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Mr. Greg Kerr

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC)): Thank you, folks. We're very pleased to have the minister here today with us.

We are considering the estimates for the minister's department, and as I understand it, Minister, we'll have some comments and there will certainly be questions. I can imagine there will be a few, and then I understand that you will be leaving later, and your staff will be remaining to provide further information as necessary.

So, Minister Blaney, thank you for joining us. We're under way. We're here pursuant to Standing Order 81(5), supplementary estimates (C) for 2011-2012, referred to the Veterans Affairs committee on Tuesday, February 28; and also pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), main estimates, 2012-2013, votes 1, 5, and 10 under Veterans Affairs, also referred to committee on Tuesday, February 28, 2012.

So we're on the record. That's why we're here.

Welcome, Minister Blaney.

[Translation]

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Thank you for welcoming me. I would like to greet the members of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

First of all, I would like to introduce the two persons joining me: Suzanne Tining, Deputy Minister for Veterans Affairs Canada, and James Gilbert, Assistant Deputy Minister for Policy, Communications and Commemoration.

Mr. Chair, I could give a very short speech and say that, at the end of the day, I need billions of dollars for veterans, but you are entitled to know why. That is why I have prepared a speech that will basically focus on two items, including the funding I need to be able to get through the year, more specifically the Supplementary Estimates (C). I am also going to seek the support of the committee members for next year's base budget, the 2012-2013 budget, which will begin on April 1st.

[English]

Mr. Chair, I want to state clearly from the very beginning that our government is maintaining benefits to veterans, and we're also making great strides in our efforts to ensure that these brave men and women—some are with us today and this makes this meeting even more meaningful—receive the hassle-free services that they asked for and that they deserve.

My department's priority is to provide services and benefits that are tailored to the needs of veterans and their families, while ensuring that all Canadians remember their achievements and sacrifices. The 2012-2013 main estimates provide Veterans Affairs Canada with nearly \$3.6 billion, an increase of \$44.8 million, which is 1.3% when compared to the main estimates of last year, which was 2011-2012.

[Translation]

We are doing everything we can to modernize and to upgrade our activities so as to maintain a balance between providing services to veterans and, of course, to modern-day veterans, whether they served in Korea, the Balkans, Bosnia, and Afghanistan, or during World War II.

[English]

To this end, we work closely with a variety of veterans groups so that they can help us balance our response and actions, as we address the demographic shift within Canada's veteran community.

[Translation]

A few weeks ago in Winnipeg, I announced the cutting red tape initiative as a way to reduce paperwork. This action plan is going to reduce administrative formalities for veterans, making it possible to provide them with the care they deserve. One of the major features of this announcement is the use of clear and plain language.

[English]

As I said during the announcement, much of what is needed to make these improvements simply involves returning to the basics and overhauling how this department works.

With that in mind, we are putting in place updated and more efficient technology to make bureaucratic delays a thing of the past. We are making our programs and policies more relevant, providing greater electronic access to benefits and services, offering professional service from employees who understand the military experience, and creating seamless transition to civilian life from military life, and this is to be done in communicating in plain language.

Last year, Mr. Chair, we processed 41,000 letters, mainly disability benefit applications from veterans. For each of these applications, a letter was written and sent out advising the veteran of a decision. We have heard from the veterans, and we have heard from the Veterans Ombudsman that these letters are too complex, and need to be written in clearer and plainer language.

[*Translation*]

As you know, we are sending out about 41,000 letters every year in response to veterans' disability claims. Over the past few years, we have made improvements to the way those letters are written, but that is not enough. The ombudsman has asked us to take this a step further.

That is why veterans now receive letters that are clearer and organized based on the following criteria: the veteran's request, the answer, the facts, the evidence we have used, the references and the means available to veterans to proceed forward.

● (1540)

[*English*]

We have heard from the veterans and we have acted upon these recommendations.

These letters are easier to read and understand. We are also making direct contact with the many veterans who have recently received them to ask for their feedback. Better training for employees and better technology will ensure that letters are processed faster and meet the accepted standards of plain language.

We have a new brochure to explain the services and benefits to veterans—and not only to veterans. It provides an overview of the department.

We are modernizing the tools our employees are using to help the veterans. The benefit browser allows employees to quickly access information on the programs and services most relevant to the veterans they are serving. We're rolling out a similar online tool that we expect will be available to veterans once we have made it more user friendly.

Veterans can see a difference. In the past year we have reduced the amount of time it takes to deliver decisions to veterans regarding their disability benefits, a fact reflected by the increased funding requested through the supplementary estimates.

[*Translation*]

We have improved the response time in our national call centres. And of course, veterans can now take advantage of the direct deposit option to receive their money more quickly.

We have announced a number of other initiatives. Last year's most important initiative was definitely the improvements to the new veterans charter. That is why I am here for the Supplementary Estimates (C). Actually, the call for these new measures is quite strong. We estimate that, over the next five years, 4,000 veterans are going to benefit from these measures. That is an additional \$189-million investment. As you know, our department has to let the Treasury Board know what our long-term estimates are. We are roughly talking about a \$2-billion investment over the life of the program, meaning the improvements to the new veterans charter.

[*English*]

With these enhancements, we are ensuring that our veterans and Canadian Forces members, especially modern vets, have the right care at the right time for as long as they need it.

In January, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced funding for the helmets to hardhats program.

[*Translation*]

Worth noting is that this program was launched jointly with the unions, the provincial government—the Ontario government, in this case—and with resources from the private sector in order to provide veterans with job opportunities in the construction industry.

In this case, TransCanada agreed to put in funds, with the government. So it is a type of public-private partnership for the benefit of veterans. And I have to say that we have had a great response so far with the program.

[*English*]

Approximately 4,000 Canadian Forces members make the transition to civilian life each year. Over the course of their careers, many have developed highly transferable skills as craftsmen, engineers, and welders—just to name a few. Others have administrative, leadership, project management, or planning experience, all skills that could be put to work at one of Canada's 260,000 construction sector firms.

The uptake on the helmets to hardhats program is good, Mr. Speaker, and we are building on this success to make it wider and to reach out to other parts of the country.

At this point I want to thank the members for the work you did on the commemoration report. I've taken note of your recommendations and I will be replying in the near future. Especially as we are to enter the centennial of the First World War, it is key that we get ready for this big meeting.

Actually, in a much shorter window of opportunity, on April 9 we will mark the 95th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge in Canada and in France. For the second year in a row, over 500 cadets will hold a candlelight ceremony on April 8, and cadets will stand vigil all night at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. They will also participate in the national ceremony the following morning.

More than 5,000 Canadians will join veterans, members' organizations, and 100 members of the Canadian Forces in Vimy on Easter Monday for commemoration, and especially to make a transition for young Canadians to learn about the key role Canada played in this battle and learn more about the stories and sacrifices of Canadians in the First World War. So that's quite inspirational.

One thing that is very good, Mr. Speaker—we also need some additional funding as I come to you—is our community war memorial program and cenotaph monument restoration program. Communities throughout the country are asking for funds to rejuvenate, and build new cenotaphs. I'm sure the members around the table have seen projects nearby.

There's good uptake for this program.

• (1545)

[*Translation*]

Last week, I was in Brighton, Ontario, near the military air base. The government announced a \$50,000 contribution for a construction project there.

[*English*]

This monument was inaugurated in 1927 by Sir Arthur Currie and has not been improved, so I think this is more than welcome.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I just want to reaffirm that I can see that, as parliamentarians, we're all here today to make the lives of our veterans better. That's my very goal as the Minister of Veterans Affairs. I really insist, and I've instructed my officials, that we need to move on with cutting red tape and making our programs easier for veterans to access.

With this, I will be more than happy to take your comments and questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Minister. I understand you have to get away around 4:30. Is that correct?

Hon. Steven Blaney: Yes, I do.

The Chair: I just want to make the members aware that up until that time, questions can be directed to him, but Madam Tining will be staying with the staff to provide detailed answers beyond that as well.

To begin the rounds, we will go around now to the various members of the committee.

I'm going to watch the clock very closely, and we start with Mr. Stoffer, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Minister, and Suzanne and James, thank you very much for coming today. We really appreciate it.

Sir, I'm going to ask you three questions, and you can answer them when I'm done asking the questions.

Number one, can you show me on the estimates where, in the cuts to Ste. Anne's Hospital, the transfer to Quebec, those 1,300 jobs are shown as a loss in terms of departmental staff?

Also, we understand, Mr. Speaker, from previous discussions we've had in this committee and others that an additional 500 jobs may be on the chopping block over a two- to three- to possibly four-year period. Could you tell me exactly where those are in the estimates, if indeed that is going to happen? Could you tell me how many employees DVA has now, and how many employees they will have by the end of 2014-2015? That's question number one.

On question number two, you had talked about eliminating red tape—

Hon. Steven Blaney: I thought those were your three questions.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: You talked about red tape, and you're bang on the money. Every government could look at its department and make sure the red tape is being eliminated, but I've asked you many times about the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. This is the frustrating stumbling block for many veterans. Would you not agree with us that if you really want to eliminate red tape, you would eliminate the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, and put the \$11 million it costs to run that politically appointed board into programs and services for veterans?

Number three is a soft one for you because I was asked it by the individuals from Bomber Command. As you know, there is a ceremony in England regarding Bomber Command. Some veterans who served on Bomber Command wanted to know if, indeed, the government is planning to do a presentation there, and if it is at all possible that the government plans to take a couple of veterans from Bomber Command to reignite and revisit that history in England.

Thank you very much for coming.

The Chair: I was going to say you have about three minutes to answer. I'll give you a warning.

Hon. Steven Blaney: That's good.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Not bad, eh? Two minutes.

Hon. Steven Blaney: I'll try to do the most I can with the time I am given.

First, I would like to address Ste. Anne's Hospital with the honourable member. Actually we are having a good discussion with the Quebec government, but at this point in time there are no agreements in principle, nor any agreements. So at this very moment, I really need the full amount for the current fiscal year, so that we are able to provide first-quality services to our veterans.

As you know, we have a high level of service for our veterans. It's important that we keep on providing those services. In the meantime, I must tell you that, as a minister, it is important for me to move forward with our negotiation with the Quebec government for two reasons. The first is that, as the population is declining, we have had a hard time.... We have a skilled workforce and to make sure that we are providing this workforce with all the challenges it needs, we need to have a....

We close a floor every month, so my first priority is to maintain high-level service to veterans. That's why we are looking for opportunities with the Quebec government, and of course, those employees. They are a great staff. They are skilled personnel. I think they can provide service to the Quebec community. That's why we'll be moving forward, but at this point in time, I need all the money.

You've addressed the red tape issue, and I would like to come back to the tribunal. I think the member will be given the opportunity. I understand that in the near future the chairman of the tribunal will be here.

There are three things I would like to say regarding the tribunal. As you know, this department is processing more than roughly 40,000 requests a year. Most of these requests are accepted at a ratio of, let's say, 3:4. Some of those requests are not accepted by our department, and I find it important for our veterans to have the tools so that they can revisit these decisions. This is exactly what the tribunal is all about, as you're well aware. As of last year, when they would revisit a decision, 50% of those decisions would be rendered in favour of the veterans.

The tribunal is important for veterans, not necessarily for the minister and not for the members. It is important that we have an effective tribunal, and that's why within this tribunal, as you know, there are skilled and competent members who are appointed. They are RCMP veterans. They are military. They are experienced medical personnel. They are people with some background in judicial or other jurisdictions. So it's important that we have an effective tribunal because it is helping our veterans a lot.

There are certainly improvements that can be made, especially to make sure our veterans are not caught in a too-long procedure. One aspect of the tribunal that I think is important is that it has this veterans "colour", and this is something I think our veterans cherish.

Regarding the Bomber Command, that's a good point. That's part of the centennial of the First...even though it's the Second World War. That's part of commemoration, and do we have the capacity as a government to invest abroad? I have received requests from Gallipoli, of the First World War. There was a human sacrifice made in Passchendaele in the First World War, and there is a museum at a house in Passchendaele, which I'm told is mostly about Canadian history. Those people are coming to see us, Canada, as a government, and asking if we can provide them with some funding. Now the Bomber Command is for the Olympics in London. It relates to these great

•(1550)

[Translation]

air force pilots who carried out bombings in Germany, during World War II.

So it is actually important to come up with mechanisms. We now have mechanisms to encourage commemoration here in Canada, through activities or cenotaphs. But we don't have the tools to respond internationally. We obviously still have to focus on commemorating activities in our country, but there are some activities that we can't really afford to miss. I definitely want to look into that over the next few months.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Between the two of you, we're allowed to go a little over, but we're going to have to push along now. Thank you.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Sorry. Thank you.

The Chair: We will now hear from Ms. Adams for five minutes.

Ms. Eve Adams (Mississauga—Brampton South, CPC): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you for attending today, along with department officials. The opposition parties over the last number of weeks have been indicating that some dramatic decreases are coming to veterans when in fact, Minister, you've been quite clear that all benefits to veterans will be maintained.

I'm looking at the main estimates that you've provided to our committee today. Page 343 indicates the amount of money you are seeking for disability awards and allowances, and just below that, the amount that you are seeking for the earnings loss and supplementary retirement benefits. This year over last year, you are seeking \$60 million additionally for disability awards and allowances to our veterans, and an additional almost \$41 million for the earning loss and supplementary retirement benefits.

Minister, would you be so kind as to provide an explanation for the increased amount of money that we will be providing to Canada's veterans.

•(1555)

Hon. Steven Blaney: I would like to thank the parliamentary secretary.

Yes, our programs are working. As you know, this department provides needs-based programs. Once we set up a program it is quasi-statutory, which the members well know means that if one person needs it, one person will have it. If 100 people need it, 100 will get it; if 10,000 need it, then we'll go up to 10,000.

What we've noticed, especially in the supplementary estimates, is 70% of the additional funding that is requested to finish the current year in a financially, fiscally sound manner is coming from enhancements to the new Veterans Charter. There's a stronger uptake than expected from modern veterans on the improvements that have been made to the new Veterans Charter. That's why you have this \$60 million for the disability award and allowances. The \$40 million, which is the earning loss benefits, is a key component, and not only of the new Veterans Charter. I may note that we are investing \$10 million in technology at this point in time to streamline our processes and better the services to veterans.

There are also some other investments. We have \$1.5 million for the community war memorial program, because at the time the estimates were done, the program was not fully operational.

Ms. Eve Adams: Minister, our Conservative government brought in the new Veterans Charter and then you announced the enhancements to the new Veterans Charter that recognized the needs of our modern veterans. Clearly, the \$100 million in additional moneys that will flow to our veterans is meaningful to those individuals. I would like to thank you for that. The dedication and the fact that the money is flowing to our veterans is really the most important component here.

You've also recently announced the helmets to hardhats program, and you are seeking money in these estimates. Could you provide some explanation as to how the ministry is helping our current veterans transition to civilian life through that program?

Hon. Steven Blaney: Sure. In the main estimates this year, we are asking for an increase of 1.3%. Helmets to hardhats is a joint partnership. TransCanada is putting \$1 million into this program in the next five years. The Government of Alberta is putting in, if I may use the expression, some money. We are putting \$150,000 into this program.

Basically, it is a website that will be available for veterans so they can offer their services. What is especially interesting is that we have been working with unions, and unions are not only providing the web service for the website, but they are providing the

[Translation]

the process to recognize equivalences. For example, if a veteran was a tank operator or a mechanic, he would have a very good chance of being employed in construction in the public sector of civilian society.

Unions, with their technical and training schools, have made a commitment to recognize equivalences. That's important for our military members. By the time they leave military life, they have gained a whole set of skills, but they are not able to get that experience recognized in civilian society. That is a problem and that is one of the objectives of the helmets to hardhats program.

That is why we are going beyond just providing the web interface for finding jobs, as interesting as that might be. There is also the service and the training. For example, if a veteran has military training as a heavy-duty or armoured vehicle operator and he wants to develop the skills for civilian society, union representatives will provide him with the necessary training to be certified and to be able to qualify for the various classifications in construction jobs.

Entrepreneurs in my riding have called me and said that they wanted to hire veterans. Other provinces have also approached me because they would like to take part in the helmets to hardhats program. For the time being, we are having a bit of trouble meeting the demand given the keen interest in the program.

• (1600)

[English]

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

We'll now go to Mr. Casey for five minutes.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Minister, your mantra since the election has been that veterans' benefits will be maintained. You've been very careful to never say the budget of Veterans Affairs Canada will be maintained. That is also the case for all who are issued your talking points. We also know, and I think you've indicated at the outset, that 90% of the budget of Veterans Affairs is paid through to veterans. So I want to focus on the 10% that you don't want to talk about, or that you haven't been talking about.

We know from Mr. Hillier's testimony that even before we get into the deficit reduction action plan, the transformation agenda will see 500 fewer jobs. Now, you have a cohort of employees within your department called pay and benefits officers, and the pay and benefits officers have basically been told that their jobs will soon cease to exist, and they're welcome to apply for 500 jobs that will be opening up in Miramichi.

So my question for you is this. Given the dramatic turmoil that your department is going to undergo at an employee level over the next few years, with the loss of at least 500 jobs, will you ensure that your pay and benefits officers remain in place to be able to help your employees through this difficult time?

Hon. Steven Blaney: I thank the member for Charlottetown, and I can understand where his question is coming from.

I want to be very clear with the member that Charlottetown is playing a key role in the department. They are the headquarters. Ms..., if I may say, is living in Charlottetown, so actually I am surrounded by islanders now.

Mr. Sean Casey: Madame Tining lives in Mr. MacAulay's riding of Cardigan, but I know she works in Charlottetown, and we see her often. Sorry, sir, go ahead.

Hon. Steven Blaney: I won't ask her who she voted for in the last election. That being said, of course—

Mr. Sean Casey: Careful, we don't want to start this discussion.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Of course, as you mentioned, 90% of the Veterans Affairs budget is invested in payments to veterans and their families, and 10% is used to run the department.

It's correct to say that within the next five years there are changes. The population in traditional veterans is decreasing. The Canadian Forces are releasing roughly 5,000 regular force members. We have some reservists, and of course, we are serving the entire veterans' community. So one key element is that we are needs-based, and we go according to the uptake.

This being said, realistically we can expect that some needs will diminish and that we will adjust our workforce in proportion. That being said, within the next five years, a good number of civil servants are eligible to retire, and we expect that most of our workforce adjustment will be made up of those members who will be eligible to retire, and some, as you mentioned, adjustment, because at the end of the day this department is aimed at helping and serving veterans. That's where we are at, and that's what all the employees are dedicated to, so I find it reasonable that we make sure we adjust our structure to meet the needs of veterans, which as you know are still quite high.

Mr. Sean Casey: Since your government took power, there's been a virtual explosion in the size of the civil service in this country. There has been a disproportionate increase in the civil service in Ottawa as compared to the regions.

This is my question for you, sir. As you downsize your workforce, will you be sensitive to the regions and not focus on the regions, as opposed to the capital, for the downsizing?

[Translation]

Hon. Steven Blaney: Mr. Casey, I come from Lévis. Lévis is the heart of the Desjardins Group. That is the largest employer in my region. As a guy from that region, I have always been concerned about whether Desjardins was going to move to Montreal. That was one of my concerns. That is why the first thing I said when I went to Charlottetown was that the headquarters of Veterans Affairs Canada was there to stay. That is very clear in my mind.

As you know, the people from Prince Edward Island have outstanding qualities and, as a result, they are providing veterans with great services. Is there a need to continue to improve? Yes. Will changes be made? Yes.

Having said that, most of the Veterans Affairs Canada workforce—we are talking about almost one-third of veterans who are the manpower of Veterans Affairs Canada—is in Charlottetown, and the adjustments will be proportionate to the territory as a whole. So yes, absolutely. It is important.

I also feel that Veterans Affairs Canada is a model for the federal public service; it shows that a department can provide services even when its head office is decentralized.

Is there a need to continue to improve and to adapt to new needs? Yes. That is what we are going to do; that is the challenge that we are going to face.

Mr. Casey, you are obviously aware that, over the past decades, Veterans Affairs Canada has had an aging clientele; we now have the modern-day veterans who come back sometimes with mental health issues and physical problems, and that is why we are undergoing changes, we have to adapt to those needs.

● (1605)

[English]

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

We'll now go to Mr. Harris for five minutes.

Mr. Richard Harris (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, minister, and thank you for your participation.

I wanted to say something, first of all, on Mr. Casey's last question. He asked whether, as you downsize, you will be sensitive to your employees. I think the question should be, and rightly so, whether as you downsize you are going to be, and were you, sensitive to the veterans and the programs and services they receive. After all, that's the most important part of your department. That's the most important mandate. It is to provide the programs and services veterans need, when they need them.

I see, Minister, in the estimates, that in fact, there is about a \$45 million net increase in funding for veterans. The majority of that funding—I think it was a net \$85 million in additional funding—was for grants and disability awards, earnings, losses, etc. I want to commend you, because cutting a department budget the size of yours is something that is a big challenge, particularly when your department is providing such needed and essential services for our veterans, who so richly deserve the help they need.

I have been in business and have gone through a couple of recessions and have survived them. I know that when I had to cut, I had a vision in front of me, which was that whatever I cut in my business, it could not hurt my relationships with my customers.

Minister, when you and your department started this process of downsizing, as you're required to do in times like these, did you have that mandate and that vision? Did you create the mandate for yourselves that whatever you do, it cannot result in decreased services and programs for the veterans, the people we need to help? Was that your prime driver as you looked for ways to cut your budget?

Hon. Steven Blaney: Absolutely, Mr. Harris. I'll answer you with two examples. I was in New Brunswick last summer, and I went into one of those joint veterans-Canadian Forces centres. We were having a discussion. At one point, the member for the Canadian Forces said that when he meets with a veteran and needs to get the veteran's data, he has to sign one form—it's a privacy sheet. He said that he found it a little bit complicated.

I asked him why. He said it's that we have five forms. Is it necessary for a veteran to fill out five forms once he has agreed to give the department access? I think that we should work towards one form, and I can tell you that we're working on that. This is an example of what we call a hassle-free service, cutting and streamlining our processes. There were good reasons for each of those forms, but at the end of the day, we have five forms for a veteran to access a veteran's data. This is four too many.

That's an example. If we take the veterans and dependants program—and I mentioned this week how the uptake for this program is big from our veterans—another example would be that every veteran is asked to submit every bill for every type of activity, and these have to be processed by some civil servant. We have some civil servants doing paperwork, and we have veterans who are asked to provide red tape.

I think these are areas that we could explore, that we should explore, and that we have to explore. Will it result in a more efficient service so that maybe some employees will be released from doing some tedious work? I hope so. I think that's the goal.

To get back, I think there are two goals in this department. Remembrance is important, Mr. Harris. I think this department is accomplishing that well. We got good feedback for our campaign—the "I am a Veteran" campaign. It's important for every veteran—and especially wounded veterans—to know of the recognition that society is giving them. It's part of the healing process, and that's why we need to emphasize, as much as possible, what we call "remembrance"—meeting the needs of modern veterans.

● (1610)

The Chair: Thank you very much. Your time has expired, Mr. Harris.

We now go to Ms. Mathysen.

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, Ms. Tining, and Mr. Gilbert for being here.

I have a number of questions. I'm trying to understand the machinations of all these cuts. Veterans Affairs Canada estimates that the personnel expenditures will decrease to about \$270 million in 2012-13, down from \$275 million in 2011-12.

Given that the main estimates don't take into account the deficit reduction plan we heard so much about, how is this \$5 million decrease in personnel cost explained? Could you explain that for me?

Hon. Steven Blaney: I'm glad you raised the question, because I think we've dispelled all the rumours. If we look at the actual number, there's an increase of \$220 million over the last five years, on average. We started in 2007 with a total budget of \$3.4 billion, and now we're up to \$3.66 billion as we end the current fiscal year.

Every year, there has been a significant increase. The discrepancy in the number is due to some Treasury Board-imposed method of calculation, but I will frankly tell you that it's virtual. I think this is clearly understood. As of today, I'm coming here in front of you and asking for more money than we asked for last year. It's an increase of 1.3%. This is how I would set it up. Does that answer your question?

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Yes.

You say you've asked for an increase of 1.3%, but you've been asked to cut your department from between 5% to 10%. Have you arrived at the percentage you will cut? I'd like to know what that is in dollar amounts, and I'd also like to know what it means to your department? What's the impact?

Because we keep talking about the delivery of benefits to veterans, but it takes people, human beings, to do that. You need the expertise. We were in Halifax and we saw some of those experts. They do a remarkable job and they put in long hours. If they're not there, how on earth will the benefits that you sing so highly of be delivered?

• (1615)

Hon. Steven Blaney: I thank you for your constructive comments on the officials working at the department. I think it's important to stress that they are giving their hearts and souls to this cause, because when you enter Veterans Affairs you really enter into serving the veterans. I think it's a great job opportunity, because it has a mission in it.

This being said, of course, I cannot comment on the upcoming budget. But I can tell you one thing, which is that all the measures that have been suggested to streamline our processes are coming from within the department. So it's those people working at the department who are saying, for example, with regard to the veterans independence program, how come we are asking our veterans to present this amount of information? Yes, we are moving forward and the officials are our best source of recommendations to implement and improve our service to veterans.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: In Halifax we heard from a Dr. Heather McKinnon, and she's a former medical officer. She served in the regular and reserve forces, and she's now in private practice and she works for the Royal United Services Institute of Nova Scotia. She was very clear that modern veterans do not receive the same level of

treatment and care as their predecessors have received. They compete in the general public for doctors and medical assistance, and if they're in a situation where they need long-term care, they have to go to provincial institutions; and those facilities are not equipped and they don't have the expertise.

I can tell you, Minister, I've been in those private, for-profit, or provincial institutions, and there are veterans there who are desperate because the culture is not conducive to their experience. The care doesn't meet their needs if they have post-traumatic stress syndrome, and they feel very much cut off from the kind of care that their predecessors had.

My question to you, Minister, is that I understand the mandate is just for World War II and Korean vets, but given the service, and the courage and dedication of modern day vets, should they not receive the same level of care and consideration as their predecessors?

Hon. Steven Blaney: I would answer, yes. Why do I say yes? The member will acknowledge that at the end of the Second World War the provincial health system was not what we have today, and that's why I'm willing to transfer the very last hospital that is still operated by the federal government, which is Hôpital Sainte-Anne, for the very same reason.

What I can assure the member is that every member who has an injury related to service will be provided with the additional medical services that the provincial won't provide.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Long-term care, though, Minister—

Hon. Steven Blaney: Including long-term care, yes.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: —in my riding the Parkwood Hospital is a long-term care facility and we're losing those beds; and once they're gone, they're never coming back. The point is that modern vets deserve the same as previous vets—

The Chair: I'm sorry, I'm going to have to cut you off. We're way over the time.

Hon. Steven Blaney: I would just say that if it's an injury related to military service, whether he's a traditional or modern vet, he will be provided with a community bed.

Thank you.

The Chair: Now we go to Mr. Lobb for five minutes.

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Before I start, I'd just like to recognize some of the impressive veterans who we have in attendance today and thank them for coming. I think it's really great when we have veterans coming to our committee and the interest they have.

Thank you for your service and I think you recognize that this is not a partisan committee. We're all working together to benefit all the veterans from coast to coast. So thank you for coming.

I'll start, Minister, with my first question. In the upcoming weeks we're going to have the Veterans Ombudsman as well the Veterans Review and Appeal Board.

The Veterans Ombudsman put out a report at the end of the year basically outlining some of the issues and difficulties with the letters veterans receive after their application has been processed. It was quite detailed. I think it was about 28 pages and there were some recommendations in there.

Can you provide us with some of the improvements the department has undertaken just to give an idea to the people at home what the department's done so that veterans have a better understanding of the outcomes of their letters?

• (1620)

Hon. Steven Blaney: Yes, absolutely.

I want to thank the member. I find it quite a privilege to be with the Veterans Affairs committee, but also to be with veterans. Some have travelled long distances to be here.

Yes, we will make sure the members are provided with some letter examples as well. Basically, the ombudsman told us that typically veterans were receiving a three-page letter, but there was not really a beginning, a middle, and an end, so it was really getting difficult for the veteran to understand what the decision was. So what we did was provide reasons for the decision.

The first thing is, what is the claim of the veteran? Sometimes it's not that easy to understand what the claim of the veteran is, because the veteran will express some challenges he's facing, but sometimes it's not that clear in regard to understanding what is the claim, the actual claim of the veteran. That's the first thing. Once we've identified the claim, what he wants to know is: "Do I get it or do I not get it? Do you recognize it?" That's the decision. The claim and the decision: one paragraph. So the veteran knows.

Whatever the decision is, the veteran needs to know what we used to make this decision. It's the key evidence. What did we base it on? Our officials have tables of disabilities, references, and guidebooks, so what did they refer to? The veterans have the right to know what was used to make the decision. Then, what is the reason that this decision was provided? As well, if the member is not happy with the decision, what can he do? He can call the office. There's eventually a tribunal, or if he wants to get a better understanding...

What I want to stress is that by making this relatively simple change, I think it's a change of... What I realize is that sometimes with a veteran, it's not because he's not happy with the decision. It's because he doesn't understand why this decision was made and because he has the feeling that the department or the officials have not understood what the reasoning was behind his claim. That's why it gets so important.

Actually, I think this will reduce the number of decisions that are asked to be revisited. This will reduce the level of frustration amongst the veterans community, which has been observed in some cases where they don't understand why those decisions are rendered.

Mr. Ben Lobb: I agree. I think as well, the fact is that they have a right to know why they were rejected, and also, that the letter has where they can appeal, that the bureau of appeal is out there to them

as well. If everything is working and this is improving, then hopefully you'll be coming back to us in the supplementals asking for more money because the veterans are receiving the benefits they're entitled to and that they've earned through their service.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Yes.

Mr. Ben Lobb: There's one other piece I wanted to talk about. I've been a member of this committee for over three years. We've heard from all groups, far and wide, about the earnings loss benefit, okay? This was one of the key pieces in the enhancements we made to the charter last year.

In this year, this future budgetary year, we're nearly doubling what is estimated for the earnings loss benefit. I would assume that has to do with the enhancements, plus, there are more veterans actually accessing the benefits that are available. Can you comment on that? I think the number I see is going from \$44 million to \$84 million. So obviously the word is getting out to veterans that these benefits are available, and the people on the ground doing the job are getting them connected with the department.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Yes, Member Lobb. The uptake is really strong on the enhancements and on the new programs. Actually, it overshadows the decline we are observing, because as of today, there are funding decreases of \$73 million. In some areas, mostly regarding the traditional veterans, we are investing less than we had expected regarding the allowances that are awarded to traditional veterans, because that population is decreasing.

As you can see in those numbers, even though for the last two years there has been a decline of 40,000 in traditional veterans, our investments and our budget, our overall budget, are increasing. There was also the Agent Orange issue, but as you can see, this year the Agent Orange is not there anymore, because we've addressed this issue and we are increasing our investments for veterans.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Now I understand we go to Mr. Lizon, for five minutes.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I would like to ask you a question. Could you give us some information on the benefits navigator? Not long ago you announced a new initiative, the benefits navigator, that is designed to improve services delivered to our veterans. As you are aware, this committee is currently conducting a study on the delivery of services for veterans, and transitioning Canadian Forces personnel to civilian life. Could you explain how the benefits navigator will improve clients' access and make information about programs and services available to veterans?

Hon. Steven Blaney: Very briefly, this is actually a user-friendly tool where, regarding your profile and your style, you click and it puts emphasis on the program to which you are entitled and the function of what....

But I will invite James, who has been closely involved in the procedure, to give some more explanation.

Just so you know, this tool is available for our employees to enable them. Eventually as we make it more user-friendly and readily accessible, we will make it available to the veterans' community as well.

Mr. James Gilbert (Assistant Deputy Minister, Policy, Communications and Commemoration, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, Minister.

Thank you for the question.

I've been proud to be working on the benefits navigator-benefits browser project. It has galvanized a lot of staff and people are excited with the products, and about how it's going to make their work easier to serve veterans.

It's from Mr. Blaney's leadership in terms of creating a hassle-free environment and cutting red tape that this benefits navigator-benefits browser puts the veterans first so one can see what type of veteran they are. Are you a modern-day veteran, where did you serve? Right away, for the staff there is a suite of benefits that are available, so they don't have to go through various different web pages, and different manuals to get it. They have a veteran in front of them, they can ask a few questions of that veteran, and right away that suite of services and benefits to which that veteran may be eligible is at their fingertips.

We tested it with one district and then we rolled it out across the country. Our front-line service staff are feeling empowered that they have a good tool, which can help them serve the veterans so that the veterans are well aware of the benefits and services they're entitled to.

It's been a great project to work on.

Hon. Steven Blaney: The comments I got from some employees, especially for new employees, is that it's very useful because it gives them a broad overview of the programs available and they can then drill in.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: To continue along this line, I understand this is available now to the employees. Are you planning or working on a web-based program that will actually be available for clients, so that the clients who are computer literate can go to check what they're entitled to and browse the website and get knowledge that way?

Hon. Steven Blaney: Yes, absolutely. As we are implementing it to the employees, I would be willing in the next fiscal year to implement this to the veterans' community.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Minister, another question I have—we spoke about this yesterday during the debate—is about cutting red tape. As I mentioned, I hear from veterans in my riding and many of my colleagues hear from veterans in their ridings about cutting red tape and simplifying procedures. Can you give us some examples of how the new procedures are working to make applications more

user-friendly and clearer for the veterans, especially at a later age because traditional veterans are in their mid-eighties? I think the average age is now 88 years in Canada.

Hon. Steven Blaney: For our traditional veterans, but now there are many more younger veterans entering into our community that is served by Veterans Affairs. In terms of initiatives, one initiative is using plain language. It is important to communicate with the veterans in plain language, so we expect that this will make for a better understanding.

In other areas I think the veterans independence program is a very good program, but we intend to move forward. I think we need to make this program more simple, more user-friendly for veterans, so I am exploring ways in which we could make the veterans independence program.... This program is helping disabled veterans. It is aimed at disabled veterans to help them, whether with

• (1630)

[Translation]

domestic chores, such as cutting the grass, washing windows or housekeeping.

At the moment, veterans have to provide invoices and send them to Charlottetown. The people in Charlottetown look at the invoices, add them all up and send them back. Is there a way to simplify that? That is what we are looking into. Right now, there are some issues with travel. Given all those issues, is there a way to simplify our procedures? We should do something to make things easier for veterans and to simplify the administrative management process so as to cut the red tape and to ultimately provide services to veterans, since that is the objective.

That is the direction we are heading in and it includes: the veterans independence program; clearer and plainer language in correspondence; and simplifying the forms, as I said—for example, confidentiality forms, among others, are redundant. It is all about reducing the administrative burden.

[English]

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

Mr. Sean Casey: Mr. Chairman, I have a point of order. The parliamentary secretary, in her question, indicated that the new Veterans Charter was passed by a Conservative government, which is factually incorrect. It was passed on May 13, 2005 by the Paul Martin government. I just wanted to make sure that this was corrected or clarified.

Thank you.

The Chair: It's not a point of order, but you got the point on the record.

Ms. Eve Adams: Pardon me, Mr. Chair, simply because I've been named....

The Chair: You're going to have to be quick, because we're really short on time.

Ms. Eve Adams: They were actually enhancements to the new Veterans Charter. These improvements to the earnings loss benefit and the disability awards are actually a result of those enhancements. That was announced last November, I believe.

The Chair: Thank you very much. If you want to continue this, it can take place outside the room when we're all through.

As I say thank you, I want to point out that we have a very brief time period for dealing with our next witness, so I want to make sure that we leave it. We need 10 minutes at the end to vote, actually, on the motions themselves.

Thank you very much for joining us today and answering questions. We look forward to probably seeing you again back at committee on other issues. Thank you for being here.

[Translation]

Hon. Steven Blaney: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: We will suspend.

- _____ (Pause) _____
-
- (1635)

The Chair: Thank you, folks.

We are under real time pressure. I just want to point that out. We have to vote on these motions during the last 10 minutes. We're running just a little late. If it seems as though I'm pushing, Mr. Larlee....

By the way, welcome. It's nice to have you here. Ms. Rowell, it's nice to have you here.

What I will do is indicate that I may want to shorten the answers. We're going to try the round with everybody involved this time so that we don't leave anybody out. But we're going to try to go for a four-minute round. We won't even make that. I'm just giving everybody notice right now.

If we're all ready to go, first we'll hear, for a few minutes, if we could, from Mr. Larlee. Welcome.

He is from the Veterans Review and Appeal Board.

Please proceed.

Mr. John D. Larlee (Chair, Veterans Review and Appeal Board): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and good afternoon, honourable committee members.

I am pleased to be here today to talk to you about the board's main estimates for 2012-13 and about how we are serving Canada's veterans.

With me is Karen Rowell, our director of corporate operations, who has been with the board since its creation in 1995.

The board fulfills the government's commitment to providing veterans, and members of the Canadian Forces and the RCMP, with a generous and independent appeal process for disability benefits decisions made by Veterans Affairs Canada. I can assure you that the

board is dedicated to serving veterans and their families respectfully, efficiently, and effectively.

The vast majority of our budget is spent on conducting hearings for veterans in almost 30 locations across the country. These hearings deal with the most complex and challenging cases, since the straightforward ones are approved by the department. The reality is that many veterans are satisfied at the departmental level and never bring their decisions forward to the board.

Let me turn, for a moment, to how our hearing process works.

The board's hearings are non-adversarial, which means that no one is arguing against the veterans. Veterans are represented at no cost by lawyers from the Bureau of Pensions Advocates or service officers from the Royal Canadian Legion.

The review hearing is the first level of redress at the board. It is the veteran's first and only opportunity to appear before decision-makers, with witnesses, and to testify about his or her disability and its relationship to service. He or she can also bring forward new information and present arguments in support of his or her case. By the end of this fiscal year, 3,600 applicants will have had review hearings.

If the veteran remains dissatisfied, he or she can request an appeal hearing. Through a representative, he or she, again, can submit new information and make further arguments in support of the case.

By the end of this fiscal year, 1,000 veterans will have had appeal hearings. Thanks to the opportunity these hearings provide, many applicants are successful in obtaining a better outcome at the board. In 2010-11, half received increased benefits due to a review decision, while a further one-third received increased benefits on appeal.

Mr. Chair, the board plays a vital role in ensuring that Canada's veterans receive the benefits they so rightly deserve, and we are committed to making ongoing program improvements to better serve them. Today the board processes review applications 20% faster than it did five years ago. Our progress is even more significant at appeal, with a 50% reduction in processing times. We have a manageable workload and are getting decisions to veterans sooner.

- (1640)

[Translation]

The board's priority is to make decisions that are fair and well reasoned in a timely fashion. In order to do so, we make sure that the veterans' applications are heard by professional and independent mediators. We have an excellent group of members who bring a wide range of professional experience to their work.

[English]

Board members qualify through a selection process that is based on merit and recognizes the value of military, medical, policing, and legal experience. In fact, our two most recently appointed members are Canadian Forces and RCMP veterans.

All new members undergo a rigorous 12-week training program before hearing cases. They also receive ongoing professional development and support from knowledgeable staff. As chairman, I have established performance assessments for members to give them regular feedback and opportunities to enhance their skills. I am committed to finding more ways to strengthen our program in the next fiscal year. We will remain dedicated to managing our costs effectively and providing a fair and effective appeal program for veterans and their families.

We are conducting a process redesign to find ways to cut red tape and make the appeal process faster and easier. We are continuing to make the protection of veterans' personal information a priority, and will look for opportunities to further strengthen our privacy practices.

We are focusing on plain language in our decisions and our communications. We are improving our website, and will publish noteworthy decisions to increase transparency and help veterans who may come before us in the future.

We are continuing to educate our members and staff about military and RCMP culture, and the challenges faced by disabled veterans and their families. We continue to expand our outreach to build stronger relationships with stakeholders and act on their feedback.

• (1645)

[Translation]

Thank you for giving me the opportunity today to talk about the board's commitment to serve Canada's veterans.

[English]

Mr. Chairman, I'm prepared to answer any questions the members may have.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Larlee, for those comments.

We'll go to the NDP for a four-minute round, shared by Ms. Mathysen and Ms. Papillon.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want the committee to be aware of my notice of motion for the next meeting. It is essentially that in the opinion of the committee, Rob Anders, MP for Calgary West, be removed from the Veterans Affairs committee. I'll be prepared to speak to that at the next meeting.

Thank you.

The Chair: We have the notice, and of course, we will not deal with it until the business section of next meeting, which gives you the 48-hours' notice. That's fine.

Ms. Papillon.

[Translation]

Ms. Annick Papillon (Québec, NDP): Thank you very much.

My question is for the Department of Veterans Affairs. I would like to go back to what happened a few weeks ago.

During Veterans' Week, we set up the scientific advisory committee on veterans' health, with the first issue being exposure to depleted uranium. Last December, when the committee was created, five people were selected and we were even able to see their CVs.

However, we have since not received much information about the committee, and I would like to know more.

First, I would like to know what the mandate of the committee is. Second, I would like to know whether the minister is making a commitment to table the committee report in the House, when it ends in June 2013. I would then like to have more information about the committee's meetings and about whether veterans can suggest witnesses to be heard during the meetings of the scientific advisory committee on veterans health. Similarly, I would like to know whether some documents might be reviewed in order to make sure that they are not documents where conclusions have already been reached. Finally, I would also like to know the costs incurred since the advisory committee was set up, as well as the committee's budget assessment.

Since many veterans are relying on this committee, could you provide me with answers to be able to reassure them?

Ms. Suzanne Tining (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you very much for asking this question. Let me give you an update.

The scientific committee was set up a few months ago. There have already been two meetings, one at which the minister has clearly laid out his expectations of the committee.

As to your second point, you wanted to know whether veterans will be able to make their opinions known. I think that is what you meant.

Ms. Annick Papillon: Will they be able to come and give a presentation?

Ms. Suzanne Tining: That's right.

I think the minister announced yesterday that a website was created and he invited veterans with presentations and opinions for the committee to make them known over the website. The appropriate steps will be taken afterwards, depending on what the veterans submit.

The idea is that the scientific committee was set up quickly. You have seen how renowned the members are for their training and medical experience. They have already started their work, the first project being depleted uranium. There is some openness and a mechanism was created for veterans to be able to contribute and make their experiences and opinions known.

In terms of the budget, I am going to ask James to give you an idea, because I don't have the numbers for the committee's budget off the top of my head.

[*English*]

Mr. James Gilbert: On the budget for this fiscal year, there were two meetings. There were travel and other expenses considered—so it was a relatively small amount of money for this fiscal year.

On the research side, we want to set the budget based on the research agenda of the committee—what they are doing, what the work plan is, and what is required to ensure that the committee has the resources it needs. We're working very closely with the chair of the committee to ensure that he has the budget he needs to get the work done.

The Chair: Thank you very much. The time goes quickly.

Mr. Storseth.

• (1650)

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and my thanks to everybody for coming.

I would like to follow up on that, Ms. Tining, as some background for those at home and for our veterans. There have been reports in the past on depleted uranium and the department didn't previously recognize this factor, so the committee that the minister has established is a significant step forward. I thank the minister for taking those steps, and I thank the department and yourselves for the leadership you have shown in helping facilitate this. It is a good thing that we have the necessary budget. This is a new project, so we'll continue to monitor it.

I should like to thank Ms. Tining. My riding is from Cold Lake to Edmonton, where a lot of my veterans access their services. There is a significant amount of travel. I brought this up with a number of department officials over the last year—the issue of mileage reimbursements, and Google Maps, and the problems it was creating. This has been taken care of. I have been critical in the past, and I wanted to thank you very much for that.

I want to follow up with a question on the VIP program. I'd like you to elaborate not only on the supplementary estimates, but also on how they're going to be used to give our veterans easier access to the VIP program and to help them get reimbursed more quickly.

Ms. Suzanne Tining: Thank you for recognizing that some things are improving in the department. We have a very dedicated workforce, and frankly, as the minister said earlier, the transformation and the improvements that we need to bring to the department stem from suggestions from our own staff, our front-line staff, who want to give the best service to the veterans. We need to update the tools they have to do that.

On the VIP program, we have in the last year made some improvements in—the minister would say “red tape”—the level of documentation that the veterans have to provide in order for us to reimburse the costs. Before that, there were numerous approvals that they had to go through one year after the other. We have streamlined that process. Once you are in the program, unless something changes dramatically in your life, you don't need to reapply.

We have given our front-line staff more authority. We have reduced the number of re-authorizations required. We have introduced direct deposit, which has been with us for decades, but which was not available to veterans. Over 50,000 of our veterans have decided to do this—it reduces the paperwork for the department and puts the money in the veterans' accounts faster.

All of this streamlining of operations is, first and foremost, to accelerate the flow of benefits to the veterans, but it is also to equip our own staff with the tools they need in order to improve service to the veterans. The VIP program is a good example of some of the improvements we've made over the last year.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Thank you.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds, if you like.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Oh, it's not often that you give me an extra—

The Chair: Time's up.

I was just kidding. Go ahead.

Mr. Brian Storseth: Okay, that's a very important aspect of it. The last brief question I will ask you is in regard to the loss benefit, as Mr. Lobb mentioned, and many of these other programs.

Can you reassure us that the actual benefits to veterans are quasi-statutory, and will be there regardless of whatever our budget shows?

Ms. Suzanne Tining: The veterans' benefits, the programs and services, are quasi-statutory. That's a complicated term that means basically once a year we have to go through the Treasury Board to get approval for our forecast. Because of the nature of the quasi-statutory, once you are eligible—and that's in the regulation and in the legislation—you get the benefit. The government budgetary process is the mechanism by which the department gets the additional money, if the forecasts are exceeded in one program or other.

Whether you have 10,000 veterans or 50,000 veterans who qualify in a given year, the money is there and the budgetary process allows the department to get that extra money. The department cannot say, sorry, we don't have enough money. The money is there.

Now what you are voting on is our best estimate of what we will need for 2012-13. Should our forecasts not materialize to exactly the same amounts, there are the supplementary estimates by which we go to get the extra money.

I want to reassure the members of the committee, and the veterans, that the budget is never, never in the way of getting the benefits to the veterans once they qualify.

•(1655)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Tining.

Now we go to Mr. Casey for four minutes.

Mr. Sean Casey: To follow up to your last question, do you mean to say that when you go to the Treasury Board they're not allowed to say no?

Ms. Suzanne Tining: What I'm saying—

Mr. Sean Casey: Because quasi-statutory is different from statutory.

Ms. Suzanne Tining: Yes. Statutory would mean that the Parliament would have approved the program through legislation or regulation. Quasi-statutory means that every year we have to go through a Treasury Board approval process whereby we will provide our forecasts and they will be approved. That's what we are doing here in the main estimates.

Mr. Sean Casey: So when you go to Treasury Board and say this number of people qualified under the regulations for these benefits and please give us the money, they're not allowed to say no.

Is that what you're saying?

Ms. Suzanne Tining: When we go to the Treasury Board, we ask for an amount of money for each program.

Mr. Sean Casey: Right.

Ms. Suzanne Tining: That's based on our best forecasts of the number of veterans who will be using these programs and the amounts of money we are expecting them to get. It's a forecast, and we have very good forecasts. As a matter of fact, over the last five years our forecasts have been less than 2% off the actual dollars spent at the end of the year.

What I'm saying is that, through the budgetary process, we have the main estimates and then we have the supplementary estimates. At the beginning of the year, based on our best forecasts, we are seeking the amount you have in front of you. In three months or four months from now, if we find we have more people applying and qualifying for these programs and therefore we will need additional money, we will go through supplementary estimates to seek these additional monies.

Mr. Sean Casey: You're seeking the additional money and it's automatic. They have to say yes.

My point is that there's a difference between statutory and quasi-statutory. If they were statutory, they would have to say yes. If they're quasi-statutory, they have the right to say no. They probably won't—it would be political suicide—but they have the legal right to say no.

Ms. Suzanne Tining: I'm not a lawyer, so I will not try to answer a lawyer.

What I would say is that it's in the legislation and the regulation that once you qualify for a benefit, the money will be there. In that sense, it's not optional.

Mr. Sean Casey: Madam Tining, you were here when the supplementary (B) estimates were presented, when I asked the minister whether he would consider an alternate employment for the employees being downsized. You will recall that he dodged the

question. I asked the same question of the President of the Treasury Board, and he seemed to be open to the idea. What I pitched at that time—I know you've seen it from the premier of the province—was an early-intervention, disability-management role for the employees who are being phased out.

My question for you is, have there been discussions between Minister Clement, or his department and your department, in keeping with his indication that it's something he would be prepared to look at?

Ms. Suzanne Tining: My answer to this question will be that you are well aware of what departments have been asked to do in the deficit reduction action plan. I would tell you that we have very qualified manpower, as you very well know, in Charlottetown and across the country, who have skills that can be used for the benefit of the department, and that they are used now. Through very careful human resource management, we are going to take advantage of the skills that are there for the benefit of the department serving veterans.

That's not to say that there won't be any interdepartmental discussions following budgetary decisions that could offer some opportunities for an expansion of the use of skill sets in different departments. We will have to see what government decisions are made through the budget. I would say that we will be very open to looking into how we can, in the federal family and in other departments, determine what opportunities might exist to use the resources and skills that we have.

•(1700)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Tining.

Now we'll go to Ms. Adams for four minutes.

Ms. Eve Adams: Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Tining, our prime focus here, as committee members, is to ensure that our veterans receive the services and the benefits to which they're entitled. Can you walk me through, from the veterans' perspective, what improvements they would see if they were to put in an application for the first time now, under the new cutting-red-tape initiative for our veterans?

Ms. Suzanne Tining: The first thing they will see on the website, even before sending in their applications, is a very clear view of what benefits are available to them, depending on if they are Canadian Forces members, traditional war veterans, or merchant navy. That's the first window.

Then, we have simplified the application process, and we are working on the re-engineering of what we do at the departmental level once we receive the application. So we have a simplified application process, and decisions are made faster.

On disability benefits, for example, we have reduced by one-third the time it takes to get a decision. The veteran will not see it, but we are a department that is very dependent on paper because we deal with military records, health records, libraries and archives, and DND. We have started to digitize the information so that all of our employees have it online at the same time. Since August, we have digitized over 1.2 million documents. That reduces the time our employees need in order to make a decision.

So from a veteran's perspective, simpler, faster, and more clearly articulated decisions. That, in a nutshell, would be what the veterans would see.

Ms. Eve Adams: Ms. Tining, how do you extend the benefit of the doubt to the veteran?

Ms. Suzanne Tining: The benefit of the doubt is enshrined in legislation, which is—unless there is any contradictory evidence—that the benefit of the doubt will be in favour of the veteran.

Ms. Eve Adams: Okay. Then once they are through the process at Veterans Affairs, if veterans feel as though they haven't received the decision that they deserve, they can then appeal to this arm's-length body, VRAB, which is set up completely separate from the department. It's fully arm's length. Basically, we have folks serving on that committee who have medical backgrounds, some have military backgrounds, and a number of different backgrounds. Could you please explain to me what the process looks like for the veteran, and how the benefit of the doubt is extended to the veteran once they've gone through VRAB?

Mr. John D. Larlee: Well, at the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, it's correct that we are arm's length. We report to the House of Commons through the minister, and we are a quasi-judicial tribunal.

We are there to serve the veterans. And the veterans, if they are not satisfied with the decision they receive at the department, have the opportunity to only be dissatisfied and be eligible to make an application to come before our board. Now, that does not mean they may not have been in receipt of some benefits from the department. They could very well have received some benefits. But all they need to do is be dissatisfied in the sense that they did not receive all the benefits they requested. They therefore can come to our board for a review hearing.

That review hearing, of course, is heard by two members. On the principle of benefit of the doubt, the benefit of doubt applies in every case. Even if two members cannot agree on granting the request that's made by the veteran, the decision most favourable to the veteran is the decision of the panel. That's in the legislation.

Now, with respect to benefit of the doubt, it's a legal principle—
• (1705)

Ms. Eve Adams: So you don't need a majority of the panel to agree. As long as there's one dissenting voice, whichever voice, it results in the best benefit for the veteran.

Mr. John D. Larlee: Yes; at review, where there's a two-member panel, that's correct.

The benefit of the doubt is a legal principle. It's been in effect for many years. It's a legal concept that's been discussed with lawyers, but it's embedded in the legislation. We have it in section 39 of our Veterans Review and Appeal Board Act.

If I can take a few moments, I can go through all the elements of it. I can also give you some examples, which I think, for the benefit of new members—

Ms. Eve Adams: The chair always cuts us off.

The Chair: Well, we're quite a bit over the time.

I'd suggest that we would like to get that in writing, if you do get a chance to detail it.

I know you were concerned you weren't going to get a question today, so welcome to the rounds.

Mr. John D. Larlee: Most certainly, I can provide that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Stoffer, for four minutes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Madame Tining, you are very careful. You said that veterans, "if" they qualify, get benefits.

Here's a list of four names of people who did not qualify: Sarah Atwood, 90 years old, denied a bed at Camp Hill; Ted Shiner, 90 years old, denied VIP service; David Kurts, 87, two years fighting for various benefits, denied benefits; and Art Humphreys, before he died at 87, denied a lift for his home.

Those are four veterans of World War II and Korea who were denied benefits. They didn't qualify. There are literally thousands of veterans out there who do not qualify for benefits.

So to say that you're going to streamline the process and give them an answer quicker, in most veterans' ears, when they hear that, they're going to hear the answer "No" quicker than the other thing.

When I bring up cases to the minister in this regard, that they get a serious review by the minister, just like Steve Dorman's case in the Annapolis Valley did.

My question for Mr. Larlee is the following. Harold Leduc, one of your board members, said very clearly that in tracking favourable decisions, the board began measuring the number of times panel members were involved in decisions that came down on the side of former soldiers.

It says here:

The slicing and dicing of those statistics had far-reaching implications and is one of the tools board chair John Larlee and his deputy used to lean on members perceived as overly-generous, says long-standing member Harold Leduc.

He's a veteran and he serves on the veterans review board. These are pretty serious accusations he's made publicly, twice, in the media.

My question to you is, quite clearly, sir, is he true? Did you or any members of your board lean on people like Mr. Leduc in terms of his overgenerous decisions when it came to veterans' appeals? Or is Mr. Leduc wrong?

Mr. John D. Larlee: Mr. Chairman, I'd first of all like to state that I'm not prepared to speak to individual cases at the board, or matters that deal with individuals' privacy.

I'd like to say to Mr. Stoffer that at the board, and across the board, one of the basic tenets in an independent administrative tribunal is that he who hears, decides. That is something on which our members are given detailed training, as soon as they arrive at the board to receive their extensive training program. We also conduct applications of training in the law to make sure that we maintain consistency throughout this country with respect to our granting of decisions. Therefore, in order to achieve that, we have our extensive initial training program for all members when they arrive, as well as continuing training. As well, we conduct performance assessments and performance reviews on a yearly basis, where all aspects of the cases are reviewed and looked at.

Colleagues on the board, who are all independent professionals, benefit from the fact that we have people with military and police backgrounds on the board. They can discuss with their colleagues the very things that veterans feel are very important to them, being their culture and how they wish to be treated. We at the board maintain that we want to provide veterans with a very effective, efficient, and fair hearing—and that's what we do. We conduct hearings, and all our members are very professional and conduct them in that manner.

• (1710)

The Chair: We're over the four minutes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: That's fine.

The Chair: I understand we're going to Mr. Strahl.

Welcome to the committee today. You have four minutes.

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I come from the riding of Chilliwack—Fraser Canyon, which has a very large and active veterans community. A lot of them did their basic training at CFB Chilliwack and served on the base there. Once you've been to Chilliwack it keeps calling you home, so a lot of them came after their retirement to settle in Chilliwack.

I want to talk specifically about the community war memorials program. I see that there's an additional \$1.5 million set aside for that. I'm wondering if you can share with the committee the number of memorials that were renovated or built in the past year, and talk about funding and how that will continue to flow. Maybe if you have time, just talk about the decision-making process for choosing them. I'm sure it's an oversubscribed program.

Ms. Suzanne Tining: Go ahead, James.

Mr. James Gilbert: Thank you for that.

The community war memorials program is a large part of our remembrance programming and is very important to communities. So for that program, in terms of the decision-making, the application goes in, and Canada Remembers staff across the country work with the organizations that are putting forward applications to make it an easier process for them going forward. Because of the sensitivity of a lot of these projects moving forward, we want to ease the pain of the bureaucracy as they're dealing with that.

The committee will have a look at that. There are clear criteria for what fits and what doesn't fit. Generally, if it fits the criteria, is within the amount, and the matched funds are there, the committee will make a recommendation. Then, depending on the amount, it is approved by me or Minister Blaney. Then Minister Blaney contacts the recipients, thanking them for their important contributions to remembrance.

The program is one of the tools we have to keep the remembrance of soldiers and veterans alive.

Mr. Mark Strahl: How many projects did you work on last year, in terms of renovations or new memorials? Do you have that information?

Mr. James Gilbert: I have it to provide it to you. I just don't have it handy at my fingertips right now. I'll get it to you, if not by the end of the meeting, then shortly.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Okay. Great.

Mr. James Gilbert: Oh, wait one second.

Ms. Suzanne Tining: I do have it.

Mr. Mark Strahl: That's fantastic.

Ms. Suzanne Tining: So far this fiscal year 2011-2012, from April until now, we have 143 projects that have been approved in that program.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Do I have some more time?

The Chair: Believe it or not, you're very efficient. You have another minute.

Mr. Mark Strahl: My question is for the Veterans Review and Appeal Board folks.

I know the main estimates show a decrease in funding, and I'm just wondering if you can explain how, even though there is a decrease there, you can continue to provide the support that our veterans need.

Mr. John D. Larlee: The decrease in the part of the main estimates with respect to VRAB deals with the statutory benefits that we have no control over. There is an adjustment with respect to those figures for the coming year. It has nothing to do with the amount that we use for our spending in our programs.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Excellent. Thank you.

The Chair: I wasn't ready for that.

Mr. Harris, for four minutes, please.

Mr. Richard Harris: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Tining, while Mr. Casey seemed to take some issue with statutory or quasi-statutory in regard to your requesting more money, the fact is that because the services and programs to the veterans are so important, when you go to the Treasury Board—of course, you have to rationalize your ask—because it's a special category, the money is given. Is that correct?

• (1715)

Ms. Suzanne Tining: That's correct.

Mr. Richard Harris: That's the important part of it. That you do get the money and deliver the services.

Mr. Larlee, Mr. Stoffer doesn't seem to like the Veterans Review and Appeals Board. As a matter of fact, earlier when the minister was here, he suggested that the minister do away with the veterans review or put that \$11 million somewhere else.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Hear, hear!

The Chair: Order.

Mr. Richard Harris: I'm really concerned about that attitude, because what other avenue of appeal do the veterans have if they were not approved in the first go-round? Where would they be able to go, if not, to appeal their case somewhere? I don't know if the numbers are correct, but for somewhere around 50% of those who don't pass the first muster and go to review board, the turndowns are actually reversed.

Is that correct?

Mr. John D. Larlee: Yes. When the members or the veterans who we serve come before the board at review, which is the first level following a decision from the department that it is not accepted, the veteran has the opportunity to come before us and is provided with representation at the review level—free representation that is—by the Bureau of Pension Advocates or a service officer from the Royal Canadian Legion.

In the last fiscal year, approximately 50% of those veterans coming before us at review have been successful in having increased benefits.

Mr. Richard Harris: I think that most people looking at the way the system is set up would argue that we just could not function without a means of appeal for the veterans who had not made the first request successfully.

They need to have some place to go.

Mr. John D. Larlee: In addition, if I may add, if the veteran is not satisfied following his review hearing, he or she has the opportunity to then take it on further to the next level, and is again provided with legal assistance at no cost on appeal. We presently, in this fiscal year, have an approximate 30% further success rate in addition.

Mr. Richard Harris: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris.

Given the time, we'll probably cut the discussion off there, because we do have some votes we have to proceed with.

Ms. Eve Adams: A motion?

The Chair: I do— Pardon me?

Ms. Eve Adams: Nothing.

The Chair: I do have to say that I want to appreciate—some of you had to travel distances—you coming today and participating with us. As always, if there are questions from the members, we'll pass them along to you if they come through in writing. Thank you, all, and we're pleased that the minister and his staff came. We want to thank them as well.

We're going to suspend for a minute or two. You're certainly allowed to stay, but if you want to leave, we'll give you a minute or so to do that. We're going to proceed with the votes.

Thank you very much.

- _____ (Pause) _____
-
- (1720)

The Chair: Members, please take your seats. We have to resume the votes.

As you know, we have to consider both the supplementary and the main estimates. I will read it, so it's on the record. We're voting on the supplementary estimates. Pursuant to Standing Order 81(5), the supplementary estimates (C), 2011-2012, Veterans Affairs, were deemed referred to the Standing Committee on February 28, as I said earlier. It's on vote 5c, which is in the amount of \$37,537,000.

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Department

Vote 5c—Contributions.....\$37,537,000

(Vote 5c agreed to on division)

The Chair: The vote is carried. I will note that it wasn't totally unanimous, but it was carried fairly strongly.

Shall I report the supplementary estimates to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed to on division.

The Chair: That is agreed to on division. Thank you very much.

We will now vote on the main estimates. Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4) the main estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2013, Votes 1, 5, and 10 under Veterans Affairs were deemed referred to the standing committee on February 28, 2012. Vote 1 is in the amount of \$882,760,567.

An hon. member: We would like a recorded division.

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Department – Veterans Affairs

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$882,760,567

(Vote 1 agreed to: yeas 7; nays 4)

The Chair: Is there a possibility it will be the same vote on the next two votes? Do you still want a recorded vote?

Ms. Eve Adams: We are happy to apply the vote.

The Chair: All right.

Vote 5—Grants and contributions.....\$2,644,593,000

(Vote 5 agreed to: yeas 7; nays 4)

Veterans Review and Appeal Board

Vote 10—Program expenditures.....\$9,932,780

(Vote 10 agreed to: yeas 7; nays 4)

The Chair: On the division as applied, all votes have carried.

Shall I report the main estimates to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: That was overwhelming enthusiasm. Thanks for the joy and enthusiasm.

That takes care of today's business.

There are a couple of points I would like to make before we go, just as an update on where we are if I can find my many notes.

First I should point out there is no meeting on the 29th. That is budget day. We are trying to get our folks from the States back on the 27th, which would be the conference call. It looks as though there is interest, but we haven't had a final confirmation. We'd still like to get them there, so I point that out.

The RCMP, which would have been today, is being moved to the April 3 slot.

There was a question about whether we would be televised for the ombudsman. I have to report that they are allowed two. They are already committed to two other committees, so we don't have an option. I just want to report that.

What else did I have to do? Was it to wish everybody a merry Christmas? No, that's not it.

We will deal with the notices of motion. Hopefully we can deal with those quickly, because we don't want to go into the ombudsman's time.

Sorry, was that for next week?

● (1725)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Who's coming in on Thursday?

The Chair: It is the ombudsman.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Oh, is that right?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Is it both of them or just the one coming? Remember, we had asked if—

The Chair: It's just the Veterans Ombudsman on Thursday, with some staff to answer questions.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Okay. I see.

The Chair: Is there anything further to bring up that I've overlooked in my failing years? No?

Thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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