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## **Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, May 25, 2010**

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**Chair**

**Mr. David Sweet**



## Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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• (1100)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC)):** Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. This is the fifteenth meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

We have two separate witnesses. We'll have one in camera, and we have Francine Matteau, who we'll be hearing from first.

Madam Sgro, do you have a point that you wanted to make?

**Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.):** Yes. I have missed a couple of meetings. Where are we with the Agent Orange?

**The Chair:** Well, in fact I was just going to go into that.

Because of a motion passed in the House, our meeting this Thursday is cancelled. President Calderon will be speaking in the House at that time. That will push everything back.

Right now at this point, the subjects we have are the consideration and of course the approval of our draft report, and then Bill C-473, and witnesses with that, of course. Then we will have the veterans' use of food banks and that will be taking up the rest of our calendar.

**Hon. Judy Sgro:** So then it's still down as work to be done; we won't get it done now before June, but it will be taken up in the fall.

**The Chair:** It's on the broader list, yes, among other things. I'm certain we'll need to have a business meeting, probably the first meeting when we get back, and we will debate what the priorities will be.

**Hon. Judy Sgro:** Okay. That's fine. Thank you.

**The Chair:** All right.

We will have Madame Matteau give her opening remarks.

I take it that you have some, Madame Matteau. Is that correct? Do you have opening remarks?

[Translation]

**Mrs. Francine Matteau (As an Individual):** Yes.

[English]

**The Chair:** Then we'll go to a rotation. We'll go through a first round and we'll get as far through the second round as we can, so please govern yourselves accordingly as far as splitting your time is concerned. Then we'll have to go to Monsieur Leduc for the second hour.

Madame Matteau, please begin. After you've finished your opening remarks, we'll have a rotation of questions for you.

• (1105)

[Translation]

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** Good morning everyone.

My name is Francine Matteau, and I am the mother of Master Corporal Nicolas Magnan, who was wounded in combat in Kandahar on August 22, 2007. As a result of my son's accident, I realized exactly what happens to the new generation of veterans. I therefore decided to undertake this crusade, out of a desire to ensure that justice is done to all concerned. My testimony will be based on what I know.

Not everything in the new Charter is bad. However, taking away the monthly pension is a serious mistake. The pension was, and remains, the only way to ensure their financial security and well-deserved peace of mind. After many discussions with the management of Veterans Affairs Canada, the facts have confirmed for us that the new Charter was adopted too quickly, without assessing its full consequences. One of those consequences is that it helps to get rid of veterans in the relatively short term. Is that out of a desire to save money? Many indications suggest it is. Once they are released from the Canadian Forces, they no longer receive much assistance from Veterans Affairs Canada.

Our country decided to send our soldiers to war. Of course, we might have expected that there would be more wounded. Canada has to take its responsibilities and look after its veterans when they come back with physical or psychological disabilities, and it must continue to do so until the end of their lives.

In developing its new Charter, Canada took its inspiration from what has been done in two different countries, Great Britain and Australia. Those two countries ultimately reversed their decision following pressure from the military, families and the media. Great Britain now provides a lump sum amount of up to \$855,000, plus a monthly pension. I am unaware of the figures for Australia.

I am not asking for as much as that. I realize that budgets must also be considered. However, the return of the monthly pension is a priority. It is also a question of fairness, of keeping one's word and of showing respect for those who have chosen a military career. When they joined, they were convinced that if they had the misfortune to be injured, their country would be there for them. But that is no longer the case. They feel humiliated, betrayed and rejected by the very people in whom they put their trust, which does not help them to get better physically and psychologically. They feel abandoned by the system.

Now I would like to address the lump sum amount. It is very simple; you do not give a large sum of money to someone who is psychologically unstable. They think about escaping, isolate themselves, abuse alcohol and drugs, go into debt, and when they receive their lump sum payment, they pay off their debts and are left with nothing. Ultimately, the families bear the brunt. They are discouraged. These men and women are human wrecks. During the mission, they are exposed to intense stress, 24 hours a day; they sleep very little and they live through and experience horrors on a daily basis. Nobody emerges undamaged from that kind of experience. Furthermore, in order to receive their lump sum payment, they have to fight tooth and nail when they no longer have the strength to do that, go from appeal to appeal, relive painful events, and all of this generally last for three years, and sometimes more.

That whole process only increases their aggressiveness, frustration and distress. They want to move on, but under these conditions, it is impossible. The maximum lump sum amount is \$269,000 for the maximum benefit—in other words, 100%. Based on the Department's rate scales, many of them arrive at rates of 200% and 300%. So, \$269,000 seems completely inadequate. In the case of my son, his legal counsel arrived at a benefit of 104%, without including post-traumatic stress disorder, for which he already received 25%. My son, Nicolas, is waiting to hear the date of his second appeal. The waiting time is almost three years.

For all these reasons, I want to emphasize the need to bring back the monthly pension. They are deeply scarred by their experiences for the rest of their lives. Some other examples will be provided.

• (1110)

Of course, with the proper follow-up, they are able to function pretty well normally, but the slightest problem or disappointment often takes them right back to square one.

I do hope that you already have, and will hear, from an expert on post-traumatic stress disorder. I am sure he could provide a great deal of valuable information about this very serious issue. It is also important to consider the fact that the older they get, the more these psychological and physical wounds are likely to cause a variety of health problems. At that point, they have the burden of proof.

Let us also talk about the impact on the family. It is not easy to support a spouse suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Just consider the myriad problems they are facing. Many of them also have children, as well as financial problems. How many more tragedies, divorces and suicides will there be? As you know, the third cause of death among military personnel is suicide.

I attended a meeting organized by the Ombudsman, Mr. Pat Strogan, at the Valcartier military base. That evening, I heard stories that completely overwhelmed me. A 40-year-old veteran was sobbing in front of the microphone, saying that he no longer had a cent to his name. That is one tragic story among many others.

I would now like to address the return to civilian life. Yes, they can go back to school and receive 75% of their salary during that period, and even obtain a college diploma. It is not so bad, if you consider there are fewer deductions; so, that is all right. The problem

is that many of them do not have the prerequisites to secure a college level diploma. Will they be able to concentrate enough to study, particularly since they have not been in school for a very long time?

I know one person who was paid to attend a security guard course. In that job, he makes \$15 an hour, or \$27,000 a year, compared to the \$50,000 he was earning as a member of the Canadian Forces.

Those who manage to complete a college diploma will have a salary of between \$32,000 and \$35,000 a year, whereas many of them were earning between \$60,000 and \$70,000 a year as members of the military. How can they keep their homes, pay for their children's education or for their extracurricular activities? That is a substantial loss of income. As the Ombudsman confirmed, many of them will end up living below the poverty line. I am sure you would agree that this is totally unacceptable. Who is responsible?

Another thing concerns me. What type of employees will they be? How many managers will be prepared to tolerate their mood swings and repeated absences because, some days, they just are not able to work? If they lose their jobs, they will have to justify it, but this system is not eternal. I am only describing the reality as it was described to me by the CF members I met with. They become antisocial, they want peace and quiet and cannot accept annoyances of any kind. In fact, that is the reason why many of them withdraw completely from society and live in isolation.

This system is not the slightest bit geared to their needs. How many of them will just give up? How many of them will put an end to their lives? We will surely find more veterans who become homeless people. Let us not forget that they remain very fragile. All these systems are very expensive to administer, not to mention the fact that they generate a great deal of frustration.

This is something that is urgently needed: give them back their monthly pension and let them live their lives as they see fit. I am sure you will agree that they have suffered enough.

I hope I have provided some useful information—that you were probably already aware of, and I hope it will help you understand just how critical it is to restore the monthly pension.

Given all the respect that we owe them, they do not deserve to be treated in this fashion. They served your country, their country. We have a duty to be there for them. Do not think that we are ready to accept that they be shunted aside just because they can no longer give 100%. These are not people who were injured at work or in a traffic accident because they were driving drunk at 150 kilometres an hour; these are individuals with a concern for the safety and security of their country.

• (1115)

The current system clearly shows that they are being penalized for having chosen a military career.

That completes my presentation. I am sure you have questions, and I will answer them based on what I know.

Thank you.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madame Matteau.

We will have a rotation of questions now.

We'll begin with the Liberal Party for seven minutes. Mr. Oliphant.

**Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.):** I just want to check: do you think we'll have two rounds?

**The Chair:** We may be able to make two rounds, depending on how tight we can keep those questions.

**Mr. Robert Oliphant:** If you could give me a signal after four or five minutes, I'll ask Ms. Sgro if she has anything she wants to add so that we both get in.

[*Translation*]

Thank you once again, Ms. Matteau, for your presentation; it was excellent.

[*English*]

I'm going to speak in English because that's easier for me, and you can hear me in French this time.

When we've brought up these cases several times to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, he's very fond of saying—he's said it three times in the House now—that when there's a lump sum payment, there is also monthly income that is given. He says this regularly and he says that we have not given up monthly income support. He doesn't seem to understand that it is a very limited monthly support in the transition fund. So when....

[*Technical Difficulties*]

**The Chair:** Excuse me for a moment. We have a technical problem.

Okay, we should be fine now. Forgive me, Mr. Oliphant. We'll start your time after you've had a chance to regroup.

**Mr. Robert Oliphant:** It seems to me that in my thinking what I'm leaning towards as the best solution is a lump sum payment for adaptation, for renovations of homes, and for expenses that are one-time expenses in nature, and then an ongoing disability pension that isn't just tied to getting back into the workforce, frankly, but is tied to the disability, which is for life.

Are you in agreement with me that there still should be a lump sum payment for renovating a house, or for those things you need to do, and then a forever ongoing monthly pension?

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** There is already a program in place that provides for adjustments to the home, for example. That might include building a ramp or widening doors so that a wheelchair could get through, and that sort of thing. There are also programs under which people who have been injured can obtain prosthetic devices for their shoes. It is also possible to have prostheses made, again at the expense of the Department.

With respect to the current lump sum payment, that payment is provided to people who have to live with their injuries. I agree with you that the amount is not very high. However, it is complex. If we give them twice as much, they will go crazy and spend it all. I really do not know what the best approach is. Right now they receive \$269,000, which is indexed to the cost of living from year to year. I

do not know whether that money could be paid out differently, but if they are given the entire amount when they are still fragile, I wonder what they will do with it. They will remain fragile for the rest of their lives, but they will get stronger over the years. In England, the lump sum amount is very high. I do not know whether their veterans behave the same way ours do. In any case, Valcartier medical staff have confirmed that they are penniless now. They are very very concerned about what will happen to these individuals, because none of them has any money left, or at least not much.

My son made some good investments. Of course, he was 32 years old, as opposed to 23 or 24, when it happened. If you give them \$200,000 when they are 23 or 24 years of age, they have the impression that they have just won the lottery and they lose control. Because they are psychologically very fragile, they isolate themselves, they drink or, in some cases, spend all their money at the casino. They all have their own way of letting off steam, but they all end up with no money.

I do not know exactly what should be done about the lump sum payment, but the idea of giving them one large amount of money concerns me a little. There may be another way of handling this—for example, by paying them a certain amount every five years. I do not know. In any case, a large lump sum payment is certain to cause the same kinds of problems.

But we must not forget the monthly pension. Personally, that is what I would really like to see. The lump sum payment does not resolve any of the issues. Some young people are even going to their psychologist in tears. They do not exactly know my name, but they know that I am Nicolas Magnan's mother and that I have been asking for certain things. They do not know exactly what will come of this. They are grasping at any straw to try and find a way out. They are discouraged. They have no money. It is a living hell for them. It is very sad.

• (1120)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** You have less than two minutes.

**Mr. Robert Oliphant:** I would add that if the lump sum is meant to be invested to give a guaranteed income over a year, it doesn't work. I look at my own RSP portfolio, which took a big hit. It's not big because I had no money. Therefore, if I were depending on it to live and hoping to earn 4% to 5% per annum, it wouldn't exist. So it is not income replacement. It is neither fish nor fowl.

If we have other adaptation processes, that's good, and we need a monthly income that we take the liability for as a country.

**Hon. Judy Sgro:** Thank you so much for coming, and thank you so much for caring about this issue.

Clearly, we're moving forward doing this review, which was always the intent when it was adopted. We knew it was not a perfect document. It was always meant to have a review to look at how we can make it better. The issue of the lump sum payment comes up a lot.

On the issue of re-employment, how did that work for your son when it came to opportunities for him to do something else in the military? Were there any retraining opportunities for him?

[Translation]

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** Well, the process has been somewhat delayed because Nicolas was on parental leave. He returned to work last Monday, on May 17. His wife is from Thailand and she wants to go back and live in Thailand. They are being offered a chance to go back to school. Nicolas has asked to learn Thai so that he can start up his own business there—he wants to learn to read, write and speak the language. He has not yet received an answer.

Very few people have gone back to school, it seems to me. Nicolas was among the first soldiers to be wounded. I am obviously aware of everything that is happening in Quebec, but I have very little information about what is happening elsewhere. I know that injured soldiers from other provinces have also returned. I cannot say what kind of follow-up they have received.

As I said earlier, that is great if they can go back to school, but a college diploma only guarantees you a small income. If they have a family, it simply is not comparable. Like everyone else, they have obligations. They have a house, the value of which reflects their previous income. The same applies to their car. Of course, you can always change that; they can always drive a Volkswagen instead of a Mercedes, but will they also have to sell the house they want to keep? These are the kinds of things that concern me, in terms of their going back to school. Also, I am not sure they would make good employees, being affected by post-traumatic stress disorder. That worries me. They are so moody and are always wanting to be by themselves. Just how do you get them to be part of a group?

Last week, I saw a program on television that some of you may have seen, because I know you have very long work hours. It was broadcast on HiSToRiA TV. It was a program about post-traumatic stress disorder. There were men who had been out of the Canadian Forces for quite a few years. They were still suffering serious after-effects. One of the men went everywhere with a knife in his pocket, which is rather strange. If he went to the movies, he would always have to sit at the back. Another could no longer stand to go to a butcher shop or see a meat counter. He said he had seen enough flesh. It sends shivers up and down your spine.

• (1125)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Matteau.

Mr. André, you have seven minutes.

**Mr. Guy André (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ):** Good morning, Ms. Matteau. I would like to commend you and thank you for being here today. I felt it was very important that you be able to appear. We have heard from quite a few officials, and it is important to now hear from someone who has personal experience dealing with a young soldier who has returned from Afghanistan.

You are making a very strong recommendation with respect to the lump sum amount and the benefit. We agree with you, as do many other people who appeared before the Committee. They said that when a large amount of money is given to young people who are only 22 or 23 years old, they may end up blowing all the money, which means that for the rest of their lives, they have nothing and the family has to support them.

As I understand it, your son has been offered \$100,000.

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** Yes, Nicolas is now up to about \$165,000. He should find out about the date of his appeal any day now. In principle, he should receive the maximum amount, considering his disabilities. They are quite serious. His legs are seriously crippled; he cannot walk. It is all right in a house, but his ankles do not adjust when he is on the ground, because they are pretty well fixed in one position. He has had nine surgeries on his legs and on his heel, and he is constantly in pain. It is difficult for him. As paradoxical as this may seem, he does ride a bike. And that is a good thing, because my two sons are former racing cyclists—they are champions, in fact. His weight is not on his legs and his feet are supported by the pedal. In fact, that is what he would like to do in Thailand. He would like to start a cycling tourism business. He was also thinking of buying some land to grow sugar cane.

**Mr. Guy André:** And right now, he is fighting to be given the maximum amount.

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** Yes, of course. It will soon be three years; he has been waging this battle since August of 2007. The deadlines are never met. They always say that it takes from 6 to 12 weeks for the first contact, but in Nicolas' case, it took 26 weeks before he was able to arrange an initial meeting.

**Mr. Guy André:** I imagine that you are somewhat familiar with the criteria that are used to determine the amounts to be paid out and the lump sum amount. I presume there have been discussions, and that there is no agreement at this time on—

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** No, there is no agreement. Nicolas sustained injuries to both legs. I believe he has 23 or 24 screws in his heel. But by some miracle, he survived: they saved his legs and he is still alive. So, you are right to say that we do not agree, because they are treating his two legs together, which is totally unacceptable, in my opinion. They refuse to consider those injuries separately, to each of his legs, and provide a specific amount for the injuries sustained to one leg and another specific amount for the injuries sustained to the other leg. He has had a bone graft, has a steel rod, and is really suffering the after-effects of the injuries he sustained to both legs, including a loss of balance.

• (1130)

**Mr. Guy André:** You said that he is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** Yes.

**Mr. Guy André:** When did you realize that he was affected by post-traumatic stress?

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** Well, I obviously realized it, because Nicolas convalesced in my own home. I did not want him to go to an institution; I preferred to have him stay with me. At the same time, this gave me an opportunity to be with him when he felt the need. I realized it primarily because of his mood swings and aggressiveness—for example, when he would say he did not want to talk about something or he just wanted to be left alone, and then he would come to see me a half-hour later to talk.

You know, these people are very unstable. It has been almost three years. He was closely followed by a psychologist, but even now, his mood will change suddenly. Just having to look for a set of keys, even though it is not much, can set him off.

**Mr. Guy André:** I would say they are not only unstable, they are unpredictable as well.

**Ms. Francine Matteau:** Yes, completely unpredictable.

**Mr. Guy André:** So, he has been offered a lump sum amount—

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** Yes.

**Mr. Guy André:** —without necessarily considering his state of mind per se.

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** No, not really—so far.

**Mr. Guy André:** Whatever the individual's state of mind, he is given a lump sum amount. As you were saying, post-traumatic stress does not necessarily manifest itself immediately in a returning soldier; it can develop afterwards. When the individual comes back, he is given an amount of money, but no one really knows how he will react or deal with that money.

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** No, exactly. Post-traumatic stress does not necessarily appear immediately. It may appear only several years later, in a specific situation. For example, one man talked about his keys being the trigger: he would think they were the keys to his armoured vehicle. Sounds or smells can also act as triggers. The fact is that these symptoms may only appear several years after the fact.

**Mr. Robert Vincent (Shefford, BQ):** People are always talking about the lump sum payment as being significant, but a lump sum amount of \$269,000 is only granted in unique cases. Let us face the facts: not everyone is deemed to have a 100% disability rate. That means that someone whose disability rate has been set at 10%, 12% or 20% may receive a lump sum amount of \$50,000. If that person cannot be retrained or go back to school and get a college diploma, then he is left to fend for himself and nothing happens; he has no other salary. Can someone like that continue to receive an amount corresponding to 75% of the gross salary on a permanent basis, like others can? I think your son is receiving it because his disability has been set at 100%, or almost.

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** The 100% rate has not yet been recognized in his case, but we have our fingers crossed.

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** It has been almost three years and you have not even got that far. According to what departmental officials told us, this is a very simple process. People do not even have to go to court; they are assessed and given an amount corresponding to 75% of their salary, and then sent for rehabilitation. According to the schedules they provided, everything is done in the same year. In the space of eight or nine months or a year, everything has been resolved and all is well. But the reality is a little different.

I would be interested in hearing your comments on that.

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** Yes, the reality is quite different. Of all my son's friends and acquaintances, none is satisfied with the treatment he has received. They have all gone from one appeal to the next. It is frustrating, and it is difficult for them to be constantly reliving these events. I can tell you that in August, my son will have been going through this for three years, and it is still not resolved. There are others whose situation is even worse. I know of no one who has seen his case resolved quickly—not one. It is all well and good to look at what it says in the book about how things are supposed to work, but the fact is that, in actual practice, that is not at all the way they work.

And I would like to add one more thing. Because my son has more than 10 years of service—he will have 12 or 13 by the time he is fully released—he will be entitled to a monthly pension from the Canadian Forces. It is not much—only about \$1,100 a month, because it is part... I do not know what the exact amount will be.

However, people who have less than 10 years of service receive a pension that corresponds to only part of the full amount. Imagine if he has nothing left of the \$200,000 or \$150,000—it is based on his injuries, and as I said earlier, you have to fight long and hard to obtain the maximum benefit and provide evidence as well. He will no longer have any basic income.

For example, if he ends up having to do what the person I talked about earlier did, and take a security guard course, he will be earning \$25,000 a year. Nicolas was telling me that nowadays, even beginners, or combat soldiers, earn about \$40,000 a year, at the beginning of their career.

• (1135)

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madame Matteau.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** So, when their salary drops to \$25,000, that is a huge loss of income for them.

[English]

**The Chair:** Merci, Madame.

Now we'll go to Mr. Stoffer for five minutes.

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

Madam Matteau, thank you for coming today and supporting your son and other veterans of his age.

You bring up a very good point today, which hasn't been discussed very frequently within our committee, about the types of jobs they receive, even after their training, when they're out of the military. As you were saying, in many cases the benefits and salary may not come even close to what they were making in the military. If you look, for example—

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** Mr. Stoffer, could I ask you to speak slowly, please? Thank you.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** You bring up a very good point regarding the amount of money they could make in the private sector compared to what they were making in the military, along with all the benefits. I look at a captain's wages, for example. They could be anywhere from \$70,000 to \$90,000, I assume. So if that person, like your son, gets retrained and goes into the private sector and makes about \$40,000 a year, that's quite a drop in income. That would also have a mitigating effect on the personal problems they're already experiencing, because they were making a decent salary before and now they're not. I'm just wondering about your advice on this.

We already have a number of people within the military who are getting full pay plus a veteran's pension of some kind, maybe for a slight disability, but they're still serving their country. Many of these people, like your son, have been medically released out of the military. So I'm looking for your advice. Is there something we should be looking at within the military that your son could be retrained for so he could go back into the service? Is there another role in which your son and others could serve their country while still wearing the uniform, but not necessarily a combat role? Would something of that nature appeal to your son? Have you talked to your son about that?

[Translation]

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** In general terms, it might be an appealing idea, although it may not be for my son, because he will be leaving the country to go and live in Thailand.

The comments that have been made in that respect are somewhat contradictory. I have read articles in the newspapers—I follow developments in that area very closely. I do not recall the names, but I read that injured soldiers could be kept in the army and given other jobs. We all know they could perform lots of other office tasks, without having to play a combat role. In another article, however, it said that veterans cannot be kept in the army because that would eventually mean that we would be accepting disabled men as soldiers, which would be contrary to established standards.

It is obvious that these soldiers do not have the necessary characteristics. You all know what the standards are. For example, they have to be able to run a certain number of kilometres with a certain number of books on their back, they have to be able to crawl, and so on. So, it is obvious that these veterans would not meet those standards.

In fact, I talked about this with my son. He told me that the guys were pretending nothing was wrong; they were trying to hang on, of course. Before taking his parental leave, Nicolas worked in the officers' mess at the Citadelle, and he could have continued to work there for a certain period of time.

However, because of the basic rules that apply in the Canadian Forces and the requirements to be met to be accepted as a soldier, slowly but surely they are moved closer to the exit door, because they can no longer fulfill those requirements. They cannot get rid of them for no reason; they are not savages. However, they cannot hire injured soldiers to be part of the Canadian Forces.

They can take certain jobs in the federal government, for example. If they have the prerequisites, they would supposedly have priority for available jobs. However, they cannot be in the Canadian Forces because they do not meet the standards. As I said earlier, someone who is disabled could use the fact that the Canadian Forces agree to keep handicapped soldiers in their ranks to argue that he can work at a computer or do this or that. That would be a problem. And they were saying that it simply is not possible—at least, that is what I read in the newspaper.

•(1140)

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madame Matteau and Mr. Stoffer.

Now on to Mr. Kerr and Mr. Lobb, for seven minutes.

**Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC):** Thank you very much, Madame Matteau, for joining us today.

We're going to share our time. Our time goes quickly, so I'm only going to get to one question.

We've heard a lot of concerns about the lump sum, but I'm a little confused. Your son is still with the Canadian Forces, am I correct?

[Translation]

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** Yes.

[English]

**Mr. Greg Kerr:** So he's getting an income right now from the Canadian Forces.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** Exactly.

[English]

**Mr. Greg Kerr:** And therefore he gets a number of benefits from the Canadian Forces. So as long as he's with the Canadian Forces, he does have medical coverage and those types of things.

Your last comment, if I understood correctly, is suggesting there's a time limit on how long one can stay. Has he been told that he has to leave the armed forces?

[Translation]

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** He has not been told that. Indeed, he was one of the first combat soldiers to be injured. I would just like to remind you that the first cases of this kind do not go back 20 years; they only go back to 2006. It was in 2007 that the first soldiers were injured. So, it has not been very long.

Nicolas put in a request to be released last week. As I was explaining earlier, he would like to go and live in Thailand. First of all, living in Canada is very risky for someone like him, as soon as it starts to snow. He has no balance and his legs are severely crippled. It is impossible for him to go to the market on his own or even do the shopping at the local grocery store. As a result, he has decided to go and live in Thailand. That is his choice, of course.

He would like to start a cycling tourism business there. In the north, there are fabulous mountains and mountain passes for cyclists interested in excursions. So, he has asked to be able to take a course over there to learn to read, write and speak Thai. His wife does speak English. But he has not received a reply yet, so I cannot answer you.

Nicolas will have a basic income, since he has more than 10 years of service. That is why I am so concerned about others with less than 10 years of service, who have been given their full amount. They did the same thing with that money as they did with the lump sum payment.

[English]

**Mr. Greg Kerr:** I appreciate that, and I understand, particularly for the youngest ones, but what I was getting at is that there's a real effort to keep those who are handicapped in the Canadian Forces. I just want to be clear that the option is certainly there, and we should see more of it as time goes on. So it certainly was his choice to move; it's not a matter of the Canadian Forces saying that he had to leave.



I know that Mr. Lobb has a question for you, so thank you.

**Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC):** Thank you, Madame Matteau, and again, thank you to your son Nicolas for his service with the forces.

One of the misconceptions we've heard in this committee on this study of the new Veterans Charter is that our veterans receive a lump sum and then that's it, but that's actually not the case. We've heard many discussions about a pension. I just wondered if you're familiar with the earnings loss benefit and the income that our veterans receive; they receive the lump sum and an earnings loss benefit that is 75% of their income. Are you familiar with that?

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** The programs are not all that easy to understand for people like us who try to find things on the Web, because a lot of pages are blacked out—there is a kind of censorship. Also, soldiers are not very open, because they are always afraid of the system; there is a code of silence and they are always very afraid.

I know that the 75% is there during their training—in other words, during the period when they are back in school. I know about the 75%. I said that earlier: that is fine, because they will have a lot fewer deductions, which means that there will not be such a big difference in income.

The supplement, as you say... for an injury, for example—and there again, I do not know exactly how you set these amounts. I also know someone who is receiving \$780 a month because he has severe post-traumatic stress syndrome. So, he has \$780 a month, and he is the same guy working as a security guard. He will be living with far less income.

It is the loss of income forced on them that I cannot accept. They went overseas and fought for our country, for your country, for their country and, in fact, it is as though they were being penalized for choosing a military career.

All these programs are so complicated that even a lot of soldiers do not understand them all. It is very complicated. They are forever being forced to go back and present additional justifications. What could be more humiliating for them than that?

• (1145)

[*English*]

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** If I may, I have just one follow-up question.

You may be surprised that the earnings loss benefit will go to age 65 in circumstances; even after they've completed their training and are unable to find a job, they would be eligible until age 65. I think that's important to note. The other point, I guess, is that 75% is 75% of whatever you're making. That's just what it is. If it adds up to \$700, I suppose that's what 75% would be.

The other point is that with the suite of programs that Veterans Affairs has put in under the Veterans Charter, that deals with the psychological, with the job retraining and job placement—

**Ms. Francine Matteau:** *Pardon?*

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** I'm sorry. My dad is an auctioneer, so I learned to talk fast at an early age.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**Ms. Francine Matteau:** *Ça va.*

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** I guess the point I'm trying to make is whether you would recognize that there's a value to that as well and that all veterans are eligible for that. All veterans' family members—immediate family members—are eligible for that for life. Would you recognize that there is a value there to make sure they're continually on the road to wellness?

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** I am in favour of the road to wellness. However, in terms of their returning to a normal life, I doubt that they can do that. Post-traumatic stress lasts a lifetime.

When you have disabilities that prevent you from... Please excuse me for always citing the example of my son, but the fact is that I do not know 50 different soldiers and the specific after-effects they are suffering. In the case of my son, he is fine as long as he is walking on a carpet, but as soon as he goes outside, he cannot take more than three steps without wincing in pain.

And you talk about 75% of his income? I wonder what it will take to actually get that 75%. Because I can tell you that, if they want their \$269,000, they really have their work cut out for them and they had better be prepared to make some good arguments. They have excellent legal counsel, but they have to work very hard in order to receive the maximum lump sum benefit.

And you say they are entitled to 75% of their income for the rest of their lives? What will they have to do to be eligible to receive 75% of their income for the rest of their lives?

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madame Matteau. Mr. Lobb's time has run out, and we don't give any latitude to be able to answer the witness.

We only have eleven minutes left, so we'll have the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party, and the Bloc Québécois, for four minutes each. That way we won't eat too far into Mr. Leduc's time.

Madam Sgro, for four minutes.

• (1150)

**Hon. Judy Sgro:** Thank you.

I'm going to provide you with the opportunity to elaborate a bit more, but I first have to say you are a great advocate on behalf of not only your son but many other men and women who are concerned and have come before the committee.

I agree with you. I think the issue is how you live on 75%, if it's \$700 a month. You get a package deal of \$260,000 if you're lucky, and you have a lot of other support programs and so on. But the reality is that you then have to live on \$700 a month, which is 75% of what a young man would have been earning. That would create a whole lot of other problems.

I certainly share some of the concerns—I suspect all of us do—and we are trying to make changes. What kinds of changes would you advocate then?

He's a young man. He lost a lot of years, which is why he partially gets a lump sum. What changes do you think we should be doing? If it's not 75%, what should it be?

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** Indeed, he has lost part of his life and part of the integrity of his person. Many have lost their legs, while others have lost their arms; still others are completely disfigured. What does the future hold for them? This raises serious questions in my mind, because I am sure you can imagine that it is not always easy. They have a whole life ahead of them. For example, they may want to start a family—they are only 22 years old—even though they may not have a spouse right now. And it is important to realize that it may not be easy for them to find a spouse, when they no longer have any legs or are missing an arm. It is fine to feel sympathy, but we are not all like Mother Teresa.

Under this program, the fact that they are single or have a family is not taken into consideration at all. I would like to go back to what was in place previously. I think they were fairly well served by the pensions they received before. They took into account that the people receiving them were single, or had a wife and one, two or three children.

I realize that we cannot ask for the moon. But what I would like them to have is financial security. I have even heard of cases where soldiers' wives have committed suicide because the burden was just too much to bear. We cannot allow this to go on; that is absolutely inconceivable. They do not deserve to be treated in this manner.

It is all well and good to say that they are offered a whole range of programs, but they always have the impression that they have to go and beg for things. Pardon the expression, but I would call this a “welfare plan”. That is how I see it. It is humiliating for them. It makes no sense. In fact, it is so humiliating and so complicated that many of them simply give up.

Right now, we are looking for the ones who are homeless in Montreal and Calgary; we will go back there because some simply give up. Remember that these are not people like you and me; they are extremely fragile emotionally.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** You have 30 seconds.

**Hon. Judy Sgro:** No, it's okay.

**The Chair:** Okay, now on to the Bloc Québécois.

Monsieur Vincent, for four minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Robert Vincent:** Thank you.

I would like to come back to the following issue. When we say that someone has a pension, it is always relative. In the past, my job was to defend people who had been injured in the workplace in Quebec, and the system there is similar to the one that provides pensions to CF members who have been injured or wounded. It is always difficult for them to have their injuries recognized for what they are, or be admitted into a program or something similar.

Reference has often been made to the 75%, but that is not for life. If someone has a 10% or 15% disability, he will be put in a

rehabilitation program, as you say, and will be trained as a security guard. I can tell you that, in Quebec, that is what they do with these people in 90% of cases. They all become security guards, because that is the simplest course to take and the simplest job you can work at and, that way, they get rid of them.

However, once that person is back on the job market and is earning \$20,000, whereas before, he was earning \$40,000, do you think that the Canadian Forces could pay the difference between the earned income he had previously, as a CF member, and his new income? Could the Canadian Forces bridge the gap between the two salaries? What do you think?

• (1155)

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** Well, to begin with, I think it would be very complicated administratively. There again, they would have to provide justification, over and over again. It is humiliating. Imagine what it would be like to administer such a program; it would cost a fortune! It would be extremely costly.

That would be like saying that every time they lost their jobs... These people are unstable. I have been living with my son since he returned to Canada, and sometimes I think to myself that you have to be an angel to put up with him. And yet, he is a really great guy who normally has a wonderful character. However, given his mood swings and his aggressiveness, who would want to put up with him at work?

So, I say: give them back their pensions. Soldiers are not lazy by definition. Yes, they may take two, three or even four years to recover and to realize that they cannot go on that way and have to find something to do. They will be bored doing nothing. And that is when they will realize that they have to find something to do. And, if they are able to earn \$20,000 more a year, that is even better; they will certainly have earned it.

A sharing arrangement, such as what you are suggesting, might be a great solution, but I think it would be very difficult to implement.

**Mr. Guy André:** Thank you, Ms. Matteau, for your testimony today.

One last recommendation was made by a Committee member and I would be interested in hearing your views on this. I have not yet formed my own opinion. The recommendation is that 30% of the staff working for the Veterans Affairs Department, as public servants, would be made up of veterans. What do you think of that recommendation?

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** Are you saying they would be public servants or that they would work for the Canadian Forces?

**Mr. Guy André:** They would work for the Veterans Affairs Department.

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** The answer is no. Why? Well, I read in a newspaper—unfortunately, I did not bring the article with me— that neither the Canadian Forces or Veterans Affairs are able to accept disabled people. And they are disabled. I am not absolutely certain, but I do know that the Canadian Forces could not accept them.

**Mr. Guy André:** Yes, but at the Veterans Affairs Department, they would be doing office work.

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** These are guys... I have come to know some of my sons' friends. If you sit them behind a desk, I can tell you that six months later, they will shoot themselves in the head, because they are active people. You just cannot talk to them about bureaucracy. So, it is difficult.

Others might be very happy, though. Yes, that could be a possibility.

**Mr. Guy André:** It opens doors; these are possibilities.

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** You know, I did not come here just to criticize. I want to find solutions.

If the Veterans Affairs Department agreed to let them do office work—it is true that some like that kind of thing—they would be very happy to do that work for the same salary—in other words, for the same salary they were earning in the Canadian Forces, of course. I think that would be acceptable.

However, will the other ones, who do not agree to do that, be forced to... After all they have given to this country; will they, once again, be forced to do something? In other words, will they be expected to obey orders, as if they were still in the Canadian Forces—to take what they are offered without saying a word, other than “Yes, Sir!”; it is the code of silence.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madame Matteau.

Next we have Mr. Storseth, for four minutes.

**Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Matteau, I want to thank your son for his dedication and sacrifice to our country. I want to thank you and your family for the dedication and sacrifice that you've also made to our country.

I agree with some of what you're saying. These are not individuals who simply need to be retrained because their jobs are no longer functions of society. These are individuals who had expectations and career expectations. Somebody such as your son would have expected to continue to move forward throughout the ranks at a certain general level, and that a certain standard of living would be maintained if they stayed in the forces. There are certainly some changes that need to be made. The charter is a living charter, and that's why we're looking at some of the changes.

I'm hesitant to say there shouldn't be any lump sum. I think there needs to be a blend. Some programs need to be put out, and we need to take a serious look at all of this to find the right solution. I have many veterans in my area who have come back from Afghanistan injured, and at least some initial lump sum is very helpful in getting them started in their lives. But there definitely needs to be another look—whether it's monthly, or who knows.

But there's something I want to address with you, because it's very concerning. You talked about them being rejected by those they trusted, abandoned by the system, and having to fight again and again for their lump sum payments. It is very troubling that we would have men and women coming back from theatres of war after risking their lives for our country, only to feel rejected by the

bureaucracy—that's what we're talking about here—in which they were fighting, in some cases.

I have two questions for you. First, do you have any solutions or ideas for how we can better serve our men and women coming back from a war with the bureaucracy? Are there ways you have seen, in going through the system, that we can streamline the system better?

The second question is a personal one from me on PTSD. Your son is very fortunate that he was diagnosed while still in DND. Those members who aren't diagnosed for five, six, or seven years face a real uphill battle in trying to access even some of the basic entitlements from the Government of Canada. So do you have any suggestions for us or ideas on how we could better serve our veterans as they come over?

• (1200)

[Translation]

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** First of all, as I recall, Nicolas had to go and see a psychologist when he came back from his mission. He had no choice. I believe they were forced to go and see someone, but I cannot guarantee you that this is the case.

Nicolas always refused medication because we are against taking drugs. When he came back, he told me that he had never wanted to take any medication and that he had been followed very closely by a psychologist. He was not against that at all, because he had an excellent psychologist. However, he did tell me that he felt as though it was catching up to him. I knew that was so because I could see the way he was and because I know my son. I knew that, not only was it catching up to him, but that it had already caught up to him before he even left for Thailand.

As regards the lump sum payment, we keep coming back to the same problem. We keep coming back to the fact that, if you give them more money or the infamous lump sum payment, they will end up wasting it. I hesitate to talk about percentages, but I really wonder whether 10% or even 5% of those who received a lump sum payment still have any money. What we are hearing is that there is no more money and that none of them have any left. But when you hear things like that, it is important to take them in stride. I have some life experience, and I know that nuance is important. I would not go so far as to say that 99.9% of them do not have a penny to their name, but I would say that is the case for the majority. And, according to medical staff at Valcartier, not one has any money left now. There may be some soldiers at other bases that are wiser than that, I do not know; but at Valcartier, that is the way it is. At the same time, it would not be correct to say that none of them has any money now, since my son still has some. But it is a difficult question to answer.

What was the other question? Sorry.

[English]

**Mr. Brian Storseth:** It's just on the system itself and whether you have any ideas on how we can better streamline the system to service our veterans when they come home. Is there any one thing that really hit you when your son was going through this that would make it better and easier for our veterans?

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Francine Matteau:** As I see it, there is only one: bring back the monthly pension. That is the top priority. It would not be difficult to do and it is the only way to ensure their security. I keep coming back to the fact that these individuals are fragile, with physical and psychological wounds. Physically, what will they be like 10 years from now?

When you are 60 years old, you often have pains here and there when you get up in the morning, or your knee hurts the following morning. But will they, who have serious injuries to their legs and have had multiple surgeries—and many of them have—still be able to walk at the age of 60 or will they be in a wheelchair?

That is why I say it is all well and good to have all these programs... First of all, have you thought of how they will all be administered? It will be complicated. I am not an accountant, but I know how to count. And it seems to me it will be incredibly complex. But the main thing is that soldiers will forever have to be justifying themselves. Do they deserve that? In your opinion, is it fair that they always have to justify themselves, after all they have

been through? They feel empty inside. These people are human wrecks.

It is awful that they are forced to justify what they are asking for every time a new medical problem arises; they have to go through the same process time and again and provide an explanation over and over again. It is awful to put them through that. In my opinion, they do not deserve that, after what they have been through and what they have given to this country. And we cannot accept that—neither any of you or any citizen of this country, starting with myself.

● (1205)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madame Matteau.

You've already heard from some committee members thanking you for the shared sacrifice your family makes. On behalf of the entire committee, please communicate our best wishes to your son and our gratitude for his service to Canada.

We will suspend for a few moments before we go in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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