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Chair

Mr. Greg Kerr

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC)): Welcome to our continued study of the review of the new Veterans Charter and the enhanced recommendations that we're welcoming.

I certainly am very pleased to welcome Sergeant Nielsen....

Sergeant Bjarne Nielsen (As an Individual): Bjarne.

The Chair: Bjarne. I was just going to say Bjorn, but I got in trouble with one of our own members here the other day by mispronouncing his name. I'm not going to do that twice in a row.

Thank you very much for being here. I think it's been explained that we look forward to your presentation, Sergeant Nielsen. As you know, we allow about 10 minutes for presentations, so we look forward to that, and then a round of questions from all the members.

Please proceed.

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Thank you.

I must apologize for my scruffy appearance. Next month, on April 16, with True Patriot Love, I'm trekking up to the North Pole—

Voices: Hear, hear!

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: —so I'm just trying to get myself all scruffy and get as much protection as I can for when I'm up there.

It might be a little bit lengthy, but bear with me.

The Chair: That's okay, go ahead.

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Good afternoon, everyone.

I just want to thank all of you in attendance for inviting me here to share my story as well as some of my insights on the matters at hand with all of you. My name is Sergeant Bjarne Nielsen. I'm 34 years old. I've been in the military for just over 17 years now, as of this next February 9th.

As I've mentioned, I'm a sergeant. I've had a very blessed career within the armed forces. I started right out of high school just trying to get my last four credits by taking a cooperative education program not knowing that it would change and pave a whole new course for my life. I'm very proud of my successes within the military, even considering recent events. It fed my insatiable appetite for challenge and productivity. The military gave me a whole new perspective on life, not just through the technical skills that I achieved but by opening my eyes to a lot of good that comes from it as well.

Now, I don't want to bore you too much with my old history as far as my career goes, but I want to share my perspective as to how I got to become the Bjarne that I am today.

The best part of my career with the military was when I was posted in Meaford. What a great experience that was, just as parenting is. I had a great time honing my speaking skills and teaching the various complexities of the military structure, mentoring and inspiring the next generation of soldiers so that they, too, can one day become leaders.

It was a great time in my life because I felt like I was contributing, flourishing in my own career but actually contributing time that seemed to be worth it. I saw some troubled and not-so-troubled kids morph and turn into fine gentlemen or women. I saw them find courage and bravery under the harshest of conditions. I saw how they could be aggressive when required, yet find the ability to remain delicate when caring for a child during a gunfight, for example, or to know when it was time to fight and when it was time to offer that helping hand, be it to a friend or stranger. It is the esprit de corps that binds us and the Canadian values.

When I rebadged from a Patricia and became a member of the Royal Canadian Regiment, it was amazing to see them all again when I moved from Edmonton and Meaford and then up to Petawawa. I trained with a majority of the young men and women I'd put through their paces when they were just starting out, and the returns on that were to come back more than I had ever dreamed.

Our workup training began in 2009. We deployed from Petawawa on May 13, 2010, my daughter's birthday. The thousands of men and women of Task Force 1-10 were mostly made up of our infantry, the engineers, some techies, artillery, and air force, but most importantly, our combat medics. Between flights and transfers, we spent two days travelling, mostly because of that volcano over Iceland that had erupted. It caused a lot of delays and diverted our flight path some.

We were held up in Spain for a few hours and then moved on to Camp Mirage in Dubai. There we geared up and prepared to take our last flight into Afghanistan, to Kandahar, actually. We had two days to acclimatize before we started heading out to our various FOBs, forward operating bases. The platoon I was with was call sign "23". My designation was "Bravo".

On July 1, 2010, at approximately 0630, 23 Bravo departed Combat Outpost Ballpein for a routine Friday morning patrol. The 45-degree heat no longer phased us by this point. It would soon reach 55 degrees.

At approximately 0800, after conducting a long halt with my patrol, we stopped to scan the area before I had my navigators resume take point. Everyone had finished their individual fives and twenties, which are five-metre and twenty-metre radial searches of where you're standing. You're looking for telltale signs of activity: disturbed earth, markers, observers, and stuff of that nature.

When I began to make my walk towards my navigators, that's when the IED detonated just behind me, to my left. In mid-stride I was launched nearly 17 metres up into the air, up and over a mud wall and into a farmer's field adjacent to the route of our patrol. When I landed, I shook my head and collected myself and briefly—and I do mean briefly—looked down at my left side. I looked at the sky and called out, “Oh, man”. I said to myself, “Stay calm, B. If you get scared and excited you'll bleed out faster and you surely will die.”

• (1535)

I took a breath, then a second, and then I called out for my guys. My first aid stuff was on my left leg and had obviously been blown away as a result of the blast. My guys and gals were there in minutes. They saved me.

I suffered what one would call a catastrophic injury, a sure need for amputation eight inches from my left hip. My left side was completely torn open, so badly that, as I recovered, I used to have cables, not sutures, that held the side of my body closed all the way up to my armpit. My left shoulder was separated. I fractured my humerus and completely blew out my elbow. I suffered extensive nerve damage as well. I severed both my ulnar and my radial nerves and had a barely functional median nerve. Let me tell you, it was the most challenging part of my life at the time, just survival.

I went through countless surgeries and learned a lot of patience, let me tell you. I spent five and a half months lying in a bed on my back. I couldn't roll onto my left side or my right either because of the PICC lines for all the antibiotics and the vacuum that was draining fluid from my limb every 15 minutes.

These weren't the best times for me. I lost a lot of perspective on what or who I was. For the first time in my life, I felt like giving up. I mean, with my family history, I was supposed to live a life until at least 90, but where would a one-armed and one-legged man make it? How was I still going to be able to make my mark?

During that time of doubt, I had a lot of great visitors. Everyone would offer their encouragement and would say how happy they were to be able to see me. Even my guys during their leave, their HLTA, would come back from overseas to visit me in the hospital. It brought my spirits up, but after a while, the bitterness came, and I was tired of seeing the green relish uniform. This wasn't because I resented it, but because it was the same thing every time they came to visit: “Sorry, man. How are you feeling? We're here for you.” All that stuff.

Something happened though, something that I couldn't have thought of or predicted would happen. I had two visitors, strangers to me at the time, at two separate times: Master Corporal Mike Trauner and Corporal Andrew Knisley. Andrew Knisley, a few years younger than me, had the exact same injury, just mirrored, to what I had. He had gotten through it, since his injury occurred in January of 2008.

His philosophy was—and army guys realize—that shit happens. We laughed about it, and it felt really good to laugh.

Everyone has their epiphany. Mike Trauner comes in. He comes walking into my hospital room with this other guy who I knew from serving in battalion. I had no idea about Mike at the time or who he was. He was just another master corporal to me at the time, dressing himself in relish and coming to give his regards, I thought. He asked if I wanted to do anything, and I replied that I would love to go out for a smoke, which was probably a terrible thing to do while you're in the middle of recovering, but I needed to get out.

At the time, I was still bleeding just transferring from my bed to my wheelchair, but it did me some good to get outside, as I said. The warm breeze, the fresh air, and the sun shining were almost too much, though. Not long after, I had him wheel me back inside, and again, he helped me to transfer back into my bed. He then asked me if he could sit down. I was wondering what was up, but I said sure, thinking “I'm the injured guy here. What's the matter with you?” He said that his legs bothered him sometimes. Then he proceeded to raise up his combat pants and expose the fact that he had lost both his legs, amputated, one above and the other below the knee. I had no idea. I think at the time he must have seen the shock and the awe come out on my face, and after some chatting and sharing his story with me, he and my friend Davidson left, and that's when I had my epiphany.

I had wasted a lot of time thinking about the fact that I wasn't going to be able to amount to anything, when really it was possible. My thoughts were that I needed to be inspired, but then I took it a bit further, deep in one of my thoughts while I lay there. Why couldn't I, myself, be the example that I needed to follow? Why can't I too be the inspiration for others like I had just experienced? I then knew I was myself again and that the repercussions of my actions would reap rewards far more than just me and my personal gain, if I got up, and I had to get up.

Eventually I did. I started with barely wiggling my thumb, and now today I can do 20 push-ups and 5 pull-ups, depending on how many chocolate-covered almonds I eat, of course, but still without an elbow. I've been doing squats off the side of my bed and hopping flights of stairs all on my one leg. It takes will to do something, but it also takes courage and support to do something you're scared to do.

• (1540)

My first time participating at the annual Soldier On army run was just a mere three months after my first day of walking, June 17, 2011. I participated in the event again last year and most likely will for the rest of my days, I'm sure. In my sights are, who knows, a mini-triathlon. To get back to running, I have no idea why, because I hated running while I was in the military, but now I want to do it. It's that insatiable appetite. I wanted to live my life, not just survive. So persevering through adversity had to be a mindset, a sentiment that can be shared no matter what path any one of us wants.

My family has been so supportive throughout my military career. Even when I knew that going to Afghanistan was going to make a huge impact on all our lives, they still supported me. After I had my incident, as hard as the times were, they were there. Maxine and I were worried about how Heather would handle this catastrophic injury that I had brought on my family. But me smiling, seeing Heather again, to see her smile too...because, even though dad got hurt, I was home. I had to put myself in my daughter's shoes and imagine the example that she was witnessing. At the tender age of six at the time, she needed a good role model. Although daddy came back hurt, again I could still be her dad.

The first time she saw me, the first thing she said was, "wobble your stump". It brought a little bit of lightness to the mood. The second thing she said though came from her anger, "I told you so." Some stuff you just don't forget. When I left on that May 13, 2010, it was her sixth birthday. She said that I would get hurt and made me promise to come home. You can't break promises.

What a great feeling though to know that my appearance didn't matter. The emotional content remained the same. For her benefit, Heather needed that example so that when she's much older and maybe has children of her own, she'll possess those same strengths and great skills not to give up when life gets difficult and to be a positive role model regardless.

We all know there is already too much sadness going on in the world, so when life gives you lemons, they say, you make lemonade. I may not have the same physical ability to perform like the soldier I once was, but I can use this muscle up here that truly matters to continue to do something that's truly worth doing.

So it was all these things, Mike Trauner, Andrew Knisley, the impressions I can make on Heather by piggybacking her, hopping on one leg. To my guys, the ones I had trained, the very same who were responsible for saving my life, it would be one hell of a thing to waste, just to survive. So I decided to live it.

I share this—and this kind of ties into everything that we're going to be discussing later—if rehab or recovery was to be put into a number or percentage, 49% comes from all the resources that surround us. That's you, the government, our friends, our family, the cleaners, the doctors, the nurses. I have to bring that 51%. I have to bring that little bit more to make all those resources worthwhile.

It's not easy, but anything that's truly worth doing shouldn't be. Relationships or working our way up the corporate ladder, or winning the cup for the Super Bowl or even parenting, all these things would be great reasons to strive for something better. It shouldn't take getting one's leg blown off to realize it, but sometimes we don't learn lessons until after the hardships have happened.

I've had a very blessed life. I've survived a lot of dangers throughout, and I've been very fortunate in many ways because of the others who have helped me. In this time that I'm fortunate to continue to live I hope to make a difference in just a few people's lives, to inspire them as others have done for me.

All my hard work and exercise to improve my own ability paid off, and continues to still. If I didn't get out of that bed that one day to start pulling out those ninja skills and start hopping flights of stairs, for example, I wouldn't have been able to do those five

kilometre walks, nor go trekking across Canada a couple of years ago with my daughter. Man, to be able to climb those mountains, to swim in hot springs or the wave pool at the West Edmonton Mall, to see all the sights that make up this truly gorgeous country of ours, and then to share them all the way to Dawson City, Yukon, with my daughter, it's priceless.

As I mentioned, this month on April 16 I'm trekking to the North Pole, just one more of my achievements because I had the people to support me. Last summer I learned to water-ski down in Colorado. While I was working with Soldier On, I ran the aquatics camp here out of Ottawa.

• (1545)

Water skiing, wakeboarding, rowing, and sailing are all good stuff, but the best part was being a peer, one amongst many who are or were feeling the same way I was at one time, and sharing that "soldier on" motto. Despite adversity, we can prevail. You don't have to be alone when you're going through those struggles. Events such as those that Soldier On puts on build confidence, but it's not everything.

I just returned from backpacking in Europe and revisiting the hospital in Landstuhl, Germany. That's where I was first treated immediately after I was blown up in Afghanistan. What a sentimental treat that was, let me tell you. I was also one of the five that went to Germany for CISM, the military sports event in Warendorf. All these things were accomplished because of friends and family, the ones who supported me along the way, those encouraging words constantly reminding me, "There's no such thing as can't, my friend, only unable to do it this time".

These opportunities can shadow my fears, and those of others like me, only for so long. Opportunities go...to water-ski, ski down a mountain, or travel around the world. Those insecurities that we face along with our new physical and mental challenges are quite daunting. With great effort and focus these fears can be alleviated.

Thank you all for listening.

Enjoy the rest of the week. Soldier on.

Ms. Heather Nielsen (As an Individual): I have a story.

The Chair: Heather, right?

You must be the research and resource with your father here. Do you have a story you'd like to tell us?

Go ahead.

Ms. Heather Nielsen: Once upon a time there was a cupboard that slammed really hard and it broke in pieces. The end.

The Chair: Thank you.

With that, we'll move along to our questions by the members.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Sergeant Nielsen, one of the privileges of being a member of Parliament just short of 17 years is that we get to meet some incredible people. I've been on this committee since its inception and I've never heard a more powerful speech by anyone. I personally thank you on behalf of our chair and our entire committee. You remind me of those heroes that liberated my parents in the liberation of the Netherlands. Your bravery and courage are incredible. Thank you, as well, for bringing your daughter today to remind us of our own families. It's amazing.

Thank you so very much.

The Chair: Mr. Chicoine, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP): Welcome and thank you for that wonderful testimony.

We are studying the New Veterans Charter. I would like you to talk more about the services you have received. Would you like to have received a different type of care compared to the care you received, or a different type of support compared to what was provided to your family?

[English]

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Everyone's case happens to be different, unfortunately.

For continuity of care, I think it's a good interaction for the member who's injured to maintain communiqué with his case representative or his caseworker, making sure that this contact is also in communiqué with the unit or units that are involved with ensuring that all the t's are crossed and i's are dotted.

I think if there is anything that should be improved, I would say that there should be a team, because my case manager couldn't always be there. The guy who was appointed to stick with us couldn't always be there, and at times we did feel we were left in the dark.

When I was injured initially my home was down in Cambridge, so my unit, being out of Petawawa, is quite the distance. It's a six-hour drive to be able to get in close to your unit, to be with and among all those resources that were available. I think, especially with our reserves, our part-time service members, if they had an opportunity for someone to be posted or someone to come out to that site and stay with them for, I would say, a period of six months, through their recovery, I think that would be ideal.

Yes, case managers help you with some of your administrative duties or burdens, but there's no one there really to support you with whatever else is going on outside that picture. For example, at the time, Heather's mom, Heather, and I were living together. Our case manager would come or call us once in a while but wasn't always there to answer questions, nor did she have the insight or the knowledge to answer all the questions that we had. Even though we had asked her stuff that pertained to the military, she didn't know the answer, and it was a huge delay.

If we had someone from the unit or from the battle group who had that awareness, who was easily able to answer those questions for us, I think that would be ideal. It could be a peer, it could be someone...

but an opportunity for a position to be filled should that unfortunate circumstance arise.

● (1550)

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: What do you think about the lump sum you received as compensation? Do you feel you received sufficient compensation? Did you receive enough financial support?

[English]

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: I don't like the lump sum payout.

Not everyone is financially savvy. It's great that the opportunity for someone to go and seek some professional help with regard to financing is available. Unfortunately, one of my peers Jody Mitic—I'm sure everyone knows about him. He's been on the news. One of his issues was that he consulted someone, got some advice to invest his money into the market, and a huge chunk of that disappeared, all because his plan, what he thought was supposed to happen, didn't come through.

Unfortunately, having a huge lump sum of money, yes, it makes you feel good right in the beginning, but do you know what? It won't last, especially if you invest it into a market that is as unsure as it has been over the last five years. This is just my opinion, but I would be happy with a year's salary up front. I think it would be best. That helps pay out any of the things that you might have to deal with at the time for the first year. For example, I had to pay out of pocket, with my own money that I got for my elbow and my leg—\$70,000—to do all my home renovations. That had to come out of my pocket first.

Here's your award, but now you have to pay for everything. Yes, you get reimbursed for it, but it took eight or nine months to get everything back, when all that money could have been invested somewhere or turned into a tax-free savings fund, or put into your registered disability savings fund, or maybe you can buy into another house so you can start building your equity to make sure you get the best return. Again, not everyone is that savvy, right?

Having that one-year salary sum paid out to you would be ideal. Then having more payments every month down the road I think is the best option. This allows for you to have some money to feel comfortable with in the beginning, but also ensures that later on down the road you're always going to be able to pay your bills.

The Chair: You're just over. Very good; I was so intrigued, I almost forgot to look at the clock. Thank you.

Mr. Gill, please, you have six minutes.

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

I also want to take this opportunity to welcome Sergeant Nielsen, and your daughter Heather, for appearing before the committee to help us in this important study. I really want to thank you from the bottom of my heart. It is an honour, obviously, to see you here again.

It was a pleasure to join you at Calabogie, the ski clinic for the soldiers. Minister Fantino has also asked me to pass his greetings along. He was very touched by your presentation at the...students, hosted by Dr. Kavanagh and project veterans on Remembrance Day.

The committee has been asked by Mr. Fantino to conduct a comprehensive review of the new Veterans Charter. We're certainly honoured to have you here today. All of us on the government side have had the opportunity to read about your story and learn about the experience that you had. Since you are an Afghan veteran who has experienced the application of the Veterans Charter first-hand, I believe that your words here today are invaluable to the work of this committee.

As a serving member, can you please elaborate on your experience between the service and support you received from DND, and the service you received from Veterans Affairs Canada?

• (1555)

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: With regard to service with DND, again it's a case-by-case basis, and you want to help those who are helping you. It doesn't do any good to go in banging your fists or yelling at someone because you're having a bad day, because you can't wear your prosthetic or whatever. You know what? That's secondary. That person who is across from you at that table may not understand what you're going through, but in order to provide them with the right tools, the necessities to be able to help you, you have to consider that.

Within the whole DND spectrum with regard to my recovery, I would say it went fairly well. I always reached out and talked to the people I needed to, because obviously if I wasn't getting a phone call, or if someone wasn't calling me, there was something wrong. So at times yes, I wasn't getting those phone calls, but I followed up, as anyone who is really caring about such matters would.

With regard to Veterans Affairs, I don't have a lot of dealings with them to be honest, not quite yet. Right now the only thing I do have with them is some of my cleaning services that happen at my house, because I have a hard time taking care of daily chores, and stuff like that. But for the most part, I don't have a lot of dealings with Veterans Affairs.

I got my payout, which came in a timely manner, but I do have some worries for after I do release. When I do release from the forces then I'm not in that comfort zone. I don't have all those resources I had as a serving member to be able to employ or to reach out to. I've heard a lot of horror stories just from talking to other peers, of all different rank levels and different generations, and the hardships that they've had.

I think my biggest concern with Veterans Affairs is the empathy. The person who sits across from you at the desk may not understand you or what you're going through per se, but if they lack the empathy then they're not able to make you feel secure in knowing that they are there truly to help you. It's a tough position to fill, because you have all these guys and gals who are coming in with all these different injuries, and wanting this and demanding that, and stuff like that. But at the base level, you have to say, "Hey, this guy or gal is hurting and they've been through a lot." That I think is the primary thing. A lot of people have had a hard time dealing with people just on a personal level.

The Chair: You have a little bit more time.

Mr. Parm Gill: Perfect.

As to the second question, I understand that a case manager is working with you on your case. At what point did your case manager become involved and how involved are they? Can you share your experience with us?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: For the first nine months post-injury, I had an assisting officer. It bounced between a couple of different guys because initially we got a member who was from the reserve world who came and catered to Maxine at the time. He was way outside of the circle of knowledge in terms of what needed to be done with respect to the responsibilities and rules of the assisting officer, the AO.

We had to fire him and another fellow only because they weren't doing their job, unfortunately. Ensuring that the individual is properly trained and up to date or current with his roles and responsibilities, and with his accountabilities to us, I think that's paramount. You have to make sure those guys have that.

As for the case manager, she didn't come into the picture until I got back up into the area. As I mentioned earlier, living down in Cambridge, you're outside of that unit bubble as a regular force member. All the major bases are out in the sticks. They're in isolated areas. Being out in Cambridge, well, there's a bit of a disconnect going on. It's a six-hour drive. You can't always pick up the phone and call your CO or commanding officer at the time to say that you have a problem with it, even though he said you could, because he has his own responsibilities and stuff.

When Tanya came into the picture, it was really nice to have that involvement. Initially, at the beginning over the first month or two, it was pretty heavy. She was there most of the time. Again, that was because I had moved up to Petawawa, so we were able to develop a closer relationship. As my recovery and rehabilitation progressed, we started weaning away from each other and going from maybe a twice a week to just a once a week. Now we're only getting together maybe once every two months.

When I was having my renovations done on my home, she and I were together like this, because there was a lot of stuff, a lot of admin stuff, that I wasn't familiar with. I'm an infanteer. It's not that I'm a dumb infanteer, but it's just not my role, right? I just didn't understand it, and it was really nice to have her there on hand when I needed her.

Every case is different, you know. You have some guys who are missing both legs, or three limbs, or four limbs, and maybe their amount or their necessity is a little bit more in demand than for a guy like me. For the most part, I had a good relationship, but it was nice to have her there once I got to Petawawa and all those amenities were available for me.

• (1600)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Mr. Valeriote for six minutes.

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Sergeant Nielsen and Heather, we can sit around this table and certainly sympathize and offer our deepest gratitude, which we do, but I'll speak for myself and maybe some others around this table and say that I can't begin to imagine what you've had to live through at the moment, perhaps reliving the moment, and struggling through.... You spoke incredible words in saying that living, not surviving—persevering—must be a mindset. We're grateful for your sacrifice.

You mentioned having partners in your recovery: friends, family, various organizations, and government resources. We have to be willing partners and we have to be meaningful partners.

I wrote this down: do you have any anxieties associated with what will happen to you once you're no longer in active service? After I wrote this down, you mentioned that you do worry. You must know, of course, that many of us around this table—all of us around this table—are concerned about the disjoint between the amount of moneys that were paid under the old Pension Act, and now those that would be coming to you more recently under the new Veterans Charter.

You seem to be the kind of person who would be planning your future. Have you looked at and determined what you could expect to receive after you're no longer in active service?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: I'm just getting into that phase right now. I'm currently in a phase called RTW, return to work. I was employed with Soldier On. I was the coordinator for eastern Ontario but I retired from that because I'm committed to the TPL adventure I'm about to go on. Then also I want to continue with my education and stuff. That's going to progress to my next career once I leave the forces.

I have some anxiety. For example, my leg, the C-Leg, the computer leg that I got from Ottobock out of Germany, is a \$78,000 leg, and I very much thank all you taxpayers. I'm an active guy. I like to do a lot of stuff. I like to train. I do everything from renovating my basement to building fences to trekking, everything. So I'm aggressive with it. Right now I'm on a loaner because I killed the battery on it, and it's been sent back to Germany to get repaired.

I don't like to let weather hold me back from what I'm able to do. So a C-Leg, as great a leg as it is for walking and the technology that comes with it, unfortunately can't be exposed to adverse weather conditions, so I won't be trekking to the North Pole with this one. If I got it wet or exposed it to water in any sense, the microprocessor computer that runs the knee would short out and it's a \$4,000 job just to repair it.

As I said, I'm in a comfortable bubble right now with the military because I have all these resources to help me continue to improve my own ability as far as rehabilitation goes. Once my time has come and I leave, if I continue to act like this and be this guy who loves life, am I going to be limited now through Veterans Affairs or any other program afterwards because there's a limit on how much money they can put out? This is where I have a bit of difficulty because some members in the system are abusing it. I don't want to say they don't deserve it but maybe they don't put forth as much effort as they should in order to be given one of these legs or something.

Therefore that money, \$80,000, comes out of that pond, which means guys like me—and there are lots of guys like me—who want to have something that could benefit them and encourage them to progress further, now can't because of the almighty dollar.

• (1605)

Mr. Frank Valeriote: You mentioned being engaged in co-op education, furthering your education and gaining some skills for a new job. I remember hearing about Helmets to Hardhats several years ago. It was lauded as a wonderful program, and I had all sorts of people coming in speaking to me. I complimented the government on presenting that program until I learned that a very meagre amount of money was put into it. I think \$100,000 is the number I heard most recently, which is a completely inadequate response to the need to help with skills training.

Could you talk to us about your expectations for help from government sources to help you transition into a new job with skills training?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: With regard to Helmets to Hardhats, I'm not too familiar with it but I do understand the program and the idea behind it. I don't think it's just how much money you can throw at it. I think it's providing the opportunity and the knowledge to our serving members that there is a life after this career.

I think the companies and businesses out there that can provide these opportunities need an incentive per se, to help encourage these members not only to reach out but be reached by these companies to gain that employment and that experience for a skilled trade, maybe a tax rebate or some incentive of that sort to these small businesses or large companies that want to hire our military members or veterans and retirees. I think that would be a good way to start.

But being a fairly new concept, I think it's going to take time, and change doesn't happen overnight. It takes a lot of encouragement and patience.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that.

We now—

Mr. Valeriote, is that...?

A voice: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: I didn't want to leave it that way. I knew we'd have a bad night.

Mr. Hayes, please, you have six minutes.

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

You have an unbelievable attitude, great attitude. That's what got you through. I think your daughter got you through. I read the articles. I'm not sure I would have survived, but had I been in your position, I would have wished I'd had children at that time because they would have gotten me through as well. That's just so cool.

I want to understand a little more about your transition plan. When do you release exactly? Is that date known to you?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: No. I'm still waiting for a report back from DMCA, or D Med Pol, I think it is. They are the ones who tell you, yes, here is your final date, and you can attest it or ask for more time.

So they're usually the ones who tell you when your release date is. I'm still two to two and a half years out.

•(1610)

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Does that fall in line with the universality of service, which basically dictates that you need to be able to pass the physical fitness test, etc., in order to be deployed again in the event you have to be deployed?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Absolutely.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Do you believe in the universality of service, or...? I'm interested in your thoughts on that.

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: To some extent I do, absolutely, because every trade is different. No offence to our logistics trade or anything like that, but they are not of the same mentality as our infanteers, nor is our air force in the same capacity as our artillery guys.

Depending on the job or the trade you're interested in staying in, or maybe doing an occupational transfer to, I think the universality of service needs to be a bare minimum for everyone to be able to achieve. If you wish to stay in a combat role of sorts, then obviously the expectations have to be raised a little bit higher.

Everyone needs to realize that. That's not just in the military. It's throughout life. If you can't make it, you can't make it, you know? It just is.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Mr. Valeriotte mentioned the Helmets to Hardhats program. Are you aware that there is also a training program available to go back to university or college that makes \$75,800 available towards your education? Are you aware of that?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Is this through SISIP?

Mr. Bryan Hayes: No, this is through Veterans Affairs.

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Actually, yes; I think SISIP helps me out with my education two years prior to release, and then Veterans Affairs carries on and picks up whatever is remaining, if there are any more years of schooling expected afterwards.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Yes. It's a new program that was recently announced.

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: I just didn't know what the amount was.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: I want to back up for one second and go back to your case manager, just for clarity. You have a case manager now. Is that through DND or is that through Veterans Affairs?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: It's through DND, but she's a civilian employee up on the base. She used to be a medic a number of years ago. Then she got this job as the case worker up on the base.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Right on.

You mentioned a great truth, that every case is different. I wonder if through your experience...because you've obviously heard from many of the injured veterans you've worked with regarding the service and support they have received from DND, or perhaps under the new Veterans Charter.

Does anything stand out from those veterans you have spoken with in terms of what improvements they would like to see with

regard to the service that has been provided to them, or perhaps what their frustrations may have been with the lack of service provided to them?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: That's a tough one, because again, everyone's case is different, right? Maybe they went in and saw my case manager but were having a bad day and couldn't make any headway with her. Then maybe another day they went in and saw her and were having a better day and could make things happen. Maybe when I talked to them it was in between those two days. The perspective on a conversation as such could be different depending on when you talk to them. Maybe some of those issues were remedied after I had talked to them.

As I mention to a lot of my peers and a lot of my friends, it's not the place to go and start yelling at people. Regardless of whether you have PTSD or a physical injury and you're having a bad day or whatever, if you are seeking someone's assistance, you don't bite the hand that feeds, right?

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Yes.

I just want to close with a comment that you made, again specific to your great attitude. You state that you have to bring 51% and the government and others provide 49%. That is a phenomenal attitude. I would suggest that in this world of veterans and military life, if everybody had your attitude, I think we would all be in a better place.

I want to thank you for appearing today. Thanks very much.

Thanks, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now turn to Mr. Rafferty, please, for six minutes.

Mr. John Rafferty (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Sergeant, for being here, and Heather, thank you for being here.

You'll find out soon when your career with DND will end—you talked about it being two to two and a half years out—and then you'll move into Veterans Affairs. You talked about furthering your education. Could you elaborate on what your plans might be? I'm curious to know what you're doing now and what will continue when you come under the umbrella of Veterans Affairs.

•(1615)

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: I have a whole bunch of things on the go. I just started teaching myself how to rebuild stuff. I renovated my own basement for the past year. I don't do electrical but I just taught myself plumbing. I taught myself how to frame walls. I do my own drywall. You name it, I do it. I taught myself how to water-ski.

My prosthetic guy who I deal with at the rehab centre here in Ottawa.... When I went on my trip to Europe I ended up cracking my socket. I ended up going into a store in downtown Copenhagen in Denmark, finding some stuff, some silicone, a bicycle repair kit, and some waterproof boat tape, and I repaired my leg all by myself. So I said, look out, Patrick, I'm competing for your job now. But it's the opportunity to continue to learn something, right?

I think more so than anything I have a passion towards financing. I want to become a financial adviser or even a mortgage specialist. Unfortunately, my generation, and the generations that have yet to come, they're not learning enough on how to deal with their finances. Unfortunately, a lot of my peers, brothers and sisters in the military, aren't all that savvy as I mentioned earlier.

I think providing an opportunity and having that opportunity to maintain those connections with the military to help provide sound advice on what to do with your after-tax dollars would be a very good role for me to get into. Continue on with doing the mentorship role, to do the leadership, to apply knowledge with others, I think that's where I'd like to get into. Because going and buying a house with the maximum mortgage amount that you're able to get ain't cool because you're going to end up house broke in a number of years because of all the other expenses. But no one talks about that. So going and settling for a nice \$200,000 house as opposed to a \$350,000 house....

Mr. John Rafferty: Where does the bulk of this education belong then? While you're still in service or after you're finished?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: I think a good deal of it should come before you release. Obviously, you need to know where you're going. Pull out the compass, find out your direction, and start marching on that bearing. But how do you find out what it is that you like? That's what I like about this return-to-work program. It's not for after your release from the military but it gives you an opportunity to get a co-op placement or an opportunity to work in a certain branch or a certain trade or wherever to build on that experience or maybe gain that exposure to find out whether or not you actually like it.

I could sit here and say I like financing, but until I actually—well, I worked in a bank when I did co-op before I joined the military. I know I like it, but not everyone knows that or has the opportunity. Some guys get released way too quick. That's an unfortunate thing because it doesn't give you that time to figure out exactly what you want to do. A guy with PTSD might have a six month time to release. Whereas I have a physical injury and I have all kinds of rehab and stuff to deal with. But a six-month release doesn't give you that opportunity for a guy who has 10-plus years or more to try to figure out their next career option. What is it that I like other than army stuff?

Mr. John Rafferty: A number of previous witnesses have indicated there are some concerns about the transition from where you are now, for example, into Veterans Affairs, into post-serving life. Do you have those kinds of concerns? I know you indicated financial concerns perhaps when you leave the service, about whether or not you'll have enough to support your family.

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Before I was in the army I had to get a job, I had to make sure I paid the bills. While I was in the army I had to make sure I kept my nose clean, did my job, did it well, earned the respect of my superiors and my peers in order to continue gaining a

paycheque so I could pay the bills. I think that mentality should continue on after your career with the military as well. Nothing should change there.

However, despite the fact that us guys decide to volunteer, yes, we sign up, we go to do a job around the world and it's pretty heart-wrenching stuff that we see, when we sign on that dotted line I think the expectation is that we're going to be cared for after the fact, regardless of whether everything works out well or if someone is injured really catastrophically such as myself or others like me. I think bottom line is that we just want to make sure we're cared for and taken care of for the time ever after for the sacrifices that we did make.

Mr. John Rafferty: Have you thought, and you do think ahead obviously, about what kind of income you would need post service, so two and a half years from now?

• (1620)

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: I need nothing more than what I make now. I don't need to be a millionaire just because I'm missing a leg or anything. I'm happy with what I have. I don't worry about what I don't have anymore.

Mr. John Rafferty: Okay, thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Mr. Hawn, please, for six minutes.

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thanks to Bjarne for being here. That's one heck of a story, and I have a feeling you will live to be 90 and beyond.

I have a question for Heather. Are you proud of your dad?

Ms. Heather Nielsen: Pardon?

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Are you proud of your dad?

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I'll take that as a yes.

I just want to correct something quickly about Helmets to Hardhats. The \$100,000 put in by DND was simply to educate members of the CF that Helmets to Hardhats existed. The program is actually run by the union, specifically Canada's building trades unions, so DND does not run the program.

I have a number of things. I'll ask you some hopefully fairly quick questions, and the answers you give can be fairly instructive to us. You talk about the lump sum, and first of all you're still serving so you're still getting a sergeant's pay, and so on. Once you leave, other things will kick in depending on your assessment, earnings loss benefits, permanent impairment allowance, and so on, which are obviously in addition to the lump sum for those who qualify. But the lump sum, you suggested maybe taking.... Right now, anybody can take the lump sum or spread it out, and 98% of the people take the lump sum, sometimes with good results and obviously sometimes not.

Would you be making a specific suggestion with regard to the lump sum that says you can only get a year's salary, or maybe two years' salary—some number—and then you must defer the rest of it to some later time? Would that be a good suggestion?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: There are a couple of points on that, because as I mentioned with my own renovations, I paid about \$70,000. So, yes, that's a little more than my year's salary, and it was within the first year and a half, almost two years, after my injury that I had to start paying that out. So having that money initially, say \$75,000, would cover some of my current renovation expenses. Having cash every month paid out I think would be ideal. Again, that adds security for your own future, knowing that while you don't have a job now, you don't have a job two years from now because you can't work, or whatever the issue may be, at least you have a guaranteed income to maintain those bills.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: While you're hopefully using the \$76,000—

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: While you're still using the \$76,000.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: The aim is obviously rehab and retraining, and you're obviously a perfect example.

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: The other point to that is that some of my other peers took their maximum payout all at once and they decided to build a home for themselves. You know what? That's totally fine. You can go and build yourself a home, but spending \$400,000 or \$425,000 on it.... I don't know. That's a little too much, let alone the property taxes, the heating costs, and everything else that's going to go into that house that you've just spent a huge chunk of your payout on. You might not make it.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Probably bad planning....

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: So I'm happy to have just bought a \$250,000 home and paid \$75,000 to renovate it.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I want to talk about the transition a bit. There's an issue that I'm trying to deal with—and I will be dealing with it with I'm pretty sure cooperation from everybody—in a private member's bill that talks about the transition from DND to being a client or customer of VAC.

Right now, DND can't transfer information directly to VAC because the Privacy Act gets in the way. It's not DND's fault and it's not VAC's fault. So the essence of the private member's bill is to break that barrier down so that DND can transfer—

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Yes, because that is ridiculous.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: You would have a service number here and it's the same service number in VAC, and the information transfers. I'd like your thoughts on that, and if that would be a good idea.

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Absolutely. I think it's ridiculous that there is a barrier between the two elements. It's like the left hand not talking to the right. It is the same body. It's for veterans coming from an organization that promotes veterans. It's the government, right?

Hon. Laurie Hawn: The other issue you won't have faced as yet, but people leave and they're not allowed to take their medical file for whatever regulatory reason. I only got mine because somebody mistakenly gave it to me, so I photocopied it—

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: You can request a copy.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: You can, but it takes—

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Oh, it takes a long time.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: It takes a long, long time. Would it be a good idea to give somebody a copy of their medical file—

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Absolutely.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: —not the original, because it has to be archived and so on eventually, but to get a photocopy?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: I think having a copy on hand presented to the member upon release is ideal because you can go anywhere in the world with it. There may be a barrier to wherever you want to go if you can't get information from the government. At least you'll have that documentation on hand to present it, as necessary.

• (1625)

Hon. Laurie Hawn: It might not be to VAC, but maybe to your new family doctor or something like that.

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Could be. Maybe you decide to move down into the States, or somewhere sunny and warm, or whatever.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I want to talk about family support for a minute. Your story was very moving, very compelling. We read all the incidents and clearly your family was an important part of your recovery and will continue to be.

From your experience so far, and I realize it doesn't extend to VAC yet, can you make any recommendations about what we can do better to support families, families of people like you who are an incredibly important part of the whole process?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: I think through the Military Family Resource Centres...providing them with the means to employ more people who can reach out directly to the family members on their ground, on their turf. So again, as I said, I was in a place in Cambridge. I'm well outside the circle of Petawawa, but while I was getting my treatments or I had my stints where I had to go back to the hospital for a couple of weeks or whatever, well, who's hanging out at the house, right? It would be nice to have someone go and visit them on their turf to make sure they're comfortable and cared for.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: You mentioned the process. You spent \$70,000. You got it nine months later, whatever. Obviously, anything we can do to.... There's a process of having to put in the bills and getting reimbursed and so on, but I agree, it shouldn't take nine months. So anything we can do to speed up that process between the time you spend and the time you get it back—

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Speed up? Don't have the member pay it.

That was the chunk of money that I got for my arm and my leg, and now you're asking me to pay it back again and separate myself from it? Oh, I just got this back, okay, that makes me feel secure for a little while, but now I have to pay out \$70,000—

Hon. Laurie Hawn: That is a separate program, actually.

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: For...?

Hon. Laurie Hawn: It's not actually...you're paying it out of the lump sum you have because that's the money you have on hand, but the renovations to your house and so on are paid for over and above that. It's just you have to expense it.

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: I had to pay it with my money.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: But you got it reimbursed, correct?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Yes, but why should I have to pay for it?

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I understand.

The Chair: Okay, I think we have it clarified now. Thank you for that.

We go to Mr. Galipeau now, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Sergeant, I thank you for sharing your story with us. Our colleagues know that I'm the son of a veteran and I don't know my father's story. I not only thank you for sharing it with us but for helping your daughter Heather to live it also so that in 35 years or 45 years she doesn't do as I do and say she doesn't know her dad's story.

Not only were you the most eloquent speaker that we've ever seen at this table—

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Thanks. I'm honoured. I'm just speaking my mind and speaking from the heart.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: But Peter Stoffer offered the most eloquent thanks that I ever heard at this table.

So thank you for telling us about your plans to make that long trek from Resolute Bay to the North Pole. I hope you're planning to do it in the daytime. I was in Alert but pretty much like a VIP, and I went during the daytime. It was August.

Are you going to the North Pole or are you just going to Alert?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: No, we're going to Resolute Bay. We fly in there on the 16th. We're there for a day to acclimatize and then we're cross-country skiing. Some guys are snowshoeing—I have no idea why—but we're cross-country skiing to the North Pole.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: There's water there.

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: What's that?

Mr. Royal Galipeau: There's water there. It's not all ice.

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: A recce was just done. Apparently it's okay. There was a reconnaissance mission and it's good.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: And eleven others are going?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Soldiers, yes. There are about 51 of us in total composing the entire expedition.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: That's an amazing feat. I hope you'll tell us about it when you get back.

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: If you invite me back, I'll share it, absolutely.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Is the Department of Veterans Affairs pitching in with any help for prosthetics and supports?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: No, no. This is entirely through True Patriot Love. I've already accumulated some of the prosthetics and the gear over my recovery period. For example, we were skiing at Calabogie a couple of weeks ago. This is my third year of skiing so I already have the technology and then being able to work with it, working with my prosthetic guy to come up with an idea because my Bartlett knee—anyway I don't want to get too drawn into but there are some mods that have to happen.

•(1630)

Mr. Royal Galipeau: That's fine.

I'd like to shift gears, if you don't mind, and focus on support for families. What types of supports does Soldier On provide, not just for veterans but for military families and military spouses?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Since I've been there, I know that they support families and stuff like that, but a lot of the events that I participated in and ran in unfortunately don't bring the families out together. The whole idea or the whole mantra of Soldier On is to help develop the individual for his own needs and the ability to gain therapy through an active lifestyle.

That's great, but when the member goes back home after learning to ski or learning to water-ski or whatever the situation is.... I think opening up an opportunity for the family to enjoy that as a whole, together.... When I took Heather out to Calabogie, I was bawling my eyes out every day because I never thought that I would be able to stand up and ski again. You wouldn't even be able to tell that I'm missing a leg if you came and skied with me, but at the time, you know, it's an honour to be able to do it. I think it's something deep down inside the member that changes you, because the family are there with you, along with you, for that process and able to enjoy it and figure things out with this new life you've been given.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: And the hugs that come with it.

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Yes, a lot of hugs. Hugs are good.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Can you describe the level of support that your family has received through other organizations like the Military Family Resource Centres, Wounded Warriors, or True Patriot Love?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: I've never dealt with Wounded Warriors. I've dealt with Soldier On and True Patriot Love. I know that True Patriot Love has been really great to me and my daughter. I know that initially my unit sent out flowers and stuff to my wife at the time. I don't know...maybe there could be more opportunity for them to get involved.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Before I get cut off by the chair—

The Chair: Which will happen very soon.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: —I'd like to know if you have any recommendations that you'd like to make for veterans on how the Department of Veterans Affairs can better support families.

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: I think it's by having people coming to the door of the family, to their house, and sitting in with them, whether it's once a week or twice a week, just to keep track and try to offer support, or to keep them up with community events and try to get them engaged so they're not just hunkering down, hanging out in the house, and worried that they have to take care of their husband or their wife or whatever.... Because they have to realize that they need to maintain their own freedoms and feel that greatness of getting out and living.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: When this meeting is over, can I go and give you a hug?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Okay, as long as it's a bro hug.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Thank you.

The Chair: Well, this is getting awfully personal in here.

By the way, Heather, we have a military expert amongst our ranks. I'd like you to get him to identify the planes that you constructed. They look kind of military.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: They look like F-35s from here.

Ms. Heather Nielsen: They're paper airplanes.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: There you go. Very good.

Mr. Stoffer, please, you have six minutes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you very much.

Sergeant Nielsen, your going into a program to help educate your brothers and sisters on fiscal literacy is, I think, a wonderful thing to do. As you may know, one of our colleagues, James Rajotte, who is from Edmonton and who was the chair of the finance committee for many years, moved a motion in the House that was universally adopted by all of us on the aspect of teaching all Canadians, including your daughter, right from the get-go about fiscal literacy.

The other day I had the opportunity to be with the chartered professional accountants, the CPAs. They have brochures on the subject of fiscal literacy. I'd like to get your address later so that I can mail one to you. Someone like James Rajotte would be a good person to link with in the future, because he's very knowledgeable about that issue and about how to get the message out. I think it would be a great career to help people—and you're right—by teaching them how to handle their money.

The other thing I would suggest to you, sir, and I suggest this to all exiting military personnel, is that when you get your medical file, don't just receive it and then exit; make sure you review it beforehand, in case something may be missing, a document or something. In the future—maybe not now, but down the road—you may need those documents, if you need to make a claim with DVA.

I just have this to say, because in two or two and a half years you'll be leaving, what would be helpful...?

The new Veterans Charter, which we're reviewing right now, is a living document. This means that even when we complete this study, the review of the charter does not end. There are always ways, regardless of what the government is in the future, to improve upon it, to ensure that the heroes of our country and their families are well looked after. As we heard the other day—I thought this was a great line—there is no expiration date on gratitude. When Mr. Cundell said that, I thought it was a great line. It's something I'll keep with me for a while.

What would be very helpful, sir, when you go, is that, with any things that you see, any suggestions you have, any comments you have now and in the future, you contact not just your local MP but also this committee with suggestions. Not only would this help us to evolve even more modern aspects of what should or shouldn't be in the charter, but also, coming from someone who is living the transition on a regular basis, it would assist us in assisting the government of the day to ensure that programs such as those you may require in the future and those things that are unforeseen right now aren't delayed into a long, as my colleague Mr. Hawn says, nine-month delay. These things should be able to assist you and your family on a very quick basis.

So that would help all of us in the future.

Again I want to thank you personally for being here.

• (1635)

The Chair: He has me stunned. I was waiting for the three or four questions that would follow.

Did you want to comment at all on any of that? There are a couple of minutes left for this.

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Do you mean as final notes?

The Chair: Well, we still have another questioner, but I meant, do you want to comment on what Mr. Stoffer said?

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: No, I have no comments.

The Chair: No, it baffles a lot of us sometimes.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Anyway, we'll hear from him again, I guarantee you.

We'll go to our last questioner for the day and our guest visitor today, Mr. Lunney, for six minutes, please.

Mr. James Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I'm not a regular member of this committee. I'm filling in for one of the regular members. We heard the very first questioner say that in his 17 years, I believe Mr. Stoffer said, on this committee, he had never heard a more remarkable testimony. I heard Royal more or less confirm that and call your remarks "eloquent"—I think that was the word he used.

I'm a regular member of the health committee, but I want to say that, just in filling in today, I have experienced one of the most remarkable meetings I have ever attended of any committee. I can tell you, I will never forget what I heard you say today. I'll start by saying, if I may, that I agree with the word "eloquent" about your remarks. I would also say succinct and brilliant for your use of time in recounting your experiences.

Did you put that together yourself? That is my first question.

• (1640)

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Heather helped.

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Yes, she's my editor.

Mr. James Lunney: I'm going to up my colleague here. Peter says that in a couple of years from now, you might be leaving.

That's not exactly what I heard. I heard that this sergeant really enjoyed mentoring. I think he demonstrated how important the right kind of mentoring is for an injured soldier.

I think you had an experience with Mike Trauner, your colleague who came to visit you at a key moment and had a huge impact on you. I think I heard this gentleman say that he wanted to pursue further education—which the department and Veterans Affairs has an interest in helping him accomplish—in financial management, which is a need for our soldiers.

But I would suggest that this gentleman has captured so nicely here, in recovery—and one of the key elements of recovery that he so eloquently put together here is the personal motivation.... Unlike my colleagues here, I had a career in physical rehabilitation, in the sense that I was for 24 years a chiropractor. But there are many people involved in rehabilitation who will not understand what you so eloquently demonstrated, and that is that the body responds—a living body will respond—to the stresses that you put it under, and your rehab is very much dependent on your motivation.

When you described hopping down the stairs with your daughter—or up the stairs, I think—on one leg.... You see, one thing I learned

as a rehab worker was that when people asked me, "Will I be able to do this?" or "Will I be able to do that?" I would always, I learned—

Yes, Heather?

Ms. Heather Nielsen: When you said hopping on one leg, do you mean this?

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. James Lunney: That's exactly what I mean.

Did your dad do that with you?

Ms. Heather Nielsen: No. He goes like this.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. James Lunney: Thank you for that clarification.

Ms. Heather Nielsen: You're welcome.

Mr. James Lunney: I want to pick this up, because what he demonstrated so succinctly was his motivation. What I learned was that I would ask a patient if they wanted to do something, and if they were motivated and wanted to do it badly enough, I could tell them I didn't think they would ever be able to do that and they would darn well turn around and prove me wrong. I learned that early in my practice.

I want to say that you demonstrate that so clearly.

I want to suggest that Veterans Affairs and the Canadian Armed Forces could headhunt to try to find someone to help mentor people in recovery, and they'd never find anybody better than this gentleman, who has lived through it and who has the motivation.

I would suggest that if you get your financial training, wherever you want to go, then I'll make the recommendation to the committee—although I'm not a regular member—that they keep your resume on hand with your address and your phone number. They would be very wise to hire this gentleman and keep him, because you'll never find a better advocate or a better example.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: You're going to get 10 letters of reference right here.

The Chair: Dr. Lunney, I totally agree with you, but you have less than two minutes now to ask your question.

Mr. James Lunney: Two minutes...? Well, I think he has very capably represented himself.

You're water-skiing and you're going to the North Pole. These things that you're doing are just tremendous. You're a tremendous example in what you're doing. I would suggest that if it's in your heart to mentor other soldiers and help them with their financial commitments, they're not going to hear it from anybody better than someone who's lived through it as you have. That option is perhaps one that you would want to keep in mind and that I hope everybody here will want to keep in mind for you in the military. Frankly, I think it would be a tremendous loss to our government and to the military, if we don't find a way to keep you engaged in working with soldiers in one capacity or another.

I want to mention that there is another program—there are 30 seconds left—for hiring veterans for other departments in the government. If you're capable of writing this well as an infantryman, and being a MacGyver—a plumber, an electrician, and a “glue your own socket back together” man—there has to be a role for you in the government. We need you.

I'll just leave it at that.

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

Sergeant Nielsen, you've heard the comments. I didn't see you turn totally sad when it was suggested you might want to join government. That may not be the option you want to take, but I'll tell you this. We want to recommend that you come back every year.

Sgt Bjarne Nielsen: Thank you.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Chair: We will suspend for about five minutes.

•(1640) _____ (Pause) _____

•(1650)

The Chair: We will reconvene. We're continuing the study on the new Veterans Charter.

I want to remind members of the committee that we're having a very brief business meeting at the end so I would ask you to stay and we'll go through that quite quickly.

I'm glad to see you all here. Mr. Chartrand, I'm very glad you made it. We weren't sure you were going to be able to make it this afternoon, so we're pleased to see you.

Mr. Blais, again, it's nice to see you.

Mr. Kovacs, it's always interesting to see you here.

Voices: Oh, oh!

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jerry Kovacs (Director, Canadian Veterans Advocacy): Thank you very much. We are very pleased to be here this afternoon.

The Chair: Yes.

[*English*]

This is Canadian Veterans Advocacy. You all know the format. We have a presentation that I assume one of you is going to make on your behalf and then we do the rounds of questions.

Thank you for attending and we look forward to your comments, please.

Mr. Michael Blais (President and Founder, Canadian Veterans Advocacy): Thank you.

Good afternoon. Thank you for inviting the Canadian Veterans Advocacy to testify before parliamentary committee today. We are grateful.

My name is Michael Blais. I am the president and founder of the Canadian Veterans Advocacy. Accompanying me today are Director Sylvain Chartrand and Director Jerry Kovacs. During the question and answer period, Director Chartrand will respond to queries in reference to the statistical analysis on the new Veterans Charter and

the Pension Act, and the plight of Canada's wounded reservists. Director Kovacs will respond to the issues identified through the ongoing consultation that we have presented as solutions through our harmonization proposals.

We have provided written documentation that clearly defines the CVA's harmonization proposals. I would note that the CVA principles are defined through extensive consultation within Canada's veteran and military communities. The message that I bring to you today represents the voices of thousands of veterans who have served in all areas; their families; Canada's Memorial Cross mothers, fathers, and widows; and far too many serving members who, in the aftermath of the war in Afghanistan or service in former Yugoslavia, Haiti, and Africa, will soon become Veterans Affairs' responsibility.

There are several issues worthy of discussion; many are complex. I would reaffirm the CVA support in principle for Ombudsman Parent's report. We are very concerned about the state of poverty many disabled veterans will confront after age 65 and the lack of recognition and comprehensive support for veterans suffering from environmental contaminations such as Agent Orange, depleted uranium, or the profoundly disturbing consequences of emerging mental wounds.

I will conform to the committee's mandate, however, and focus on three issues of concern.

Reservists... I am pleased to note that this is one issue where consensus has been reached within the veterans community. To that end, I will request that you fulfill your obligation to the thousands of reservists who have been summoned and who have offered great sacrifice on behalf of this nation, not only in Afghanistan but in many areas of the globe wherein the threat of both physical and mental violence was, and perhaps is, a clear and present danger. Why is the leg of a reservist worth less than the leg of a regular force member, when both were catastrophically injured in the same incident? Or two legs? Or two legs and an arm?

I would speak to Corporal William Kerr, whom I have assisted as an advocate. Tracy Kerr and her family are now responsible for ensuring Canada's only surviving triple amputee's quality of life is assured. They too have been called upon to offer great sacrifice. Mrs. Kerr needs your help. There must be equality, recognition of sacrifice, understanding, and compassion dictated by need. Need, not budgetary restraint....

I am obliged to speak to the adverse issues our war widows and mothers and fathers of men and women, unmarried, who have offered the ultimate sacrifice to this nation.... I am profoundly saddened to note that there are Memorial Cross widows, such as Mrs. Joan Larocque, who have been excluded and consigned to an existence far below the \$40,000 poverty threshold that this government deems necessary to provide the basic necessities of life: food, shelter, and clothing. All Memorial Cross widows, regardless of the time when their loved ones passed, must be accorded the new Veterans Charter earnings loss benefit, particularly those who are living beneath the poverty threshold. We must also include the VIP services for them. The two-year restrictive window on vocational training must be waived, and the opportunities for vocational assistance extended indefinitely.

I'd also speak to the plight of parents of unmarried fatalities, and suggest, with all due respect, that their profound sacrifice to Canada be formally acknowledged through the provision of VAC pain and suffering awards in addition to the Memorial Cross.

• (1655)

Why are they excluded when they were identified as the primary next of kin? Should they not be treated with the same level of respect as any other primary dependant, the widows and the children?

Finally, I would address the most contentious issue, the pain and suffering quotient of the new Veterans Charter. This issue, without question, defines the sacred obligation. It is the very essence of the sacred obligation—a contract, a social contract, with Canada's sons and daughters sent into harm's way. The award is unique, separate from income replacement programs such as SISIP and ELB, or the many service-related provisions provided, depending on the veteran's needs.

We have commissioned an unbiased, strictly statistical analysis of the Pension Act and NVC, and have submitted our conclusions to the committee. Unequivocally, the pension plan provided better compensation and more services to disabled veterans than does the new Veterans Charter.

That being said, we have a sacred obligation to those who we as an advocacy would serve. Our duty is clear, and we must respond with all due diligence. We must accept the fact that the concept of the lump sum award is appealing to veterans approaching the twilight of their years, or younger veterans who have dreams and require the funds to build the foundation of a new life beyond transition, beyond military service. We must also be cognizant of the wounded in Afghanistan, supported through the Equitas Society's quest for equality, and the court-inspired questions particularly in reference to the sacred obligation, the social contract that has been raised.

How do we as a nation reconcile the divergences between generational desires? How do we as a nation create mechanisms that will satisfy the needs of veterans of all generations without weighing one generation's needs over another's?

Today the Canadian Veterans Advocacy will provide you with a solution to this complicated dilemma, a solution that will respect the most sacred obligation Canada bears for all generations of veterans. We propose harmonization and the option of choice, choice between a respect-driven lump sum award and the Pension Act.

With regard to the lump sum award, Canadian Veterans Advocacy acknowledges the voices of those who would prefer a lump sum award. What we do not acknowledge or support is the current level of financial compensation, or the new Veterans Charter's practice of excluding spouse and children. Nor do we agree with or support the Royal Canadian Legion or the many prominent veteran organizations they have united under the banner of the consultation group on this issue. They would propose solutions that compare the sacrifice of Major Mark Campbell—whose legs were explosively amputated, who suffered serious internal injuries, including the loss of a testicle, who has a brain stem injury and complex PTSD—with the plight of a civilian awarded legal damages due to negligence at the workplace in Ontario.

This is unconscionable. There is no comparison. The sacred obligation is not accorded to a litigant in a lawsuit. The sacred obligation is reserved for Canadians who have sworn allegiance to this great nation, who have borne arms in our name and bled in battle, who have suffered in peace with unwavering loyalty and offered great sacrifice while treading in harm's way in Canada's name.

Clearly the compensation quotient of the lump sum award must reflect and respect the sacrifice borne. Surely we are obligated not only to the wounded but also, as provided in the Pension Act, yet denied in the NVC, to the spouses and the children who were here today, those whose lives have been catastrophically affected by their father's or mother's service-related physical and mental disability.

• (1700)

CVA proposes, for those who wish to choose the option of the lump sum award, that a 100% disabled veteran be awarded a tax-free lump sum of \$1.5 million; that there be a supplementary lump sum award for a wife in recognition of her sacrifice, of \$250,000; and that there be a supplementary pension award for the children in recognition of their sacrifice, of \$50,000 per child. Conversely, those who would prefer to embrace the Pension Act provisions would be free to do so for a modernized program that would harmonize the Pension Act provisions with the new Veterans Charter opportunities.

Thank you for inviting the Canadian Veterans Advocacy to speak to these issues. We pray that our words have inspired the spirit of our nation within you, and that you will indeed craft legislation that is comprehensive and that will restore, not ignore, that will embrace, not replace, the sacred obligation that we—you, I, and all Canadians—bear for those who stand on guard for thee with true patriot love.

Thank you.

• (1705)

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

We'll now go to the rounds of questions.

Mr. Stoffer, we'll start with you, please. You have six minutes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Mr. Blais, Jerry, and Sylvain, thank you very much for coming. I want to personally thank you, and on behalf of all of us, actually, for your continued advocacy, not just for the men and women who serve our country but for their families as well. It's very much appreciated as well by those families who contact me.

Michael, if I may use your first name, you mentioned—and you are correct—that if a person receives a lump sum and little else after that, then the old system is much better. There's no question about that.

But when the new Veterans Charter was initiated, the lump sum was an initial payment for pain and suffering to assist that person in any initial unforeseen cost that they might have at that specific time. In being disabled, in missing an arm or a leg or whatever, other programs, like the permanent impairment allowance and the earnings loss benefit, were to follow. The problem we're finding is that in many cases for those veterans who applied for those two additional payments, which would have made it better than the old system, they didn't receive those benefits or they had to fight really hard and long in order to receive those types of benefits.

If indeed a recommendation from you or if this committee were to go to the government to push them to move much more generously, as the new Veterans Charter was initially advertised—not sold but advertised—in regard to the fact that the generosity of the additional programs would be in place for those most seriously injured veterans.... Would you agree or like to see that or help us recommend...? What would you suggest to us to put in a report to state very clearly that those additional payments should be made forthwith without much hesitation?

Mr. Michael Blais: I think what's important is that we separate the earnings loss and the other benefits that are provided from the pain and suffering award. The pain and suffering award is unique. It is the definitive explanation of the demonstration of patriotic spirit to which this nation has committed.

Now, you have brought up very interesting things, such as the permanent impairment allowance. Many of you have seen me. I'm not eligible. My pension is 30%. That's the problem. When we go forward, we're always underbid. You must have a certain percentage point even in order to qualify for permanent impairment allowance. I'm on a scooter. I get 30%. I don't qualify. How many more are like me? You've all seen me walking around. You know I'm crippled. How many more...?

I think that first of all we must differentiate the pay and suffering award from all other programs, whether it's the Pension Act or the new Veterans Charter, because there were very positive programs within the Pension Act, you know, that were replicated within the new Veterans Charter. I'd also like to say that there are positive things in the new Veterans Charter. The fact that thousands of people slipped through the cracks, apparently, on SISIP and needed this supplementary help is indicative of the fact that there was a problem. It's indicative that the government responded. It's indicative that everyone agreed that it was a problem, and hence it was passed forward.

But let us not confuse the sacred obligation with the obligation you have to replace income supplements, to acknowledge permanent injuries, and to provide vocational care. These are all good things,

but they're expected good things. They're the same things that were provided by SISIP and are now replicated by Veterans Affairs.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I have a last point for you before I get cut off as well. The Veterans Bill of Rights is a separate sort of document that is not really legally binding in any way. In another meeting, the ombudsman told us that he would like to see the Veterans Bill of Rights enshrined in the new Veterans Charter. I personally take responsibility because there is no preamble in the charter, such as the whereases and all of that.

Would you agree that the Veterans Bill of Rights should be included in the new Veterans Charter, as well as some form of language that mentions—this is regardless of government, because this document has to continue on for an incredibly long time with reviews and amendments as we go along—that there is a moral and/or social obligation on behalf of the Canadian government, and on behalf of its people, to those who we ask to put themselves in harm's way? Would you like to see something of that nature?

• (1710)

Mr. Michael Blais: I would indeed.

We present bills, we come forward with great fanfare. The Veterans Bill of Rights, we're going to stand up for the lads, we're providing, yet we don't legislate them. I could extend that to the office of the Veterans Ombudsman as well. He should be legislated. He should be reporting to Parliament, not the minister.

We have issues here where, yes, it's a great thing, but at the end of the day a lot of them are headlines without substance. If we're not willing as a nation to abide by the Veterans Bill of Rights, then it's a headline without substance.

How do we change that? Legislation, enshrinement—make it happen so that those rights are inalienable, deserved, and perpetual.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you, sir.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Gill, please, you have six minutes.

Mr. Parm Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also want to thank our witnesses for appearing before the committee and helping us with this important study.

I have a whole bunch of questions so I hope you'll keep your answers brief.

Can each of you tell us briefly about your service, where you might have served, and the medals that you have been honoured with? Can you share that information with the committee?

Mr. Sylvain Chartrand (Director, Canadian Veterans Advocacy): I went to Cyprus in 1990, and Bosnia in 1993. I've got a CD, a Bosnia medal, a peacekeeping medal, a Cyprus, and a Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal. I served 21 years in the reserves.

Mr. Parm Gill: Thank you.

Mr. Michael Blais: I served in Cyprus, did two tours in NATO peacekeeping or NATO cold war activities in Germany, a peacekeeping medal, 12 years undetected crime.

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: I'd be delighted to provide you with the written response to your question. I'd appreciate a question on a veterans' issue or any of the three issues the minister has asked us to talk about today.

Mr. Parm Gill: Could you please provide us with a written one, if you don't mind?

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: Absolutely.

Mr. Parm Gill: We'd appreciate that.

The second question is this. If you can tell us, are you currently a Veterans Affairs client, any one of you, or are there benefits that you are currently receiving as a VAC client?

Mr. Sylvain Chartrand: Yes, I do receive benefits, a wide variety of benefits from Veterans Affairs Canada.

Mr. Michael Blais: I'm a client of Veterans Affairs Canada, and guess what? I have not had a problem with Veterans Affairs Canada, but it's never been about me.

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: I'm not a client.

Mr. Parm Gill: You're not a client. Okay.

Mr. Chartrand, you made comments this morning at the press conference where you said everything under the new Veterans Charter is applicable under the Pension Act. Do you believe this statement to be true?

Mr. Sylvain Chartrand: I believe the statement is true; it is actually true.

Let's forget about the lump sum disability award. Everything that is under the new Veterans Charter is not new. It has only been repackaged from SISIP and named new Veterans Charter.

PIA exists in the new Veterans Charter. The Pension Act was EIA. There is nothing that the new Veterans Charter provides that the old system did not. We only repackaged it. Vocational was SISIP; rehabilitation was SISIP. Even pre-2006 I was getting rehabilitation: psychosocial, medical. There is nothing new in the new Veterans Charter that did not exist before.

This is there. The chart that I have provided you shows very clearly that the government states there are 19 pension systems, which should say Pension Act, and 30 services under the new Veterans Charter. When you combine what you could get from the new Veterans Charter from a Pension Act client, you get 34 services under the pension services and only 30 services under the new Veterans Charter. This has significant financial impact in analysis, which we have provided.

Mr. Parm Gill: Thank you.

My next question is for Mr. Kovacs.

During the same press conference, sir, you said that the Minister of Veterans Affairs will not hire a veteran to work in his office. Do you believe this statement to be true?

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: How many veterans work in his office at the moment, sir?

Mr. Parm Gill: I'm asking you a question, sir.

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: I'm under the impression that at present time there is one veteran employed in his office of 10 people, and that's his chief of staff, Monsieur Fauteux.

My comment today was that the Minister of Veterans Affairs talks about priority hiring, he talks about partnerships with the private sector, and he talks about individuals hiring veterans. My comment today was that he should show leadership and hire some veterans to work in his office because I'm under the knowledge and belief that he has an office budget of approximately \$1 million with 10 staff and he has one veteran on staff at the moment. My comment was to encourage him to hire more veterans to work in his office.

● (1715)

Mr. Parm Gill: Did you at any point in time check with either his staff or the minister himself to see how many veterans may be working in his office before making the comment?

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: Yes, I checked with his staff.

Mr. Parm Gill: What was the answer you received?

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: They were reluctant to provide me with the information. They wanted to know why I was asking for that information.

Mr. Parm Gill: Was your question sent in a written format or was it verbal?

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: It was just a verbal question. How many veterans work in the minister's office?

Mr. Parm Gill: Are you able to share with us the name of the staff member you may have spoken to, sir?

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: Yes, I'll provide that to you in writing after the meeting.

Mr. Parm Gill: We would look forward to getting that information.

Mr. Blais, in regard to your organization, is there somewhere on your website that indicates where your organization's funding comes from, and any lobbying or political activities that your organization does?

Mr. Michael Blais: Our funding comes from veterans who feel like donating. We do not subscribe membership fees. We realize those that we serve are invariably experiencing some form of financial discord as a consequence of the new Veterans Charter or they wouldn't be reaching out to us for help. So a lot of the costs are borne by us. We've had contributions. Yes, we had a union contribution two years ago, if you want to go there. The Union of Veterans Employees, as a matter of fact, contributed \$2,000 to the war fund. That doesn't mean I'm a union man; it just means they supported what we're doing.

Mr. Parm Gill: I appreciate that—

The Chair: Unfortunately we're past six minutes now. You will probably get another chance later, I think.

Mr. Valeriote, please.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, gentlemen, for your service and thank you for appearing before us today.

First of all, Michael, if I may, you mentioned in your remarks today the Royal Canadian Legion. The Royal Canadian Legion, as I understand it, is suggesting an increase to the lump sum payment, but I don't see a similar suggestion in your presentation. Can you tell me why that is? Am I wrong?

Mr. Michael Blais: No, well, you're somewhat incorrect. We propose that the \$1.5 million be as a foundation on the lump sum award. That's through consultation, that's not Mike Blais just picking a number out of his hat. That's the response from many veterans who we've talked to on this issue. On the Pension Act, they don't even want to go back there.

I find it very disingenuous that a veterans' organization representing 300,000 people who have united other organizations, where you're probably adding another 40,000 people to the equation, would not respect the wishes of the wounded as they have been clearly stated by the Equitas foundation. I also found it very disingenuous that an organization at that level that fought so hard to get the benefits in the Pension Act, that stood up for so many generations of veterans, is now abandoning this generation of veterans. Most repugnant to me, it will compare a modern-day veteran's sacrifice to some poor schmuck on the side of the road who got hurt in an accident in a carefully regulated safety environment. There are two different standards here.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Okay, Thank you.

I had the opportunity yesterday to follow through telecast or by reading the report following the meeting, the presentation before the Senate. Yesterday, Lieutenant-General Walter Semianiw, the assistant deputy minister of Veterans Affairs, said that he supported the idea of exploring perhaps an advisory council with credible experts that may include, and I'm quoting, "veterans, family members, maybe some spouses and those who know these issues inside and out. They could provide advice to either the minister or the department as one of the voices as we move ahead."

It's been said by Mr. Stoffer, everyone around this table, that we know this is a living, breathing document, the new Veterans Charter. Do you support that kind of advisory council?

Mr. Michael Blais: No, I don't and I'm going to tell you why.

This government has spent thousands upon thousands of dollars already on advisory councils. We've struck two. At the first stakeholders' meeting that I went to we brought forward all these resolutions. Three advisory groups spending thousands upon thousands of dollars, spending hours upon hours of study.... Very brilliant people put their minds to this—ignored. So what? Now we're going to reinvent the wheel? Now we're going to start again? We know what's wrong. We know our people are suffering in the now.

Now it's time for you to embrace what we're telling you—not only me, every witness who comes forward—and bring forward that legislation that will fix it. That's what we want.

• (1720)

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Okay, I have a third question, sir.

Is this—and anyone can answer this.... I'm new to the committee. This is only my second meeting, and I understand that reservists receive less for the same injuries than people on active duty, and those who were post-Veterans Charter receive less than those who were pre-Veterans Charter.

So my impression is that we're creating three different classes of veterans. I've read some of the Equitas briefings. I think this is almost unconstitutional and a violation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Would you comment on the inappropriateness of that three-class system that's being created?

Mr. Sylvain Chartrand: It is very inappropriate because we have augmented the regular force by about 25% in Afghanistan. Why are we different? Those with knowledge of the military know, and it's an undeniable fact, that reservists have always been shafted.

Now we're creating another system and we are not providing the same level of financial benefit. This is not acceptable. I will tell the committee some exclusive news now. Not only are reservists getting shafted financially, but now my team has worked very hard for less for many years. Reservists are entitled to workers' compensation of up to 90% of the highest salary. That does not mean the military salary; it means the highest salary. So now we're stuck in another situation, that reservists who are entitled to workers' compensation.... We have the government—who is not informing the reservists of this right to this day.... I've been going to the Department of National Defence, up to the minister's level, on this.

So we need to ensure that we provide reservists with a fundamental right—because workers' compensation is not a privilege, it's a right. It's an obligation to declare injuries, but we are not doing it.

Thank you.

Mr. Michael Blais: When we treat someone with fiscal discrimination—for lack of a better word—and then we send them to isolated communities across the nation, we take away that bracket they've been in..... The combat team is gone, the base is gone, all of those support elements that were inherent there are gone. The peer support is gone. Then we consign them to a life of poverty.

I say poverty, by this committee's description of a \$40,000...the end results are sometimes catastrophic, but they could be prevented if we had a standard that was equal for all. If we treated reservists that we sent to war as we treat our regular force, we could save lives. We could make lives better.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We now go to Mr. Hayes, please, for six minutes.

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

Mr. Blais, we've heard your comments around the lump sum payment. I'm interested to know if you can give me a sense of some of the other financial benefits you support within the new Veterans Charter.

If there are more financial benefits that should be included in the new Veterans Charter, I would be interested in what you think those financial benefits would be.

This again is outside of the lump sum—

Mr. Michael Blais: Thanks for that, because I get a lot of flak at times. They say I'm too negative on the new Veterans Charter. I'm negative on certain aspects, the sacred obligation for one thing. But we're not talking about that.

The ELB is a positive thing. It was brought in to provide that net. It has worked, definitively. We have over 7,000 veterans on ELB now. We cannot deny that it is not effective, and I won't tell you it's not effective because it is effective.

On the second issue, I know the Legion has brought this forward. On the ELB, I have a problem with the position in the sense that—not that the 100%.... They would say that if you are on ELB you should get 100%. I don't know about that. My personal conviction is that it should stay at 75% and just go tax free because that was the intent in the beginning.

But the problem with the entire concept is that they've ignored those who are on SISIP. We can't say if you're on ELB, we're going to give you—in my scenario—a tax-free disability thing, when meanwhile, by definition, Canada's most seriously wounded veterans are on SISIP. There was no two-year expiry date that they went beyond and then a mental wound surfaced and they came back to the fold but it was too late for SISIP, and ELB reached out to provide that security net.

So if it's going to go that way...and I would recommend that it be tax free, but it has to include SISIP. It just can't be ELB and create two standards of veterans again and I'm sure create another class action suit again because of it.

• (1725)

Mr. Bryan Hayes: In terms of the vocational rehabilitation program and the training, is that something you're supportive of? Is it a good program? Do you think that something needs to change?

Mr. Michael Blais: There have been enhancements. I would note that many of the provisions in the Pension Act or through SISIP.... I'm on the old system, and there was maybe not as much money in those days by any means. I know that it's up to potentially \$70,000 now. Well, that didn't exist back 10 to 15 years ago—that's for sure—but there are positive things.

This is why I'm here today talking about harmonization, because those good things and the things that were good things there are what harmonization is all about. Let's do the best we can for our veterans. Let's acknowledge the positive in the new Veterans Charter. Let's listen to what they want. Let's provide legislation that makes everyone happy.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Maybe you have done this in the past, and if you have, please accept my apologies, but for our committee, would you be prepared to put clearly in writing what you support in the new Veterans Charter and what you absolutely oppose in the new Veterans Charter, and prioritize that in some way for our committee?

Mr. Michael Blais: I certainly would. But my intention in coming today was to be positive and to provide a venue for you to look at a harmonization proposal that identifies the issues where we're lacking, discusses those issues where we're lacking, and comes forward with legislation.

Sure—if you want me to write a little blurb about what I like and what I don't like and what I think you should do, by all means, I would love to do that.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Absolutely 100%.

I'm looking at the comparative evaluation of the Pension Act and the new Veterans Charter, including the actuarial analysis and things like that. It's complicated, because there are so many different scenarios. I'm wondering how this compares to the actuarial analysis that was conducted by the ombudsman. Does it line up or are there some differences in what you're saying versus what the ombudsman is saying versus some of the things we looked at? That's question number one.

Question number two is this. Do you believe that, depending upon the circumstances—because we looked at many different scenarios with the actuarial analysis—of a particular individual, that one or the other might be better?

Mr. Michael Blais: One or the other might.... Well, here we go again. This is why we brought forward this harmonization so we don't have that equation that you just talked about, which in turn means somebody's getting bumped because he's not eligible for the old system. If that one was better, in that case, well, there's a perfect example of why I'm speaking to a harmonization, because it's not always the same. You're right, there are instances where it goes back and forth, and that's why we have to be open-hearted on this and look at these numbers legitimately.

We have issues, for example, with actuaries when we look at inflation rates, for example. They're all over the place. Well, they're not really all over the place. There are a couple of other issues that are minor. But the bottom line is the numbers we've used and the numbers they've provided, those numbers are what we have today. Believe me, we were not out to make anyone look bad here. We are trying to provide you the tools that you need to have this legislation come forward. If there's something on this paper that you might find.... We've been pretty intense. We've had it checked over by a few people, as you might imagine, and we're not infallible, but the fact of the matter is that these numbers are pretty hard and they're pretty hard to dispute.

• (1730)

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Thank you.

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

Yes.

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: Briefly then, the importance of your question—and it's a very good question—is addressed on pages 23 and 24 of the ombudsman's report, "Improving the New Veterans Charter: The Actuarial Analysis". Those are the six items there on pages 23 and 24 that are extremely important—

Mr. Bryan Hayes: I'll look at it.

Mr. Jerry Kovacs:—and they were discussed yesterday at the Senate subcommittee as well.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chicoine, go ahead, please, for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to thank the three witnesses for being here today and for helping us in our review of the New Veterans Charter.

Mr. Blais, you briefly talked about the Memorial Cross Widows. Some of them live beneath the poverty threshold. Can you explain to us why that is so?

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Blais: Well, they're experiencing great distress. It's almost uncomfortable for me to speak of this because when I help people who are in distress like that—and we're talking about Memorial Cross widows—when they don't feel that their government has provided the empathy and compassion and understanding they need, it's difficult to fight. We have fought, and let me summarize.

Here's where we have a problem, and this is why I've said "all Memorial Cross widows" should be entitled. I mentioned Mrs. Joan Larocque at the time. Her husband died in 2005 at a point in time where the new Veterans Charter had been voted on, but not enacted. There was a gap there, and at that time, as you know, Veterans Affairs pensions were considered in the equation of income adjustments, right? As you know, through the SISIP lawsuit, those Veterans Affairs Canada pain and suffering awards are no longer allowed into that equation. Conversely, just recently, or in Bill C-55, we also brought in a \$40,000 anti-poverty threshold, which we have identified correctly. I think, once again, if you're looking for a credo, there's another good one, identifying a poverty threshold, identifying a need for basic shelter, food, and clothing. We're not talking about Cadillacs here; we're talking about basic essentials.

Well, we have a situation where Mrs. Larocque is not being covered by the new Veterans Charter. She is being denied, even though her average mean income is under \$30,000 a year. Now, come on, we all know how difficult it is to live on under \$30,000. Maybe you don't, but I do, and I'm telling you, it's not fun. There are issues there, and for a woman, alone, who has sacrificed so much on behalf of this nation, we can harmonize this.

Here we go on harmonization. Well, good thing, new Veterans Charter; bad thing, Pension Act—harmonize, bring these widows into the fold. There aren't many of them, but we have an obligation to them that is very high, and it's probably one of the highest things that we can do. That's why we have the Memorial Cross. That's why we respect our widows and mothers on Remembrance Day, and every day of the year. But there's a lack there, and it's time to fix it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Thank you for those explanations.

Mr. Chartrand, I would like you to come back to the issue of discrimination against reservists.

Apart from the fact that they were not informed of their right to be compensated by their provincial working board, how does the new veterans Charter discriminate against reservists compared to regular armed forces veterans?

• (1735)

[English]

Mr. Sylvain Chartrand: We know the government has established that \$40,000 is the minimum requirement, as was mentioned, so a reservist is only entitled, class A or class B with minus 180 days, to \$2,700; that's 75% of the minimum, and taxable. So now a reservist is living on what, \$32,000? This is not acceptable. This is a discrepancy.

One of the mechanisms that has been in place for over 25 years, and that no one is aware of in the Canadian Forces, which are certainly not disclosing this to their reservists, is that we are entitled to workers' board compensation. We are a federal employee. Just ask, and I think you are covered under workers' board compensation. In Quebec, that provides 90% tax free of the highest salary. The minimum is, I think, 75%, again, tax free. In Ontario...earnings loss benefit...\$83,000. So why again are we still making a difference in 2014 between reservists and members of the regular force, such as Billy Kerr, a triple amputee? Why are his legs worth less than someone from the regular force? Why?

Why are we now, again, catching up, and we're having problems catching up? Why? We're in 2014. Everyone knew about it. Everyone knew we were entitled to workers' board compensation, yet no one told us.

Now we have another situation. You cannot collect workers' board compensation and your pension. So now a reservist who has workers' board compensation will get his pension clawed back. Does that remind you of something, Dennis Manuge and the RCMP? So I will be asking the minister to ensure that there is no clawback, as there are two...federal jurisprudence and much provincial jurisprudence, so that this does not end up in court. If it is not solved, it will end up in court, as did the Dennis Manuge case and the RCMP.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Hawn, please, you have six minutes.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's good to see you guys again. It's always interesting, always challenging, and that's the way it should be. I appreciate that.

I guess anybody could answer this, but Mike, I'll probably ask you. With regard to the ombudsman's report, we put a lot of stock into what he does and so on. Do you think we should simply take every one of the ombudsman's recommendations and implement them regardless of anything else?

Mr. Michael Blais: No, not at all. I think you should do your job, discuss every one of those options, and come to a reasonable—

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Good. I'm glad to hear you say that, because there are those who think we should just take the ombudsman's—

Mr. Michael Blais: No, absolutely. I've never believed in just a sign-off, Laurie.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Good. That's terrific.

As you know—we've had lots of discussions about it—some of the drums I've been beating are access, burden of proof, transition, and that sort of thing. Just for the record here, one of the things I'm

working on, as you know, is a private member's bill to break down the information barrier between DND and VAC.

It's not DND's fault. It's not VAC's fault.

Mr. Michael Blais: No, it's just this—

Hon. Laurie Hawn: It's the Privacy Act that gets in the way.

Would you support anything that breaks down the barriers? In my view, and I think you'd agree, if somebody signs up with a service number, the service number should follow them until they die, and the information should follow them too.

Mr. Michael Blais: I would like to answer your question with an affirmative: absolutely.

We're dealing a lot at the advocacy level with DND. We're very engaged on suicide prevention. We're helping many veterans—to many veterans, frankly—going through JPSU, going through transition, going through the issues. One of the problems we're seeing is that we want to provide Veterans Affairs Canada with that information prior to his being released, because he is going there, there's no doubt about it. This would facilitate that problem very well.

So yes, absolutely; go for it, Laurie.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: This is a repetition from the last witness, but I want to get it on the record as many times as possible. Should the member receive a copy of his or her medical file—

Mr. Michael Blais: I believe so.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: —when they're released from the CF, which doesn't happen today?

Mr. Michael Blais: It doesn't and it's funny. You mentioned that you had a buddy or whatever and you had an opportunity to photocopy. I did the same thing, believe it or not. I always tell serving members that if you ever get an opportunity to photocopy your medical, do it. It may not be “legal”, but it sure goes a long way when you're retired and those documents are in your possession.

• (1740)

Hon. Laurie Hawn: They gave me mine by mistake when I went back from Victoria to Cold Lake. I obviously have a copy of them. I don't need them yet—

Mr. Michael Blais: I admire your initiative.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: —but at some point I may be a customer or a client of VAC.

You've been talking about the Pension Act and so on. You've been around a little while, the same as many of us have. Were there any complaints under the old Pension Act? Were people complaining about things under the old Pension Act?

Mr. Sylvain Chartrand: As they are complaining now on service and delivery; the service and delivery problem existed before.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I'm not going to get into the argument that one's better than the other, but the point is that whatever the system, it's never perfect. People are going to complain about it, as they have, forever.

Mr. Sylvain Chartrand: People will complain. There's no problem there; we can't satisfy everyone. But the problem is on the service and delivery side.

Mr. Michael Blais: I think the largest complaint I've heard has been on the actual level of the disability.

I'm not complaining, but I like to use myself as an example. You had a young man who was in here earlier from my regiment. We were both sergeants. We both wore the red sash. As a matter of fact, the Canadian Veterans Advocacy would not exist were it not for my regimental duty to those to whom I have passed the torch. I'm serious. Before the CVA was conceived, I was at this memorial service for one of the fallen. I was the president of the RCR Association down in Niagara Falls. I was shocked when I was hearing what these young guys were telling me, what they were experiencing, and how they were being treated.

On the old system, I think the two most common ones are that... For example, I had to fight for that 30%, by the way. When I got out it was 10%. So I mean, it's a fight. For most of the people I talked to, the major problem on the old system was that the amount of the award did not reflect the sacrifice. Secondly, it was the review, or VRAB.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Yes.

I probably won't win this one—not with you, but with people above my pay grade—but there's no question in my mind that VAC has an insurance company mentality. You have to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that you need the benefit, and there are some legitimate reasons for that.

What I would like to do, frankly, is to turn that around and say that unless somebody's gaming the system... People obviously game the system. That's just human nature. But unless you're obviously gaming the system, whatever benefit you asking for, if it's reasonable, if it seems reasonable, make it happen. Continue the due diligence, and if, at the end of the day, the man or woman doesn't actually qualify for that, then you have to stop it. Don't claw it back, but stop it.

In my view, we'd have a lot more happy people—up front, at least—and long-term happy people. At the end of the day, they'll be told, yes, you deserve that benefit; yes, we did the right thing.

Mr. Michael Blais: And the process would start moving quickly.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I think that would be something you would endorse.

Mr. Michael Blais: I would endorse yes, but—

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I'm not trying to sell that.

Mr. Michael Blais: It has to be written in stone that there's no clawback there though because—

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Yes, I agree.

Mr. Sylvain Chartrand: Can I add something? We should consider, as Senator Collins mentioned yesterday, a universal way of doing things. There is Bill 1 that was introduced, I think, in Alberta. If you're a policeman, a firefighter, a paramedic, if you develop PTSD automatically it is deemed to be service attributable.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Do you people ever have a purpose—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Laurie, we are over, as interesting as it is.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Answer it to the next guy. Do you think we'll ever have a perfect system?

The Chair: What he was saying is there's a list of services—do you want to repeat what you said about those services?

Mr. Sylvain Chartrand: Yes, there is a Bill 1 which I think is in Alberta. They are introducing legislation that states if you are a police officer, a paramedic, or ambulance worker, if you develop PTSD, let's say, that is automatically deemed service-related. That's it.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

It gets interesting now because I have about five names. They're going to all speak at the same time here, but the one that sort of stands out is Mr. Opitz, so I'm going to assume—

An hon. member: He's going to give me his first minute.

Mr. Ted Opitz (Etobicoke Centre, CPC): Yes, he has my first minute.

The Chair: I knew it was going to get confusing.

You have a minute.

Mr. Ted Opitz: Never say I didn't help the air force.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: This is a question that we couldn't get on the record last time, but do you think we'll ever have a perfect system or will it always be a work in progress? We'd love a perfect system.

Mr. Michael Blais: With good will, yes, there will be a perfect system, but there has to be good will. There has to be this non-partisan stuff going on. There has to be a willingness for all parties to embrace our veterans and put aside ideology as far as financial or whatever goes. Once the moment that we, as a nation, that you, as a parliament, say it doesn't matter what the cost is, the need justifies the cost, the cost justifies the need.

• (1745)

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I admire your idealism.

The Chair: Mr. Opitz, if Mr. Hawn is now on silent mode you can carry on.

Mr. Ted Opitz: I have my five minutes then.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and through you, I have a couple of things. Certainly, I agree with Mr. Hawn because those of us who are veterans in this House work very hard on veterans' issues. Obviously we're highly concerned about it. This is something that is foremost in our minds and we do want to improve the system. There is room for a substantial amount of improvement. Nobody has said there isn't. We've always said that. The minister has said that. He is on record as saying that, but we continue to find those ways to do that. In our economic action plan we just added another \$108 million to that, and that's very substantial. The minister himself is.... That's why this committee is doing what it's doing to examine all these issues, and you, gentlemen, are here to assist us to do that.

Mike, you and I know each other from before I even got this job.

It's all good. I heard you mention General Semianiw. I didn't catch in what context you were talking about him, but he's an excellent general, an officer I once worked for. He's one of our finest.

Mike, just for you, quickly, do you think the military should be unionized?

Mr. Michael Blais: Yes, I do, and I know that may sound like a very extraordinary comment, and I'm not saying that I think it should be unionized in the sense that there's evil going on there and the troops are being oppressed, etc. My greatest concern is the focus of the Legion and the traditional veterans' organizations that once stood up for our veterans. When we have organizations that have lost their way, where they compare the sacrifice to a civilian level, when they are not speaking up for the military in a sense of where it should be, yes, I do.

But I don't think it should be called a union though. It should be an association that has standing with DND, that has standing with Veterans Affairs Canada, that can work with good, open dialogue with both to attain the positive results that they need. I don't think it has to be adversarial. I would never condone a protest as the unions do or whatever in front of DND. I don't think that's the appropriate response.

Mr. Ted Opitz: You want an association with left and right of arcs.

Mr. Michael Blais: I think there's a need.

Mr. Ted Opitz: Mr. Kovacs, over to you, sir, I understand that you teach at the University of Ottawa. Is that correct?

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: Not at the moment....

Mr. Ted Opitz: Okay, but you were in the law department.

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: I was in the department of social sciences. I taught law courses in the department of social sciences.

Mr. Ted Opitz: Okay. Can you take some time to explain the principle of parliamentary sovereignty. Are you familiar with that?

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: How does that relate to the new Veterans Charter?

Mr. Ted Opitz: It has a role in it. Can you answer the question or not?

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: Yes, I can. Parliamentary sovereignty is the sense that an elected Parliament is sovereign in its field to make decisions on behalf of Canadians.

Mr. Ted Opitz: Okay.

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: Parliament is supreme.

Mr. Ted Opitz: In 2011 this government made changes to the new Veterans Charter after, I think, a rather fulsome review by Parliament.

Did you suggest that this committee should add text to the new Veterans Charter?

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: In 2011...?

Mr. Ted Opitz: That's correct. That speaks to the commitment we all have to veterans.

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: The only other time I have appeared before this committee was in October, when the committee talked about the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. I believe it was towards the end of October. I represented the army, navy, and air force veterans association.

Mr. Ted Opitz: Very well.

Mike, I wanted to get back to you in terms of your association idea. Can you give that some harder shoulders on how you think that would...?

Mr. Michael Blais: I've read Michel Drapeau's article, and I'm sure you have as well. It planted a bit of a seed. I spoke to him afterwards. Actually I interviewed him for an hour on it on our new television-radio network we're providing for YouTube. To expand on it a little bit, clearly there's a need for hard-serving members to have a voice.

A union seems like a draconian kind of thing for military. Let's face it. We're not union people per se. However, we are a brotherhood. We are a sisterhood. As a brotherhood and a sisterhood, we have rights. When our rights are not being spoken up for due to the military, due to our unwavering allegiance to the military, due to the way we have been brought up in the military not to complain—ours is not to reason why; ours is but to do and die—I and probably 95% of the military have that in our mind.

But we have issues now. We're a compassionate organization, particularly with mental health issues, with transition, and with grievances. There are many things there. I'm just touching the health aspects of it, where it would be beneficial.

You know as well as I do. For example, a guy comes up and says he needs help and he's going to Veterans Affairs Canada. That would be your union rep or your association rep. He would go with you. He would fill out those forms. He would make sure that the BS between the SIN number and the other number was mitigated on site. Then he would follow up so that the soldier could go do his job and focus on getting better, knowing he had a representative that was looking out for his interests.

We have things with summary trials. There's another thing. We would provide the lawyer, not the military.

• (1750)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we go to Mr. Rafferty, please, for six minutes.

Mr. John Rafferty: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, gentlemen, for being with us here today.

Many of our new veterans won't access services for maybe five, 10, 20, or 25 years. When they do, and they have an issue, one of the things I believe happens now is that Veterans Affairs will only go back so far. They won't go back to when an injury may have occurred, for example, if it was 20 years ago.

I wonder if that's one of the things you have been talking about or one of the things you think need to be addressed in the new Veterans Charter.

Mr. Michael Blais: The problem is that...and it's not Veterans Affairs' fault sometimes. I mean, the life of a soldier is not easy. There are times when you see a doctor or a medic in the field and buddy writes it down on the CF 98 form and sticks it in his pad, and it may not make it to your medical files. These are serious issues here, right? Then there's the follow-up. What is the benefit of the doubt?

I'm glad you asked this question, because we've helped so many people with problems that weren't documented. They had the issues; there was no doubt about it. Many were in the hospital. But they couldn't find the documentation. This is where we come to the benefit-of-the-doubt protocols that aren't being applied.

The ombudsman mentioned this as well. The ombudsman before him sure as hell mentioned it, on more than one occasion, right?

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Michael Blais: He was pretty active, right?

But the fact of the matter is that we haven't addressed this yet, and now, we as a committee.... You're right; there is an opportunity.

What is the benefit of the doubt? Well, the benefit of the doubt is based on trust, on trust and on respect for that man's service or that woman's service. When that man or woman comes forward and says, "Listen, I broke my ankle in 1977", it was broken in 1977. We have

to trust these people. It's not their fault that they can't find the medical docs about when the incident happened.

I know there are some people out there and we have to be on guard for fraud, but 99% of the brotherhood is not like that, and 99% of the sisterhood will come forward to you in good faith. Yet we refuse to give them the benefit of the doubt—

Mr. John Rafferty: Thank you. I only have six minutes, so....

Now, we've heard a number of witnesses talk about this, and you also mentioned it briefly when you talked about the lack of services for member's spouses and families and what a serious issue it is. I wonder if you'd like to expand on your thoughts on this issue, mainly because I think every other witness we've had before us has talked about that as one of the things that is lacking in the new Veterans Charter.

Some have even gone so far as to say it should be enshrined in the Veterans Charter that spouses and families should be taken care of too. I wonder if you would comment on that.

• (1755)

Mr. Michael Blais: Well, prior to 2006, they were taken care of. There were supplements for them, right? But we've been at war now, and the times have changed. We have obligations to those who are taking care of our wounded today. Those obligations are very serious in the sense that they need tools, they need help, and first of all, they need us to listen to their voices.

I have Jenny over here. I brought her to Ottawa a couple of weeks ago. She just wants the tools and says, "Help me help my man, help me make my family whole, help me get away from this cycle of despair, and help me pre-empt this." Most important is "help me", period.

Mr. John Rafferty: Would extending the war pensioners' allowance past Second World War veterans and Korean veterans be helpful to start moving...? Because to call Second World War veterans and Korean veterans the only wartime veterans...we have other wartime veterans. I wonder if that act should be extended to cover more. Would that be part of a solution, do you think?

Mr. Michael Blais: What was the war pensioners act for? It was designed to provide supplementary care for people who needed it as a consequence of their husband's service or their service and time.

We've become more understanding now, in the sense that there are supplementary pensions that may have been available had we not gone that route. ELB didn't exist for many. As a consequence, they went to the war pensioners' allowance. Now it does exist, and now if they're under 65, perhaps the earnings loss benefit program would be the better solution, because it guarantees the \$40,000 poverty level. It guarantees 75%.

I'm not sure on that, in the sense of what benefits it would provide or whether it might become a mechanism that would deny benefits, in the sense that they would go with the war pensioners' allowance when the better alternative would be to go on ELB.

Mr. John Rafferty: Okay. Do I have time for...?

The Chair: You have time for a very brief question.

Mr. John Rafferty: I wonder if just very quickly you could tell me if you think that Veterans Affairs could do a better job before members leave the service, a better job in getting them enrolled in Veterans Affairs even if they don't need the services right away and in explaining what Veterans Affairs does—being a little more proactive, in other words.

Mr. Michael Blais: Sure, and there is coordination going on there now, the JPSU units, Veterans Affairs has a place there, and I believe that. I really do. I think that place should be a little bit more heightened but we have issues with privacy again. We have issues of transition wherein the two departments are not in sync yet. That's essential, right? But I also think it's vital that we do something. We just can't sit here anymore.

I got so frustrated yesterday. Lieutenant-General Semianiw—I like the guy, but I was so frustrated when he said, maybe they should consider another advisory.... How many do we need to do and how much time will that waste, and how many people are going to die because of it, and how much discomfort and discord is going to happen? Now we have to have that combination where DND and Veterans Affairs are working together, and when we identify the wounded, we bring in a comprehensive package that includes the wife, that includes the children, and once we start that process, it doesn't stop when they get out. The transition is automatic. The continuance of care is automatic. The continuance of compassion persists until, God willing, we provide that quality of life that they need, so that wound is diminished. It may never go away, like myself, but my God, we can provide a life that's acceptable, that's fulfilling, that's Canadian, that makes you feel proud to be alive.

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

For our last questioner, we go back to Mr. Gill, please.

Mr. Parm Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the opportunity again. I have a bunch of questions so if we could keep the answers short, I would really appreciate it.

Mr. Blais, you mentioned part of the funding your organization receives comes from the union. Are you able to tell us what percentage of your funding comes from the union?

Mr. Michael Blais: We've only received one cheque, \$2,000, two years ago, and we don't raise a lot of money, so that year it was probably half. Really, you have to understand that we may appear to be well-financed or whatever but the reality of the situation is that, from day one, we've been pretty well sponsoring our advocacy on our own.

• (1800)

Mr. Parm Gill: I appreciate that.

Do you think to help the committee you would be able to provide for the committee a breakdown of your funding for the past two years and any activity you have engaged in with political parties in Canada?

A voice: How is that relevant?

Mr. Michael Blais: I don't think that's any of your business.

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: How is that relevant, Mr. Chair?

Mr. Michael Blais: I have no problems with it and don't get me wrong. I just find it disingenuous that I'm being asked this at committee when we're supposed to be dealing with the new Veterans Charter and the positive aspects—

Mr. Parm Gill: It just helps us understand in terms of the organization—

Mr. Michael Blais: If you want to talk about it after committee, Mr. Gill, I'm all for that, but I think we should be focused on the new Veterans Charter now.

Mr. Parm Gill: Thank you, sir.

My next question is, do you believe your organization to be non-partisan?

Mr. Michael Blais: Absolutely.

Mr. Parm Gill: I understand to the best of my knowledge that one of the directors of your organization holds a Hill pass. I believe it's Mr. Kovacs.

Mr. Michael Blais: Yes, and I approved that. It made it easier for him to get in and out of the building, but that doesn't mean he's a Liberal and it doesn't mean that we have any political affiliations whatsoever. I don't have a pass and I've been offered passes, but that would be over the line.

Mr. Parm Gill: My understanding—

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: In fact, if you'd like to know about my political background, sir, I can tell you that I joined the Progressive Conservative party in 1972. I worked for a number of Progressive Conservative MPs from 1979 to 1983—

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Jerry Kovacs: —and I worked for a Reform Party of Canada member of Parliament in 1993.

The Chair: Could we refocus then?

Mr. Parm Gill: Sir, the reason I ask the question is that in order for one to obtain a Hill pass you either have to be a volunteer in a member's office or you have to work for a member.

Mr. Michael Blais: Let me answer it this way. I don't give a coot what his political affiliation is. I don't care what his political affiliations are and they shouldn't care what mine are either because we are apolitical, period, end of story.

Mr. Parm Gill: My question is, sir, if one has a Hill pass.... I'm just trying to understand what the background is. It's one of the directors of your organization. It's important for the committee to understand—

Mr. Frank Valeriotte: Mr. Chair, I have to raise a point of order. I just think these are so irrelevant, these questions. They're here to—

The Chair: Could I just suggest we move directly on to charter stuff? That would be helpful, if you could, please.

Mr. Parm Gill: Mr. Blais, in formulating the position you have taken here today at the committee and during your press conference, would you be able to tell us how many veterans you have consulted in formulating those positions?

Mr. Michael Blais: I'd have to do an approximation. I mean, my consultation's ongoing. We consult through Facebook. We consult through social networks. I've consulted today with three veterans who were visiting us, who came to me with problems that they're having. The consultation is ongoing. What that consultation creates, ironically, is reflected directly by the ombudsman's office. What a coincidence.

It's not a coincidence; it's reality. The ombudsman's report is accurate. So are our reports, because we are responding to the voices of veterans.

How many? I've been at this since 2008 when Pat Stogran was unceremoniously canned and we had the first national day of protest, which I organized as an independent veterans' advocate. How many people did I talk to there? Thousands, because I was out in the cold. We were establishing policy. It was active. Every veteran that I met, I said, "What do you need? What is it that you think we need to do?" To serving members, my regimental family, "Where do we go?"

Mr. Parm Gill: Sir, my question was related specifically to the press conference that you held today and the issue that was dealt with at the press conference, not from 2008.

Mr. Michael Blais: Well you know, we're going over time. I mean, you asked how many people I consulted from 2008 to now. I don't know. I would be lying to you if I guessed. Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands? You guess.

Mr. John Rafferty: These guys can check Kijiji and tell us.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Parm Gill: Can you also tell us how you believe our system fares compared to around the world with some of our allies?

Mr. Michael Blais: No, that's not my expertise.

Mr. Parm Gill: Do you have any knowledge of benefits offered to veterans by our allies?

Mr. Michael Blais: Yes, but that's not my expertise.

• (1805)

Mr. Parm Gill: I am done, Mr. Chair.

I have more questions, but you know—

The Chair: No, I think that's probably a good time to go into recess. We're doing reasonably well here, I think, and it's been a long day. I appreciate it.

I'd like to thank our witnesses very much for taking the time. You could follow up on these other conversations afterwards.

I'd like to thank the veterans and the guests and family who've joined us today to participate.

We're going to break now for a minute. We have to go into committee business, which means anybody who's not part of the committee, we'd ask that they please move on with our thanks.

Thank you very much.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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