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**Chair**

**Mr. Greg Kerr**



## Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Thursday, May 10, 2012

• (1530)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC)):** Okay, folks, we're back in session. The first hour being public, we're continuing our study of transformation initiatives at Veterans Affairs Canada.

We're very pleased to have two representatives. I think one, at least, has been through the mill and this process before.

I'd like to welcome Krista Locke, regional director, and Colleen Soltermann, director of outreach, consultation, and engagement. I was going to ask about the engagement part, but I'll leave that to you folks to explain.

You understand the process. You've been through it. We look forward to your opening comments for about ten minutes. I understand that you're going to split your time. Then we go into the question period. We have an hour today for this, so we'll try to keep it on track.

Welcome. It's good to have you here. Please proceed.

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann (Director, Outreach, Consultation and Engagement, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon.

My name is Colleen Soltermann. I'm the director of outreach, consultation, and engagement at Veterans Affairs Canada. Here with me today, as the chair indicated, is my colleague Krista Locke, who is the regional director general of the Atlantic region. We welcome this opportunity to be with you today.

[Translation]

We are here today to discuss VAC's commitment to enhance outreach, consultation and engagement with veterans' organizations and other stakeholders in keeping with the department's transformation commitments.

[English]

Strengthening outreach and consultation is an integral part of our ability to meet the evolving needs and expectations of veterans and their families, and that is what we are doing. As part of this commitment, we have created a dedicated team that has a mandate to strengthen and coordinate our departmental approach to outreach and consultation.

We are working directly with our colleagues in the field, such as Krista Locke, to identify best practices so that we implement an effective and consistent approach across the country. At the same

time, we are building stronger relationships and are broadening our reach with external partners.

Today I'm going to speak to you about how we are supporting VAC's transformation initiatives through consultation with veterans organizations; increased outreach to Canadian Forces members and modern-day veterans and their families; leveraging of new technology, including social media; and public opinion research and analysis. Finally, Krista will speak to you about the outreach and consultation our department does at the local level.

At the national level, the department is engaging national veterans organizations, including traditional and emerging organizations, as well as the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces.

We communicate regularly as part of an ongoing dialogue with representatives of individual veterans organizations and other stakeholders to keep them up to date on VAC initiatives, events, and announcements. This communication includes a combination of bilateral and multilateral meetings, emails, and teleconferences.

We know that it is important to also engage veterans and their families on matters that are important to them, from a local perspective, in the communities where they live. We accomplish this through various activities in the field, including consultation with local committees.

• (1535)

[Translation]

My colleague, Ms. Locke, will speak to you about the outreach and consultation that our department is doing at the local level.

[English]

As VAC changes to meet the evolving needs of our veterans and their families, we are also expanding our outreach efforts. Working in close collaboration with the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces, VAC is continuing to deliver information on programs and services directly to serving members, veterans, and their families.

Over the last year, with the support of the chief, military personnel, VAC held 26 information briefings at 20 different Canadian Forces locations. We directly reached more than 6,000 CF members, veterans, and their families in regard to the benefits and services available to them.

[Translation]

These briefings were a key component of our joint outreach initiatives with DND, and we continue to work together to identify shared priorities and joint outreach opportunities, as part of the second phase of this targeted outreach to the military.

[English]

Ongoing participation at CF professional development days, CF SCAN seminars—second career assistance network seminars—unit briefings, and a VAC presence at many family days, to name a few, will continue. And we'll be enhancing them.

With this approach, we hope to improve awareness of the services and benefits available and to ensure that they are well understood by Canadian Forces members, veterans, and their families. We want them to know what they are entitled to from VAC and that we are cutting red tape to make it easier for them to access our benefits and services.

Ladies and gentlemen, at this point I've given you a broad overview of how we are consulting with veterans organizations across the country. I've also talked about our increased outreach to CF members and modern-day veterans.

We're also making great strides in our outreach to veterans through new technology, which I'd like to discuss with you now.

VAC continues to be very successful in using social media tools to engage and communicate with Canadians. A strong presence has been established on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. These tools have primarily focused on remembrance. However, to better promote VAC services and benefits, a Twitter account was introduced. We issue daily tweets on updates and news concerning the department, and we have attracted 1,800 followers so far.

We've also launched a departmental mobile application that features information on services, benefits, and remembrance. And our website, veterans.gc.ca, is now more mobile-friendly, as more and more people use smart phones.

We expanded our traditional use of television advertising by adding an online advertising component during Veterans' Week, and target print advertisements where appropriate. For example, we had advertisements running in regional newspapers around Canadian Forces bases across the country between November 2011 and January 2012. The ads targeted serving Canadian Forces members and their families, as well as veterans who are living on or close to a Canadian Forces base.

These new tools and activities provide VAC with additional ways to target, reach, engage, and build a relationship with veterans, their families, other stakeholders, and Canadians.

We are always looking for ways to improve our approach to outreach, consultation, and engagement. To do this, we need to analyze what we are doing now, what is effective, and what needs to be enhanced.

As part of our department's transformation, public opinion research is being conducted to measure the level of understanding and awareness of VAC's programs and services. It will take place over the next three years and include Canadians and targeted groups.

We will use a combination of focus group testing, custom surveying, and targeted surveys with stakeholders, including modern-day veterans. The information obtained will allow VAC to determine the impact and effectiveness of its current outreach and communications, provide direction to areas that require attention, and adapt activities to ensure that Canadians and stakeholders are well informed about VAC's mandate and services.

Feedback from these activities will be useful in guiding the department in its future planning and programming. As well, information will be used to determine if Veterans Affairs Canada's engagement and outreach objectives are being met.

With that, Mr. Chair, I want to thank you and your committee for our time here today. I hope I've provided you with an overview of our outreach, consultation, and engagement in support of transformation.

● (1540)

[Translation]

I would now like to invite my colleague, Krista Locke, to give you her local perspective, after which, we are happy to respond to your questions.

[English]

**The Chair:** Mrs. Locke, please.

**Ms. Krista Locke (Regional Director General, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Merci.

Thank you, Colleen.

Good afternoon. My name is Krista Locke, and I am the director general for the Atlantic region as well as the national contact centres network and treatment authorization centres. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to talk about outreach in the field.

From an Atlantic region point of view, we are very active when it comes to outreach, consultation, and engagement with our various stakeholders. Over the past couple of years we have participated in several on-base information sessions promoting our programs and services. In cooperation with the chief of military personnel, we were able to reach out to hundreds of Canadian Forces personnel at CFB Gagetown, CFB Halifax, and Canadian Forces Station in St. John's, Newfoundland. But it didn't stop there. We also visited personnel at Greenwood and at Shearwater earlier this year for similar sessions.

I would also like to point out that these outreach sessions that were part of our CMP's tour were beyond the ongoing outreach and information sessions that take place regularly throughout the year at these bases, as well as other sites, on a number of topics relevant to serving members.

We also reach out to reservists to provide an overview of our services and benefits at presentations to reservist units across the region. Like our colleagues at a national level, we also have active client advisory committees in the Atlantic region at the local level with representation from various veterans organizations and groups.

Our committees are very active and engaged in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, and work is currently under way to revive and rebuild the stakeholder committees in other areas to ensure we have full coverage throughout the region and that we have a consistent approach across the board. We realize the tremendous potential of these committees and the role they play in fostering relationships with our stakeholders and sustaining a two-way dialogue on issues pertaining to our veteran population.

We also support many community groups interested in grassroots initiatives in support of veterans. As many of you may have learned during your cross-country tour earlier this year, the town of Conception Bay South in Newfoundland and Labrador launched a community covenant late last year, a formal commitment by the town and its residents to support local veterans.

Departmental staff in the Atlantic region, in collaboration with a number of other federal and provincial government partners and community groups in Newfoundland and Labrador, were actively involved in the successful implementation of this unique community-driven project.

Through our community engagement partnership, our community war memorial program, and our cenotaph and monument restoration program, we continue to reach out to collaborate with community groups on remembrance-related activities and initiatives at a grassroots level.

In closing, we know that continuing to build stronger relationships and broadening our reach with external partners will not only help in our planning and programming for the future, but it will also help us learn better, faster, and more efficient ways to do so.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you both very much.

We'll go right to committee questions. We'll start with Mr. Stoffer for five minutes.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP):** Thank you all very much for coming today.

My first question for you, Colleen, is on page 2 of your document.

Krista, this goes to you as well.

You talk about the outreach you're doing with various veterans organizations like DND, the RCMP, etc. You mention reservists, but many reservists are not attached to bases; they're more in the private sector. They could be in college or university.

Has consideration been given to doing this outreach with universities, colleges, chambers of commerce, municipal and provincial representatives or their governments, aboriginal communities, or the CFIB, to let the corporate and business sectors, the academic sector, provincial and municipal sectors, and first nations sectors understand that this outreach is ongoing? Have you expanded it or considered expanding it to all those other organizations to get the message out to those military personnel who may not be attached to military bases?

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** We've been focusing in the last year on working with our Canadian Forces bases and reaching those members who are serving, as well as veterans in the community. We understand that in many cases CF veterans tend to locate near the bases in which they serve, so we focused on that. Some of our print advertising in the last number of months also focused on those areas.

As to broadening beyond that, we haven't looked specifically at those areas, but we are looking at where we want to reach out in the future. We realize there are some target populations that we aren't necessarily reaching with the approach we've taken. In the future we will likely be looking to expand, and some of the areas you've identified are certainly opportunities for us.

• (1545)

**Ms. Krista Locke:** In the Atlantic region, although we don't have outreach activities that specifically target reservists or CF members on the benefits and services we provide to them, we are visible at teachers conferences and in universities when they have student forums. We provide information on the department, the kind of work we do, and the benefits and services we provide to veterans in Canada.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** Krista, this is a question that's closer to home for you.

As you know, Jim and Debbie Lowther and the VETS organization in Halifax are doing a tremendous job on their own dime and time looking after, finding, and searching for homeless veterans. We know that Keith Hillier did a walkabout with them one day and was quite fascinated by their work. Can you tell us what the local or regional Department of Veterans Affairs is doing to help that organization assist homeless veterans?

**Ms. Krista Locke:** We've worked very closely with Jim Lowther and the VETS organization. We meet with them on a regular basis. I know that in the Halifax district office a homeless committee was established well over a year ago to address this issue. They work with community organizations, along with the VETS organization. They visit shelters and other organizations on a regular basis to ensure that the information is out there for those providers as well as for any veterans out there who visit any of those organizations.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** One of the unfortunate things is to see this fine organization with a jar asking for donations to help their organization.

Do you have any authorization to allow any financial support to this organization in Halifax?

**Ms. Krista Locke:** I can't speak to that at this point. I will certainly look into that.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** You have 50 seconds left to get a question in quickly.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP):** In connection with that, I wonder if there have been any discussions around doing outreach beyond the organizations to find homeless veterans. I know in my community we didn't know about it, and then someone did some research. It was astounding and staggering how many homeless veterans there were right in London, Ontario. It worries me that there are certainly others elsewhere.

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** I can help answer that question. I'll start off by saying that the department is currently developing a comprehensive strategy for homeless veterans. We're focusing on key areas that are within VAC authorities at the present time. These include prevention, outreach, strategic partnerships, education, and awareness. We want to maximize the services and benefits we have available already and extend those to homeless veterans to provide them support.

We've also established three initiatives for homeless veterans across the country: one in Montreal, one in Toronto, and one in Vancouver. These have been developed through partnerships with community organizations such as the Royal Canadian Legion, Wounded Warriors, the Veterans Memorial Manor, and the Good Shepherd Ministries, as well as Veterans Affairs Canada, the Department of National Defence, and our OSISS network for operational stress injury social support. So we do have initiatives through which we, along with community organizations, continue to reach out to help find homeless veterans.

We also have veterans organizations that help us as well, and we really value the support they provide us. There are some like the VETS in Halifax. They advise us when they encounter someone who needs help.

Krista can speak a little more about that as well.

• (1550)

**The Chair:** It would have to be fairly quickly. We're quite a bit over time on that question.

**Ms. Krista Locke:** I would just add that when the VETS organization or any other organization identifies a veteran who is homeless or near homeless, we're contacted immediately, and we have case managers who respond very quickly.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Mr. Lobb, go ahead for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC):** Thanks, Mr. Chair.

My first question is for Ms. Soltermann.

Obviously, with transformation that would mean there were some areas for improvement within the department, and it's probably fair to say within each area of the department. What would you say were the top two or three areas that were in need of improvement, from your perspective?

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** My area—the outreach, consultation, and engagement directorate—was established just a bit more than a year ago. My main mandate is to ensure that we have an integrated, coordinated approach to consultation, engagement, and outreach.

Veterans Affairs Canada, through various individuals and our offices at the local, regional, and national levels, have been carrying out outreach. We've been consulting, and we've been engaging veterans organizations for a long time. We felt that there was a key need to ensure that we were coordinated and integrated. There are a lot of good initiatives and activities that are happening across the country, and we want to benefit from those good success stories. I think two key things would be to make sure that we have a strategic, integrated, and coordinated approach and that we share best practices across the country so that we can all benefit from them.

One of the ones I would share is the community covenant in Conception Bay, which Krista spoke about. That's very successful at helping veterans integrate, and that's a good practice that can be shared and benefited from.

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** So if you take that particular best practice, how does that get disseminated from coast to coast? How long does it take to be identified as a best practice, and how long does it take in practice to actually get it implemented?

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** I'll let Krista speak a little more about how the community covenant unfolded in Newfoundland.

**Ms. Krista Locke:** The community covenant in Newfoundland was actually a community-driven project by Conception Bay South. There was a partnership in place at the time to build capacity in mental health. I can speak to that later if necessary, but as a result, the community was aware of the work that was done in partnerships. They approached us and said they would really like to do something for their returning veterans and to develop a covenant. It was community-driven and very unique, and we provided support to help, as did the other partners as part of the committee. It is indeed a best practice.

Another was with the group when we met with the mayors, and it's often at that level of discussion with mayors—across Newfoundland at least—

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** Okay, so if you're going to take that best practice to northeastern Alberta, say, how long do you think it would actually take to do that? Because what you're trying to do with your best practices is to have others mimic them coast to coast.

**Ms. Krista Locke:** We're trying to share them.

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** We're just trying to get our heads wrapped around how long it actually takes to do that.

**Ms. Krista Locke:** We are currently working on the final results of that particular capacity project, including the covenant, and we are in discussions about the next steps as far as sharing those best practices to see how it can be done in other communities and other provinces that are interested.

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** One other thing—sorry, the time is getting short here—is that obviously your outreach objectives are in the tens of thousands of people. That's what I'm assuming your target is. From what I read in the material, you're reaching them in probably the hundreds—lumps of hundreds, right?

I noticed in the material that there are 1,800 Twitter followers. That's a good number, but it wouldn't really meet the need for what you're trying to do.

With the modern veterans, who are in the tens of thousands, I'm going to generalize and say you're getting them by hundreds at a time. How do you get them by thousands at a time? What does it take?

I'll give you an example. In one of my communities the firemen went around to see how many homes actually had fire detectors. You would think that most people would have a working fire detector in their house. After they went through the community they found it was less than 5%, but they had to go door-to-door to do that.

I'm just asking how you plan to reach the thousands.

• (1555)

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** We've had great success with our social media tools, our Canada Remembers or remembrance programming. I think now we have over half a million followers on our Facebook page. We've been able to reach many, many individuals through Internet-based tools. We're learning from what we've been successful at doing with our remembrance programming and incorporating some of those successful approaches.

There are other initiatives. We were talking about what we were successful in doing with our major initiative to visit the bases across the country in the last year and a half or so, and we also have people on the ground. We have people who work in our district offices, in the integrated personnel support centres, which are a VAC-DND collaboration. They're in 24 locations across the country.

There are opportunities there. People can walk in. They do outreach in their own communities from those areas.

We have partners, such as our veterans organizations, the Royal Canadian Legion. The Canadian Veterans Advocacy is another one that has a significant presence. We work with our partners as well, to ensure we can multiply our information to the community on the benefits and services we have.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Now I'll go to Mr. Casey, for five minutes.

**Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Soltermann, I'll start with you. I asked this question on Tuesday to Charlotte Stewart and Mr. Butler.

I'm aware that you have meetings with veterans advocacy stakeholder groups. In fact we've got a couple of representatives in the room here, Mike Blais and Sylvain Chartrand, who may look familiar to you.

We've heard evidence before this committee in the past that over the course of several months and years this stakeholders group has

met at a high level within Veterans Affairs, right to the minister and the deputy. They have come up with...the number that I recall from the testimony was 500 recommendations, three of which have been implemented.

Before you answer, when Mr. Butler answered this question on Tuesday, in fairness to him he said they do all these other consultations and these are all very helpful. I expect if you have talking points, that's where they're supposed to take you.

I want you to focus in on the stakeholder group I'm talking about. There are these umpteen recommendations that haven't been met. Could you tell me what you know about that and whether that is in the process of being disbanded?

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** I'll tell you a little bit about the structures we used to have in place.

We did, in the past, have advisory committees, or "groups" as we called them, that existed until about a couple of years ago. They issued, in fact, a number of reports making recommendations.

In the most recent past, we've looked at how we can renew our approach to engaging at the national level. We wanted to make sure we brought to the table some new organizations that we hadn't really engaged in the past. As you mentioned, one of our organizations we have been engaging with is in the room today. They're relatively new to us in the last year or so, I would say, and they certainly have been an important contributor to the work VAC is doing, helping us understand the needs and services.

We did have, from those previous committees, a number of recommendations, and if I'm not mistaken, Mr. Butler indicated that there were about 250 recommendations from those previous structures. Of those, about 160—a good percentage of them, therefore—were either fully or partially implemented. Those recommendations, I would say, live on. That may not necessarily be the correct term, but they still remain relevant in the work VAC does as it looks forward to how it's going to continue to enhance the programs and services that are offered, and they continue to guide the department.

The new stakeholder committee that was established met three times: June last year, last October, and last February. We continue to work with those veterans organizations on an ongoing basis, whether it's everyday discussions—I have calls every day with some of those organizations and their representatives—or whether it's having teleconferences or meetings on a bilateral basis. We'll continue to do that. We'll continue to engage with them.

We're looking at the different formats—bilateral or multilateral meetings, where we had the veterans organizations at the table last February on a multilateral basis at our committee.

Our commitment to continue to engage with veterans organizations remains.

• (1600)

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Tell me if I'm wrong, and it wouldn't be the first time today. Is there a group that has made upwards of 500 recommendations and that is saying publicly that only three have been adopted?

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** Veterans Affairs Canada has implemented more than 160 of the 250 recommendations. There are many recommendations that have been made from outside of government, from individuals, but the ones I'm talking about are the ones we formally had from those advisory councils that had made recommendations. VAC has acted on a number of those ones.

You may be referring to the implementation of the new Veterans Charter enhancements that came recently, through which we improved some of the benefits and services.

We've acted on a majority of those recommendations.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Thank you.

Ms. Locke, your title is regional director general of the Atlantic region as well as the national contact centre and the treatment authorization network. What is the national contact centre?

**Ms. Krista Locke:** The national contact centre is the network whereby clients can call in to the department.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** So it's a call centre.

**Ms. Krista Locke:** It's a call centre, yes, and the treatment authorization centre is for providers to contact the department.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Where is the call centre?

**Ms. Krista Locke:** We have call centres at three sites across Canada: Dartmouth, Kirkland Lake, and Winnipeg—sorry, we have a fourth centre—and Montreal.

**The Chair:** We're right up against the time, Mr. Casey, so just ask a quick one.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Okay, thank you.

We now go to Mr. Harris for five minutes, please.

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

Colleen and Krista, we appreciate your presentation.

Although I came to the social media age late in life, and I'm still kicking and screaming to not get into it, I know that it's really effective. Could you give us an example? Let's talk about the introduction of a Twitter account. Can you just give us a little capsule look at how successful...? It looks as if it's been pretty successful. How does it work for you, and how do you start off getting something out on it on a regular day? What's the procedure?

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** I'm not as familiar with our Twitter account. I'm a little bit the same as you on some of that new technology.

Mr. Chair, if there is an announcement that's going out, we take advantage of Twitter to create some awareness. We send it out. There are some people who subscribe and are followers of Veterans Affairs Canada on Twitter, and we disseminate messages that way.

We continue to build the reach of our Twitter account to make sure we have people who want to follow and want to know that they can follow us on Twitter.

**Mr. Richard Harris:** Are you getting the feeling so far that it's achieving the things you originally thought it could achieve?

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** I'm not necessarily the best person to answer that. However, from the perspective of using social media as a whole, we've had much success with our Facebook page and our YouTube account. They've been cited as good practices by those companies. So we have been on the forefront of using social media.

**Mr. Richard Harris:** I want to stay on this subject as to how you're gauging your success. I know the department is actively pursuing ways to enhance the service provision to our vets and there are a lot of ways you can do that. To find out how you're doing, I see that as part of the transformation you're using public opinion research, focus groups, polling. Typically, what types of people would come to a focus group?

● (1605)

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** I'll speak to that.

Typically, the people who would come to focus groups would probably depend on what you're trying to achieve with the focus groups. We're carrying out some focus group work, and at this point we're recruiting participants to join our focus groups. We have two projects under way on focus groups. One is assessing knowledge of Veterans Affairs Canada's programs and services for Canadian Forces members, particularly the new Veterans Charter. Our second project is linked to gaining an understanding of how effective our communication is to CF veterans. So we're carrying out two separate focus groups.

On the one to assess the knowledge of programs and services in the new Veterans Charter, we're looking to establish qualitative survey results on how well individuals understand our programs. This will form a basis for us for future surveys to understand where we need to continue to improve our outreach and our consultation and engagement to make sure that CF veterans who have access to those programs and services know that they're there. It's going to help us enhance both how we communicate and how we reach out.

**Mr. Richard Harris:** In closing, I'm going to put you on the spot. You're trying new initiatives, a lot of different things. Can each one of you, in a quick statement, tell us how satisfied you are with what you've been trying? Just briefly, where do you think you can go next to improve the service and contact with the vets even more?

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** My team was put in place a little over a year ago, so we're still in the learning phase, the development phase of where we want to go. Our younger CF veterans are often out in the community, but they're often also using technology a lot more than we have in the past. While not forgetting that we have to continue to provide services to individuals face to face whenever possible, Veterans Affairs Canada has to learn how we can maximize the Internet and technologies to reach them and make sure they know about our programs and services.



**Ms. Krista Locke:** I would add a similar statement: that investing in technology I feel is the way we can improve not only our outreach but also our service to veterans. The feedback to date is that they would like to be able to self-serve and go to our site and get more information, so we are looking at ways to improve that.

**Mr. Richard Harris:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We're going to Mr. Stoffer and then Ms. Morin.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** Krista, you had indicated that when veterans call the 1-866 number some of the calls are handled by Service Canada. Is that correct?

**Ms. Krista Locke:** That's correct. We entered a partnership in January.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** Is there a private company called Quantum that also handles some of those calls?

**Ms. Krista Locke:** I don't have all the details, but I understand that, yes, we are in partnership with Service Canada, and in turn they ensure there is a group of individuals who respond to callers.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** Quantum is a private company that answers the phone at Veterans Affairs Canada. How is a private company able to tell veterans that they're not Veterans Affairs Canada, yet they answer the phone as Veterans Affairs Canada? I wonder how that ever took place.

**Ms. Krista Locke:** I'm not closely involved in the partnership, so I'm not able to answer.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** Is it possible for you to get that information for us?

**Ms. Krista Locke:** Yes.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** Thank you.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Isabelle Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, NDP):** Thank you very much.

To continue on from what my colleague said, I would like to talk about Twitter, which I like and use a lot. It's a technology of my generation. While we were talking, I looked to see what was going on on Twitter.

I'm surprised to see that there are close to 2,000 people following the English Twitter feed and only 300 following the French one. What are you going to do to get francophone Canadians interested in it? Actually, you apparently aren't using a good approach to reach out to them because you have had only 300 people following you since you started, so for just about a year now.

• (1610)

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** Thank you for that observation.

We are continuing to promote the use of our Twitter feed. It's a good observation, and I am going to bring it back to the department so we can look into it. I'm not necessarily the best person to answer your question, but it's a good observation.

**Ms. Isabelle Morin:** I'm going to carry on with this because I like it.

I don't want to be overly critical, but there have been 400 tweets in one year. That doesn't seem like very many to me. You may think it's a good way to reach out to people, but personally, I've been using Twitter for less than a year and I have close to 4,000 tweets. That's a big difference. If you want to use this method to reach out to people, they need to see the tweets. I'd like to see an improvement in that respect because you said that using social media was a priority for you.

When we look at your tweets, we see that many more of them have to do with the minister than the department. I would also like you to explain that to me. Why focus your tweets on the minister rather than the department?

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** I don't have an answer for that. I can't explain the department's approach in that respect. I know the technology is something fairly new for the department. I'm not the best person to explain the difference, but I can certainly provide you with that information if necessary.

**Ms. Isabelle Morin:** I would really like you to send it to the committee.

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** Okay.

**Ms. Isabelle Morin:** Thank you.

I have no other questions.

I'll give the floor to Ms. Perreault.

**Ms. Manon Perreault (Montcalm, NDP):** This will be very simple.

Outreach came up earlier. We are talking about it because we want to foster interest in some issue. I thought to myself that if you are going to contact people, if you are trying to communicate with them, there needs to be some follow-up. It's really important to know what the results were, if any.

I don't know if you talked about it, but I feel that it will be difficult to tally the results you'll subsequently get.

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** Are you talking about our outreach efforts?

**Ms. Manon Perreault:** Yes.

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** We have developed a framework that provides parameters that indicate whether we attained our intended goals. I don't know the term in French, but in English we call it a

[*English*]

performance measurement plan.

[*Translation*]

It's a plan that sets out standards that we must comply with. We measure ourselves against it. So we will be able to know if we have attained the objective based on the indicators that we will have established. With respect to outreach in particular, we have a plan that will help us determine if there is an impact.

I would also like to talk about something else. We are doing research on public opinion. I think that's what we call it. This initiative will help us measure the scope of our outreach efforts with our target clientele. We are currently carrying out a project. We intend to have focus groups that we will interview to determine how much they know about the department's programs and services. The research is currently qualitative. In the coming years, we will carry out quantitative research to determine whether we are making progress with respect to outreach on the programs and services.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thanks. Sorry, our time is up. That's fascinating, though. It was good stuff.

We'll go to Mr. Lizon, please.

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

Thank you, witnesses, for coming here this afternoon.

I will maybe continue on the outreach activities you do.

Madame Soltermann, in your presentation you mentioned that you have a presence at the military bases. You do a lot of work informing future veterans of the services.

As a committee, we have travelled to several places in Canada. We have heard from witnesses. It seems that despite all the work you are doing, there's a gap in information. It looks as if some people still do not get the information. Would you elaborate on that? You said that your team has been around for only one year.

• (1615)

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** Yes.

**Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon:** From your experience, what should be done to narrow that gap in information?

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** Thank you for the question.

The efforts Veterans Affairs Canada has been making over the last year have been primarily to establish a focus area. My unit, the outreach, consultation, and engagement unit, was established. We work with our colleagues in the field.

We now have a team called community engagement. They're located across the country. This is a relatively new concept within the organization. We have taken some individuals who had other broader responsibilities and we include them in how we are going to develop our strategy for outreach in the future.

Veterans Affairs Canada has done some outreach in the past. What our team is looking to bring is a more integrated and coordinated and strategic approach to how we're going to do those three functions: consultation, outreach, and engagement.

We've been working with the Canadian Forces and National Defence. Over the last year and a half we carried out those information sessions on the bases. We reached a number of individuals, but we know that there's more we can do. The Integrated Personnel Support Centres, which have both Veterans Affairs Canada staff and DND staff, are really helpful in ensuring that we interact with and have an opportunity to inform veterans and serving members of their benefits and services. In addition, what

we're looking at doing is working collaboratively with the Canadian Forces to identify other opportunities we can carry out.

One of the examples I'd like to use is the second career assistance network sessions they have on the bases. These are sessions that prepare people who are ready for their departure from the CF. They're retiring. They're releasing. That's a key moment. We can ensure that we have the appropriate information so that they can be informed about the programs and services and can make decisions about what they are planning to do.

Would you like to add something, Krista?

**Ms. Krista Locke:** Sure. I would just add that as Colleen said, we're doing more and more every day to reach out. Two years ago, the IPSCs began to be set up. It's only since that time that we've had more of a presence on the bases. We have VAC staff working side by side with their DND colleagues.

To share a story, one of the case managers said that there were all these opportunities now to go out and meet with reservists, because he is located in an IPSC and hears what's going on, on the DND side. If they can be part of that group, they can put up their hands and offer their help by sharing some of the outreach and information. Actually, by being there, we have more of a presence than we had, definitely, two years ago.

**Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon:** To continue on the outreach activities and social media, you mentioned that you use Twitter. I use social media, but maybe not to the degree that some people use it. I still prefer telephone conversations or a face-to-face talk.

Of course, with the veterans population we have—we have traditional veterans who are at the very late stage of their lives—social media would most likely not be the best tool to use to reach out to them. What are you doing to continue to have some outreach activities with those veterans?

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** As you indicate, many of these war veterans are advancing in age. We don't necessarily think they will be using social media to the same extent as our younger veterans.

• (1620)

**Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon:** I know some who do.

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** Some do, but it won't be the majority of them. What we will be able to do through the social media, as we continue to develop it...They often have family support around them. Often at that advanced age they need the support of their family. So our social media will continue to support them and help their families.

In addition, because we're going to be using more social media, it doesn't necessarily mean we're going to stop meeting with them, ensuring that we're following their needs. There are still opportunities for face-to-face meeting, working with them when they need the services.

Social media is not to replace but it's to complement how we provide services to veterans. Many of our younger veterans want to find out what they can get at ten o'clock at night or two o'clock in the morning. Our technology will help them do that. As we move in our transformation agenda and we're smarter about how we use technology, we will be able to reach them, but we are not giving up how we need to be engaging with our older veterans.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much for that. Time is up.

Ms. Adams, five minutes.

**Ms. Eve Adams (Mississauga—Brampton South, CPC):** Thank you very much for coming and presenting today.

The department has certainly undertaken considerable improvements at reducing the amount of red tape that our veterans face. Can you tell me how that initiative to reduce red tape will affect your outreach initiatives?

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** The red tape is part of the transformation. My role in the transformation is to support outreach, consultation, and engagement on the programs and services that we have. It's also an opportunity to be more integrated and strategic about how we do things, bringing best practices forward, making use of new technologies, as we've been indicating, not only to serve individuals but to inform them.

As part of where we're going with cutting red tape and moving on our transformation, there are opportunities that we might not have explored to the same extent in the past to ensure that we are reaching out. Part of our transformation was establishing my team. That was a transformation commitment, and also what we recently added was a group of individuals we now call "community engagement", located across the country. In part their role is to support my team in how we are going to ensure that we're effective in sharing information about our programs and services, and also hearing about what veterans and their organizations are saying at the local level on programs and services.

Through our public opinion research, we will also have the opportunity to know whether our transformation agenda is having the success we're looking for. They will, through our public opinion research, be able to tell us whether our outreach is effective.

There will be lots of opportunity through my group to contribute to the transformation agenda.

**Ms. Eve Adams:** You had mentioned Conception Bay South and the covenant that has been undertaken there with the community, with city hall and so on, to ensure that we're recognizing younger veterans.

The country has certainly done quite a bit to recognize the contributions of our World War II veterans, but what more can we do for newly returning veterans?

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** My colleague Derek Sullivan is going to be coming to the meeting on May 15. He will be able to give you some more information about what we're doing to recognize members when they return.

The community covenant is a really good example of an initiative that provides support to veterans in their community and helps them integrate into the community. It's recognizing that maybe they need

some specific support in order to help them integrate into the community, and that the community is supporting them as a whole. They're making a conscious decision to do so.

**Ms. Krista Locke:** I would just add that I see more and more community-driven events throughout the Atlantic region that do recognize Afghanistan veterans. We are seeing an increase in the recognition events out there for modern-day or younger veterans.

**Ms. Eve Adams:** Generally speaking, has the transformation initiative strengthened your relationship with DND?

• (1625)

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** I would say that our relationship with DND certainly has been growing stronger in the last ten years, but particularly in the last five years we've been really strengthening our relationship. Also, there are a number of initiatives under way with DND. There is the VAC-DND steering committee, which provides strategic direction as to how the two departments can collaborate for the betterment of veterans and how we can jointly support their transition.

As for outreach, in my area of work we were really fortunate to have the support of the chief of military personnel in DND and the Canadian Forces on our outreach that we did on the bases across the country. We visited 20 bases. We did 26 sessions on our programs and services.

**Ms. Eve Adams:** Did you notice any differences that cropped up based on geography? Were there different concerns, or was there a different focus in different portions of our country?

**Ms. Colleen Soltermann:** Our outreach in those information sessions was around the new Veterans Charter. We were explaining to CF members, veterans, and their families the new Veterans Charter programs and services. There were many similarities across the country as to the questions individuals had around their benefits and services. They were really pleased to have a better understanding of the new Veterans Charter programs and services.

Certainly they had questions. They still had concerns. Some of them had their own personal concerns, and through those sessions we were able to enable individuals who had questions about their own situation to speak to VAC staff to sort it out or to get some explanations.

**Ms. Eve Adams:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

I just would add that when you're talking about communities' involvement, we saw a great example. I'm talking about Annapolis Valley, where the Greenwood base, the Legion, and community groups got together to do a welcome home ceremony, and it was really quite something.

You're right, the communities are paying a lot more attention to welcoming back the veterans, and it's a good thing, a very positive thing.

I want to thank you very much for coming in today and being with us.

We're going to suspend now for a couple of minutes and then continue in camera. [Proceedings continue in camera]

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