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## **Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs**

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**Tuesday, March 5, 2013**



**Chair**

**Mr. Greg Kerr**



## Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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•(0845)

[English]

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP)):** Order. I see quorum here this morning.

Welcome back, everyone.

A special hello to our minister, the Honourable Steven Blaney, and to the deputy minister, Mary Chaput.

Thank you both for coming today. We know that your schedules are very busy, so we appreciate your being here today for the estimates.

Minister, just to confirm, we believe we have an hour of your time. Is that correct?

**Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs):** That's correct, Mr. Chair.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Well, sir, we look forward to your presentation.

I will let everyone know that unfortunately the chair of our committee, Mr. Greg Kerr, is still recovering. We hope he will have a speedy recovery and be back in his chair as soon as possible.

Minister, please proceed, if you wish.

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We send the chair our best wishes.

I am glad to be here this morning, accompanied by our deputy minister of Veterans Affairs Canada, Mary Chaput.

I'd like to take a moment to talk about what we're doing for veterans.

[Translation]

Before we implemented our initiative for cutting red tape, applications for our services or programs involved numerous forms and telephone calls. Thanks to this plan, most calls, forms and emails have been eliminated.

[English]

Before our cutting red tape efforts, veterans had to send in countless receipts for VIP services that they were already approved to receive. We have fundamentally changed this important program for veterans and their families.

With our cutting red tape efforts, veterans are now receiving decisions on their benefit applications weeks faster. Veterans receive

over 85% of all benefit applications made to the federal government: that means a “yes”.

[Translation]

Our government, the Prime Minister and myself, as a minister, are determined to provide help and assistance to veterans and their families in order to give them the tools they need for a smooth and successful transition. We have plenty of work ahead of us, and we are devoted to the task at hand. That is why I am here this morning. I have two requests to submit to the members of the committee.

Those two initiatives are mentioned in supplementary estimates (C)—for the current fiscal year—and in the main estimates for the next fiscal year tabled by our government last Monday in the House.

[English]

Each member has been provided with a chart that outlines the total investments since 2005. This chart clearly shows how the Veterans Affairs budget has increased massively since 2006.

I always say that we are a needs-based organization and we are there to meet the needs of our veterans. In terms of numbers, this means that, on average, in 2005, the budget for Veterans Affairs was \$2.8 billion. Today I am seeking authority to spend upwards of and to invest more than \$3.6 billion.

That's an increase, as you can see, of \$800 million for our veterans. Of this money, 90% is going directly into the pockets of our veterans.

Our work is not yet done this year. That's why I'm also seeking support to approve the supplementary estimates (C) and of course the main estimates for next year.

For the balance of this fiscal year, I am asking you this morning to approve \$44 million, in supplementary estimates (C), of additional funding for mainly the veterans independence program, VIP; the earnings loss benefit, which is the core of the new Veterans Charter; and veterans' children's education.

•(0850)

[Translation]

I am confident this morning that, by the end of the meeting, I will have your support to ensure that the Canadian government will continue to provide our veterans and their families with the benefits and programs they are entitled to and deserve.

You are probably familiar with the Veterans Independence Program. That's a very practical program that has a direct impact on the lives of our veterans and enables them to pay for snow removal of driveways in the winter, lawn mowing in the summer, housekeeping, window washing and so on. That program is available to our injured veterans and their families.

With the initiative for cutting red tape we have implemented, veterans now receive up-front payments twice a year and no longer have to submit receipts for small amounts that used to be reimbursed several weeks after the service had been provided to them.

[*English*]

Since January 1, more than 17,000 veterans and widows have received an average first installment of \$1,300 to go towards these much-needed services. Of course, I cannot speak to any individual veteran, but let's talk about a veteran who is living in Toronto. He's 86 and used to be under the old veterans independence program. He had to fill out a form each time, attach a receipt, mail it to Veterans Affairs, and wait a few weeks to get his money back. This system took much of his time. He would spend hours a month on the phone with Veterans Affairs trying to track down where his money was and do some administrative tasks.

Now he gets the money up front. He can arrange for payment with his service provider so he's no longer spending time going back and forth with Veterans Affairs. Of course, veterans should keep their receipts, but they no longer have to submit them each time to get their money back. This is cutting millions of transactions. This is happening for this 86-year-old veteran in Toronto. This is also happening in P.E.I., in Manitoba, in Saskatchewan. Everywhere in our communities, veterans are getting the money up front and can move forward with respect to the veterans independence program.

[*Translation*]

The reason I am here this morning is to talk about the Veterans Independence Program.

[*English*]

That's the reason I'm taking time to describe this program to you this morning. That's why I'm here for the supplementary estimates (C). I'm seeking your support. I hope I'll have your support, because it's for our veterans. That's for supplementary estimates (C).

The main business, the main core for the next fiscal year is the main estimates. This is the money that will allow this department, our government, to provide the services to our veterans.

• (0855)

[*Translation*]

This morning, I am seeking authority to invest \$3.637 billion for our veterans over the next fiscal year. That is \$69 million more than this year. Those figures may seem high, but allow me to provide you with a breakdown.

To support veterans and their families, we expect to provide more than 38,000 disability benefits and continue to make payments directly to veterans for disabilities sustained in their military service.

We will also provide support to nearly 700 veterans for career transition services.

In addition, we support our deceased veterans' widowed spouses. Almost 38,000 people are also eligible for the Veterans Independence Program. We will process 5,000 applications for rehabilitation, and over 9,000 veterans will benefit from long-term care thanks to the partnership with the provinces. Of course, modifications sometimes need to be made to accommodate disabilities and allow our veterans to stay at home.

I think we all have a nice opportunity this morning to confirm our commitment to veterans. That's why I am confident I will receive your support regarding supplementary estimates (C) and close out the current fiscal year—especially when it comes to the Veterans Independence Program—and that I will also receive your support concerning the 2013-2014 main estimates.

[*English*]

I look forward to your questions.

Thank you.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you, Minister.

Before we go to questioning, I want to thank, on behalf of all of us here, the Government of Canada and Veterans Affairs for making this the Year of the Korean War Veteran. On a personal level, I thought this was a wonderful distinction. So congratulations to the department for doing that.

Because of the time the minister has, after he leaves, Mary Chaput and Charlotte Stewart will be here for the second hour for any further questions that you may have. I have to be strict with the time; I hope I'm not rude.

We'll start off with Mr. Sylvain Chicoine, from the NDP.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you very much for joining us today to answer our questions.

You are appearing early this year—on March 5. Usually, we hear from ministers a bit later in the year, in April. Was there a reason or urgency behind your early appearance?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** There are two reasons behind my early appearance. On the one hand, we have submitted the amounts required to close out this fiscal year. As you know, it ends on March 31. We need that money to provide services to veterans. On the other hand, as you know, the Minister of Finance announced that he would table the budget very soon.

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** Thank you.

Minister, I would like to know what is planned for the next fiscal year when it comes to the Last Post Fund. An amount of \$1 million was cut from that fund. However, veterans and undertakers have asked for an increase to complement the funeral costs for veterans in need.

Given the demands that have been made over the past few months, we find those cuts to be contradictory. Could you explain the situation to us?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Thank you for the question, Mr. Chicoine.

I want to reassure you by saying that all the benefits and services provided to the families of deceased veterans are being maintained. In addition, as part of an effort to cut red tape and simplify procedures, the Last Post Fund is saving money internally, and that helps improve the effectiveness of its program.

Generally speaking, as you know, the Last Post Fund helps cover veterans' funeral and burial costs. The amount provided for funerals is \$3,600. There is no cap for burial costs. That is why veterans' burial and funeral costs can total \$7,000 on average. Since 2006, more than 10,000 families have used that program. That is one of the most beneficial veterans' programs around the world.

● (0900)

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** If I have understood correctly, you will continue to provide \$3,600 per veteran, but you will not cover all the costs, which are at least \$7,000 or \$8,000. I don't understand why undertakers often have to make up the difference. The amount provided for veterans whose family is unable cover funeral costs will remain at \$3,600.

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Actually, the amount provided to a family can be as much as \$7,000. In some cases, the costs have come up to \$10,000. We are always working on improving our programs, and it is clear that any money saved internally does not affect the amounts provided to deceased veterans' families.

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** My next question is about the projections regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs' workforce.

The documents state that Veterans Affairs Canada will still have about 3,400 employees over the 2013-2015 period. However, we know that Ste. Anne's Hospital employees—about 1,200 of them—are about to be transferred.

Does the department plan to adjust the workforce projections, since those employees will no longer be at Ste. Anne's Hospital?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** We won't be able to include the Ste. Anne's Hospital employees in our projections until the agreement has been concluded. As you know, the negotiations with the Government of Quebec regarding the hospital's transfer are going well. The objective is to maintain quality services for veterans, in both official languages, but also to eventually allow the Quebec community—especially those people living in Montreal's west island—to benefit from that infrastructure.

Once this agreement has been finalized and the transfer has been completed, those employees will be transferred to the Government of Quebec. From there on in, we will no longer include them in our projections. What is interesting about that transfer is that, on paper, it will reduce the number of employees at the Department of Veterans

Affairs. The transfer helps maintain those long-term jobs, since we are ensuring that institution's sustainability by maintaining and securing quality care for veterans. In addition, Montreal's west island community will constitute a new client base.

[English]

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Now we go to Ms. Adams, for five minutes, please.

**Ms. Eve Adams (Mississauga—Brampton South, CPC):** Thanks very much, Minister, for appearing before us today.

Our Conservative government has put a strong priority on reducing red tape, eliminating those wasteful processes, and then reinvesting dollars into front-line services.

You spoke at length about the veterans independence program, probably the most popular program Veterans Affairs delivers.

Could you provide some additional examples of how the department is cutting red tape and inefficient bureaucracies?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Yes, sure. I would also like to thank you at this very moment for your hire a veteran initiative. We are getting pretty good comments from all across the country from companies that are willing to hire veterans.

More than 5,000 veterans are released from our Canadian armed forces every year. Some of them are willing to retire, but some of them still want to be active, whether they voluntarily leave the Canadian armed forces or have been medically released.

One good example of the cutting red tape initiative we have implemented is certainly the forms. Many veterans said they had to deal with a lot of forms when they had to deal with us. So far we have eliminated 250 forms from the department. Thanks to the people at the department, this is making life easier for our veterans.

Also, as I have already said, we have simplified our procedure in the veterans independence program, but we are also taking the same approach for health-related travel expenses. Whenever a veteran has to go to a medical facility to see a specialist for some services, he is entitled to have his travel expenses covered.

Once again it was the same thing. They had to fill out forms, send the bill, and wait for it to be processed. It was lengthy, but it was a routine administrative task. So we are moving forward with upfront payments since we have a clear idea of the needs of every veteran. That's another example.

So VIP, health-related, and the elimination of forms are three clear examples of our cutting red tape initiative.

Also the first step we took was to communicate more clearly with veterans. You can ask me in what way it is diminishing red tape. We realized by communicating more efficiently with veterans, and this has been requested by the Veterans Ombudsman, veterans get a better understanding of the decision and of the process. This reduces their requests and their demands because it is clearer. This also has an impact on reducing red tape.

• (0905)

**Ms. Eve Adams:** Absolutely. At least the veteran is not frustrated in not understanding perhaps what's being communicated, but it's obvious you would want to have clear communication so the veteran doesn't need to pick up the phone, contact the department, and ask for further clarification and explanation. It's very well received.

When I'm visiting Legions I have to say the upfront payment for health expenses and for the VIP is very positively received. Whether the veteran is a younger veteran or an older veteran, it was quite the hassle and quite the paperwork burden for them to have to complete the forms and submit the receipts. That's all daunting, so this is very positively received.

Minister, the face of veterans in Canada is changing. We now have far more younger veterans, obviously, with thousands of younger individuals discharging from the Canadian armed forces each year.

Could you perhaps provide us with an overview of what the department is doing to ensure we're keeping pace with the changing face of our veteran?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Thank you. This is a pretty good question considering that, since November 2011, the department has been providing more service to those who we used to call our modern veterans. That means they are not from the Second World War or the Korean War. So we have accrued younger veterans; some can be returning from Afghanistan. This means we have to shift toward new technology. That's why over the last year we have moved toward e-services, in that we can provide services online to veterans.

We also realize that this is also helpful for our Second World War veterans, because sometimes their advocates, whether it's a sibling, a child, a parent, or a friend, are using the e-services to follow up on the file of those veterans who may have served in the Second World War. The e-services mean you can have access with a VAC account. You would have an access number. One very important principle is privacy. Privacy is secured through the Internet, so they can provide requests online. There is also a possibility for them to follow up the request through the Internet when the demand is going through the department.

We have also implemented what we call My VAC Book. It's very easy access for any veteran in the country to get a glimpse of this program and services that can be provided to them. Actually some veterans sometimes come with their own VAC book and seem quite pleased with it so far.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Mr. Minister, thank you very much.

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

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

Good morning, Mr. Minister.

I want to ask you about your trip to Charlottetown last month. I asked you about it in question period, but I think the time restriction didn't allow you to give a complete answer.

Last month, you went to Charlottetown and you contacted the local media to tell them that you were going to do an interview with them on a Friday afternoon, which would be embargoed until five o'clock. Your employees were aware of this plan but had no idea why you were coming to town under a cloak of secrecy, where there was only going to be publicity at five o'clock. You would understand, given the cutbacks within your department and the disproportionate cutbacks in the civil service in my province, that people were clean terrified.

Sir, whoever gave you that advice, I presume, were from Ottawa because they clearly don't know the state of stress within the national headquarters over the cutbacks that have happened. Probably the worst thing you could say in Charlottetown is, "I'm from Ottawa and I'm here to help".

So when you came to Charlottetown, sir, you made two announcements that were embargoed until five o'clock on a Friday afternoon. I have here the coverage from *The Guardian*. Of the two announcements you made, one was about the opening of an access office. What you didn't say and what I would invite you to clarify here today is that the access office is going to replace a district office and you will have two full-time equivalents in that access office. I would ask you to confirm that the staffing of the office will be two full-time equivalents.

The other thing you said, and I'm reading from *The Guardian* now, is that you announced Friday:

...three new director general positions within Veterans Affairs Canada will be posted to Charlottetown.

The director general of communications, director general of finance and director general of Canada Remembers positions within the department will all be posted externally and those who are chosen for these positions will have to live and work in P.E.I.

I invite you today to clarify what you said in the local media, because you know and I know that these are not new positions. You know and I know that two of these positions have always been based in Charlottetown, and you announced back in May that the third one was coming and it hasn't happened yet.

You have a Mr. Schwenker who stalks me on Twitter, and every time I say something that he thinks is inaccurate, he corrects it. Apparently he doesn't know to contact *The Guardian* to correct these inaccuracies, so I'm asking you to do it.

These are my two questions. Will you confirm that the access office will have only two full-time equivalents? Will you now correct the record with respect to your announcement on these supposedly new director general positions?

Thank you, sir.

• (0910)

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** I thank you for the question.

I hope I will be able to get a second question from you. I will try to make the answer as short as I can.

[Translation]

I have to specify that these are new competitions for three existing positions. As you know, when I was appointed to my position, the director of communications was based in Ottawa. As you can see, that position is now based in Charlottetown. The first competition has been held. Unfortunately, there were no candidates. That is why we are launching a second competition. It is open to all Canadians and anyone from Prince Edward Island. I would very much like to fill those three positions in Charlottetown, and I am confident I will be able to do so.

As you said—and this bears repeating—Charlottetown is the flagship of the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Canadian government. This is the only department located in one of the country's regions. I think you can rightly be proud of that. I am very aware of the benefits to regional economies stemming from the Veterans Affairs office in Charlottetown.

I will now answer your second question about the access centre. I feel that, when more than 1,000 employees are dedicated to services for veterans, it is only natural for those Charlottetown veterans to have direct access to the headquarters, or the central agency.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** I don't think I have received an answer to my question about the number of employees at the access centre. My understanding is that there are two employees, while there used to be many more at the office you will close.

Thank you for answering my second question.

[English]

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Mr. Casey, I'm sorry. We need time for the minister to answer.

[Translation]

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Can you confirm that this office will have only two employees?

• (0915)

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Allow me to reassure you by saying that the access centre will begin its operations once the office has been shut down.

If the chair approves, I will let the deputy minister give you an answer about staff management procedures.

[English]

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Yes. Okay.

**Ms. Mary Chaput (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Sir, by way of explanation as to how the access centre will work, a veteran will come to our building. He will be greeted at the entrance of the building where he will provide his name and, if he wishes, his file number and the nature of his inquiry. An employee will then be paged to come to meet the veteran. That employee, who will be a generalist with experience in a wide variety of services and benefits available to veterans, will then sit with that veteran, face-to-face, and deal with what his wishes or needs might be. If indeed they are very complex, that employee would ensure the veteran has an immediate bridge to any kind of specialist he may need, be it a case manager or other health professional. If they are of a more general nature, for instance, information on programs and services, it's quite likely the veteran's inquiries will be dealt with right then and there.

The effort is to ensure that those who need very specialized care get it without delay should they have an urgent or emerging need, and that those with more general interest still get the kind of attention that's appropriate. We need to keep in mind that many, many veterans are very well situated; in terms of their personal lives, they are getting along fine, but they still have questions now and then. We want to make that information easily available to them as well as those with complex needs.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you very much, Deputy Minister.

We will now go on to Mr. Zimmer, please.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks, first of all, to all the past and present service men and women who have served our country. Thanks for your service.

Thank you, Minister, for coming today. It's always great to have you here. I've said to you before that you're a minister who obviously cares about veterans, and you wear it on your sleeve. We appreciate that, and we appreciate your care for veterans.

You've already talked about some new supports that we have for our veterans, but what could we do, as members of Parliament, to help you ensure we repay our debt of gratitude to our veterans?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** I thank you for your question.

I will tell you that in my personal experience as a member of Parliament, veterans naturally go to their member of Parliament, because it's the link between them and the government for which they served this country. Whatever party you are in, it's important, I believe, as a member of Parliament, to always welcome veterans, listen to them, and of course convey their requests to me, which many members already do. Actually, I must tell you that I'm always amazed by the level of commitment that members of Parliament have for their veterans.

On a broader basis, I invite all members of Parliament to take initiatives in the Year of the Korean War Veteran. There are Korean War veterans in every part of the country. We used to say that it was the forgotten war. I thank the chair for raising this issue. I think we have a great opportunity.

I want to tell you in advance that this year's Remembrance Week will be focused on all veterans, but we'll pay special attention to Korean War veterans. Why is that? Because, of course, 60 years ago, in 1953, those Canadians went abroad and fought for liberty and for freedom, and today in that country we have the 13th industrial power in the world. I always brag about Samsung, Hyundai, Kia, Daou, and all those Korean companies that are part of our daily lives. They are due to the successes of these Korean people, who have benefited from the sacrifices of the Canadians.

Yes, we will put emphasis on the Year of the Korean War Veteran, and we will raise awareness. That's the other mandate. My department can work with all members to make those stories known and to awake the curiosity of Canadians about the Korean War. Canadians were there. What did they do? What did they accomplish? What were the big fights? Who was involved? Those are the kinds of questions that we're seeking to answer. That's an important part of the mandate.

This morning I'm asking for money that will go mainly into the pockets of veterans, but one...and this committee has already approved it, since the first study in this session was about Remembrance. There are important dates, so that's for Remembrance.

To conclude, the other part where you can get involved is in encouraging corporations in your riding to hire veterans. There's a strong appetite and there's a strong will, so we can be facilitators. My department and our resources, and charities such as True Patriot Love and Canada Company, are involved in our helmets to hardhats initiative. There are a lot of initiatives. Also, of course, we are working with a corporation in the veterans transition committee. They are there to make ways for our veterans to transition into civilian life. This is a way to help veterans and to give them meaning after their military career, such as some members who have turned to politics.

● (0920)

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Yes. Thank you, Minister.

I have another question that builds on what we've discussed before about your being an effective minister. In your estimation, do the moneys asked for in the main estimates allow our ministry to be an effective ministry for veterans?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Yes, and I will tell you why: because we are a needs-based organization. As long as I get the support of this committee to come here for additional funding, we will be able as a country to make sure that veterans get the benefits and the services to which they are entitled and fully deserve. Together, of course, we can work at streamlining those processes and making access easier.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

Mr. Zimmer, thank you very much.

We'll now go to Ms. Mathysen, for five minutes, please.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister.

I have a number of questions.

First, we're all very familiar with the SISIP class action suit. What was the cost to the government of defending that lawsuit against veterans?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** I will defer this question to my colleague, the Minister of National Defence.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** You have no idea what...?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Well, I don't want to give a number that is not accurate, and this file was related to National Defence.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Well, my number is \$150 million. Wouldn't that money have been better spent on veterans?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** If I may, Ms. Mathysen, I think it is important to seek clarity whenever the government is making important decisions. As you know, our government has decided not to appeal this decision. This has an impact of more than a billion dollars that will go into the pockets of our veterans.

As you know, we as Veterans Affairs have decided that we would go above and beyond this court decision. That's why we are levelling up our earnings loss benefit, our Canadian Forces income support program. I also intend to bring forward some legislation for the veterans allowance so that we can make sure that when our veterans receive money, it is legally and undisputedly legitimate.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Yet, still, the veterans had to take the government to court. It's unfortunate. And very clearly you seem to understand that there is an imperative in regard to supporting veterans. Yet you waited until they actually took you to court.

My next question has to do with the idea of including the supplementary estimates in the main estimates. We don't have the report on plans and priorities yet. In your own notes, you indicate this report will change the actual number in terms of the department. Why is there the rush? We have until the end of June for the main estimates. I feel very uncomfortable with being asked to approve main estimates before I have all the information. And so my question again is, why the rush?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** If I may, if you are willing to show support for veterans in the coming weeks and the coming months, I invite you to support the War Veterans Allowance Act that will allow you to directly support veterans by investing and making sure they are receiving the benefits that they deserve.

Regarding the main estimates, I never find it too early to invest prudently in our veterans. As you know, it is important that we move forward since the budget is coming, since we are ending the fiscal year, and I know your time is precious. I am always happy to come, but I believe that to come here and ask for main estimates, and of course, the supplementary estimates (C), is a good use of your time.

● (0925)

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Thank you, Minister. Certainly, we, in the opposition, fight very hard for our veterans.

I assume this will probably be my last question. You said that veterans come to federal MPs because they see them as the direct link to the government for which they served.

By that token, what level of government should be responsible for the needs of veterans? Is it federal or is it provincial? If it's federal, why on earth are we transferring the cost and responsibility of the long-term care of our veterans to the provinces?



**Hon. Steven Blaney:** On the contrary, this government and the previous government take their responsibility to our veterans very seriously. I think you have in front of you the chart that shows that since 2006, investment in government has increased, on average, by more than \$800 million. Of course, we're not here to talk about numbers, but I think it shows a clear demonstration that, as a society, we're committed to providing our veterans with the services to which they are entitled.

One of the reasons there has been this massive increase is the implementation of the new Veterans Charter, which was an all-party initiative that was supported broadly. And I would also mention the enhancements that were brought forward initially by my predecessor, Minister Jean-Pierre Blackburn, and which I have implemented, which were the enhancements to the new Veterans Charter that were specifically aimed at the most injured and seriously ill veterans.

Now, regarding the long-term care, as you know, Ms. Mathysen, it is clear that every veteran in this country who has a service-related injury, who needs long-term care, can have access to the full array of services from this department.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Sorry, Ms. Mathysen. It's well over five minutes.

Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

We now go on to Mr. Lobb, for five minutes, please.

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

Welcome, Minister.

I have three or four questions. The first one is on depleted uranium. During the four and a half years that I've been on this committee, there have been different witnesses who have testified at committee. They haven't spoken directly about depleted uranium, but you certainly have alluded to it. You've taken it upon yourself and the department to have Dr. Morisset do a study and a report. I just wondered if you could talk about that and the commitment from the department to shed light on this.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Mr. Lobb, thank you for your question.

The government has a duty to ensure that the care provided to veterans is based on the most recent scientific data. That is why I called on international experts who have had an opportunity to appear before the committee.

I would like to thank you for taking the time to study this important issue regarding the health of our veterans. That is why I struck the Scientific Advisory Committee on Veterans' Health, which is chaired by Dr. Pierre Morisset. The work done has been remarkable on an international scale, and it will be used as a reference for scientific rigour, scientific review and the analyses you are currently looking into. As you know, some of the experts even come from the United States. Those people have medical and military experience. I want to reiterate that the principle consists in making sure that any services provided by the government are based on the most recent scientific data. That is clearly why this report was produced and why we are implementing the recommendations.

That being said, if you will allow me a more personal comment, Mr. Lobb, I think that, although we must ensure to provide the services our veterans need, we should also keep in mind the idea of suffering or perception. The goal of the government and the department is not to engage in a debate with veterans, but rather to ensure that we are providing them with the programs and services they need.

● (0930)

[*English*]

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** I agree with you there. For veterans who maybe thought that they had this issue, maybe it allows their treatment to move down and look at other possible avenues for getting better.

Another question I wanted to ask you is along the idea of transformation within the department. Certainly we know that years ago the department was very much antiquated from a technology standpoint. I just wondered if you could bring the committee up to the date with the department's efforts on technology and really transforming the department into a modern one.

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Thank you.

There's a need, as you know, to move toward technology. That's why we've implemented those services on the web. Now a veteran or a family member of a veteran can have access to our services and can also have private, secure access to the file. We believe that there will be stronger pickup as the year goes on since, of course, we are all turning toward technology. We are investing in technology.

Actually, I was with Ms. Chaput, and we had an opportunity to share our Canadian experience with American General Shinseki, a former Vietnam veteran who's been in the enduring freedom mission in Iraq and who is now the United States secretary of veterans affairs. He has complimented the people of my department for having developed the software that's used by our veterans and for their ongoing discussion with the American government sharing our experience. These tools were developed by the department.

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** I agree. When we look back at the administration of the department, we'll see that this was the best investment for taxpayers' dollars, enabling the delivery of a world-class service and being a model for the rest of the world on how the administration is delivered within Veterans Affairs. Thank you for that continued investment.

One last topic you've touched on a couple of times today is privacy. The department has done a tremendous amount of work on privacy in the last three or four years. Perhaps you could bring the committee up to date briefly. I know we're probably out of time, but just quickly, if you can, comment on some of the initiatives the department's done on privacy.

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** To make sure that privacy is of utmost concern, the best tool is to make every employee in this department aware of the importance of respecting the privacy of all our veterans. As part of our action plan and the additional recommendation we've implemented, after having analyzed the report of the ombudsman, we have measures to ensure that we are protecting the privacy of our veterans through information, guidance, rules, and procedures that make sure that only those related to a file have access to it in a secure manner.

That's the way we've been moving forward. I was given the opportunity yesterday, and I will take this opportunity today, to mention that we got a comment from the Office of the Privacy Commissioner, which said, "Veterans Affairs Canada has sent a clear signal that privacy is vital to its operations....The Department is moving from reacting to privacy issues to proactively addressing them". We are moving in that direction and we will keep on moving that way.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Lizon, you've been trumped by the parliamentary secretary. She'll be splitting your time but she'll be first.

**Ms. Eve Adams:** There was some discussion earlier that there seems to be some rush, Minister, in having you appear here. What is that needless rush? For the clarification of members of the committee, and for their edification, I've just pulled out a copy of the Standing Orders. In chapter 10, page 54, it says that in every session main estimates need to be tabled by March 1, or deemed to have been tabled by March 1, and then it comes back to committees to put any questions to the minister. This is something that happens each and every year. It's certainly not something new.

Over to you, Mr. Lizon.

• (0935)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Mr. Lizon.

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

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** She said she would be quick.

**Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, good morning. I would like to join my colleagues in welcoming you and everybody this morning to this committee. Minister, you briefly mentioned the programs in your remarks and answers, but I would like to ask you about the helmets to hardhats program and the program to hire a veteran that your department has been focused on.

Can you explain to this committee how these programs will benefit our veterans?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Hire a veteran and helmets to hardhats are part of an array by which we are trying to help our veterans transition to civilian life. Helmets to hardhats is oriented towards construction. Companies such as TransCanada have invested \$1 million in this initiative, and the unions are investing as much money. Moreover, they are offering their skills and expertise to help veterans translate the experience they have acquired in the forces to construction. If

you were operating machinery in the Canadian Forces, then you can get the certification required to get your cards and

[*Translation*]

the accreditations you need to work in construction.

[*English*]

We also have provincial governments, such as those in Alberta and Ontario, that have stepped in. We are open to any additional form of partnership to get more people involved as there is a strong need for labour in construction in all parts of the country.

Regarding the hire-a-veteran program, we are working as a government, and our parliamentary secretary is showing leadership. We are offering in our local communities, in partnership with local entrepreneurs, opportunities for them to reach out and hire a veteran. These are ongoing initiatives and so far we've been getting pretty good results.

**Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon:** Yes, Minister, actually we are working in our constituencies, connecting with the potential employers. We will be collecting information for a database, and I hope in a relatively short time we will start seeing results of that new initiative.

Can you tell the committee, Minister, in a little bit more detail, about the partnership with CN Rail? How many positions has CN Rail committed to offer to our veterans?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** CN Rail is expecting that within the coming years there will be more than 1,000 jobs available, and they have announced that they will open those positions up to veterans. This is a way for a large company to meet its needs in terms of labour resources and to recognize the expertise, knowledge, and skill of our veterans.

Canadian veterans, as you know, have been trained all their lives and have great qualities of discipline and loyalty and work ethic that are above those of many others. That's why Canadian veterans are wanted at all levels of the work market. They are skilled. If we consider all the investment that has been made in the training that our military people have received throughout their careers, they are quite a great asset for a company to acquire.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you, Minister.

We'll now go to Ms. Papillon for our second round, for four minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Annick Papillon (Québec, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, what is the annual cost of Ste. Anne's Hospital and what will be the budget impact of its transfer to the province of Quebec?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** I could send you the exact figures involved in that transfer.

**Ms. Annick Papillon:** You don't have them now.

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Instead of giving you a random figure, I will send you the exact information.

**Ms. Annick Papillon:** Very well.

Once the Ste. Anne's Hospital transfer is completed, do you intend to transfer the available funds to other long-term care programs our veterans have been calling for?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Several hundred veterans will still be patients at the hospital when the transfer is made. The transfer agreement we are negotiating with the Government of Quebec currently contains a significant clause whereby we would pay for the beds occupied by veterans. So we will have to make substantial investments to ensure that our veterans receive quality care, in both official languages.

• (0940)

**Ms. Annick Papillon:** Do you intend to preserve the expertise of the Ste. Anne's Hospital staff, who are internationally renowned for the care they provide to veterans?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Absolutely, Ms. Papillon. We are currently facing a clientele problem. The number of veterans at the hospital is unfortunately dropping monthly. So the hospital management has a staff surplus. If we do not take action, the staff will have a reduced workload, and that will jeopardize not only the jobs, but also the quality of care. We are transferring the hospital in partnership with the Quebec government in order to maintain the quality of care.

**Ms. Annick Papillon:** Veterans Affairs Canada had 3,947 employees in 2009-2010, and it will have considerably fewer employees in 2013-2014, when the number is projected to be 3,463. However, those projections do not take into account the cuts made in the last budget. Will the number of employees be revised downward again in the 2013-2014 Report on Plans and Priorities?

At the Quebec City office, in my riding and our region, 11 client service agent positions have been cut. Veterans regularly drop by my office to complain about the lack of front-line services. You have talked a lot about cutting red tape. It's true that no one likes to fill out forms, but there's nothing like having access to a real live person when we feel overwhelmed by a lack of answers. Will you revise the number of employees in the report?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** I am surprised by your question. We are hiring people in sectors where needs are the greatest. To answer your question, the figures provided take into account all the measures we are putting forward and our projections, since we adjust the number of employees based on the needs, especially in the regions and close to military bases, in areas such as Valcartier, Trenton and near Petawawa. We are planning to hire more case managers, and we are exceeding our ratios in terms of the number of case managers available per veteran.

**Ms. Annick Papillon:** If you plan to increase the number of case managers....

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** We are already doing that regularly, Ms. Papillon.

**Ms. Annick Papillon:** However, you have cut jobs.

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** On the contrary, people have been hired at the Valcartier office and the Quebec City office, over the past year, to adjust to the reality.

**Ms. Annick Papillon:** But what about the 11 positions that have been cut?

[English]

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** I'm sorry, that's it.

Mr. Minister, with your indulgence, could we have just a couple more minutes of your time? My colleagues Mr. Hayes and Mr. O'Toole would like to ask you a couple of quick questions as well before you go. Thank you.

Mr. Hayes, please.

**Mr. Bryan Hayes (Sault Ste. Marie, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Minister, I think the announcement on the Year of the Korean War Veteran was great. The forgotten war; it's great we're no longer forgetting it.

I understand commemorative events have already taken place this year to mark the Year of the Korean War Veteran. Could you outline what events have taken place, what events might be forthcoming, and also whether or not there are funds available to communities who may wish to honour the Korean War veteran? Thank you.

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Absolutely. I thank you for your question.

Under the leadership of our Prime Minister, we have launched a community partnership program. Every organization that is willing to organize and even pay a tribute to our veterans can go to our website, fill out the form, and have access to funding through this program. That means we can support initiatives, and we are doing it already, throughout communities so that we are paying tribute to our veterans.

Of course throughout the years as a government, as I've mentioned, we intend to pay a special tribute to our Korean War veterans during Remembrance Week. There have already been special events, like the Imjin River hockey tournament that took place here in Ottawa. There are some exhibitions, and there are events happening throughout the country as well.

• (0945)

**Mr. Bryan Hayes:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Mr. O'Toole, please.

**Mr. Erin O'Toole (Durham, CPC):** I'd like to thank my colleague Mr. Hayes for allowing me part of his time so I could ask a question. Thank you, Minister.

As the rookie on this committee I want to echo the comments of Mr. Zimmer. I had the good fortune in my work with the True Patriot Love Foundation for military families and veterans to see you at Crieé d'automne in Valcartier, with the veterans transition program, even at Remembrance Day. I think you're one of the most hands-on ministers this department has seen in a generation.

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Thank you.

**Mr. Erin O'Toole:** My question specifically is on the veterans independence program. You have eliminated red tape, which is terrific. I note this program is generally drawn upon by older veterans. I noticed the pension and benefit payments are slightly decreasing, while the veterans independence program is slightly increasing. I would imagine that's partially due to the fact that widows and survivors can maintain this program and in some cases access it for the first time.

Could you speak a little about that? I think it's important to talk about how after the veteran passes away, their surviving spouse receives that benefit.

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Sure, Mr. O'Toole, and if I may return the compliment, it's always great as a member of Parliament to have among us a Canadian who has served our country, and who has a great and respected experience. I think it's an asset for all parliamentarians to have you as a former member of the military in our Parliament.

Regarding your question, through VIP our government has taken the initiative to make sure that every time we lose a veteran, the veteran's partner, whether a man or woman, a widow or widower, can have the same access to the same benefits the deceased veteran was entitled to. This is an expansion of the veterans independence program. That's why there are more than 30,000 widows throughout the country who are benefiting from the program.

Hopefully by the end of this committee I will be able to tell them that I got the support from the veterans affairs committee so we are able to move forward with the supplementary estimates and with the main estimates as well.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you, Mr. O'Toole and Mr. Minister.

That concludes our time with you this morning. Thank you very much for coming.

I remind the committee that Madam Chaput and Madam Stewart will be here shortly afterwards. We will suspend for a couple of minutes to say our goodbyes.

Minister, before you go, we understand one of your employees, Derek Sullivan, who did a tremendous job on Canada Remembers for many years—I have travelled with him on several occasions—is leaving us and leaving the department eventually.

If you can, please offer on behalf of the committee and our chair, Greg Kerr, our sincere wishes on a happy retirement for him. He has done a tremendous job for veterans and for Canada when he serves overseas in those remembrance programs. If you can give him our very best, we'd appreciate it.

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** I sure will.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you for your time.

[Translation]

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

[English]

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** We'll suspend for two minutes, and then we'll come right back.

Thanks.

● (0945)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

● (0950)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** In continuing our discussion today, first of all I want to apologize to Mary Chaput; I was pronouncing her name incorrectly. I'm sorry. I apologize for that.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** That's okay.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** We're also joined by Charlotte Stewart.

Thank you both very much for coming.

We understand that we're going to go directly into questions. Just to remind everyone, we need to be done by around 10:30 so that we can get on to the votes on the estimates as well. So if we can, let's make it very quick.

I'm going to reduce turns to four minutes so that everybody can have a chance.

We'll start off with Mr. Chicoine, please, for four minutes.

[Translation]

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, Ms. Stewart and Ms. Chaput. Thank you for being here today to answer our questions.

I have a question about the line in the main estimates that mentions housekeeping and grounds maintenance. We see that \$251 million is projected for 2013-2014. I don't understand at all. By comparison, about \$36 million is allocated for services to veterans. I don't understand that \$251-million amount. That's almost \$200 million more. I'm confused.

[English]

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** I'll have Charlotte add to this when I'm done, but the costs you're looking at, sir, relate to the program in its entirety. As the minister has explained, it's a demand-driven program based on market rates and usage by veterans, so the figures go up and go down for different components of the program. All the increases you see are associated with the expenses that veterans will incur for groundskeeping or housekeeping, for which, as the minister explained, we now provide upfront funding to avoid the veteran's being out of pocket.

Any increases you see related to the veterans independence program very definitely flow through the department into the pockets of veterans.

Charlotte, did you want to clarify further?

**Ms. Charlotte Stewart (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Human Resources and Corporate Services, Department of Veterans Affairs):** No, that's correct.

We do of course forecast our demand based on the number of veterans we expect to use these programs. What's very important is that, because of the demand-driven nature of our programs, we adjust our forecasts and adjust our requested funds to reflect increased demand. This program is a reflection of the fact that we expect to have more veterans who will avail themselves of it.

[Translation]

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** I don't understand your explanations. There is no figure for real years 2011-2012. We see \$36 million under the estimates to date in 2013. However, for 2013-2014, the amount is \$251 million. I don't understand your explanations. There is probably an explanation, but I still don't understand.

• (0955)

[English]

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** I think, sir, that what you're perhaps looking at is the increase we see in the supplementary estimates—

[Translation]

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** Yes, that is right.

[English]

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** —and what amount that brings the total spending for this program area to. The smaller number is the increment in these supplementary estimates; the total number is the spending associated with the program in that year.

You would see the same thing in the main estimates. The number would go up or go down, and you would be presented with a new total.

Does that help?

[Translation]

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** Yes, that helps me. I did not understand the whole explanation.

An additional 2.3% is allocated to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, or VRAB. Does that increase include an amount allocated to help VRAB publish the board's decisions? Will an amount be set aside to enable the board to do that?

That is what the board's representatives mentioned to the committee. They did not have enough money to publish their decisions, even though the ombudsman requested that. Will a decent amount be included in that 2.3% increase in the future, to enable them to publish their decisions?

[English]

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Thank you.

As the members of the committee may know, the budget for the Veterans Review and Appeal Board is separate and apart from that of the department. There is no mixing of expenditures or flow-through of funds from one organization to the other. The budget of Veterans Affairs is going up by 2%. That will be used for the programs we administer and for the benefits and services we provide to veterans. The requirements of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, be they related to publication of decisions or other matters, would be handled through separate main estimates and separate supplementary estimates.

The short answer is that none of the money in the Veterans Affairs Canada budget would flow to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. Those needs would be attended to elsewhere.

The minister and the chair of the board, Mr. Larlee, in particular attend to the operating budget of the board. I, as the deputy minister

of Veterans Affairs, do not become involved in their business, it being a quasi-judicial tribunal.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you, Madam.

Thank you, Mr. Chicoine.

We now go to Mr. Zimmer, please.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Thank you for coming today.

I'm going to ask you about some numbers. I've been trying to put some meaning to the numbers we have before us.

From reviewing supplementary estimates (C), I believe the amounts for the veterans independence program are close to \$40 million. Could you please highlight the increased amount for this program and the rationale behind it?

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** The increasing amount, or the delta—the additional funding provided by virtue of supplementary estimates (C), should they be approved—is indeed close to \$40 million. That \$40 million is required by the department and in turn by veterans for two reasons.

The principal reason is the conversion of the program from a contribution program to a grant program, as explained by the minister. What this means is that instead of veterans being provided with reimbursement for their expenses, they are provided with an upfront payment in anticipation of those expenses. In that way, they're never out of pocket.

Because of the change in the sequencing of those payments—we're paying the same amount, but sooner—the requirement for funding hits the balance sheet, one could say, sooner, and we therefore see an increase here in the amount of money.

That is in part the explanation for the \$40-million increase. The other part of it has to do with an increase in both the number of people availing themselves of the program and the types of services they're availing themselves of.

As you would know, there is groundskeeping and housekeeping, but there are also elements of the program that relate to such things as personal care. When a veteran is still at home but may be in need of someone coming in a couple of times a week to help with personal care, we provide that as well through the program. This is a more expensive component of the program, and therefore it drives the costs up disproportionately as more people shift into that area of the program.

• (1000)

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Sure.

I have another question.

There is another increase, of \$5.5 million for their earnings loss and supplementary retirement benefits. I want you to explain why that increase was included.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** You're right, sir, that approximately \$5 million relates to both earnings loss and the Canadian Forces income supplement.

Basically, that increased cost is driven by the fact that while veterans are in rehab, be it vocational rehab, medical rehab, or psychosocial rehab, we cover the cost of the earnings they forgo by virtue of being in rehab.

As veterans' needs change and in these days become more complex, their time in rehab has become a little longer than it has been in the past. Whereas in the past a veteran had typically stayed in rehab, if they needed it, for about 24 months, we're seeing that period now extend to about 38 months. Because of the 38-month versus 24-month period, earnings loss payments have increased as a result.

I would say part of the beauty of the program is that a veteran doesn't have to rush through rehab and risk an unsuccessful transition into civilian life. They can take the time they need, knowing their earnings will be attended to during that period. It allows for a very unrushed, comprehensive, and successful transition.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you very much, Madam Chaput.

Now we go to Mr. Casey, please, for four minutes.

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

Welcome, Madam Chaput and Ms. Stewart.

We've heard at this committee and in the public, when we talk about broad numbers within your department, that the Department of Veterans Affairs operates on a budget of about \$3.6 billion, about 90% of which is paid out to veterans.

It's true that this has been stated in the past, right?

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Yes.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Is it roughly accurate?

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Yes, sir, it is. I could break it down a little bit for you, if you wish.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Well, the reason I've posed the question is that the backgrounder we've been given from the Library of Parliament indicates a flow-through of between 70% and 74%.

Have you seen that backgrounder?

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** I have not, but I could potentially explain what the confusion or difference might relate to.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Sure.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Typically a department's operating budget is shown in what's called vote 1. Our vote 1 represents much more than our operating budget, so it's possible that the Library of Parliament assumed that all of vote 1 was our operating budget.

In fact, our vote 1 is worth almost \$1 billion, and that is because included in our vote 1 is about \$650 million associated with purchases we make on behalf of veterans. It's not actual programs and services, but it's purchases we make for such things as glasses, dental, drugs, even special equipment for their homes. All of those purchases are included in our vote 1 amount.

So when you separate those purchases as well as the budget for Ste. Anne's Hospital, and then finally the costs of rehab, which are also included in our vote 1, you end up with what we call our pure

operating budget, which is in the order of \$230 million. If you add Ste. Anne's to that, it comes up to about \$330 million.

That may be the reason that the Library of Parliament cast its light differently.

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

In terms of the raw numbers of employees within the department, in the last four years we've seen that number go from just under 4,000 to the most recent number in the report on planning and priorities; that number for the next year is projected to be under 3,500. We're about ready for the next report on planning and priorities, in which there will be, I presume, an updated number.

I have two questions. One, do you anticipate that the number in the last report, the 3,463, is about right? Two, given that this is a reduction from last year, can you give us some insight as to where you expect to see the cuts as between head office and the regions?

• (1005)

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Sure. The numbers in the RPP are planning figures, as you know. They're not soft estimates, but they are not actual head counts on any given day. That's because, as you would know, there's an ebb and flow to employees joining and leaving the department.

In Veterans Affairs in particular, a couple of variables in the equation make it even harder to predict than it might be for other departments. Over 30% of the workforce in our department is eligible to retire. That doesn't mean they will, but they may. That can cause the number to go up and down at any point. Moreover, temporary programming comes and goes, and as you would know, transformation of the department is under way whereby, frankly, we're catching up with the business of government in terms of the movement from paper to electronic processes. That's changing our skill mix. It's changing somewhat the things we have people doing on a day-to-day basis, but I would say the biggest variable is that eligibility to retire and the choices people will make in that regard.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you very much, Madam.

Now we go on to Ms. Adams for four minutes, please.

**Ms. Eve Adams:** In fact, it's Mr. Lobb.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Sorry, Mr. Lobb.

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** You touched a little just now on the movement of labour and the arrangement of labour within the department. I'm wondering if you could tell the committee about attrition and what you're experiencing. If you could start there, that'd be great.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Sure. We include in attrition both spontaneous departures when people get a job or make a choice to leave for a career change on any given day as well as those who retire with a full pension.

We had anticipated that retirements would slow to a certain degree with the onset of government downsizing. In our department, there hasn't been a significant change. People are continuing to retire. That's because these people aren't only eligible to retire, but they're much past the point of being eligible to retire, meaning they're almost as old as I am. They're not 55. They're older than 55. They've got to a certain point in their career. In combination with their pension, they feel confident in leaving the public service.

Our attrition rate remains reasonably stable. We have people leaving and people coming. That's spread proportionally throughout the department's headquarters and regions. It's not always an even-stein match because of shifts in local markets. Generally speaking, we're seeing a steady movement through the department in terms of attrition.

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** Nobody ever wants to lose their job, but it does seem quite fair. I came from the private sector and worked in the automotive parts manufacturing sector. I can tell you the approach in that sector, in industry, is far and away different from the approach taken in the public sector, which in many ways is 100 times fairer to all the workers, especially the younger employees.

• (1010)

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Yes.

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** I appreciate your comments. The other thing I want to talk about, and I asked Minister Blaney about this as well, is more on what you're doing as far as implementing technology. He touched on where the veterans will touch, but tell us a little more about behind the scenes, what's going on inside the administration, and how the transformation's taking place about the technology being used.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** There are a couple of technological advancements that are actually changing the way employees do their work in a very fundamental fashion. You've probably heard about case managers who we are now equipping, on a pilot basis, with mobile technology. That would allow a case manager to meet veterans at any point, be it in their home or in a Tim Hortons, and to work with them as to what benefits they are getting, what benefits they might need. They would be able to open the veterans' files electronically and track where an application might be. That is one example of how a case manager's work is changing.

Other elements of the technological epiphany in Veterans Affairs have to do with how we are securing records from both DND, from which we secure service records, and Library and Archives, the organization that holds the records after a veteran has left the government. In both cases we used to get paper copies of these documents and move them around within the department on a need-to-know basis, in a physical way. At this stage of the game we secure, not completely, but increasingly those records in an electronic fashion, which would allow more than one employee to work on the same record in close succession.

The important thing about securing electronic records and working more digitally, if we can say that, is that at the same time the organization has to be very careful to ensure that only those who should have access, do have access. That brings us to yet another group of employees who, by virtue of the transformation, are doing a different type of work. Those would be the employees in our

information technology and information management sector, who are continually monitoring our systems to ensure that access privileges are as they should be, that an employee who needs access to records gets access by virtue of passwords, etc., and that employees who do not need access to records are not allowed entry into systems.

There is a very pervasive change in the department at many, many levels as we move into this electronic world.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you very much, Madam, and Mr. Lobb.

Now we will go to Ms. Mathysen, for four minutes, please.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here.

I want to begin by saying I am very aware of the Standing Orders and the fact that estimates are tabled on March 1, but those same Standing Orders also indicate that we have until the end of June to take a look at the budgetary priorities of departments. I must say I'm also concerned about the fact that we've heard from various actuaries, the Auditor General, and the perhaps somewhat maligned Parliamentary Budget Officer that estimates never receive the attention they need. They're rushed through. There needs to be greater scrutiny if we're to do the job that MPs are intended to do in regard to careful examination.

I come right back to my concern about passing these main estimates and the supplementary estimates today, because I have so many questions.

First and foremost, we usually see a breakdown in regard to costs. In this particular main estimates publication, they're not included. I'm wondering if it's possible that you could provide us with the expenditure details for each of the elements combined in the operating costs that make up vote 1 of the 2013-14 estimates. That would be in regard to the salaries, long-term care, etc.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** We'd certainly be happy to provide you with those kinds of details if they are helpful to you. It is true that the shape and form of the estimates this year, for all government departments, was adjusted by the Treasury Board Secretariat to relate more to strategic outcomes than to areas of operation. My understanding is the idea was that by linking estimates to outcomes, Canadians and parliamentarians would be able to see the depth of investment in a certain objective or intended outcome, as distinct from the depth of investment in a certain area of activity within a department, and it would be more meaningful from that point of view.

• (1015)

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Thank you. I appreciate that extra detail, but of course, it doesn't help if we're going to vote on the main estimates today. It's sort of putting the cart before the horse.

I'm also wondering, in regard to the main estimates, about the funding related to the government's decision to end the offset of disability benefits. You may have touched on it before, but I would just like some clarity in regard to what that decision refers to.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Well, certainly I can clarify. You'll know of what's called the Manuge decision, whereby the court made a decision related to a class of recipients who received benefits from the Department of National Defence. The government made a decision to go beyond the court order and apply the spirit and intent of the court decision to those programs that we offer from Veterans Affairs. What we have therefore done, consistent with that decision, is ceased the deduction of disability benefits from two programs, earnings loss and Canadian Forces income supplement, these being programs offered by Veterans Affairs. As the minister was noting, he's also pursuing legislative change to allow him to cease those same offsets as they relate to the War Veterans Allowance Act.

You will see in the main estimates a net increase of \$70 million, but in fact there is an \$85-million increase offset by a \$15-million decrease elsewhere, and that \$85 million relates in part to the cessation of offsets in the earnings loss program.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you very much, Madam.

Now we go to Mr. Lizon, please, for four minutes.

**Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'll start with a very general question. In your opinion, is the funding provided in the main estimates enough for the proper care and treatment of Canada's veterans?

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Yes, sir. I'm quite confident that the funding provided is sufficient for the appropriate care of veterans. My confidence stems from the fact that our programs are what are called quasi-statutory, meaning that, if and when it's determined that we need more funding to deal with the needs of veterans, then we can go back to the government for supplementary estimates whereby we can table renewed forecasts and associated financial requirements. So for our department, there is always an avenue to come back to the table, so to speak, to get any additional funding that may be required.

That said, we make every effort at the juncture of main estimates to get our forecasts as precise as we can to avoid the need for supplementary estimates. But that precision depends on things such as release rates, mortality rates, and take-up rates within programs, and to a certain degree, you're trying to predict human behaviour. As I said, while we try to get our forecasts very tight, we do have that safety valve that supplementary estimates offer and quasi-stat funding allows.

**Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon:** Would you agree that the changes in funding for certain grants and benefits are due to a forecasted decrease in access to the benefits by veterans? Can you give some examples?

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** I will start and then I'll have Charlotte fill in the blanks for you.

Certainly the changes in our programs are twofold. They're related to the style of delivery, be they grants or contributions. Grants always cause an upfront payment versus an after-the-fact payment, so it changes the timing of the expenditure and causes them to, as I said, hit the balance sheet sooner. As well, there is always an ebb and flow of the number of people who are partaking in a program, and so that causes the programs to go up and go down.

One would expect that, and what we have seen is that the new Veterans Charter programs are typically increasing in costs as people come to those programs in greater numbers. The more traditional programs, such as VIP, one would expect to see fall, the fact of the matter is that many of what we call modern-day veterans are getting to the age that they are now also availing themselves of VIP.

And I should note that I don't mean to imply that VIP is only for the elderly. It's for any veteran who has the need for that kind of household support by virtue of—it could be very definitely by virtue of—a service-related injury at a young age.

Charlotte, do you want to add to that?

• (1020)

**Ms. Charlotte Stewart:** I think the deputy minister has outlined the complexity of our forecasts and how it's not necessarily a straightforward matter to say that if a program is increasing it's related to one particular cause. But just quickly, our disability pensions, which is our largest program in the department, has been in place for many years. While Canadian armed forces members can have a disability pension, it's predominantly used by the traditional war veterans. As our largest program, we are seeing a decline in that area, driven by the declining numbers. On the new Veterans Charter side, we're seeing a 20% increase year to year in this program. That's a good sign. That's the number of people who are getting access to this program, coming into it and availing themselves of it.

I'll mention one area that's increasing quite rapidly, and that's in the earnings loss area. I mention this because it goes back to several factors. One is the enhancements to the new Veterans Charter, where there is a minimum pre-tax base for assessment. This allowed more veterans to avail themselves of it, but also increase the amount that they received. In addition to that, we have an increase in the numbers who are using the program. The third change is related to the recent decision to not offset disability pensions. So within one program, which two years ago was quite small, we've seen three major changes affect over 50% of the participants in that program.

To your question, our forecasts and our management of these programs is very precise, as precise as can be, but to the deputy minister's point, we have to always be prepared for variables.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you.

Now we go to Mr. Hayes, please, for four minutes. Thank you.

**Mr. Bryan Hayes:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

If we did not pass the main estimates today, do you feel they would change if we waited six weeks from now? An awful lot of time and effort and a lot of forecasting, a lot of work, went into presenting the supplementary estimates, preparing those and the main estimates. If you came here six weeks from now, I would anticipate we'd probably see the same numbers, wouldn't we?



**Ms. Mary Chaput:** You would see the same numbers. The preparation of our main estimates actually begins way back in about May, when we begin to update our forecasts on the take-up of our main programs and run mathematical models as to what the costs of those programs would be. Over the course of the summer we work on those calculations, and we vet them with parties like DND, but outside parties as well. Hired actuarial experts look at our costing assumptions to confirm or correct that they're within the realm of the reasonable. That whole process of updating the estimates takes close to six months, so a six-week period at this stage of the game would not change our estimates.

**Mr. Bryan Hayes:** Thank you.

Since 2005, there's been an \$800-million increase in your budget, and directly into the pockets of veterans, I might add. I'm on public accounts as well. We're having an Auditor General's report today and we're looking at the long-term fiscal sustainability. So I want to get a sense of where you see your budget five years down the road. We've had a significant gain. What do you do in terms of planning for down the road? I'm looking specifically at what will the demands be, and how you are factoring in the modern veterans, and what considerations you look at in terms of long-term fiscal sustainability.

• (1025)

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Certainly we attempt to look five years out. As you know, we're not funded five years out, but we always try to have an eye towards the rolling calculus. In that degree, we would rely to a certain extent on our research and statistical division, which would tell us what the trends are in things like release rates and program participation. We would attempt, based on things like the average age of a veteran, to extrapolate on use of programs today and into the future.

We'd also, though, from a sustainability point of view, look at program design and whether the needs of the veterans are evolving in a different way that would require us to change programs and change costing. For example, we're in the early stages of looking at mental health issues, because we anticipate, as we do with the Canadian health system writ large, challenges as we move forward. The physical issues that veterans face are treatable, and the costs are known. The mental impacts are tougher to quantify and therefore we're always looking at our program design from that point of view.

From the perspective of sustainability, we are always trying to attend to the needs of the veteran but up front to be more proactive around mitigating them or preventing them entirely through good things like appropriate rehabilitation and other psychosocial programs we have.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you very much.

Now we will go to Ms. Papillon, please.

[Translation]

**Ms. Annick Papillon:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to support my colleague's statement to the effect that transparency is sometimes lacking when we want to access certain information. That prevents us, as parliamentarians, from doing a better job, going beyond information and determining—even on the opposition side—whether we agree with what is happening within the government.

The estimates set out departmental priorities for 2013-2014, such as improving service delivery and advancing the fair treatment of the veteran community. The goal is commendable, but what kind of concrete plans does the department have to improve the situation with regard to those important issues? I would like to know what the new programs and investments are, since I am being told that more will be done with less despite those cutbacks to the department's operating costs. It is difficult for us to find out what changes will be made to programs, services and investments.

[English]

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Okay. In large part those improvements you're talking about have to do with the manner in which we're delivering our programs. As I've made reference to, the movement is towards more electronic service delivery. There are new e-tools that we're just rolling out now. An example would be what we call the post-traumatic stress disorder app or coach, which allows a veteran using a mobile device to assess how they are doing from a mental health point of view.

Other improvements would be things like increased functionality on already existing tools such as the My VAC Account, which is like a bank account, but it's a program and services account that veterans can avail themselves of to track their applications, to track where their application is in the system and whether it has been approved yet, and to track when payment will be received.

What's interesting about the My VAC Account is that in the course of the last 18 months, subscriptions to that have gone up by almost 200%. Even more interesting is that among those subscriptions, over 1,300 are by veterans who are over 60 years old, and over 100 are by veterans over 90 years old. We are seeing veterans subscribe to these processes much more broadly.

• (1030)

[Translation]

**Ms. Annick Papillon:** Unfortunately, I have very little time. It is great that you are moving towards more electronic service delivery. However, I am not sure that would help everyone. The minister said he was planning to hire more case managers, probably at the expense of other types of jobs. What jobs within the department were affected the most?

Jobs are being cut—that is very clear—but the minister is saying that recruitment and hiring is in full swing within the department. So in what area exactly will the transfer be made? According to the minister, case managers are being hired, but what positions will be cut within the department?

[English]

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** It is true that we're hiring case managers in those offices where the veteran demographics require further case managers. The minister made reference to Quebec, I believe. What we find is that anywhere where we are operating near a base or a wing, veterans tend to settle, even after their military careers.

[Translation]

**Ms. Annick Papillon:** But the positions of people who will be...

[English]

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** I'm sorry, Madam Papillon. That's it.

We now need to move to Mr. O'Toole, please.

Thank you.

**Mr. Erin O'Toole:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Chaput and Ms. Stewart.

I think, like many Canadians, that people are starting to recognize the shift within Veterans Affairs, and I admire the department's moves in regard to making sure that we care for what I might call our traditional veterans. When people think of their local cenotaph, they think of World War II or Korean War vets. I had the honour of participating in a Remembrance Day ceremony years ago with Bowmanville's last World War I veteran, Fred West. They're recognizing there's a new generation of veterans, the new veterans.

I note in the estimates that disability awards and other benefits have seen an increase of 72%, so we're starting to see disability related to Afghanistan, but I have a more general question. If we wanted to categorize new veterans as 50 years of age and under—or maybe the department does it in a certain way—I'm wondering how much of an increase for overall services of Veterans Affairs Canada are these new veterans.... How much is that increasing each year, on all services? Are you studying a rate of uptake of services among that new cohort of veterans?

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** I'm going to let Charlotte answer that.

**Ms. Charlotte Stewart:** Overall, we are watching that, and it does vary by program. I think one that's very indicative is the rehab program, where now we have 5,700 veterans who are participating. For that, with the earnings loss that goes along with it, we've seen an increase of about 20%.

Now, there are many factors that bring people into these programs. Some will come to our department through conversations when they release from the military, through transition interviews. They'll be made aware of Veterans Affairs Canada, and they may come into our department quite quickly after they release. Others may release, move on, and then at a future point require the services of Veterans Affairs Canada. Through outreach, they'll become aware of it as well.

The inflow and the increases don't all happen just at the end of an engagement, for instance, such as an engagement in Afghanistan or another similar event. It's not necessarily going to work in a linear fashion, if I could say it that way. What we manage, what we look at, is how many people are accessing our programs. We know that it's increasing by about 20%. I mentioned earlier that the disability pension program continues to see a decline, which is at about the same rate.

I guess to go to your question, it's very important for us to understand this, but at the same time, we need to be looking to the future and trying to determine what the needs will be there. That will bring in potentially a different type of client at different times.

**Mr. Erin O'Toole:** That's perfect. I have a follow-up on that, based in part on the minister's comments about e-services.

Looking again at both the traditional veterans and the new cohort of veterans, and the e-services and mobile apps, which I think are admirable, because that new generation of veterans will use services in that way, is the department tracking adoption rates of these new services?

Also, it was alluded to earlier that some of the traditional veterans have caregivers or children accessing the e-services. Are we tracking that as well as to how much uptake of these services there is and how many veterans are actually having someone assist them?

• (1035)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Mr. O'Toole, that's a very good question.

If we can have a response fairly quickly, that would be great. Thank you.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Yes, okay.

Yes, we do track it, because we want to make sure that we're investing in those processes that are most useful to them. For My VAC Account, for example, my understanding is that we have 5,300 subscribers now, that number having increased greatly, as I said, in the past year and a half.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you very much, Mr. O'Toole.

I have a very quick question before we go to Eve Adams.

I was very pleased at the system decision that the earnings loss benefit be tagged onto that. That was extremely helpful.

One other offset still happens on disability payments. My friend Mr. Hillier knows this very well.

A fair number of military and RCMP veterans have been medically released from their departments, and unfortunately they cannot work anymore. They receive Canada pension plan disability. The unfortunate part is whatever they receive from Canada pension plan disability is deducted from whatever superannuation they receive. That offset is still happening. That's not affecting too many of them, but it is still affecting some of them.

Are you in discussions with the department and Treasury Board and others regarding the offsets and what can be done to continue this program? Anything that can be done to eliminate that offset of Canada pension plan disability from military and RCMP individuals would go a long way to helping those individuals.

I leave that as a general comment.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** I'll ask that.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you very much.

Ms. Adams, please.

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

When the members of the Canadian armed forces serve overseas for us, we ask them to stand in harm's way. We invest in them at the same time as they move through their career. Canadians are well known for investing in the careers of the members of the armed forces.

When they choose to leave we're spending quite a bit of our resources assisting them in that transition.

Can you speak a little about that transition from military to civilian life?

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Certainly.

As the minister mentioned, there are a number of initiatives in this area, helmets to hardhats probably being the most well known. That's the process whereby unions in both the construction and the skilled trades sectors make jobs known to and available to veterans, there being a very obvious skill match there.

There are a number of others. One the minister didn't get an opportunity to mention is the work the department is doing with the Public Service Commission to try to make it simpler for veterans to move from a military career into a career in the public service.

As you may know, there are veterans who medically release from the military. For a certain period of time they are considered priorities in terms of hiring. We're working with the public service to see if we can extend that period of time.

Moreover there are veterans who have never ever in their career, since the point at which they enlisted, attended an interview, written an exam, prepared a CV, or searched for jobs. So with partners we have a number of other initiatives to help them in those kind of job-seeking activities to ensure the transition is successful.

**Ms. Eve Adams:** I have a final question for you, please. When the current government took office in 2006, the budget at Veterans Affairs was under \$3 billion. It has now grown substantially.

Can you give us a quick overview on where those investments have been made? For instance I certainly think the establishment of the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman is a brand new expenditure this government undertook. What are some of the other key items that have led to the dramatic increase in spending at Veterans Affairs?

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** I'll give you the high points, and then I'll ask Charlotte to fill in the gaps.

Certainly the enhancements to the new Veterans Charter, Bill C-55 account for a significant portion of that increase.

**Ms. Eve Adams:** Are these added benefits that go directly to our veterans, our most seriously injured and ill veterans?

• (1040)

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Precisely.

They include things like the guaranteed income of about \$40,000 per veteran and the permanent impairment allowance supplement of \$1,000 per month for those who are very seriously injured and cannot secure gainful employment. Of course there's the disability award. The other feature of Bill C-55 was the option to secure or obtain the disability award in installments versus a lump sum. Then the final piece, a fourth piece, is the expansion of the VIP to a broader number of veterans and other recipients to ensure we work hard to keep those veterans, be they young or old, who wish to stay in their homes, in a position to do that. That would be a large component of the most recent increases.

The other increases you see in the estimates over time have to do with demographic shifts. As the numbers go up in certain areas of programming, as Charlotte said, earnings loss being one of them, the quasi- statutory increases are required to support that.

Further back in time there was what was known as the legacy of care. I'm going to let Charlotte comment on those elements.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** If you could hand that to us in writing in the future, it would be great. We're just out of time right now.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Sure.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** On behalf of the committee, we want to thank the two of you, Madam Chaput and Madam Charlotte Stewart, for being with us today and helping us along with our discussion of the estimates. On behalf of the committee and Mr. Kerr, who can't be here, thank you and your officials very much for coming today.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Thank you for having us.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** We will suspend for 30 seconds. We'll come right back and do the votes.

Thank you both very much.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Thank you very much, sir.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** We're voting on the supplementary estimates (C). Pursuant to Standing Order 81(5), the supplementary estimates (C) for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2013, vote 5c under Veterans Affairs was deemed referred to the standing committee on February 25, 2013.

A quorum of seven is required. We have that.

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Department

Vote 5c—The grants listed in the Estimates and contributions.....\$44,755,000

(Vote 5c agreed to)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Shall I report the supplementary estimates to the House?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you very much.

We're voting on the main estimates. Pursuant to Standing Order 81 (4), the main estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2014, votes 1, 5, and 10 under Veterans Affairs were deemed referred to the standing committee on February 25, 2013.

A quorum of seven is required, which we have.

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Department

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$871,509,739

Vote 5—The grants listed in the Estimates and contributions.....\$2,726,718,500

Veterans Review and Appeal Board

Vote 10—Program expenditures.....\$9,995,067

(Votes 1, 5, and 10 agreed to)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Shall I report the main estimates to the House?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

Ladies and gentlemen, that's it. Well done.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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