as representatives of the Canadian people, to tell Veterans Affairs to change their product.

Third, the selling of the new Veterans Charter product seems more characteristic of the hype associated with an intensive marketing campaign like those I have only seen in the business world, unlike the noble and sacred process of open debate and inclusive discussions necessary to create any law, especially one so important to so many who have given up so much for Canada. These are the democratic principles that inspire me, and I imagine all Canadians need to know that our disabled veterans and their families are granted the fullest generosity of the very democratic principles for which they fought and lost so much.

Sadly, as the public campaign to sell the new Veterans Charter continued, I witnessed the damaging effects of another campaign that took place behind closed doors to silence and discredit a disabled veteran who merely wished that the new Veterans Charter be studied better before it was approved. I am, of course, speaking about my husband.

The new Veterans Charter programs do not apply to Sean. He was only standing up for those disabled veterans and family members who could not speak for themselves. Instead of listening to him, certain Veterans Affairs officials viewed him not as someone trying to improve the product, if you allow me to come back to our business model, but as a competitor who had to be crushed at all costs.

After going through many of the 13,000 pages that VAC holds on Sean, I am still unable to find a reasonable answer to the following questions: Why did more than 400 people within VAC, including the media relations director, need to know details about my husband's medical conditions or financial benefits? While the director of public consultations on the new Veterans Charter was opposing my husband's view on it, why did he need to know that my husband suffers from fibromyalgia, has PTSD or a prostate illness, and how are these medical conditions relevant to my husband's opinions on the new Veterans Charter? Why did VAC bureaucrats, such as the director of treatment and her assistant, who were in charge of treatment approval, sarcastically refer to him as "our favourite client"? Why did this same director mislead the VAC finance section into supplying her with the details of his financial benefits, only to place them in a briefing note to the VAC minister the next day? Are VAC employees, such as the director of the task force that designed the new Veterans Charter, so afraid of open debate that they have VAC take the gloves off to deal with my husband? Why did bureaucrats call my husband twice in one week to say that they knew he had been trying to exercise his democratic right to speak to a minister and that he should not try to speak to former Minister Thompson? Since when does disagreeing with VAC and trying to help others without any self-interest become such a revolutionary idea to our government that we allow disabled soldiers to be persecuted and punished by any means necessary? Even in the business world, such behaviour is not acceptable and is even illegal.

• (1130)

Thankfully, veterans' benefits and freedom of expression are not controlled by the business world. They are matters of the heart and at the foundation of this country, a country so impressive in principle that I and so many others have left our homes to become Canadian.

After five years of witnessing such an un-Canadian reprisal by public servants, I urge you to stop this from ever happening to anyone else. I plead with you to create a mechanism that allows veterans to voice their concerns without fear of reprisals from the people who have a fiduciary duty to care for them. I urge you to write a law that prohibits the sharing of personal information of any veteran or their family member to anyone in the department, especially to senior managers and ministers, just because the department has possession of it.

I have watched firsthand the devastation of my husband as he witnessed the most sacred and personal facts of his life—his inner

thoughts—being shared without regard for his dignity. I ask you please not to let these actions go unaddressed. We have both lost much because of what Veterans Affairs has done, just because Sean was trying to help other disabled soldiers.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Bruyca.

Now we'll go on to Mr. Oliphant for seven minutes.

Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you, Captain Bruyca, and thank you, Carolina, as well for being here. You create lots of work for us, which is good. I thought we had done it with 40 recommendations. Now we have 55, which we'll take very seriously. I will; I'll make sure we go through them all.

In your remarks you've raised three sets of issues: one with respect very directly to the new Veterans Charter, one with respect to the office of the ombudsman and his independence, and the third around the reprisals that you have experienced in your advocacy work.

This morning I'm going to focus on the first one primarily. I think there's going to need to be another forum with respect to the review of the office of the ombudsman, which I will want to be pushing for our committee to work on.

Then the third one, the reprisals.... I don't know the venue for that one. I want you to know that we're going to take it very seriously, but I'm not sure that today I'm able to deal with it. Maybe others will raise it.

I'd like to focus on your recommendations, which are related to the new Veterans Charter. That is our study at hand.

I recognize also that even though you come as an individual, you're really broadly briefed. I see Perry Grey here as well, and I know there are many veterans that you speak to regularly. I recognize that your now 55 recommendations with subsets are more than Sean Bruyca's: they come from a broad base. Your chart is also helpful on the comparison of the new Veterans Charter and pension benefits.

I want to pick away a little bit about that and give you a chance to highlight, out of the 55 recommendations, what it is you think we need to do. Part of it is the principle of the new Veterans Charter and then the program of the new Veterans Charter.

The principle has to do with an effective rehabilitation program. Yet we also have to deal with catastrophic injury. In the principles, there's a little bit of confusion at times about whether catastrophic injury really is being well met by the new Veterans Charter, which has a focus on rehabilitation.

There's a question on principle; then there's a question on program and program delivery. I wanted you to have a chance to comment on whether you agree with the principles of the new Veterans Charter; not the outcomes and how it works, but the principles of rehabilitation, reintegration, independence. It's okay not to agree. And then we can get into some program ideas that you have.

• (1135)

Mr. Sean Bruyey: Thank you very much, Mr. Oliphant.

Yes, in terms of the report and my ideas not being mine alone, I wouldn't claim to own those ideas. In fact, more than 90% of Canadian Forces veterans do not belong to an organization. We're talking about more than 400,000 veterans who have no affiliation whatsoever. Who represents them? Who reaches out to them? That's what my job is, I think, as an advocate: to try to do the work that's not being done, which is to communicate with them and represent their views.

As far as the new Veterans Charter is concerned, there are many really good words: rehabilitation, re-establishment, opportunity with security. These are not new words. These are words that came from and were plagiarized from the World War II programs. The way they were defined after World War II was noble—extensive programs that addressed all aspects of one's life—and they dealt, as you said, with both the re-establishment or rehabilitation of someone leaving the military and entering civilian life and the catastrophic injuries. They had a comprehensive program that basically set the stage for the rest of the world to learn from Canada about what rehabilitation really meant.

The problem with using those words and associating them with the new Veterans Charter is, as we've already discussed, that the charter did not create any new programs per se; it merely duplicated or re-packaged them.

There really has to be a sit-down discussion of what it means to rehabilitate someone. I think we have to then decide, when rehabilitation is not extensive, that then all we have to do is give someone assistance with job placements, a bit of job hunting, and let him transition out of the military with a bit of cultural understanding. The new Veterans Charter does okay with that. That may be a person with a twisted ankle or Plantar fasciitis or some mild medical condition like that.

But for anyone who's seriously injured—and it doesn't have to be catastrophic, but for anyone with a psychological injury, for anyone who's dealing with a severe physical impairment or loss of a limb—the programs of the charter, although they may be present to assist these people, are virtually inaccessible to them for two reasons: first, that the bureaucratic processes, as all of you have noticed, are ridiculously overwhelming and far too discriminatory; second, that the Veterans Affairs employees have neither the skill nor the time to administer their programs. I'm sorry, I'll add a third one, which is the cultural barriers to assisting these veterans to access these programs.

All three of those areas are not being addressed by the Veterans Charter.

Creating all these new repackaged programs and throwing them on case managers who already have 900 to 1,500 clients each and not hiring any new case managers means basically, as the expression

goes with justice—that “justice delayed is justice denied”—that benefits delayed are benefits denied.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: I don't want to interrupt your train of thought, but I'm going to anyway.

On the principles issue, one of the concepts is independence. Yet as I talk to soldiers, including last week a recently retired general, about his experience with going through the forms on release in Veterans Affairs Canada... He was bewildered by them. This is a leading general, having trouble with the bureaucracy. They live for bureaucracy, so I'm concerned.

Without being pejorative, I'm trying to struggle with the issue that there is a fostering of dependence and interdependence in the military culture. It's part and parcel: you have to depend on your brother and sister to survive, and it is part of the dominant culture. Then Veterans Affairs says, we have to train independence.

It seems counterintuitive to me. Without saying “I want to keep veterans, injured or not, dependent”, it seems to be a problem in culture. Am I right in this or wrong?

• (1140)

Mr. Sean Bruyey: You're absolutely right. It's not something new that we're learning.

I remember that my wife and I watched a movie a few months back called *The Best Years of Our Lives*. It was produced before the end of World War II. It understood that you needed to combine all the factors of government, community, and family and bring them together to help these veterans transition out of the mentality that they had to be trained in order to carry out the job.

If one is willing to give up one's life, unquestionably one must put immense faith in those social structures around them in the military. Those social structures don't exist outside the military, so we must find a way. I believe we need to have some sort of formal transition course—perhaps a little less intense for those who are not as seriously injured, because they may not have as many adaptation issues, and more intense for those who are more seriously injured and more long-term.

In some cases, we need long-term coaching for these people to help deal with everything from what happens when the light bulb goes out and the person is overwhelmed by the issues of dealing with everyday life in the household after leaving the military to how to deal with a job interview. How do you train the employers to adapt to this person who needs time, some caring, and understanding to integrate back into society?

I really think those can all be arranged.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: That's the practical and the psychosocial.

Mr. Sean Bruyey: That's right.

The Chair: We're way over.

Thank you very much.

Now we'll go to Mr. André for seven minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy André (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Good morning, Mr. and Ms. Bruyeya.

First I want to commend you both for your courage and determination in standing up for veterans' interests in recent years. I have nothing but admiration for you. And you, Ms. Bruyeya, because you were right there alongside Mr. Bruyeya when he was going through everything. I cannot imagine that things were always easy with the injury and the post-traumatic stress disorder. My first question is for you, Ms. Bruyeya.

We talked about post-traumatic stress disorder. Did you feel that you had enough information available to you to give Mr. Bruyeya the support he needed and to better understand what he was going through on a daily basis and during the rehabilitation process? I am talking about information and support from the departments of Veterans Affairs and National Defence. How did all that work? What improvements would you recommend, especially with respect to post-traumatic stress disorder? The problem is fairly common. We have seen that over the course of the committee's work. We have heard about situations where soldiers who had lived through difficult experiences were not the same once they returned home. It is very hard on anyone who is living with an individual who has post-traumatic stress disorder. I would like to hear your thoughts on that.

Mr. Bruyeya, you recommended that veterans make up 30% of all staff at Veterans Affairs Canada. Where does that 30% target come from? What is it based on? You called into question the lump sum payment, and you talked about the lifelong monthly pension. Have you studied the files pretty carefully? Have you examined the budget a bit to determine whether veterans with a disability would receive more money before the charter came into force or after? Do you have any statistics or insight into that?

You also said that Veterans Affairs Canada's head office was too centralized in Charlottetown and should be moved to Ottawa. What kind of problems does that situation create as far as services go? I would like to hear your thoughts on that.

Another thing you said was that senior managers were often the ones making the decisions in veterans' files. I have a health background, and I know that that is often the way things work. It is usually middle managers and senior managers who make certain important decisions. The employees who review the cases have less authority. That is an institutionalized approach.

How could things be done differently, in your opinion?

• (1145)

[English]

Mrs. Carolina Bruyeya: *Je m'excuse.* I needed to confirm what you asked me.

No, I haven't received any information or any education on what the services for families are from VAC. I've never been contacted by VAC. For example, I never knew what types of benefits Sean was entitled to. We found out by trying and asking, but as far as I'm concerned, I don't see any proactive reaching out to families by Veterans Affairs.

What I would like to see...I think DND does have some types of programs where they actually tell the families what the issues are with their husbands—for example, what PTSD is, what they can expect in the way their husbands are going to behave, what types of things they are going to suffer or go through. But I don't think Veterans Affairs has that type of program. I think it would be very helpful for wives and kids to know what happened to their loved ones, what challenges they are going to face, especially because people who go to Veterans Affairs are the ones who are suffering with some type of injury, either psychologically or physically. They are the ones who are suffering. That's why they go to Veterans Affairs.

I am sorry, my first language is Spanish, so sometimes I have problems dealing with English and French with Spanish in my mind.

For example, with PTSD, I really didn't understand what PTSD was, and it has taken me 10 years to understand what Sean goes through and to understand what I can do when he's suffering his symptoms and how I can help him. It would be very good for someone to explain that to the family, when they come back and have these types of psychological injuries. If you will allow me to give a little example—

The Chair: Not too much.

Mrs. Carolina Bruyeya: Okay.

The main issue with PTSD is that people suffering with it can't handle stress very well. The normal stresses of life for us are very tough on them. I remember when we got married. One time Sean lost his keys; he couldn't find his car keys. He was actually crying because he couldn't find his car keys, and I didn't know what to do. I didn't know that this was a symptom of his illness. Now I know that, and now I help him find the keys. For those types of issues it would be very helpful to have someone explain those kinds of things to the family members, and maybe some type of support for family members, too.

In my case, I'm alone with Sean. Sometimes I really need someone to tell, "You know what? My husband is going through these things and I don't know what to do with it." Maybe there could be some type of, I don't know, psychologist or someone to help the family cope with the issues that the family members are going through.

• (1150)

Mr. Sean Bruyeya: I found my car keys, by the way.

As well, for me, my wife is a separate human being, and yet Veterans Affairs doesn't have a separate card for her. We've heard witnesses testify that wives and spouses and family members, if they qualify, should be allowed to deal directly with Veterans Affairs and be provided with a ticket right in; they shouldn't have to go through my benefits. My wife should receive benefits and assistance on her own identification number, her own card, her own programs. She is an individual. She should be respected as such.

To get back to the 30%, that number is used because statistically, in studies of populations—and I'm not an expert on this—when numbers approach too low a concentration, the influence of that population on the culture is minimal. If it approaches 50%, there is too much clashing. So I think 30% is a good number to shoot for, roughly.

First of all, bringing Veterans Affairs or some of its major components to Ottawa would I think assist, because it would allow for an understanding of how Ottawa works: that general principles of oversight, once they're enhanced—for instance, in whistle-blower protection—mean they are under the watchful eye of you and the minister and the oversight agencies, the Auditor General. And we'd all be in one place. It can share the same pool of hiring, so that you get the same quality of people—or higher quality, perhaps from retiring CF members. Liaison with the Canadian Forces would be much easier, because the military gets things done, and we have to have some sort of stronger military link with Veterans Affairs to oversee them.

To get to the question of whether budgets would be more or less after the NVC, it was anticipated that the new Veterans Charter would cost \$1 billion over six years, because of a lot of the lump sum payments that would be paid out as well as the initial start-up for some of these programs. They appear to be somewhat within that budget.

Curiously enough, they anticipated for a lot of their programs a certain amount of money, and as we heard, for instance, with financial benefits, only 1% of eligible veterans are accessing them. However, with the disability award they predicted something around a 17% award, which was going to be a lump sum somewhere between \$35,000 and \$40,000. Ironically, five or six years later, they're right on target.

That raises a very important question that we have to look at. Are the disability awards being managed to keep within budget, or are the disability awards being managed to care for the veterans and meet their needs with a compensation that reflects the degree of disability? I think that question needs to be answered.

In terms of—

The Chair: Be just as brief you can be, Mr. Bruyca.

Mr. Sean Bruyca: Sure.

How to deal with files at VAC...? We've all heard the complaints from veterans and veterans organizations that we have non-medical persons adjudicating over files. This is simple. You start getting some trained, educated people with qualifications that require that whoever is reviewing a file have a rehabilitation background, have case management study, and have a workload such that they can really look at that file and process it quickly, as opposed to making clients wait six to eight weeks.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bruyca.

Now we'll move on to Mr. Stoffer for five minutes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Buenos días, Carolina. It's good to see you.

I'm always amazed. The chairman and I were at a meeting about four years ago. We had some disabled veterans and their spouses at a table in an in camera meeting. It went on for almost four hours and it was one of the most tremendous meetings I'll ever remember.

Everyone was going through concerns similar to those you yourself are, Sean; through PTSD and through various things they couldn't understand. They were once healthy, vibrant military personnel, and a lot of them were broken. If it hadn't been for their spouses, many of them couldn't have been there.

So kudos to you, Carolina, for your steadfastness with Sean and for representing all those wives, husbands, and partners out there who care for their disabled veterans in this regard.

Sean, this chronology of key events is really quite disturbing. I don't know what more to say about it. I think it needs further review. We'll talk about it at another time.

One thing I'd like to have you comment on is the 16 recommendations from the gerontological advisory group, which I believe you aren't part of. Have you had a chance to look at those 16 recommendations, and would you more or less agree with their theme? I notice that some of them more or less mirror yours, so I'd like your comment on them.

Second, Carolina, on the aspect of the family members not receiving the information from DVA, I know from talking to DVA and to DND that an awful lot of information that is there is sent home by the military members, the veterans themselves. I could only assume that in a lot of cases that information doesn't get transferred over to the spouse either because of embarrassment, pride, or whatever the answers are, because there is a tremendous amount of information at DND and DVA.

You're indicating that people aren't contacting you directly. I think it's a great recommendation to make, that DND and DVA people contact you directly. But I can foresee a possible problem there, because the military person may feel a bit offended by the fact that they've gone past them directly to the family. There may be things there, maybe privacy issues, that I'm unaware of. That is something we need to key on.

Sean, I'd like your comment on that as well. You have worked with a lot of disabled veterans. Do they willingly pass the information they receive on to their spouse, or is there some holding back because of some concerns they have?

By the way, I lost my keys once. I didn't cry; I swore up and down big time. It's a pain in the ass to lose your keys, I'll tell you, especially if you're 200 miles away from home and there's nobody there to pick you up.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I thank you both very much for coming out today. I appreciate your testimony.

● (1155)

Mr. Sean Bruyca: Thank you, Mr. Stoffer.

I just want to validate what you said. If it weren't for Carolina, then much of this advocacy work and the support would not be possible. In fact, I think I've grown over the years undoubtedly because of her.

Just to clarify, between the gerontological.... Were you referring to the new Veterans Charter advisory group?

• (1200)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Yes.

Mr. Sean Bruyea: Okay.

The recommendations there are all excellent, by the way. They did great work. I'm really happy that Muriel Westmorland was made chair. I had recommended her to be part of SNAG, and my 13,000 documents show that VAC then took that recommendation and put her in as chair of the NVCAG. Unfortunately, VAC never called me to say, "By the way, thanks for that good idea." I never heard anything from them.

Anyway, she did do the work, and I think that's the important thing here. Of the 16 recommendations, all of them need to be recommended. If you look at them, they actually break down to about 85 recommendations, because there are sub-recommendations to each. As I said, there are an additional 200-some recommendations from the special needs advisory group.

I think it would be unfair to point out any single one that is better than another recommendation. I think the stuff they put in their report should have been considered before the charter was actually passed in Parliament, but now is the opportunity. I know it's going to be a lot of work for you guys, but we didn't do it five years ago; we have to do it now. I think we have to put it all in.

In terms of the family question, about Veterans Affairs passing on literature, I think there are two issues. As you know from watching *Frasier*, maybe losing the material that was supposed to be passed to my wife was subconscious on my part. But to be honest, I haven't seen any material that said "for spouse of Sean Bruyea".

Perhaps, if we're concerned about having the husband feel isolated, singled out, or somehow inadequate—because PTSD has a huge shame issue component with it—the solution is to invite both members in, discuss with them, have an agreement made with Veterans Affairs, and have the suffering veteran agree, with the contract, that Veterans Affairs can deal directly with the spouse. I think that would then make the veteran feel important, because there's one thing about PTSD and the way that Veterans Affairs handles issues: veterans do not feel important; they feel demeaned; they feel as if they are being accused of fraud. The processes are so difficult. They will say, "I served my country. I didn't question or ask anyone to fill out forms when I went overseas and entered battle. Why am I asked, when I made that sacrifice, to fill out this ridiculous number of forms?"

As you've said many times in the past, Mr. Stoffer, if you're a veteran, that's the only qualification you should have: "Here, what can we help you with?"

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bruyea and Mr. Stoffer.

We have a tradition of allowing the witness to answer at whatever length here in the veterans affairs committee. It's different from any other committee.

I was hoping to get two rounds in, but the final questioner will be Mr. Kerr for seven minutes.

Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. It does squeeze our time way down. There's obviously a lot we could be talking about. I do want to say thank you again to both of you for coming in. It's a difficult topic, with difficult areas.

We're not going to even get near touching the sorts of things we could talk about. I agree with those who say a future time, a future issue.

I'm pleased you responded to Mr. Stoffer on the review committee's 16 recommendations. Because we have so much to focus on, we at least want to know that we have a core of things there.

I would like to raise the question of the ombudsman, and then I'm going to share my time with Mr. McColeman.

I was a little concerned about that, and I don't want to get into your personal details so much as that we were kind of exposed to the ombudsman as being very independent. He goes out and does what he wants to do and makes public statements, and so on.

You're raising a different concept on that, and I'd like you to expand on that just a little bit, because we feel that the ombudsman is an important component of a long-term process that works. I know he considers himself often to be quite independent and he's made that point quite clearly, so maybe there's more work to be done. But perhaps you could just expand on that, and then I'll go to Mr. McColeman for a second question.

Mr. Sean Bruyea: Super, and thank you, Mr. Kerr. I'm really encouraged that you guys are willing to not only consider those 16 or 85 recommendations from the new Veterans Charter advisory group, but also look at adding in from the 200 recommendations from SNAG, as well as my 55 recommendations that I've piled on top of you guys tonight.

Mr. Greg Kerr: There are now 55.

Mr. Sean Bruyea: There are now 55.

In terms of the ombudsman, I don't know Mr. Stogran personally. There's always the problem in any organization that one individual may see himself as perhaps independent, as he does, but the functioning of the office severely hampers any independence he can have. His administrative control, his contract hiring, that's all done through Veterans Affairs. Even his web-based administration is all done through Veterans Affairs. My ATIP has to go through Veterans Affairs for that office. So I think those factors have to be considered.

The other one that has to be considered is that when he accepted that office, there were already people who were put in place by Veterans Affairs. These may not be bad people, but, for instance, to give you an idea of how they thought.... The ombudsman's office was already established. We're talking January 2007, a week before the ombudsman was appointed. I called up the ombudsman's office and asked them, "What's the status of the office? I might be doing an article, I'm not sure, but could you please tell me what's going on?" Well, that call was made, but an e-mail was generated at 9:49 in the morning and it was sent to the assistant deputy minister, as well as the media relations officer in Veterans Affairs. Let's get this right: I called the ombudsman's office, and they communicated with at least six other senior managers in Veterans Affairs at 9:49, to say, "Just wanted to give you a call, give you a heads-up that Sean Bruyca contacted Louise Wallis yesterday re the ombudsman."

Within 12 hours, more than 12 senior managers were notified, including both assistant deputy ministers and the deputy minister, that I had contacted the ombudsman's office. This was obviously information that Louise Wallis passed on to the department.

So we have to ask.... Someone who has been placed there by Veterans Affairs may have all the good intentions in the world, but they're culturally tied to Veterans Affairs and not culturally tied to the idea of independent oversight.

Mr. Greg Kerr: Thank you very much.

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): Thank you again for coming in and enlightening us.

There was some discussion during question and answer here about a real breakdown, a real disconnect on the education and communication side of things. Could you expand a bit on that? On this communication challenge, what are your thoughts in terms of recommendations as to making that a healthy connection?

Mr. Sean Bruyca: That's an excellent point, Mr. McColeman.

First of all, we have to show the veterans, in this committee's rewrite of the charter and recommendations, that there are going to be programs and processes in place. Only you can do that in Parliament. Only you can force Veterans Affairs to implement the programs that establish trust and build confidence once again. A lot of broken trust has been generated over the years with Veterans Affairs.

Once that foundation of solid, dependable, trustworthy programs is in place, then we go to the 30% hiring and we start employing veterans in remembrance; we employ them in communications about treatment benefits; we employ them in designing the pamphlets that are sent out.

We have creative, innovative ideas that adapt to the modern world, and not just mirror processes that have been followed for 20 years. These veterans then feel that they are included and they can reach out to their peers.

The OSISS network is a perfect model for that. It's small. We're talking about something much larger, but I think that's the way we

have to start looking: first, the foundation of excellent programs; second, start involving the veterans in determining how that message should be conveyed and encouraging people to come in for help.

• (1205)

Mr. Phil McColeman: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. McColeman.

Mr. Bruyca, do you have any final comments before you depart today? We have a couple of minutes for that, if you would like.

Mr. Sean Bruyca: I just want to really thank the committee for looking at this. I think it's really important that the committee look at the fact that the reason the new Veterans Charter was created was that there had been 10 to 15 years of slightly negligent behaviour, abandoning the veterans. That was well-recognized. When the minister was before the Senate committee, she admitted in her speech that there had been adverse effects on this population of veterans. We were promised that the charter would address all of that. Yet when the charter came, it was more prospective as opposed to being retrospective in the way it dealt with the issues.

There are no intensive programs to help, as we heard from Mr. Zimmerman when he came in to talk to you. The long-term results for people who have been unemployed for a while are not good, as the statistics show. But why doesn't Canada step in, just as we did after World War II? Just as we rethought rehabilitation back then, let's rethink rehabilitation now.

The words "psychosocial rehabilitation" have been bandied about. It mostly applies to, and has been developed for, people with organic brain trauma, with schizophrenia, but it has some good principles that could be adapted. We could have our own definition of psychosocial rehabilitation to include transition from the military and taking people.... I believe that many of these veterans, as they've told me, want to work. They want to contribute, but they need some long-term coaching, some long-term psychosocial rehabilitation.

It's going to cost money, but what better investment can you make? The return is not only in terms of quality of life for the veteran, but also in terms of the taxes they are going to start paying when they become employed. They're going to start paying them back to the very government that invested in them.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bruyca and Mrs. Bruyca. Again, as I mentioned last time, I want to thank you for the great work you do with veterans. More importantly, I know the whole committee is appreciative of your service, Captain. So thank you very much.

[*Applause*]

The Chair: We're going to suspend for a couple of minutes and then go in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

MAIL  POSTE

Canada Post Corporation / Société canadienne des postes

Postage paid

Port payé

Lettermail

Poste-lettre

**1782711
Ottawa**

If undelivered, return COVER ONLY to:
Publishing and Depository Services
Public Works and Government Services Canada
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0S5

*En cas de non-livraison,
retourner cette COUVERTURE SEULEMENT à :*
Les Éditions et Services de dépôt
Travaux publics et Services gouvernementaux Canada
Ottawa (Ontario) K1A 0S5

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

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the *Copyright Act*. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a Committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the *Copyright Act*.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its Committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Additional copies may be obtained from: Publishing and
Depository Services
Public Works and Government Services Canada
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0S5
Telephone: 613-941-5995 or 1-800-635-7943
Fax: 613-954-5779 or 1-800-565-7757
publications@tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca
http://publications.gc.ca

Also available on the Parliament of Canada Web Site at the
following address: <http://www.parl.gc.ca>

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

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

On peut obtenir des copies supplémentaires en écrivant à : Les
Éditions et Services de dépôt
Travaux publics et Services gouvernementaux Canada
Ottawa (Ontario) K1A 0S5
Téléphone : 613-941-5995 ou 1-800-635-7943
Télécopieur : 613-954-5779 ou 1-800-565-7757
publications@tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca
http://publications.gc.ca

Aussi disponible sur le site Web du Parlement du Canada à
l'adresse suivante : <http://www.parl.gc.ca>