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## **Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Thursday, November 21, 2013**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Royal Galipeau**



## Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Thursday, November 21, 2013

• (1100)

[English]

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP)):** Good morning, everyone.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and pursuant to our study of the new Veterans Charter, the committee is extremely pleased to have Lieutenant General Walter Semianiw, assistant deputy minister of policy, communications and commemoration, from the Department of Veterans Affairs, and Janice Burke, the senior director of strategic policy integration. I love those titles.

I also want to recognize Andrea Siew of the Royal Canadian Legion, who I believe, if I'm saying it right, is their policy person for service officers across the country.

**Ms. Andrea Siew (Director, Service Bureau, Royal Canadian Legion):** Absolutely.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** May I say, on behalf of the committee, you do a great job.

Also I'd like to let the witnesses know that our regular chairperson, Mr. Royal Galipeau, unfortunately can't be with us today. I'm sure he would send his thanks to you for coming and helping us in pursuit of our study.

At this time, if you'd like to proceed, Mr. Semianiw, go ahead, please.

[Translation]

**LGen Walter Semianiw (Assistant Deputy Minister, Policy, Communications and Commemoration, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

First, Mr. Chair, on behalf of the deputy minister and the department, we'd like to congratulate you on being named parliamentarian of the year. Clearly, we know that your support, your interest in veterans, is first and foremost and in large part has to do with that designation and that honour. We congratulate you from the deputy minister and the department for that.

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

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** *Chers collègues*, my name is Walter Semianiw. I am the assistant deputy minister of policy, communications and commemoration with Veterans Affairs, and I'm here today with my colleague Janice Burke, the director of strategic policy integration in the policy division, to give you an overview of the original design and principles of the new Veterans Charter.

As Minister Fantino noted just two days ago, he clearly asked this committee to look into this. The new Veterans Charter is a very important issue for our veterans, and we're hoping today that the information we'll provide you will perhaps be those first steps toward having an even better understanding of what we call the new Veterans Charter, and that you can all use your collective wisdom at the end of all of this to come up with some very strong ideas and recommendations about the way ahead.

[Translation]

More than half a century ago, one million Canadian servicemen and women came home from the Second World War. A grateful nation and a responsive government provided a wide range of programs to ease their adjustment to civilian life.

[English]

As a result, prior to the implementation of the new Veterans Charter, when modern-day members of the Canadian Armed Forces returned home from overseas missions with physiological or psychological injuries, there clearly was little for them beyond the disability pension program and related health care. This was a serious issue that the government of the day had to address, particularly with our involvement in the war on terror and our troops deployed to Afghanistan.

**Ms. Janice Burke (Senior Director, Strategic Policy Integration, Department of Veterans Affairs):** In looking back at the military context then, there were several factors at play that sharpened the need for change. The Canadian Armed Forces were experiencing an increased operational tempo, and deployed Canadian Armed Forces members were facing traumatic war-like peacekeeping or peacemaking conditions, resulting in significant physical and mental health impacts, including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. More of these released Canadian Armed Forces personnel than ever before were looking to VAC for assistance.

Correspondingly, the VAC context required a shift. Research was showing that VAC programs were not achieving positive outcomes for meeting the needs of veterans of Bosnia, the Gulf War, Rwanda, or other deployments, and their families. As the minister mentioned in his remarks to you on Tuesday, these veterans were not successfully re-establishing into their communities, family lives, or civilian jobs, and for good reason. There simply were no transition or rehabilitation supports available to them.

Further, the disability pension income was insufficient to meet their financial needs. Eighty per cent of Canadian Armed Forces pensioners received pensions at 30% or less, which amounts to \$800 per month for a single veteran, and there was increased pressure on the disability pension as a source of income without providing an incentive for wellness or work.

• (1105)

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** What was clear was that the previous system, the disability pension benefit as a gateway to accessing needed health care, represented an outdated approach, an approach that was not consistent with modern disability management principles and practice. Instead there was a demonstrated need for early intervention with the injured and ill based on their level of need, involvement of family members in planning for their transition to civilian life, and, most importantly, a comprehensive rehabilitation program.

**Ms. Janice Burke:** For VAC, this significant transformation in veterans programs and services began with a study of the needs of veterans and their families, starting with the review of veterans' care needs, which profiled veterans in receipt of VAC benefits and identified any gaps in benefits and services to ensure they receive the care and support they need. The review concluded that the existing programs, designed for an aging veteran population, were inadequate for a younger population, particularly for those with disabilities. These findings are consistent with a number of other reports concerned with the well-being of Canadian Forces personnel.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** I'm moving away from the speaking notes in the spirit of providing a broader context. For greater understanding, the Department of Veterans Affairs was already looking at this issue between 1996 and 2000. In the end, you're going to hear me say that we looked at this issue for a decade—not a year, not five years, but a decade—and finally determined what the NVC should look like. From 1996 to 2000, that first step, which Janice just provided, was to look into this, within the department, because the signals were very strong that things had to change for a lot of reasons.

The Veterans Affairs Canada–Canadian Forces Advisory Council—you'll see this in a lot of the readings—the VAC-CFAC, was formally established in July 2000 to provide the minister and the department with advice on enhancing existing policies or developing new policies, programs, and services for still-serving Canadian Forces personnel, veterans, and their families. This 21-member council was chaired by Dr. Neary—an important name to note—former Dean of the Faculty of Social Science at the University of Western Ontario. He was joined by other academics, researchers, and practitioners, as well as representatives from the still-serving and retired Canadian Armed Forces community and representatives from other government departments.

I'm moving away....

Mr. Chair, I apologize, but I want to make sure that we put this in context. When you look at the back of the report, which I hope members of this committee will read, it lists who those 21 individuals were. They included General Roméo Dallaire. He was part of the committee that looked at this important issue on the new Veterans Charter. It also included four other veterans—I confirmed this again last night. It included representatives from all the

stakeholders that existed at the time. Remember, at that time, this committee didn't exist. It was the Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs. At that time, there weren't all the stakeholders we see today. To hear some stakeholders today say that they didn't get a chance to write a comment is understandable because they weren't in existence at the time, or who knows if they were a veteran or part of that group.

There were the stakeholders. There were serving men and women in uniform, at the time, representing the reserve force, the regular force, as well as—very important—those from the military health care system. When you look at those 21, as you'll see if you dig down, it's fair to say that it was a very broad, very inclusive group. It included stakeholders, veterans still serving, academics. We had the collective wisdom of those who knew this issue.

Janice is going to explain in a minute what they then did, which will open up a lot of eyes—it did for me—on how broad and extensive this collaboration was as that group went out.

• (1110)

**Ms. Janice Burke:** In March 2004, the Canadian Forces Advisory Council released a major discussion paper entitled *Honouring Canada's Commitment: "Opportunity with Security" for Canadian Forces Veterans and Their Families in the 21st Century*. In its report, the Canadian Forces Advisory Council called for immediate government action, referring to the current response to the needs of Canadian Forces veterans and their families as "inadequate". This report formed the basis for the design of the modernized programs and services, otherwise known as the new Veterans Charter.

[Translation]

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** And in the process of responding to this challenge, we embarked on the most extensive consultations ever undertaken by the department.

[English]

That's a decade of review and consultation, not a year, and not two years. I'm very passionate about this, because when I read in the paper that people are saying there was very little consultation, if any, I find that hard to understand when I actually take a look at what's on the record, which is what we're going to lay out for you.

During the development of the new Veterans Charter, several rounds of consultation took place with men and women of the VAC-CFAC, as well as representatives, as I've stated, from the six major veterans organizations, including both traditional veterans and peacekeeping groups.

Feedback from the sessions was fed directly to the design team. Then those who were consulted received feedback on how these suggestions and comments were considered and/or factored into the design. This is an important point, because when you hear the presentation, it sounds like it was very linear. It wasn't. Actually, it was a loop-back mechanism, whereby ideas were worked on, developed, and brought back to men and women in uniform and to veterans to say, "Look at this: what do you think about this?", before we moved ahead to say, "Here's where we landed."

**Ms. Janice Burke:** During this period, focus groups were held with Canadian Armed Forces personnel and veterans and separately with the families of Canadian Armed Forces personnel and veterans to feed into program design. In addition, in advance of the legislation being tabled, information sessions were held at bases across the country with Canadian Armed Forces members, veterans, and their families, involving some 800 participants.

The men and women in uniform told us that they needed services and benefits that were tailored to their needs and to those of their family and that support, wellness, independence, and a successful transition to civilian life. So we did that. The Canadian Forces Members and Veterans Re-establishment and Compensation Act and regulations, called the new Veterans Charter, was designed to build a future where there's opportunity with security. That's important, because the average age at military release is 37 years, an age at which they and their families need the assurance of a secure future. They needed programs that support them if they suffer from chronic pain, permanent disability, and/or operational stress injury. They needed programs that would support them should they be grappling with employment, income, and disability support issues as they moved from a very structured military environment to civilian life. Also, they needed programs that recognized that this transition is a major adjustment for their entire family.

[Translation]

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** The New Veterans Charter shifted the focus from disability to wellness. The programs were designed as an integrated suite of benefits and services that work together to support the successful recovery, re-establishment and reintegration of veterans and their families in civilian society.

The monthly disability pension benefit was replaced with a package that includes a series of financial benefits to improve economic support, as well as the lump-sum disability award to compensate for, and recognize, the non-economic impacts of a service-related disability, such as pain and suffering.

• (1115)

[English]

**Ms. Janice Burke:** The new programs, which also included comprehensive rehabilitation, health care benefits, and career transition services, are based on the principles of modern disability management. They focus on early intervention and are tailored to the needs of the individual. They provide the most support to those with the greatest need.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Yes, and if I can note this for the members of the committee, when you look at the research, it's very, very clear. The key is not just for the veteran but for the veteran's family. The most important thing to do is to get people to gainful employment, back to work. It's not about sitting at home. The research is very clear. The longer you stay out of the workforce at home, the less likely it is that you are ever going to get back to work.

What we also know is that the skills our veterans bring to the table and to the nation are unbelievable in a lot of cases, which is again why we need to get those skills back into the workforce and back into the economy. When you took a look at the research, it was very clear why you needed to move towards a program focused on wellness, a program that focused on getting our men and women in

uniform who were injured better, so that we can get them back into society.

However, to be fair, as you will hear, in some cases that may not be possible where veterans, given the injuries they've sustained, may not be able to get back to work. That was examined as part of the charter: that first step to opportunity is rehabilitation. Veterans who were medically released or have a service-related rehabilitation need now have access to comprehensive medical, psychosocial, and vocational rehabilitation services.

As well, they will have uninterrupted health benefits for themselves and their families. To ensure that they are financially secure during their rehabilitation, or if they are unable to work, a series of monthly financial benefits is available, including earnings loss and the permanent impairment allowance—

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** General, I'm sorry, we have a point of order here.

Mr. Karygiannis.

**Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.):** Chair, this is not the first time I'm bringing this up. I have brought it up before, and it has been mentioned by my office.

Although we have reassurance that we're being piped out right now, if we were piped out, my computer would be playing my voice. So I would say to you that the public is not able to hear us. I could be wrong. I would ask that we might want to check with our offices to know that this is being heard.

This is not the first time I have brought this up. My office has repeatedly tried to get in to listen to this, and they cannot.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Mr. Karygiannis, you bring up a very good point.

I have checked with the clerk, and they are checking with our folks right now to see where the problem is.

I have just been advised by the clerk that from the House of Commons' perspective, everything is fine. I don't know the technical concern of it, but there must be a glitch or something wrong on the receiving end somewhere.

What I can assure you, sir, is that the clerk and the—

**Hon. Jim Karygiannis:** Chair, I appreciate the facts and what you're telling me. I'm telling you that I'm live at this very moment and am able to listen to the stream. If you and I, Chair, were on—

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Well, Mr. Karygiannis, I'm being advised by the clerk that from the House perspective—the committee's perspective—everything is going exactly as it should be going. As to the reason why it's not on the receiving end, we don't have the answer yet, but they're looking into it right now.

I'm being assured by the clerk and the woman behind that from this perspective the “out” part is fine—there's nothing wrong with it, they say—and it's, for whatever reason, on the receiving end that it's not working. But we will definitely look into it.

Mr. Semianiw, would you like to continue, please?

Thank you.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Mr. Chair, I'll turn it over to Ms. Burke.

**Ms. Janice Burke:** The next step to opportunity is a new career. The new Veterans Charter provides career transition services to all releasing Canadian Armed Forces personnel, not just those who are medically released.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** But that's not all. It also provides a tax-free lump sum payment of up to \$298,587 to compensate and recognize Canadian Armed Forces veterans for the non-economic impact of a service-related disability, such as pain and suffering. These lump sum payments help veterans kickstart new civilian lives, helping them invest in a new home, a new business, or just a new start.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** I just want to note that we're back on track now, to address Mr. Karygiannis's point.

Thank you.

**Ms. Janice Burke:** Another top priority that was addressed in the new Veterans Charter was how to adequately meet the needs of survivors. These individuals have dedicated their lives to supporting their loved ones and helping them in their military careers and are instrumental in achieving a successful transition to civilian life.

• (1120)

[Translation]

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** All of you in this room can truly appreciate how great the adjustment from military to civilian life is for the entire family. We need to ensure we take care of those who took personal care of our servicemen and women.

[English]

**Ms. Janice Burke:** The new Veterans Charter provides more for veterans' families than ever before. The death benefit, vocational rehabilitation, and financial benefits are available to spouses or common-law partners in cases in which the veteran is deceased or disabled.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** The charter is not perfect, but it's a strong foundation on which to build, as we did with a series of enhancements to better support our most seriously injured veterans or families in 2011, also called Bill C-55. As the minister touched on this week, these improvements represent an investment of approximately \$189 million over five years and are benefiting approximately an additional 4,000 veterans.

They include, first, an increase in the monthly financial allowance under the earnings loss benefit, bringing the minimum annual pre-tax income for full-time regular force personnel to \$42,426—and that is the 2013 rate—for those participating in rehabilitation or who are unable to be gainfully employed; second, improved access to monthly allowances, including the permanent impairment allowance under the new Veterans Charter for seriously injured veterans; third, a new monthly supplement of \$1,047 at the 2013 rate to the permanent impairment allowance, intended for the most seriously disabled veterans who are also unable to be gainfully employed; and fourth, more flexible options for the payment of the lump sum disability award.

Veterans and Canadian Armed Forces personnel receiving a disability award of more than 5% now have the choice of receiving a single lump sum payment, annual payments over any number of

years, or receiving part of the award as a lump sum and the remainder as annual payments.

Mr. Chair, in closing, and before we take your questions, I want to stress that the new Veterans Charter reflects the government's commitment to the Canadian Armed Forces, an essential piece of Canada's place in the world. In order for Canada to be able to carry out future military recruitment and retention for missions at home and abroad, our men and women in uniform and their families must know that their needs will be met if they can no longer serve in Canada's military.

Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Chair, thank you very much for the opportunity to provide this short presentation.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** General Semianiw and Janice Burke, thank you very much for your presentation.

We now go to five-minute questioning, starting with Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle.

Sir, welcome to the committee.

[Translation]

**Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle (Rivière-du-Nord, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Semianiw.

I'm no expert on the matter, but I do have some concerns. My riding is home to a number of veterans who call my office to complain about how long it takes to process their files and what a hard time they have establishing their various health problems. They also tell me that the department is very rigid in examining their cases. I would like to draw your attention—

[English]

**Mr. Bryan Hayes (Sault Ste. Marie, CPC):** Mr. Chair, excuse me. We're hearing the interpretation in English, but the sound level is very low, even though I have my volume cranked right up. I'm wondering whether it's possible for them to turn their volume up.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** As a point of order for one moment, we'll double-check with the interpreters and their equipment.

Okay?

Merci. Thank you.

[Translation]

**Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle:** Intuitively, my take on the situation is this.

The people who come to see me have several problems and run into challenges when they are trying to assert their rights. The service income security insurance plan comes up a lot. In Quebec, if someone suffers an occupational injury, the CSST pays between 85% and 90% of the person's wages. Conversely, the plan available to reservist veterans, and others, covers just 75%.

How did you arrive at the conclusion that 75% would be enough to satisfy their needs, despite the fact that provinces such as Ontario and Quebec pay 85% to 90% of a worker's income? Why is 75% sufficient for a reservist or veteran? I can't wrap my head around the fact that you came to a different conclusion than some provinces have when it comes to work-related accidents.

• (1125)

[English]

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Thank you very much for that question.

Before I turn it over to Ms. Burke, I want to remind the committee that as we parse out individual issues that come to the table, which I think are extremely important, I would say, Mr. Chair, that if there's anybody in this room who has veterans who have issues, they should just call the department. We're there to help; we're there to support and to get through any specific cases that may arise.

I would come back to saying that it's really dangerous at times, as you go through this important exercise, to pull out and ask, why 75%. We'll provide you with an answer; we'll do that. But remember, 75% is part of a broad program.

As it is, I would submit that if you take a look at the case in Quebec—85% to 95%—and look at what suite of programs is provided, and look at it with a holistic approach.... I'm not clear on exactly all that's provided in the Province of Quebec as part of a program, but regarding the 75%, Janice will explain how we came to 75%.

**Ms. Janice Burke:** As Walter indicated, it's often very difficult to compare one system with another, because they can be very different, but for the Veterans Affairs system at the time when the new Veterans Charter was created, we looked at using a dual-award approach to compensate for injuries and illnesses that were impacting upon the veteran. Essentially, perhaps differently from other systems, we created the disability award, which provides up to \$298,000 in a lump sum.

In addition to that, we provided the economic benefit, which is, as you've indicated, an earnings loss benefit that replaces 75% of a veteran's pre-release salary. But in addition to that—and this is the reason you can't compare one with another—for our most seriously injured we also provide, in recognition of economic impacts and loss of career progression, a permanent impairment allowance, which can pay up to \$1,000 a month. And on top of that, for veterans who are not able to continue to work, we also provide a permanent impairment supplement of I think approximately \$1,000 per month.

So you really have to look at the full suite and at both the non-economic and the economic benefits, because they can differ from one system to the next.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Mr. Chair, let me build on that. What I'm unaware of is whether the Province of Quebec provides, as we do in this program, up to \$75,000 for retraining as part of that vocational rehab, whether the Province of Quebec allows those who are injured to also go to university, or whether the Province of Quebec also allows that within that \$75,000 someone who is a carpenter can buy three or four pairs of boots. That change was just recently announced, as part of our change to vocational rehab; we now provide veterans flexibility in that \$75,000.

That's part of my challenge. I'm not familiar with the system so as to be able to compare one with the other, but as Janice said, there are many supports on top of that 75% to address this issue.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thank you very much, Mr. Dionne Labelle. Your *cinq minutes* are finished. I'm sorry.

We now go over to the parliamentary secretary, Mr. Gill, for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Parm Gill (Brampton—Springdale, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also want to thank our witnesses for taking the time to be with our committee.

The Canadian Forces Members and Veterans Re-establishment and Compensation Act, commonly known as the new Veterans Charter, is focused on a holistic approach that supports wellness and transition. It is described as a living charter and is constructed in a fashion that allows parliamentarians and the government of the day to implement adjustments in order to better provide for the needs of our veterans.

This legislation was first tabled in 2005 by the government of the day. Would you please explain the history of how the new Veterans Charter came to be?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Yes. We had laid out a synopsis to bring it all together. From 1996 to about 2000, there was a lot of work done within the Department of Veterans Affairs because the department was receiving signals from many people that things had to change for a lot of reasons. One reason was that, given the increase in the operational tempo, given what we were hearing from veterans, and given what we were hearing from stakeholders, we had to change what we were doing in the programs at the time. That then led within the department to teams being brought together to look at this issue, and in the end what that led to—and this is the watershed—was the establishment of this committee led by Dr. Neary in 2000.

At that time the decision was made to establish a committee, what I call a committee of experts, to bring them in, including all the stakeholders, who then, Mr. Chair, looked at this issue from 2000 to about 2004. As I mentioned, it wasn't linear where they just went into a room, closed the doors, and came up with ideas. They did sit down, they spoke, they did consultations, and, as Janice would tell you, they went out to the field and consulted at times across bases and wings with men and women in uniform.

Once they had completed their work, they wrote their report. Again, I would encourage the committee to read the report, as Minister Fantino has asked the committee to look into this. It's worth looking at. They then used the report to show what had been learned as part of the journey. They presented the report at that time to the government, to the minister, and then the Department of Veterans Affairs established a special team of people who came to work each and every day, and all they did was sit down and start putting together what we call the new Veterans Charter. It's a team that was brought together, a pretty large and multidisciplinary team, that included representatives from the Canadian Armed Forces. As they did their work, they went out and consulted with stakeholders, and at the end, what you have, Mr. Chair, is the announcement of the legislation and coming into force in 2006. I don't know if that answers the question.

• (1130)

**Mr. Parm Gill:** Thank you.

Since its inception, the new Veterans Charter has been known as a living charter.

Can you explain how the concept of a living charter came to fruition, please?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Yes. At the time, clearly, the understanding from all those involved was that this was not something that we needed to stop and put on a shelf and walk away from. It's something that we need to continue to look at. That was the department. As a result, people such as Janice, who works in the policy group, have a mandate to always be looking at the NVC, not just now, not just last year.

You know, we've been looking at this for a long while to ensure that as we hear from stakeholders and veterans that there needs to be change, that we start bringing forward that change. That then led to the first key major legislative change, with Bill C-55, which actually came to life in 2011. That speaks to that living aspect of the charter.

Bill C-55 came into being. Bill C-55 does direct the government of the time to go back and look just at Bill C-55, so we're very clear. I would ask this committee, if you're interested and have some time off—which I know you don't have a lot of—to look at that question, because I've looked at it with a lot of people, and the mandate was very clear. Just come back here with this group and look at Bill C-55. Clearly, the intent was to respect, to acknowledge the fact of the living charter, which is why we're looking at this one more time, and we will continue to look at it in the future as we continue down the road.

As we said, Mr. Chair, it's not perfect. I don't think any legislation is ever perfect. You know, perfect is the enemy of good enough. You need to keep things going, and as we brought the legislation in place, we realized we learned what we have to do, Bill C-55, and we'll continue to do that. And we wait to hear the collective wisdom of this committee and what you think we should work on.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** General Semianiw, thank you very much for that.

Before we move on, men and women of the committee, I just want to say that someone in our committee is celebrating their 25th anniversary today as a member of Parliament: Mr. Jim Karygiannis.

For some reason, the people of Scarborough—Agincourt have voted for this man. He has won eight elections. So, sir, on behalf of the entire committee, congratulations on 25 years of service.

[ *Applause* ]

**The Chair:** And you get an extra 30 seconds for that.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**Hon. Jim Karygiannis:** I get an extra 30 seconds to say thank you and to also congratulate you on being the parliamentarian of the year. It's a great title, but I'd rather keep mine, the one I have.

Chair, witnesses, and members of VAC, I want to thank you for coming here.

I was part of this when we all voted for it in 2005 and 2006. If I knew then what I know now, I would tell you that we were sold a pile of goods.

You mentioned that the needs must be met. I think \$290,000 was the greatest figure you mentioned that a veteran can receive as a lump sum. If somebody gets \$40,000 or \$60,000, that's five years, and after that, that money is gone. If somebody invested it wisely, they'll be okay. If you live in Winnipeg and you buy two houses, you'll be all right. If you live in Toronto, you cannot even buy a shack to live in for \$290,000.

I have a couple of questions, and maybe you can take some time and answer us in writing. One, if this was the greatest thing since apple pie and ice cream, why is a large part of the whole community, I would say to you, P.O.'d about the lump sums?

I got a letter last night that I will email you, but I will read it to you. It goes something like this:

I am writing to inquire what will it cost the Canadian Government yearly and over the next 20-30 years if the Veterans Affairs was giving our physically disabled soldiers a monthly payment according to the old method of Military Pension? Can you please also let us know how many soldiers were since 2006 when the NVC come in, how many soldiers have received lump payments? Also what is the total of lump sums to date since the NVC came in to affect? More specifically these soldiers which were given lump payments if they were given monthly payments according to the old system what would cost the government yearly over the next 20-30 years? What savings has the government realizing by implementing the NVC? What are the other costs which the department has given out for other programs? Please get us a yearly sum of these expenses (this should be minus the lump sums)?

Many thanks.

I will email that to you. Mr. Hillier already has it.

In concluding, why is there so much dissatisfaction among the men and women who served? Why are they telling their future comrades not to enlist? Why were we so stupid as to get fooled to support it? Now, some of us were not there, or some of us who were there were sold a pile of goods. I'm told this was arrived at in front of the plane coming back from overseas. The leaders got together and supported it.



Mr. Hawn, you can shake your head all you want. I'm just telling you what I've heard. You have different comments and you have different ideas. This is not the place, okay? If you disagree with me.... That's what I'm hearing.

• (1135)

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** We'd be more than happy to get those answers back to the committee. As you said, Mr. Hillier might have those.

If I may, Mr. Chair, I'd like to provide a number of comments that might add some kind of support and understanding of part of it.

Part of the danger—I just throw this out to the committee—is the challenge that the new Veterans Charter has been kind of labelled or designated “the lump sum”. This was part of our message in our preamble, that we would strongly encourage.... And we understand this. We accept this. We're going to do better and communicate it better: it's more than just the lump sum.

At this point in time, the department that I'm part of—and I say this, that I'm part of it and I want to be part of it—is providing to veterans and their families \$3.2 billion a year. That has nothing to do with running the department. That has to do with supporting veterans and their families.

When I tell that to my colleagues, they're shocked that it's so much. I'm not saying it's enough; no one could ever say that. But I come back to a point we made that I think is extremely important when you get into the wellness issue. Remember what the new Veterans Charters was really all about? It was about looking after those who needed the most help. The comment was made that those who are physically injured or disabled are the individuals who we need—and it's the group that the minister did ask this committee to look at, the most seriously disabled, to really focus in—to get that work.

I also heard the word “Government” of Canada. I think that's really, really important. The danger in our presentation today is that you're just looking at what this department provides; the Government of Canada provides so much more.

For example, yes, the department provides \$298,000 in money as part of the lump sum, but the SISIP program does as well. What will happen is that if I am seriously disabled, I will receive a lump sum from SISIP and I will receive moneys, support, from the Department of Veterans Affairs. I come back to the point that this payment of \$298,000 or whatever it might be is one part of a suite of programs that were not there before.

So for one to say, “Let's take this out, put that in, put this in, and take that out”, it is difficult to look at because it is very much a suite of programs.

**Hon. Jim Karygiannis:** As well—

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Unfortunately, Mr. Karygiannis, I gave you an 45 extra seconds, so...

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** When you look at it, I think it's important that the committee look at the wide range—

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** You can come back to it again.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Am I supposed to stop too?

• (1140)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** No, no, please carry on. We don't interrupt a general, sir.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Thank you.

**Hon. Jim Karygiannis:** You outrank us all.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** No, I don't. I serve the public like you do as well—which is an important point. Remember, we all serve the public, but legally we have different monikers. That's an important nuance there in the question that you posed the other day.

At the end of the day, when you take a look at it, it's a suite of programs. That's what we would encourage the committee to look at. It's great to parse out the issue of the \$298,000, but it's a lot more than the \$298,000. There is case management. There is rehabilitation. There's support to the families, and the death benefit.

So it's a broad suite of programs that the committee needs to look at, I would submit, and look at what the entire whole of government does provide.

Thank you.

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

We will move on to Mr. Chisu, please, for five minutes.

**Mr. Corneliu Chisu (Pickering—Scarborough East, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, General Semianiw, for your presentation. It was excellent.

You were presenting to us the birth of the new Veterans Act. I understand that the research ended before 2005, and in 2005 the new Veterans Charter was enacted and so on.

Between 2006 and 2011 I served in Afghanistan. Just in the time I was there between January and August 2007 we had 24 casualties. In 15 years in Bosnia we had 23. That was a tremendous change in the approach to veterans.

So it's very nice—it's very, very, very nice—that you're speaking about the “living” charter. It is a living charter. It really is a living charter.

I listened to the minister speaking on Tuesday, and he was speaking about the 160 recommendations that have been fully or partially implemented to improve the new Veterans Charter. Apart from the legislative amendments, many were regulatory amendments, I understand, and refinements to the internal processes to improve how Veterans Affairs does business.

Have these types of changes been shown to be effective in providing better care and services to our veterans? This is also in the context, which I outlined, of 2006 to 2011.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Mr. Chair, I think it's a great question. I would answer that question very simply, like this. If recruiting in the Canadian Armed Forces is a reflection of how well Veterans Affairs is looking after its soldiers, then the answer is outstandingly yes.

Recruiting in the Canadian Armed Forces was at its highest levels between 2006 and 2011. Therefore, I would submit that it did not go down; it went up. Therefore, I would submit that what men and women in uniform did see is that if they were injured.... That's the important point here: when they go out and serve the nation and are prepared to pay the ultimate sacrifice, if they're injured, will they and their families be looked after? We had that as we saw recruiting levels go up, and I can say that personally because I was responsible for recruiting in the Canadian Armed Forces from 2007 until 2010 or 2011. So clearly we see there was extremely strong support.

When you look at it all, one can say it's the best thing since ice cream and apple pie. But I would submit to you that ice cream and apple pie today is very different from what it was in 2005. It's changed—all the different varieties. That is because people looked at it, people ate it, and people said they wanted to see change, and that's what this is all about.

**Mr. Corneliu Chisu:** Minister Fantino stated that in focusing on how Veterans Affairs does business overall, and not just amending the legislation, this approach has the potential of generating the best outcome for our veterans.

Do you agree with this philosophy?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Yes, and I think it's very important, Mr. Chair, to say it has the best potential. Clearly, as we've said, and as I believe personally, the new Veterans Charter is a solid, sound foundation to build on. You'll see that we've had a number of individuals even support that, if you've read the paper in the last couple of days.

What we're not hearing is people saying to scrap the charter, throw it out. What they want to see is changes to the charter, because when you get into the charter, you'll see the suite of benefits provided—be it case management, be it rehabilitation, be it mental health care. If you take a look at the mental health programs that are in place today, you'll see they're first rate, both at the Canadian Armed Forces and with Veterans Affairs. Clearly the answer is yes. But we have to build on it; we need to improve on it. Again, that's what the minister asked this committee to look at.

•(1145)

**Mr. Corneliu Chisu:** Okay, thank you.

Do I have more time?

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** You have another minute, yes.

**Mr. Corneliu Chisu:** Okay.

The new Veterans Charter shifts the focus from a lifetime of disability to assisting our veterans, to pushing wellness and fulfillment. I will echo the minister's comment that more can and must be done to improve how we support veterans who are the most seriously injured.

In combatting homelessness and supporting families, how can Veterans Affairs apply the charter to best meet these aims? I say this

because I have seen many veterans from Afghanistan and so on, and unfortunately I met two or three veterans on my way home. I have a veteran licence plate, so one was coming to me saying, "I served also", but he was homeless.

How are we dealing with this?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** From a homeless perspective, what's in place right now—from a departmental kind of view and structure—is that in each of our Veterans Affairs locations and in another location to start with, we have one VAC staff member who has become better experienced or trained in the homeless issue. This is a more complex case than you'll normally find with veterans coming forward who may be injured.

It kind of works this way. If there is a veteran who we do find on the street—remember, one homeless veteran is too much, and we want to move away from there—it's about then connecting that veteran. We work with local police forces and with Jim Lowther and his organization on the east coast to connect the homeless veteran to the Department of Veterans Affairs to see what we can do to help. For example, we have an emergency fund that we can access quickly to immediately help a homeless veteran. But when you look at the homelessness file, you'll see it involves municipal, provincial, and federal roles. It's not just a federal role.

Right now we have four pilot projects ongoing across the country working with ESDC, formerly HRSDC, where we're supporting homeless veterans. We're doing a lot in this area to ensure that if we do find a homeless veteran, we provide him or her the support needed.

The second part is the prevention piece—

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Sorry, you're way over the time, unfortunately.

Go ahead.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** I'll be very quick. I'll only be ten minutes.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** On the prevention side, we're working with the Canadian Armed Forces to ensure that if we see that someone might be homeless or might have a mental health issue, we are able to provide that support.

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

We'll now move on to the fighting Labradorian and Newfoundland, Mr. Ryan Cleary, for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Ryan Cleary (St. John's South—Mount Pearl, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses and thank you to the General for appearing before the committee.

As Peter said, I come from Newfoundland and Labrador, with a proud history of fighting Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. I attended a Remembrance Day service on November 11 in a town in an outpost called Petty Harbour. It's about 20 minutes outside of St. John's. It was held in a church because the weather was pretty motley that day. In the church it was blocked to the rafters; there were 600 people there. There were children, there were middle-aged people, there were the elderly, and there were veterans. I have to say it was absolutely inspiring. The respect that we have for our veterans in Newfoundland and Labrador, again, is inspiring. But not all our veterans feel respected.

In Newfoundland and Labrador we will see the closure of one of those nine Veterans Affairs offices across Canada. I have two questions.

The first question comes from a quote from a veteran near Corner Brook, on the west coast of Newfoundland. He says:

A lot of these [veterans] are deaf, old and crippled and can't understand anything they hear on the telephone. They need one-on-one service. That's the way it has got to be.

What do you say to the senior, General, in terms of the closure of the Corner Brook Veterans Affairs offices? He and up to 1,500 people like him rely on that office for the services they need as veterans. What do you say to him about the closure of that office?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Mr. Chair, when you look at the issue of the closure of offices...the decision has been made to close offices, so we'll kind of put that aside. The next question is, what do you say? At the end of the day, if an individual crossed the country, as the minister mentioned and noted, if they do have challenges, if they're old, if they're 95 or 90, they can still call the Veterans Affairs number and get assistance and help on the phone to do what they have to do. If we're talking about case-managed veterans, we need to be very clear on this issue. If a veteran is a case-managed veteran and needs case management, the case manager will go to the veteran's location. The veteran does not have to drive anywhere to meet the case manager; the case manager will actually come to the veteran's location. That will ensure that veterans receive the support they need. The veterans who need the most support and the most need get it from their case manager. When the case manager drives from wherever it might be, whether from Halifax all the way up into Newfoundland, he will be able to sit with the veteran to deal with their needs.

At the same time, you're right, they can talk to folks on the phone to get the support they need. There are Service Canada locations across the country. They've added the 600—

• (1150)

**Mr. Ryan Cleary:** Excuse me, General, I have to interrupt.

Again, I'll read you the quote: "A lot of these veterans are deaf, old, and crippled..." The first word was "deaf". When I asked you that question, at least twice in your response you said they can still call. Did you not hear what I asked you?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Mr. Chair, I did hear the question.

In the end, if they're deaf they can have someone else give them a hand to provide the support they might need to get hold of Veterans Affairs.

Mr. Chair, I apologize, I did hear the question. Clearly, the issue is to have someone there to help them in their time of need.

**Mr. Ryan Cleary:** The second part of that question is, we understand that when a person calls when they need help, and a lot of times it's immediate help they need, the response time is two to five days.

Is that correct?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** That's something I have to get back to you on, whether it's two or five days. When you say immediate help, what type of immediate help do you mean? If we're talking about mental health and immediate help, that's available, not from Veterans Affairs but it will and could be available from across the province under the provincial health care system to provide the support to a veteran who might need it. If that veteran is in crisis, it doesn't matter who you are or whoever you call, they'll tell you to go immediately to a hospital, if it's that type of a crisis.

**Mr. Ryan Cleary:** So many veterans in Newfoundland and Labrador feel disrespected. They feel that the country they served is not looking after them like they thought it would. Do you think this disrespect that they feel is going to impact recruitment in places like Newfoundland and Labrador?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** I think it's a fair question. It's something you may want to pose to the Canadian Armed Forces, because I work at Veterans Affairs, in terms of whether or not there actually will be an impact in CA reduction in recruitment, which we didn't see from 2006 to 2010 and 2011. There actually was an increase in the number of individuals being recruited, particularly in Quebec. In the province of Quebec, recruiting did go up. So it's something you'll want to pose to them. But first we'll see if there is that level of disrespect, and, secondly, if that disrespect—if there is any—is translated that way.

**Hon. Jim Karygiannis:** On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I've heard twice that there was an increase. I'm just wondering if the general could substantiate that, because if I'm not mistaken—

**An hon. member:** That's not a point of order.

**Hon. Jim Karygiannis:** It is a point of order. Let me finish. I heard it twice. There was an increase in hiring forces by 5,000 people per year.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Mr. Karygiannis, that is not a point of order; that's a point of debate.

Mr. Semianiw, we will now move on to our next questioner. The time has well exceeded the five minutes already.

We're going to move to Mr. Hawn, please, for five minutes.

**Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you both for being here.

Give quick answers, please, because I have a number points. There are a couple of things I want to say, first of all, and you can answer or not.

Some veterans are saying that they feel disrespected, and I might suggest that's because there are certain interest groups, or certain individuals in the country, who are making a point of telling them that they're disrespected, and therefore they think, "My God, I must be disrespected." You don't even need to answer that; I know you agree.

You talked a lot about the extensive consultation with stakeholders across the board. For somebody to suggest that this was suddenly arrived at standing in the front of an airplane on the back of a napkin, I'm sorry, is absurd and theatrical. Again, you covered the consultation, so we don't need to cover that again.

I have a couple of specific points. This is a good summary of what's covered under the new charter and under the old one, and so on. All parties supported the new Veterans Charter because it was so widely consulted on. Even the erstwhile chair, I've heard him several times say—as recently as yesterday in the House of Commons—that the new Veterans Charter was a marked improvement over the old Pension Act.

• (1155)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** I didn't say "marked"; I said it was an improvement".

**Hon. Laurie Hawn:** Whatever. It's better.

As you know, General, as you and I have talked about it, my issue is access. We just have to find a way, in my view, to make it easier for folks to access their benefits. We're going to have some suggestions, but I want to hear if you have some.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Yes, that's fair. Again, that's what I think the minister asked the committee to do.

On the issue of respect, I think it's a fair comment and it's a fair question from both sides. But it takes me back to the one issue I would throw out to all of you, and that is that what we need to do is to better understand what the new Veterans Charter is all about. We need to ensure that is actually communicated to folks who are out there, and that they're aware of what it is. When people say to me that it's complex, I would come back and say it's comprehensive. When it's comprehensive, there are a lot of pieces in there. It was developed that way, which is why I think it's extremely important that those who want to know about the charter and learn about how it was developed, brought into place, and what the charter is made up of... I come back to this to provide you with the strategic view. Remember that at the centre of the charter is "wellness", with six programs around it.

**Hon. Laurie Hawn:** Thank you.

Now on the issue of office closures, I just want to confirm that the criterion for closing an office is if there were less than 160 clients. Is that true?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Yes.

**Hon. Laurie Hawn:** And is it not also true—and this is a subjective question and answer—that we talk about deafness or deaf and disabled and whatever needing help, and obviously they do, but most of the people also have families. If my dad is a disabled veteran and 90 years old and deaf, I'm going to be helping him. That's not to take away the responsibility of VAC, but this is just a reality of Canada and families. Family members help. In cases where they

don't, obviously there's going to be somebody who's going to be there to pick it up.

We talk about "seriously injured" and all the benefits and so on. Can you define "seriously injured"? Is it both legs? Is it one arm? Where does that term—

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** What we could do for the committee, if the committee would like, is actually provide you with our sense of what that means. I'm not saying it's right or wrong, but I would say it's something the committee should look at, given that the minister asked the committee to focus on it.

I think it's an important point, Mr. Chair, to realize why it is that we should focus on the most seriously injured. It comes back to one issue, and the issue is that if any member of this committee were to turn to me and ask, who do you think should get the support that this government and any and all governments have provided, it would be to those veterans who need that support the most. Those are who we define as the most seriously injured, those who have mental health issues, who have lost a limb, who have perhaps been involved in a catastrophic type of event, or who have gone through a lot of rehabilitation or a lot of surgeries. It starts putting a frame around it. But we'd be more than happy to provide you with our sense or view of that.

**Hon. Laurie Hawn:** Can you tell me where the \$298,582 kicks in? Is it the loss of one leg, two legs, one arm...?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Yes, we can provide the committee with the entire range of all of the amounts and the definitions for each of those and what you're entitled to, what you would have to suffer to receive the \$298,000. And just as a reminder, the SISIP, a totally separate program, is also going to provide almost the same, another \$298,000.

**Hon. Laurie Hawn:** Thank you.

When people talk about the Pension Act, it doesn't make it right, but is it fair to say that the issues of access didn't start with the new Veterans Charter, the issues of access have always existed?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Yes, access has always been an issue, and it's something that as we're going ahead we need to get focused on to a greater degree.

**Hon. Laurie Hawn:** On the list of services and benefits and so on, under the Pension Act, you have the disability pension. Is it fair to say that when you go across the page to the new Veterans Charter, the earnings-loss benefit is that equivalent?

**Ms. Janice Burke:** There is a dual award approach, meaning the disability award, the lump sum, was to recognize pain and suffering, so it's a non-economic aspect.

The economic aspect, in terms of the impact of injuries on your ability to earn an income, is where the earnings-loss benefit comes into play, which is 75% of pre-release, a minimum of \$42,000 per year, but also there's a permanent-impairment allowance that's provided, up to \$1,700 per month, and an allowance of up to \$1,000.

• (1200)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Mr. Hawn, you're well over your time, thank you. I know your colleague, Mr. Hayes, would not want his time interrupted—as much as you'd like to.

Mr. Hayes, please, for five minutes.

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

I don't have a Veterans Affairs office in Sault Ste. Marie. We never did have. Veterans would have to go to North Bay, I assume, which is a five-hour drive. But not once in my two and half years as an MP have I had a veteran come to my office and say, "Bryan, I haven't been able to receive the service that I require."

I do a really good job of educating my veterans. Here's a slide presentation that I presented at our Legion. I invited all the veterans in our community to come and listen to what we have done, which includes the Veterans Bill of Rights and the veterans ombudsman, the 24-hour toll-free crisis hotline, the community war memorial program, the helmets to hard hats program, the cutting red tape initiative, all the financial assistance programs, career transitioning services, the veterans independence program. We discussed some of the results of our reports and the recommendations that this committee has brought forward, talked about the new Veterans Charter, talked about appealing a decision.

This was incredibly well received by the veterans, and I have to tell you they are overwhelmingly satisfied. I realize Canada is a big country, but I just don't understand how veterans in one individual's riding can feel so disrespected in comparison to veterans in another individual's riding. There's no disrespect in my riding for what we are doing for our veterans.

That being said, Mr. Chair, I'd like to direct a question to Mr. Semianiw.

You talked about the career transition services and you mentioned them only briefly. I'm wondering if you could elaborate on what those services are. Because this committee has been tasked with improving the new Veterans Charter—and we will take that job very seriously—with respect to those transition services, do you feel that at this point in time more improvements are required? I'd like to get your take on how it's working so far.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Looking at it from the perspective of our men and women leaving the Canadian Armed Forces, when they're either an individual who has been injured in the forces or leaving non-injured—you have to understand there are two groups—what is available to all men and women in uniform to start with is called a second career assistance network meeting. It's a two-day event. We invite them and their families to come.

We have them across the country. Last year, we did almost 50 of these across the country at bases and wings. We brought in the men and women still in uniform, with their families, to say there are some things they should be aware of as they leave. The Department of Veterans Affairs has a number of presentations to everyone as part of those second career assistance network presentations.

We have part of the presentation focused on those who are injured. They are that second group. If you are injured and leaving the Canadian Forces, you will have a transition interview with folks in the Canadian Forces as well as with someone at VAC. Why? It's because we've established what are called "integrated personnel support centres". We put these centres on bases and wings across the country.

To give you the synopsis, they include Canadian Armed Forces personnel, return to work coordinators, social workers, a chain of command to be responsible for the injured, and Veterans Affairs staff. They are already working and dealing with them before they leave the Canadian Armed Forces. As part of that transition, if you're injured, they already know who you are. Remember, in some cases, men and women in uniform will not relocate to their last posting, so we need to ensure the Veterans Affairs office in the new location is ready for them. That happens before they actually leave.

If they're not injured, and this is not well known—again, we have it up on our website—we also provide up to \$1,000 for transition support for every man and woman in the Canadian Armed Forces who is being released; it's either for how to do a job interview or to write a resumé. Once they have done that, if it's been determined that they need vocational rehabilitation, they'll be brought into the program we have talked about, to retrain if needed and get the support they need.

I don't know if that answers your question.

**Mr. Bryan Hayes:** It does.

On top of that, how is it working so far? In your experience to date, are there some improvements that can be made in that area, or do you think that's an area that this committee should explore?

We're looking to explore areas for improvement with the new Veterans Charter, and if in your opinion this isn't an area... We obviously want to prioritize, I would think.

• (1205)

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Clearly I would say that transition is an area you should focus on, to better understand it.

If you agree that the new Veterans Charter is strong and is providing support, and while it needs improvements we're going to work on those, and this committee will provide advice, and if you agree that the support of the Canadian Armed Forces is strong, which it is—the Canadian Armed Forces health care system is first rate, the 14th health care system across the country, with outstanding support for mental health—at the end of the day, the question is about that period where you transition. It would be worth the committee taking some time to look at that transition, how well it is going, and what could be done better, if needed.

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

Folks, if we could have private conversations outside the room, that would be most helpful.

To let the committee know, at the end of our second round of questioning we'll be going in camera regarding the supplementary estimates, in order to get that done. We were supposed to have done that at the last committee. Unfortunately, with the ignorance of the chair—I take full responsibility—we didn't do it. But we will get it done this time.

Now for our four-minute round, Mr. Hoang Mai, please.

[Translation]

**Mr. Hoang Mai (Brossard—La Prairie, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

LGen Semianiw, thank you for being with us today.

This is a much talked about issue. My role as an MP has really opened my eyes. Every year, my riding, Brossard—La Prairie, holds events marking Remembrance Day week. In taking part in those events, I realized a number of things. I was fortunate enough to spend a lot of time with veterans, an opportunity that opened my eyes greatly. I am tremendously grateful to them for all they have done and given.

I have a concern about the New Veterans Charter. The ombudsman's report came out and was fairly critical of the charter, especially as it relates to those who are seriously wounded, to disabled soldiers.

[English]

What the ombudsman has been saying is that there will be a financial hit for the veterans who are most severely wounded, who are disabled soldiers, especially after age 65. Some of the comments are really strong. They're saying that elderly veterans and families are left out in the cold, and we heard that they could live out their old age in near poverty under the new charter.

What would be your response to that?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** I would say we need to look at the report in a little bit more detail. What the report says, in the end, is that it's only 406 veterans—not 40,000 or 400,000—who might live their twilight years in some financial distress. That's 406 out of 200,000. But it doesn't matter. Even if it's one, it's not good enough.

I've spoken to the ombudsman's office on this issue. The other thing we need to remember is that the benefits go down post-65, but at the same time, the Government of Canada benefits kick in post-65, the old age security and others. It is an area that we're looking at, the post-65 piece.

But I'd like to give you some of the theory behind this. The other thing they parsed out of it is that those who leave the Canadian Armed Forces with a pension are not included in this group. So what we're talking about is a group of men and women in uniform, veterans, who left not too long after they enrolled, prior to that 20-year pension gateway. They're getting out probably between 20 years and 40 years.

If you look at the development of the charter, it was focused on that issue to ensure that you get back to work. The ombudsman's team and I talked yesterday, and the issue is all about creating wealth. Is everyone getting an opportunity to create wealth so that when they hit 65 they don't have to rely on all of the programs that are in place? The challenge is to look at that group to see whether or not that's true. We can't corroborate it; we need to look at it a little bit more. But he did identify 406 out of a vast array of veterans and their families.

● (1210)

**Mr. Hoang Mai:** As you mentioned, even one is too many. What do you say to people who enrolled before 2006? Their benefits are different, not as beneficial as they were when they enrolled.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** What I'm hearing in that question is that the new Veterans Charter is better than the old system, and I'm happy you acknowledge that. Remember, veterans had a choice in 2005-06 to see where they wanted to go on this. You're right; some wanted to stay with the older system, and this is a reminder for the committee. Legislation was passed during a transformation of the nation and of society. Society today is different from what it was many years ago. I'm not a sociologist or an expert, but it is different. What we are seeing and hearing is that those veterans, prior to 2006, are satisfied with the support they're getting, except in one area. This is fascinating, and it's very important that you hear it.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Mr. Semianiw, go very quickly, please.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** It's in the area of mental health. What we're now seeing is that those veterans from the Bosnia era and before, particularly from Quebec, are now coming to our mental health clinics. After 2005-06, we put in place an outstanding mental health system that they are now realizing is much better. It's a system where they're going to get the support they need. We've captured that area of mental health where there were some challenges prior to 2005.

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

Thank you, Mr. Mai.

We now go to Mr. Lobb.

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

I will just go back to the point Mr. Dionne Labelle made in the beginning about 75% versus 80% or 85%. At one point you said you can't only look at it as 75% or 85%, that you have to look at the entire component that goes along with it. I'm certainly not criticizing at all. I'm just trying to make another point.

In 2011 we took the minimum, from around \$29,000, I think it was, up to \$42,000 or \$43,000 as the minimum for the earnings-loss benefit. So in some cases, if a Canadian Forces member's income is lower, it's actually probably closer to 90%. As you say, yes, it is 75%, the earnings-loss benefit, but it is a minimum of \$42,000 or \$43,000. That's an important component to point out.

Another point is astonishing to me—and I'm not commenting about any members of this committee, but members of Parliament, in general, and other members of the community, and even some veterans and some current Canadian Forces members think that if they are injured, the only benefit they'll receive from Veterans Affairs is a lump sum, which is astonishing to me. There are members of Parliament in this House of Commons today who think that.

What I always tell people when they ask me this is that this is the very beginning, and then you get into the earnings-loss benefit and potentially the permanent impairment allowance. Then you go into the vocational rehabilitation. And if you need to have psychological rehabilitation, it's there, and on and on. When I tell them that, they can't believe it. They're amazed there is such a program, from A to Z, that will look after our veterans in such a caring, courteous, and respectful way.

I just wonder if you could comment on that, if you want to add to that, because it is worth pointing out.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Mr. Chair, when we talk about the 75%, I think it's important, again, to stress that aside from the 75%, it's also a vocational rehabilitation program that provides up to \$75,000, a program that allows you, as we've just made the changes, to be more pragmatic.

In the old program, if I was a carpenter in vocational rehabilitation, in training, I might have only been able to buy a pair of boots. Now I can buy two, three, or four pairs of boots. There is a lot more choice, actually, in that area, as well as going to university.

So you're right. You need to take a look at that entire suite of programs, versus just picking out the 75%. As Janice mentioned, it's not just 75%; it's more than that, if you have that need, if you have a PIA and you need other forms of supplement.

I would agree with you. It's something I found, Mr. Chair, as well. It's this whole issue that you don't really want to know until you really need it. If you were to ask me when I joined the Canadian Armed Forces if I was interested in what was going to happen in 20 years, I was probably less interested than I was in serving the nation and joining the infantry, which I did.

So this is part of the challenge with the NVC, because it's so comprehensive. When people finally do bump into it, it's overwhelming. What they do hear about and see bits and pieces here or there is that it's about the lump sum. I come back to it because I'm passionate about this. It's a lot more than a lump sum, as you said. That's the challenge. Sadly, that moniker has been connected to it. It's something that takes away from the real strength of what there actually is there. That's not to say, to be fair, that there may be individuals who may not like this part or that part, but you have to parse out the issue.

My colleague Mr. Hillier might be coming in after me, on the service delivery side. Remember, we do policy, communications, commemoration. At the end of the day, he delivers the service, and he delivers a first-rate, first-class service to us. We talk about—

• (1215)

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** Another thing I just want to point out—

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Mr. Lobb, unfortunately, your time is up.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** I'll be quick.

In the end, we talk about dissatisfied or unhappy veterans. I hear that. I've heard that from individuals. But as I would say—and I've done this myself—here's my number, give me a call. I've talked to

reporters. I've talked to many individuals. And when you finally get to the real story, it's far from where it started.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Thanks very much, all of you.

As chair, I will now take the prerogative of asking a few questions on my own behalf.

First of all, I want to thank both of you for being here. We greatly appreciate it.

One of the questions I have for you is on the aspect of the reservists. How are they dealt with in this particular regard? It's one thing to be a regular forces member, retired, or a 3(b) release, but the reservists are the most challenging ones we have in terms of finding them and getting them the information they require to access the services.

Here's what I find in terms of my meetings with veterans. On my desk right now I have 52 files of veterans from across the country, and Mr. Hayes, I'd be more than willing to give you a couple of them just for you to read, to show you some of the frustration they have. In fairness, it's not necessarily the charter they're frustrated with; it's getting the services from DVA in a timely fashion, as my colleague Mr. Hawn said.

I give you the example of Shane Jones in Halifax, who had three case workers in four months. He didn't care if it was a Conservative, a Liberal, or a New Democrat. He didn't care about cutbacks. He didn't care about the charter. All he wanted was help, and he wasn't getting it. He shouldn't have to do a press conference to get that.

In those experiences where we see people who are dissatisfied, it's not necessarily just the charter. On the charter, by the way, I was on that airplane the day that happened, and I recommend highly to everyone.... The true history of that was there was plenty of consultation with me and the late deputy minister, Jack Stagg. The Royal Canadian Legion, the ANAVETS, and everyone else were all consulted very broadly, but that said, one of the selling points was the living document point and the access to programs—not just the lump sum, but everything else.

The difficulty was in accessing the earnings-loss benefit, accessing the permanent impairment allowance, and accessing a case manager. Therein lie the challenges: it's getting to those programs. It's one thing to have them on his chart and say "Here's what he can get", but it's getting them that is the frustration that many of these veterans and their families have. Hopefully, with the review of this charter, we'll be able to work with the department in order to streamline those processes to get them.

My question is for you, Ms. Burke, if you don't mind. There are roughly 8,000 case-managed veterans in the country right now. As we found out the other day, we heard the minister indicate that, yes, veterans, when these offices close, can call and get someone to come to their homes, but we know that's not necessarily correct, because they have to be "case-managed" vets. There are roughly 210,000 veterans under the DVA blanket right now. We have 740,000 veterans, RCMP, and their spouses in the country, so more than two-thirds of that community is not even being serviced by the government now.

Here's my question to you in this regard. For those who are not case managed and who have difficulty with the Internet and all of that other stuff, what suggestion would you make to us that we could tell them?

My second question for you is please, please, please...my colleague Mr. Mai said it very correctly: that cutoff at age 65 is very, very hurtful to people. No veteran—and I think I speak for the committee—should be losing money at age 65 in this regard.

I'm glad to see, sir, that you have indicated you would look at that.

I'll stop right there. I have more, but my time is almost up.

• (1220)

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Yes, and I don't know who's checking your time or if I address the clerk right now.

It's a great point, and it has been mentioned three times in this room. We're privileged to have Andrea Siew here. I would ask the committee to look at this, because the Royal Canadian Legion has case service officers actually in the legions to help veterans. It doesn't matter where I am across the country, if I'm a veteran and I need help with filling out a form and getting support, they have folks who are full time—they're actually paid full time—in our legions, be it in Newfoundland and Labrador, be it in Quebec, be it in Ontario, where veterans can go to get that support.

I think it's an area that we haven't stressed enough. There are many veterans who actually use that great support that's provided by the Legion. Again, it's another area that you could look at, agreed, when it comes to getting the support that you would need.

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

Now we'll move on to Monsieur Lizon, please, for four minutes, and his Nijmegen experience.

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

First, to start, General, I would like to thank you for coming to Nijmegen to support our marching troops, myself included, and for marching with us. That was great.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** For clarification for the committee Hansard, Nijmegen is a town in the Netherlands that has the march.

The way you said it was kind of....

**Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon:** Okay.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Also as clarification for the committee Hansard, Mr. Chair, the individual who mentioned it actually went and marched with the Canadian Armed Forces—

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Yes, he did.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** —on a gruelling march of hundreds of kilometres every day. He was there from the beginning until the end. A real bravo to him.

**Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon:** I would like to ask you to clarify the issue that was raised by the official opposition on the closing of centres. The average age, if I remember correctly, of World War II veterans is now close to 90, and for Korean War veterans it would be over 80. Is that right?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Yes.

**Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon:** So even if they are in good physical shape, these are people who are at the later stage of their lives. For those who are case managed, I suppose the help is there because they can have someone come to their home, but there must be a better way of getting the service to them other than driving to a centre that may be 20 kilometres away. I mean, these people are old, unfortunately.

Can you comment on that, General?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** When we come back to case-managed veterans, the case manager will drive to the veteran. I think we all agree and understand that this is actually happening already; it's ongoing today. We don't need to talk about office closures; this is already ongoing, be it in Sault Ste. Marie or anywhere else. If you're a case-managed veteran and you need support, someone will be there to support you. That has been the way all along. The key message is that this is not going to change as we go ahead into the future.

You're right, in the end they can get the support they need, and also perhaps support from the Legion and others.

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

The second question I have is on the funding. Since 2006, since we formed the government, there has been over \$5 billion provided to veterans in new funding. Nearly 90% of the funding was directed to services and benefits for veterans. Can you share with this committee the historical amounts of funding contributed by previous governments?

• (1225)

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** I would have to get back to you and provide you with that information, not about previous governments but about at what time in the past.

What we do know is that between 2005 and 2006, if we take a look at what has been provided to the department, the amounts of money have increased, and that's a fact.

We'll get back to the committee with that information, if it's fine with you, Mr. Chair, because I don't have that at hand right now.

**Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon:** You were at the last meeting when the honourable Minister Fantino asked the committee to determine, with this review, how best to serve veterans and what our government can do to best serve veterans.

Can you share your views on the review and offer some suggestions?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Perhaps I can come back to a comment the chair made, simply to provide greater clarification.

The chair made the comment that there are many other veterans who don't get benefits and programs and services. That's really not true. I'm not challenging the chair, but that's really not true, because at the end of the day, of the 800,000 veterans, they still do get support through commemoration.



I agree, Mr. Chair, that it's not benefits programs due to injury, but there is that commemorative program that my team is responsible to deliver for all those other veterans. It is as important to them as it is that we provide the services, support, and programs and benefits to those who are ill and injured. So we have that in place.

I think it's critical for the committee, as we're doing here today, to understand the background and then to get into—please, quickly—what the new Veterans Charter is really all about and to get a clear understanding of what it is, what it stands for, what the effects are, what it achieves, and some of the areas—you may have touched on one already—where we could perhaps further examine to get some type of improvement.

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

I want to get in my own point of clarification.

You are correct about the commemoration, but the unfortunate part is that when many veterans are turned down for a benefit, they're not considered a DVA client. They may have been turned down and didn't appeal because they were frustrated. Those are the folks I was referring to in that particular regard, but I do thank you for that.

To the last questioner now, Mr. Jim Karygiannis, for four minutes.

**Hon. Jim Karygiannis:** Thank you, Chair.

General, you said that the Royal Canadian Legion has full-time service officers. Who pays them?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** The Legion pays them.

**Hon. Jim Karygiannis:** Are they subsidized by the government? Does the government contribute anything to it?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** I would ask the chair whether Ms. Andrea Siew could come forward.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** The chair will seek the committee's permission to invite Andrea Siew to the table, please.

**Ms. Andrea Siew:** It's important to note that the Royal Canadian Legion—

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** I'm sorry, Andrea, would you introduce yourself again, please?

**Ms. Andrea Siew:** I am Andrea Siew. I am the director of the service bureau at the Royal Canadian Legion.

In response to the question, which I think is extremely important, we have 23 service officers across the country, who are paid and are full-time, and we have 1,400 volunteers.

The Royal Canadian Legion receives no funding from the federal government.

**Hon. Jim Karygiannis:** Thank you.

General, you also said, if I'm not mistaken, that a centre will be closed if it has fewer than 160 people being case managed.

• (1230)

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Yes.

**Hon. Jim Karygiannis:** I'm going to join the chair in stating that a number of people have also come to me who have been changed from one case officer to another time and again. One thing I've been

hearing when speaking to case officers is that they're overwhelmed in trying to deal with the people they have.

I understand that a case officer must not have more than 40 people, and those were your words when you came to my office.

I'm glad that you agree with this.

Even in a centre in which we have fewer than, let's say, 160 people—I'll grant you that there is such a centre out there—could we not move those service managers into a Service Canada office and have them work out of it in order to look after their veterans? If you are a veteran and you're in Thunder Bay, you have a heck of a drive.

If you are a veteran at a rally in Sydney, where there was a rally with more than 3,200 people... I'm not sure whether they marched from all across the province, but many of them were local. The people who were there were overwhelmingly not very pleased that the centre was closing down.

If it's bricks and mortar that we're trying to save money on, I'm sure we could move those service officers into the Service Canada section, so that when veterans go to get some help, those who fought to put us at the front of the line and not at the back of the line...so that a 90-year-old veteran will not be given a 1-800 number to call to "punch 1, punch 2" or be told to go on the Internet to get service.

Can we not accommodate? Can we not do that? I realize you want to save money, because the centres are there and you probably want to get rid of the property. But could we not move the case officers into Service Canada?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Mr. Chair, I think there are a lot of permutations in the issue and on this theme that you could look at. That could be one.

At the end of the day, we've moved ahead to define getting the support from case managers and at the same time to continue with the training of Service Canada. Service Canada staff are being trained more and more each day, and I think you are going to find over time that the training and support will get even stronger. But this is an idea.

**Hon. Jim Karygiannis:** Is this an idea that you will explore and come back to us about before the service centres are closed, or is it an idea that we'll probably leave in the ether now? The fact is that the minister is given something to sign off on, and he certainly signed off, because the money needed to be saved, according to the action plan. Is that correct?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Mr. Chair, I think it's a good question—

**The Vice-Chair (Hon. Jim Karygiannis):** Hold on. I haven't finished.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** Mr. Karygiannis, can you finalize in 10 seconds?

**Hon. Jim Karygiannis:** Can we put off the closures until you can come back to us with those suggestions and firm recommendations? Will you recommend to the minister to hold off on closing them and to examine other possibilities?

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Mr. Chair, that's a great question, and it's one of the questions the minister asked this committee to look at among all issues involving the new Veterans Charter and Veterans Affairs. I'm sure this committee will look at this item and at some point in time come with some type of recommendation.

Thank you.

**Hon. Jim Karygiannis:** May I have another word, Chair?

I could be mistaken, but our centres are scheduled to close in February of next year.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** I believe it's not all going to happen at one time. Certain centres will be closing earlier than others.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** I agree, Mr. Chair; therefore, the committee is going to have to get on and do its work a lot quicker.

Thank you.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer):** In fairness to the witnesses, that question was something I would ask more in political terms. It would be the minister who would answer that question in a more forthright manner. A suggestion to recommend to the minister is fair, but the actual decision would come from the ministerial level.

General Semianiw, Madame Burke, and Andrea Siew, thanks to each and every one of you for coming today. We greatly appreciate your input to help us, help our veterans, and help the department eventually to work hopefully towards more improvement and better enhancements, which we all want for our veterans and their families.

Thank you very much.

**LGen Walter Semianiw:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Thanks to the committee.

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

We'll take one minute to go in camera to pass the supplementary....

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*

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