



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

ACVA • NUMBER 122 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Wednesday, June 12, 2019

Chair

Mr. Neil Ellis

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• (1555)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Neil Ellis (Bay of Quinte, Lib.)): Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we begin the study of the subject matter of the main estimates 2019-20: votes 1, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30 and 35 under Department of Veterans Affairs, and vote 1 under Veterans Review and Appeal Board.

I'd like to welcome the minister here today, the Honourable Lawrence MacAulay.

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brantford—Brant, CPC): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair, before we begin. Obviously we expected the meeting to start at 3:30. It's now one half-hour later, and I would like unanimous consent from the committee and also from our key witness that he remain for the full hour he was committed to, which was from 3:30 to 4:30. Now that would be from four o'clock to five o'clock.

The Chair: Yes, he is scheduled for an hour.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Is there unanimous consent for that?

The Chair: He has already been scheduled for an hour.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Am I involved in the unanimous consent?

A voice: It was updated.

Mr. Phil McColeman: When was that update?

An hon. member: That's not what we saw.

Mr. Phil McColeman: I got a note just near the end of question period at about three o'clock that this meeting had been postponed by the chair, no reason given, until four o'clock.

The Chair: Minister, are you here for an hour?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I am here for an hour.

The Chair: Good. We'll start the meeting.

Minister, do you want an opening statement?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and good afternoon.

Members of the committee, I want to thank you for this opportunity to appear before the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs for the first time. I certainly appreciate the great work the members have done on behalf of Canada's veterans and their families. I especially want to acknowledge the important work

undertaken by the committee recently on issues such as indigenous veterans, ending veterans' homelessness and medical cannabis.

Mr. Chair, I also want to thank you for your motion on ending veterans' homelessness. All of us agree that having one homeless veteran is one too many, and it's important to shine a light on that issue. That's exactly what you have done, and I look forward to working with everybody on the committee to make sure that we can reduce homelessness.

I want to say that I was previously, 25 years ago, the secretary of state for Veterans Affairs, and it's certainly an honour and a privilege to be back here at this committee. I consider it an honour to have the position that I do and to have the privilege of representing the people who have done so much for our country.

Last week, I had the tremendous honour of accompanying the delegation of veterans to the shores of Normandy to commemorate the 75th anniversary of D-Day and the Battle of Normandy. I was accompanied by a number of members, and I think everybody involved would be nothing but proud of the ceremonies and our country.

D-Day was of enormous importance for our country and for the world, and also a day of tremendous loss. Three hundred and fifty-nine Canadian soldiers made the ultimate sacrifice that day and more than 700 were wounded. To walk these beaches with the people who fought there 75 years ago and who saw their friends fall there, to visit the memorials and the final resting place of thousands of comrades—there are really no words to describe it. Together, we laid wreaths, we saw old battlefields and we paid tribute to those who made the sacrifice. Quite simply, it was one of the greatest honours I've had in my life.

Also, with many young Canadians as well, the best way to learn about our history is to ensure it lives on and to hear it from the veterans themselves. It is so important. We all gained a deeper understanding of what our troops went through 75 years ago.

I think it's fair to say that we went through some understanding, but it's pretty near impossible to realize what it would be like at Juno Beach. My colleagues here were there too, and just to look at coming up that beach...can you imagine it 75 years ago with the Nazis shooting down at them? It was just something else. Because of what they did, that's why we're at this table: for them, for their families and for all the people who followed in their footsteps, from the hills of Korea to the mountains of Afghanistan, and now in Iraq and Mali and beyond.

Canadians are forever in debt to those who step forward in the service and defence of this country and in support of our friends and allies around the world. It is our job to remember them and to take care of them when they return.

Before I speak to the changes compared to last year's estimates, I'd like to take a step back.

As you know, Veterans Affairs is a different department than it was four years ago. It's driven by vision and with a clear focus on the overall well-being of our Canadian Armed Forces members, our veterans and their families. It's because of that vision that we have invested over \$10 billion in new dollars since 2015. It is a vision that saw our government immediately reopen nine Veterans Affairs offices. In fact, we opened an extra one, giving veterans better access to the information and programs and the services that they've earned.

In budget 2016, we increased the maximum value of the disability award for Canadian Armed Forces members and veterans with service-related illnesses and injuries to \$360,000, putting more money directly into the pockets of veterans. We also increased the earnings loss benefit, raising it to 90% of an injured Canadian Armed Forces member's military salary at the time of their release from the forces.

We reversed a decade of cuts in service, hiring 700 more staff to deliver services and benefits, answer questions and help veterans through the transition process. We need people at Veterans Affairs to deal with veterans when they come in. We have increased outreach in every part of the country, including a strong effort to reach our veterans in the Canadian north.

• (1600)

Budgets 2017 and 2018 introduced eight new and enhanced programs, including a new veterans education and training benefit, providing veterans with up to \$82,000; the caregiver recognition benefit; a veterans and families well-being fund; and a new veterans emergency fund, which is a fund that's so important. It's \$4 million —\$1 million a year—and last year we had to add \$300,000 to that. It's something that's used. Last is expanded access to military family resource centres and a centre of excellence on post-traumatic stress disorder.

More recently, through budget 2019, we continued to build on these important initiatives with investments of \$41 million to improve the transition process to civilian life; \$20 million for a centre of excellence on chronic pain research; \$30 million to recognize the contribution of Métis veterans to this country in Second World War efforts and to commemorate the sacrifice and achievements of all Métis veterans; and \$25 million to improve how we care for members of the military, veterans and their families.

There's one underlying purpose for all of these changes and in fact for everything that our government has done over the last four years. It's not just the well-being of veterans but that of their families, because a veteran cannot do well if his or her family does not do well. This is why we are committed to ensuring our veterans and their families are better informed, better served and better supported.

I am pleased to report that this approach is working and, in fact, that applications are on the rise. In fact, with the renewed trust in the department since 2015, we have seen an increase of 60% in disability benefit applications since we formed government. This is a good thing. It means that veterans are coming forward and getting the help they need.

Of course, this kind of increase demands a response, so we're taking concrete steps to improve our service. Our government is providing \$42.8 million over two years, which started in 2018-19, to increase service delivery capacity and keep up with the rise in demand. We also refocused our efforts, and service delivery is now centred on the individual veteran: their circumstances, their needs and strengths and those of the family.

To help address these needs, we have hired hundreds of new caseworker managers, who work directly with veterans. We have hired more than 450 new case managers, up from a low of 194. This is a significant improvement from where we were four years ago, and we will continue to recruit to meet the demands of the veterans community, because we know there's always more work to do for veterans.

Of course, the recent implementation of the pension for life was critical and delivered on our promise to bring back a monthly pension. The pension for life combined what veterans and stakeholders asked for with the most up-to-date research and understanding of veterans' well-being, which brings us back to why we're here today.

If we look at the main estimates and the numbers themselves, the net increase of \$25.4 million that Veterans Affairs Canada will receive compared to the 2018-19 estimates will directly benefit veterans and their families.

The increase in funding as a result of the pension for life includes \$685 million for pain and suffering compensation, \$628 million for the income replacement benefit and \$102 million for the additional pain and suffering compensation. All of these changes are significant fundamental improvements to the many services, supports and benefit programs required by veterans and their families to make a successful transition from military life.

I want to remind the committee that over 90% of our budget represents payments to veterans and their families, because they are the single guiding focus for everything that we do.

It's our job to help them transition smoothly to life after service and to commemorate and recognize their sacrifice. We have come a long way since 2015—from improving benefits and services to restoring trust with the veteran community and shifting the focus of government from being one of cost savings to one of support for veterans and their families.

● (1605)

In the months that follow, we will continue the important work that veterans have asked us to do, because that is what they deserve and that's exactly what Canadians expect from their government.

Again, I want to say it's an honour to be here, and I again want to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of this committee and my deputy minister, Mr. Natynczyk, whom I neglected to introduce, but most people know him.

Thank you very much. These are my remarks and I'm open to questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. McColeman, you have six minutes.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Minister, I'm going to read from a card that's in my hand, and you're receiving a copy of it.

This is on the back of the card. On the front side, there's a picture. It says, "Constable Catherine Campbell - Pay it Forward with Kindness in her Memory". It continues, "In 2015, the life of Catherine Campbell was tragically cut short. Catherine was a dedicated police officer with the Truro Police Service, a volunteer member of the Stellarton Fire Department. She was a daughter, sister, aunt and friend. In Catherine's professional and personal life, she truly believed in kindness. One simple act of kindness can make a difference. In her memory, we ask that you take this card and perform an act of kindness. Then, pass this card onto others and ask them to do the same. Remember the passion, integrity and kindness Catherine exuded in her life. She will never be forgotten." This says it is courtesy of the Central Nova Women's Resource Centre.

On the front of the card is a picture of Catherine Campbell holding a sign that reads, "#ReasonToRise One act of kindness can go a long way!" You can view that picture, sir. That picture inspires me every day.

Christopher Garnier, age 30, of Halifax, was convicted in 2017 of second-degree murder in the 2015 death of Truro, Nova Scotia, police officer, Catherine Campbell. An expert at trial testified that Garnier developed post-traumatic stress syndrome as a direct result

of strangling Campbell, putting her body in a compost bin and dumping her under a bridge.

While behind bars, Garnier has been receiving treatment from a private psychologist funded by Veterans Affairs. That ties into today's discussion of the estimates. This money is allocated and dedicated in the estimates.

Christopher Garnier never served a day of his life in the military. He's getting his PTSD treatment paid for, while so many veterans must fight Veterans Affairs for theirs.

Sir, I've come to know you. We've travelled together. You are a fine gentleman. You are a person of integrity. You are a person who has served this country for over 30 years in your capacity as member of Parliament. You are now the minister. Your predecessor chose to maintain the benefits for Christopher Garnier.

On September 25, 2018, this motion was put before the House of Commons:

That, given the Prime Minister has told veterans that they are "asking for more than we are able to give", the House call on the Minister of Veterans Affairs to revoke the Veterans Affairs Canada benefits that have been extended to Chris Garnier, who is not a veteran, is incarcerated for second-degree murder and for interfering with the dead body of police officer Catherine Campbell, and is currently receiving benefits for a disability he sustained while committing his heinous crimes.

I chose not to gloss over any of the facts in this or sweep this under the carpet because I've spent time with her parents Dwight and Susan, both in Truro and in Ottawa. On September 25, they watched every member of your Liberal government vote to maintain the benefits—including yourself, sir—of Christopher Garnier.

You have the power, as minister, with the stroke of a pen to revoke those benefits in your position. Will you do so?

● (1610)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

Certainly I know you're very passionate and concerned about the issue. I was, of course, in the House when this was an issue in the House. I understand. I certainly want to pass my condolences on to the family. I think you're fully aware that the veteran's family is also qualified to receive benefits. It creates a difficult situation if you take it away from all the veterans' families. That is what the problem is.

I will let my deputy explain as to what—

Mr. Phil McColeman: Excuse me.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: —the facts are on it, but the thing is that, when you make a change on one issue, it can affect all veterans.

Just give me a minute. I would like to answer the question that you put forward.

I would not agree to make a change that would hurt veterans' families—

Mr. Phil McColeman: Can I—

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: —but I certainly couldn't be more sorry and more sympathetic to Catherine Campbell's family, and you know that I would be.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Okay.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: But I think it's fair, being that you asked the question—

Mr. Phil McColeman: I only have limited time, sir.

The Chair: You're out of time, sorry.

Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Thank you, Minister, for being here with us today, and the deputy of course. I appreciate it.

I forget now exactly if it's two months or just a little over two months that you've been minister, and 25 years ago you were the secretary of state for Veterans Affairs, so the experience is there. Again, thank you for the work that you have done.

I'd like to ask a few quick questions. One is about service ID cards. I know that in my riding this was a big issue and many veterans were asking me to continue to advocate for them and the service card. I'd just like to know a little about how the service cards are being launched now and what the feedback is that we're getting around the new service cards that are coming out.

•(1615)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

Yes, we have started the process and it will continue. The deputy might add to it, but it's something that we want to do.

The cards and recognizing veterans are something I want to look at down the road, too. There are many things that can be done in that area.

I'll let the deputy respond.

General (Retired) Walter Natynczyk (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): Sir, for everyone who wears a uniform, having that ID card on them each and every day is part of our culture. It's always difficult the day you walk out of your unit, your ship, your squadron, that last day, and you hand in your ID card. Even that transition is pretty emotional. The Canadian Armed Forces, for a whole host of reasons, stopped issuing the ID cards to veterans about two years ago. What was terrific was that, when we were able to restart the issuance of the ID cards, not only were we able to backdate it to when that process was stopped, but we're now able to expand it to all those veterans out there who wish to have a card.

The reissuance will be happening three phases. The first phase goes back to the date when the ID cards were stopped. The second phase goes to all of those who are walking out of the military and transitioning. The third phase, which will begin in the fall, goes to all veterans out there, even those who released prior to when this whole practice started in 2002. Indeed, when we were doing the various town halls, regional summits and national summits over the past few years, we heard how important it is for all veterans, again, to have that ID card back in their hands for their own identity.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you, deputy.

I was very happy to hear from the minister that we're even looking at maybe drilling a little deeper to see how we can recognize them even more through that card. I think there's more we can do, but the first step is very much appreciated.

The second thing that many a veteran spoke to me about was marriage after 60, where if they married after 60, their spouse or partner would not receive their pension and benefits. That's a change that we brought forward in budget 2019. Can you expand on what we've done and the vision we have to make sure that we identify and process these individual claims?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Yes, \$150 million has been dedicated over five years. Basically what we're trying to do is to work with the veterans organizations to put a formula together that will work to make sure that the distribution of funds is done in a proper manner. We want to make sure this is done in a proper way. In fact, we're into that process at the moment to make sure that we're able to deal with this issue.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you.

With regard to the transition, it's such an important piece for veterans and their families. We did a report on it as well.

We're looking for a seamless transition, of course, which is crucial. I know we have the joint committee, CAF and Veterans Affairs, working and trying to ensure.... I hope some day in the very near future we'll see that no military individual will be able to leave without getting all the benefits and everything lined up, that no one is released before everything is done. That's my dream; there's no question about that.

In budget 2019, again, we added not only the injured veterans but the non-injured veterans who are due to transition. How do we see that on a moving-forward basis?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I'm an associate minister of National Defence, and that's to try to have the transition a little smoother—to make it smooth, in fact. The card itself—I don't have an answer today—in other countries, helps in many ways.

When military people retire.... Let's say you go into the military after high school. You're there for 25 or 30 years and you come out. Number one, where do you find a doctor? There are so many things that have to be looked at in order to make sure the transition is as seamless as possible.

Also, that's where the education fund comes in, the \$82 million. It's a very valuable workforce. They had a hiring session in Halifax and there were a lot of major companies there. We have so many people coming out of the military who are trained, but they could use this money in order to be valuable to the private sector. That's why this \$82 million in the training program is so vitally important.

As you know, right across the country, we need workers. These people want to work, and this helps provide the qualifications that are needed for them to be able to work. When somebody leaves the military, they want to work—

• (1620)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: —so we're making it a bit easier.

There are other problems too, but those are just a couple of issues that I'm trying to deal with at the moment. There are many others. We are trying to make the transition seamless.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Minister. We're out of time.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you, Minister. I see your vision. It's going to be impressive.

The Chair: Mr. Samson, we're out of time.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Yes, Sir.

The Chair: Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, both of you, for being with us today.

As you well know, Minister, I've asked you a few questions in the House. In your response to your question, you mentioned the \$10 billion and you also mentioned it in your report today. I'm going to ask some clarifying questions so I can better understand.

In the budget I received, actual cash payments are about \$2.8 billion from 2015 to 2024. I'm wondering if you could explain where that number of \$10 billion is coming from.

I also want to say that I don't have a lot of time, so if I interrupt you, I am going to apologize in advance.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Of course, the \$10 billion is ongoing, but on the pension for life—I don't have the exact figure—all of this costs so much money. The education fund is so important, the top-up of wages.

Walter, I'll let you answer that.

These programs are so vitally important and these are new ventures that are taking place from Veterans Affairs so that the veteran, when he leaves active service—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I know the intention. I'm just trying to get some clarity—

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: On the actual dollars....

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Yes.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: There are more dollars being spent now than there were last year.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: From what I understand, the \$10 billion is the absolute maximum expenditure overall, for all of these programs, assuming that every single eligible veteran applies and is approved.

Is it really likely that the \$10 billion is going to be spent?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: It's an ongoing issue.

Will the \$10 billion be spent this year? No. Down the road, the money will be spent improving.... We have wait times that are more than we should have. We're working hard to digitize the department to make sure that you can push a button and get the information from the doctor when a veteran applies for.... This is the kind of thing that costs money.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: It's an important point that you're bringing up. I've asked about that in the House.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Yes, it is important.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I appreciate what you're saying. There is an increase in the number of applications that VAC is receiving and it's great that there has been that extra capacity added. However, I know from veterans in my riding that they're still seeing incredibly long wait times. With the increased traffic, wait times over a year are still the norm. What veterans are telling me is that they're hearing from VAC that it's just going to get worse.

I'm wondering what the solution is, especially when you look at this budget that tells us these new positions are short term and in the following year you are going to start decreasing them. With that sort of long wait time, I'm trying to figure out how that makes sense in terms of serving our veterans in a timely manner.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Number one, the wait time is not over a year. There are likely people applying today. There is a number there, without a question—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I have multiple veterans in my riding and veterans from other ridings who have called and told us that, and it is definitely a concern for them. They're calling in to check on their file and they're being told, "This amount is your wait time," but the amount of time they've waited has already surpassed the number that they're being told.

One of the things when we had the ombudsman here was that he talked about veterans just wanting a realistic wait time. If it's a long time—if it's a year or a year and a half—just knowing that would be a lot less stressful than continually calling back and being told that it's going to be longer.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I agree with you. The wait times are something that we definitely have to deal with, but you also understand that we have an over 60% increase in applications. The point is that in Veterans Affairs you can never be sure. You don't know exactly how many veterans are going to come to the door, but the doors are all open. That's why we opened the centres right across the country.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I guess the clarity I'm really looking for is that, with the wait times being about a year in many cases—I'm going to listen to what veterans are telling me—with that happening.... Right now, I appreciate the increase in staff that have been hired, but what the budget is saying is that after this year, going into 2020-21, there is actually going to be a decrease in the funding because these are temporary positions to support all of the people calling in, but the backlog is so significant. I'm just trying to figure out the rationale for that.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: There is certainly going to be no decrease when we're behind the eight ball, but I'll let my—

• (1625)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: You're saying that if it continues at this high rate, then next year we would hopefully not see the budget decreased.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I feel that we're basically obliged to supply the service for veterans. The fact is that we started with under 100 caseworkers and now we have nearly 500, I believe. That's number one.

We've hired over 700 people of the 1,000 who were let go by the previous government, all of which created quite a problem. Is it all solved? No, but we have done an awful lot to get it in line. In fact, what we have done has increased the inflow of applications.

Go ahead, Walter.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Could I talk to a few of those points?

The \$10 billion for our department is accrual funding, which means we have actuarials come in, looking at the full projection, the number of clients and the client base, and then we consider a young soldier, sailor, airman or airwoman who is 20 or 25 years old, and we're providing a benefit to them for potentially 60 or 70 years.

When we talk about our funding, some of that \$10 billion is in the funding going forward, but be mindful that whatever benefit comes in is a statutory obligation and, every year, as our financial statements will show, we have had to go back and ask for additional funding because the benefits are needs driven. In addition, within that \$10 billion, as the minister indicated, is the augmentation of staff.

Going to the whole aspect of wait times, right now, mindful of the 60% increase, the average wait time has been 32 weeks.

The Chair: Mr. Eyolfson.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia—Headingley, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, and thank you, General. It's good to see you back, as always.

There was some mention of this before. The nine veterans centres that were closed by the previous government reopened, and a 10th one has been opened. Can you comment on the impact this has had on Veterans Affairs' ability to deliver services to veterans?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: First of all, having the 10 offices open across the country provides information for veterans right across the country, but in fact what it has done is that it has spurred

the application process, because the fact is that—and the department is saying yes more often now, too—it has increased by over 60% the number of people who are applying for benefits. That's a good thing, because that's what we're supposed to do: provide benefits for the veterans. That's what we're here for. Over some 90% of what is spent at Veterans Affairs is spent on services to veterans.

Also, on the allocation of funds, if Veterans Affairs in the allocation of funds is short of funds, the government is obliged to supply the funding. There's always a question of estimation on how much will be needed, but I think there was a lapse last year.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: We actually had to ask for an additional \$300 million.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: It was \$300 million, and of course it came. Sometimes there is some left over. Now because of the vote in the House, it's been reverted back to be used by Veterans Affairs, all of which is helpful.

Do we have all the problems solved? No, we haven't. Do we have a wait-list of more than we should have? Yes, we do. Are we continuing to work on it? Yes, we are. We want to digitize the process. We want to make it faster. That's what we're attempting to do. We are hiring more staff, all of which makes it better for veterans. That's what we're trying to do.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you.

In October 2016, I understand that the earnings loss benefit increased from 75% to 90% of veterans' pre-release salary to encourage them to complete rehabilitation programs. Do you think this provides enough incentive for veterans to complete their rehabilitation programs?

• (1630)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Quite honestly, you never repay somebody who is in that situation, but what Veterans Affairs has done, what the government has done has made it better. It was increased from 75% to 90% just to put more money in the pockets of veterans. That is why that was done.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Okay, thank you.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: There are many other programs that they can apply to.

Walt, do you want to add to that?

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Yes, just to say, sir, that what has been really powerful has been going from the earnings loss benefit of 75% to 90% of pre-release gross income for the sailor, soldier, airman and airwoman veteran, and then evolving that into the new pension for life model where we have been able to simplify and consolidate the benefits into the income replacement benefit. Again, that's what the veterans were asking for.

For those veterans who require medical treatment, for those who are going through vocational rehabilitation, they will be financially sound and solid, and be able to support their families while they're going through that, and not have that burden or anxiety as they go through that process. Then, if they cannot return to meaningful employment, we will continue on with that income replacement benefit, which is benchmarked at 90% but then indexed to the consumer price index.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Plus 1%.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Some feedback we've heard is that case managers often have an excessive load with too many clients. As of March 2018, the number I have here is 32.9 clients per case manager, and the department has recommended reducing that to 25 clients per case manager. Can you give us any ballpark figure as to when you think you may be able to achieve that ratio?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I can tell you that we're working full time in order to get to that ratio. You understand the situation that we inherited. We had less than 200. We now have just under 500, between 450 and 500. That's so vitally important. We're working hard to make sure that we get the ratio to 25:1, but to tell you exactly the date we get there—no. We're working continually.

Perhaps Walt can give an estimation. It's hard to give an estimation when you're not sure just what you're going to face, but we're working very hard to do that.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Sir, thanks for the question. It goes back to Madam Blaney's question a little bit.

Again, the influx of veterans coming in is the one thing we don't control. We want to welcome veterans with open arms as they come in and provide them the support they require based upon the complexity of their needs and the risk that they're at.

We were able to get some surge funding for a few years as we transition to this new pension for life model. We're now looking at how this pension for life is rolling out and the nature of the clients that we have, ensuring that the case management is there for those people at the high risk level. At the same time, we are creating a new responsibility for our veterans service agents, something that we've piloted very effectively called guided support.

Those veterans who are at a medium or lower level of risk will be provided guided support by the veterans service agents, and as the veterans who are at a higher risk progress and achieve their objectives, obviously the risk and complexity diminishes. When they're ready, we're able to graduate them from case management to the veterans service agent guided support. At the same time, as the minister indicated, we are onboarding additional case manager social workers. We've put in place a pretty rigorous training program, and as they ramp up—and I'm sure that the assistant deputy minister will be able to provide some—

The Chair: Sorry, we're running out of time. Could you just finish that in a couple of seconds, please?

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: We want to make sure the best trained folks are out there supporting our veterans.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Ludwig.

Ms. Karen Ludwig (New Brunswick Southwest, Lib.): Thank you, Minister, and thank you, General, for being here today.

About 10 years ago, I had a contract through the university to do training with the Canadian Forces. Actually, we did some weekends in Halifax. It was to train the trainers. It was military faculty who were teaching members. It was based on consistency, so no matter where someone was in Canada—and they were receiving online

training, for example—they would get the same quality outcomes no matter where it was being delivered.

I'm wondering where we are with that today, because we have heard from different witnesses before the committee that the training and skills they received and the vocations they were practising within the Canadian Forces are not always recognized in civilian life. I'm wondering where we are with that transition.

• (1635)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Of course, training is vitally important. I think that would be the deputy's line, but we're going to make sure that we have people well trained.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Perhaps I can approach this in two ways. One, in terms of the Canadian Armed Forces, what you're talking about is the prior learning and the certification—

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Exactly.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: —of the various trades and qualifications across the Canadian Armed Forces. That question really is in the domain of the Canadian Armed Forces. Even though I know a lot about that, I would be very cautious about going down that path. I can just say the Canadian Armed Forces has made a huge amount of progress in the training they are providing to their men and women and having that recognized by the various professions across the country.

In terms of Veterans Affairs, over the past few years, again, one of the conclusions coming out of this committee was to ensure that we had standardized training for our case managers and our veterans service agents, professional follow-on training for our medical professionals, and so on. As a result of the feedback from this committee, we have instituted a national orientation training program that is provided to all of those case managers. One of the issues here is how quickly we can ramp up these folks so that they have all of the tools to support our veterans. We're putting folks through what I'm calling a “boot camp” for Veterans Affairs.

I would also say to you—again, you may want to ask our assistant deputy ministers about this when they come to the table—that prior to the launch of the pension for life, we brought in 800 employees, the case managers and veterans service agents, to the same schoolhouse. We were able to provide them with education—which, again, came out of this committee—in a formatted, standardized training program. We're still learning about the systems and so on, but we have normalized training coast to coast.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Okay. Thank you.

My next question is about the My VAC Account. That's been in place for a couple of years. Do you have any measurement on both the uptake and the outcomes?

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: The My VAC Account is our online portal for all veterans, their families and survivors to be able to communicate with Veterans Affairs. We've been able to make it a much more sophisticated, intuitive, user-friendly tool, engaging with veterans, with the users, to make sure it actually communicates the information to them in the way they wish to use it.

I think about five years ago we started off the system. My latest data point is that we have 95,000 veterans, family members and survivors who are using the My VAC Account. We are using these various benefits that have come in—an example would be the education and training benefit with the career transition service—to provide some of those services there. Veterans can go into any of our offices. Many like to use the phone. All of that is there as well.

To give you an example of the career transition service, one veteran applied early in the morning, was approved within the hour and that afternoon was contacted for career transition. It's allowing us to use a digital connection between that veteran and his or her service records, his or her medical records, and accelerate the process. To go back to the question about what we're doing, in terms of accelerating services, we want to leverage this digitization in order to assist our employees to provide that quality service to our veterans and their families.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Okay. Thank you.

We had the ombudsman in recently—on Monday, I think.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Yes, it was Monday.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: He spoke specifically about women who are veterans. They don't always self-identify as veterans, and maybe they're less likely to reach out for services. Is there any plan in terms of extending that a little deeper and finding a path for the women veterans?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: About three or four weeks ago, we had a women veterans conference in the department in Charlottetown. We had women veterans from right across the country attend that conference. It was very successful. It spreads the word right across the country so that they're fully aware of what's open to women veterans. We are encouraging them all the time to become involved.

We also indicated quite clearly that this conference will continue so that women veterans feel comfortable and are fully aware that they played a major role. It's important that they're treated exactly the same, and that's what we want to do. Was there a problem? Yes, there was. We're trying to deal with it.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Ms. Wagantall.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Minister, it concerns me that it took you so long to determine whether or not families of veterans were concerned about Christopher Garnier's scenario and its impacting them. Believe me, it did impact them. As a matter of fact, it was very clear very quickly that they were very unhappy with this service being provided to him, a non-vet and not a dependent of a veteran's family.

I want to ask you a question specifically in regard to a promise that was made by the Liberal Party in the 2015 election to Aaron Bedard, who was with Equitas at the time. It was in writing to him that they promised they would create a dedicated veterans addictions and mental health treatment centre that would invest directly into the health and recovery of veterans—a hands-on actual treatment centre.

I'm curious. Could you tell me if that's on schedule, and is this promise going to be met before the end of this sitting?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Are you talking about the centre of excellence?

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: No. He asked specifically for treatment, a physical place to treat veterans. It's not to do research, but a place where veterans could go rather than going to these other centres where there are many other different types of people. They wanted a specific treatment centre—hands on.

Yes or no, is that promise being kept?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: We have one in Ste. Anne's Hospital.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: No. This was a separate specific facility for veterans.

Okay, so let's talk about Ste. Anne's—

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Why can't we respond to that?

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: No. I want to carry on.

Let's talk about Ste. Anne's Hospital.

I was able to visit with some wonderful people in eight Legions who came together in Moncton to speak with me at a round table. They are very concerned about their veterans health centre in New Brunswick, which is also, like Ste. Anne's, being handed over to the province. However, there is a memorandum of agreement between the federal government and the province that their care as veterans would be continued in those sites. They're very concerned about what's happening there.

I would like to know, with that memorandum of agreement, have you followed up? Are you making sure that the agreement is being met? How often is that happening?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: With any memorandum of agreement, or any money that's spent by the Government of Canada under our government, it's certainly analyzed as to what.... It's always step by step and seeing what progress has been made. I can assure you that would be made here too.

We also would have—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: When was the last one done?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I've asked my department to evaluate the situation and come up with the facts of what the situation is in Ste. Anne's—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: —because we want to make sure that the—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Will the veterans health centre be included in that as well? There's also a memorandum of agreement there and it's being handed over to New Brunswick.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: We want to make sure, on the Ste. Anne's first—if you want me to answer—that they get the proper care, and we're going to make sure that happens. We have to have the facts first.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay.

Will that report be provided to the committee, please?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Pardon...?

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Will that be provided to the committee, please—the results of that report—and also in regard to the veterans health centre in Moncton, yes or no?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: First of all, we have to find out the facts and what we're going to do—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I think if you create a memorandum of agreement and promise veterans that they are going to continue to have care in those places, the government should be making sure that the province and the health care system there are being accountable.

Again, we can talk about the pension program. The Parliamentary Budget Officer has made it clear that there are discrepancies between what has been promised and what has happened with the new pension for life.

Medric Cousineau, as well, has indicated that there are many, especially the most needy, who are ending up with less, losing an amount equivalent to \$300,000. Sammy Sampson, with the Rwanda vets of Canada, has come up with a very amazing tool called a “pension disparity calculator”. It's based entirely on the government's data for computer use, and it's being shared with veterans across Canada.

You've heard about this disparity. Will this disparity be fixed quickly and what is the timeline?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: First of all, the well-being and security of veterans is our major priority.

The fact is that the Prime Minister indicated in the House...and the department is reviewing this very carefully to make sure there is nobody who gets less. We will make sure that every veteran receives more than they did under the previous government. That is what will take place. We have to get the facts—

•(1645)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: When? Because this rolled out in April

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: At the moment, right now—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: When?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: If you ask me a question, I have to be able to answer it.

The fact is, you asked me a question—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: When?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: When? Right now, we're looking at it—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay. Good. Thank you.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: —but you don't get the answer right now. What are we trying to do is get the facts.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Sir, I want to know as well, with all of the 40,000 backlog, there was an increase moving up towards April 1, because there were a lot of individuals who were very concerned that when this pension came in... As we can see, for the career impact allowance and its supplement, they have not qualified and that's where they're losing.

For anyone who has applied already, even though they're in a backlog, they should be able to get the funding they deserve in that regard, even though it's ending up that because there's a backlog in the department they weren't processed prior to April 1.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: We will make sure that anybody who receives this funding will have more financial security than they had under the previous government. That's a commitment.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay. Thank you.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: That will take place. That's why I was trying to tell you that we're evaluating the situation right now. I have directed my department to do so.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay. That's good to hear. They'll be watching for that, then. I appreciate that.

You've mentioned in regard to case managers that there were not enough case managers when you came into government.

The Chair: Thank you.

Sir, we're out of time. Can you answer that in 30 seconds, please?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Yes. We were down to less than 200 —

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: The Conservatives had already committed funding for 400 more in their budget.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Pardon...?

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: No. There were 400 in the budget going forward when we lost the election, so you haven't invested more funds.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I just have to answer that question. The fact is that you fired a thousand people, employees from Veterans Affairs Canada.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: But you haven't rehired them—

The Chair: I'm sorry, but we're going to have to move on. We're out of time.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Yes, we have. We have rehired near 500 caseworkers.

The Chair: Minister, I'm sorry. We're on a tight timetable. We are out of time.

Mr. Bratina will share with Mr. Chen.

Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.): Mr. MacAulay, could you finish what you were saying?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I don't want to be political, but the facts are the facts. The point is that there were a thousand employees fired. There were less than 200 caseworkers in Veterans Affairs. Does that create a problem? Yes, it creates a problem. Are we working on it? You have to start where you are, and that's where we were when we took over government.

Now we have between 450 and 500 caseworkers. We have actually hired about 700 extra, but the fact is that the demand on the department is even larger than it was then. The application process has increased. There's the 60% increase in applications, which creates work, but then we want to digitize the process. We want to make it faster, and we will. It takes time. We want to be able to push a button and immediately get the papers from the doctor for the client. That's the type of thing. We have to digitize the system so that it works smoothly. When it all happens, it's more efficient, but we can't tell if it's going to continue to increase or to decrease. We don't know, but we have to be ready.

The deputy would like to add something.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Please.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: First of all, with regard to case managers, as I mentioned before, we're onboarding them as quickly as we can. We're also again trying to change the triage system as to who needs case management and who needs guided support.

As the minister indicated, we received surge funding and we've hired not only additional case managers but additional adjudicators.

In terms of the backlog, the backlog is in the order of 18,000. The number of 40,000 is for all of the files that are currently in the department, no matter whether they've been waiting a week or a longer period of time beyond the standard, but the backlog is in the order of 18,000.

What we've been able to do is to get surge funding to assist us in terms of getting more adjudicators and case managers while we try to do some other things, because it's not only about people. As the minister indicated, we're trying to digitize as much as we can. It used to take us weeks to get medical files and service files. We're trying to do it digitally and link in to the Canadian Armed Forces or Library and Archives.

We're also trying to take a much more presumptive approach.... I know that the lawyers in the room may not like the term "presumptive", but with regard to mental health, we're being much more, I guess, open to the notion that someone who has served and gone through a difficult time, as a result of that has a bona fide diagnosis, and we're approving it at a rate of over 90%.

The other thing we're doing, especially for those veterans who have served in pretty physically demanding trades, is that we're using a cumulative joint trauma tool. For example, for an infantryman who has hundreds of parachute jumps, the likelihood is that he or she could have difficulty with their ankles, knees, hips, back, neck and shoulders. Again, we're trying to expedite it in that way.

What we are also doing is using the My VAC Account in order to—again—expedite the whole application system. One of our problems is that some of the applications don't come in complete, and we have to go to and fro and back to the veteran trying to get a diagnosis. Through using this pension for life digital tool, the system, kind of like your taxes, only accepts it when the application is complete.

The last piece is closing the seam with the Canadian Armed Forces. About 24% of all of our clientele are still serving in the Canadian Armed Forces. By closing the seam of the Canadian

Armed Forces, we can get all of this work done while these men and women are still in uniform. They have their pay and they have some of the best medical care in the country. Let's get everything done before they take off the uniform.

It's all of these steps that we're going through in order to see what the trend is if we put all of this into place and then what is in our enduring model in terms of the workforce as we project over the next few years.

● (1650)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chen, you have two minutes.

Mr. Shaun Chen (Scarborough North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister and General, for being here today.

I want to continue the questioning from my colleague Ms. Ludwig with respect to women veterans.

We heard from the veterans ombudsman earlier this week. He said to our committee that he had had the chance to speak to a number of women veterans and women advocates, and it's clear that a number of the programs and services they have access to were not designed specifically with women service members or women veterans in mind.

I know that our government has talked about running government policies, programs and services through gender-based analysis plus. Can you speak to how GBA+ may have been used to evaluate current programs for women veterans and how we can improve those services so that women can have greater access and be better included?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Number one, it's important for the ombudsman to highlight this. Number two, we had the conference for women veterans in Charlottetown. All of this brings together the issues they're facing. What we want to do as a government and as the Department of Veterans Affairs is to make sure that all programs are fully open and accessible and in the right setup for women veterans. That will be done. What problems are there will be dealt with.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Wonderful.

I also want to thank the minister and the general for their work in supporting the Highway of Heroes. Highway 401 runs through my riding of Scarborough North. Earlier this year, on January 31, I wrote to Finance Minister Bill Morneau to encourage the government's support of this very important project that will see two million trees planted honouring our veterans, our brave servicemen and service-women, 117,000 of whom have paid the ultimate sacrifice. That investment is incredibly helpful. I want to highlight your comments, Minister, when you said earlier today that the best way to learn history is to ensure it lives on, and this initiative certainly does that.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I couldn't agree more.

The Chair: You're out of time, Mr. Chen. Thank you.

Mr. Kitchen.

Mr. Robert Kitchen (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister and General, it's good to see you again. Thank you for being here.

A year ago, the number of veterans waiting to get access was 30,000. Wait times were 16 weeks. I think I heard today, General, that you said it's now up to 32 weeks. Ultimately, last year the government committed \$42 million, plus hiring more front-line staff, to improve that. What did it do? It's up to 40,000. It's almost like climbing up a ladder and then falling down.

My question to you is this. What did you get out of that? You put in \$42 million and you've increased the backlog.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: You're right. The fact is, as I said before, there's an over 60% increase in applications for the services of Veterans Affairs. I'm not going to repeat it again, but you know what the situation was with caseworkers and with employees. We have addressed that as well as we can. We're working on the digitization of the department to make sure we'll make it quicker.

The fact is that we have a lot more applications for service because we are saying yes to more customers at Veterans Affairs Canada. That's why it's so important that this money is properly used and we digitize the system and make it faster.

•(1655)

Mr. Robert Kitchen: But it's not accomplishing what you want, so—

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: We're—

Mr. Robert Kitchen: —you're putting money in and throwing money away.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I have to answer—

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Sorry, I'm short on time.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: In all fairness you have to let me answer the question. We're not throwing money away at all.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: You did answer it and I appreciate that. Now I'd like to continue.

On Monday, we met with the ombudsman, as you're aware. My colleague Mr. Chen described the ombudsman's report card, which he presented to us, as a failing report card, with the number of items that were not completed in the past year. Some of them—I'll just read a couple of them—were triage applications upon receipt based on health and financial need; ensure that all VAC benefits are in place at time of release; upon receipt, immediately return applications if required documents are missing; provide each applicant with an individualized, expected turnaround time for their application, and inform them if the decision will be delayed and why.

Why has this government not implemented these easy fixes? They're easy fixes. No wonder we're seeing a backlog, and no wonder we're getting that report card from the ombudsman.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Go ahead, Walt.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: First of all, I just want to say how much we appreciate the ombudsman's work.

Much of the minister's mandate that came out in 2015 we've been working on as a result of the ombudsman's report of June 2013, so we have worked on each one these things and we're continuing going forward.

Some of the items that you just mentioned, sir, are really part of closing the seam that, again, we've just received funding for through the budget, and we're working through that now. Is done yet? No, but at least we have the funding and we're working along that line.

This notion of being able to provide the veteran's tracking of exactly where his or her claim is, that is an evolution of this pension for life digital system that we're trying to get to. We've been able to implement it in terms of an initial operating capability. As part of a full operating capability, we're trying to put in that kind of information so that the veteran using the My VAC Account can go online and find exactly where his or her claim is in going forward.

The last clarity I'd like to provide is that the 40,000 claims are all those claims that are in the hopper, whether they are within the service standard of 16 weeks, or outside it.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: I received some correspondence from a veteran who states that he was forced to surrender in Bosnia and was held captive for 15 days, but because he was only.... The ruling is that you need to be held captive for 30 days or longer. Now as far as I'm concerned, if you're a prisoner of war, whether it's one day, 30 days or 300 days, who knows what the outcome will be?

Ultimately the decision on these 30 days comes down to the minister, so my question to you is this: Where are we standing on this and why are we taking something like this—and whether it's this gentleman or others who have been subjected to this—and determining that 30 days is the set time versus 15 or two? Regardless, you're held captive. Who knows how veterans handle this stress? What might happen for some is that it may roll off their backs, but to others, it may be extremely stressful.

Where are you on this, and if you're not, will you get on it?

The Chair: You'll have to make it quick. We're out of time.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: You've kind of answered it. For some, it can be different from others. It's impossible to answer an individual case here, quite simply. If you have a veteran who has a difficulty with this, I wish you would make sure that I'm given the information and I will deal with it, I will assure you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Ms. Blaney, you have three minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I get a second round, Minister.

One of the things that I found very compelling when we had the ombudsman here was that he talked about children and families and their access to mental health support and that it is an ongoing issue that they're not able to access those services. I'm just wondering if you could speak to that because the concern that he shared with us is the impact it's having on the families. When they don't have that individual support to deal with the issues that their loved one is going through, it has devastating impacts on the family.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Are you talking about caregivers?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: What I'm talking about is that, in the report card from the ombudsman, what we saw really clearly was health care and supports got overall a failing grade. I think eight out of 10 were not met at all.

One of those specifically was children and families having access to the mental health supports that they desperately need, and he just identified that as one of the most significant concerns.

• (1700)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: It's definitely an issue that needs to be addressed. I'll let the deputy expand on it, but it's vitally important, as I said when I spoke, that the veteran and the family are fully involved.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Again, as the minister indicated, when a veteran serves, the family serves too, but the minister's accountability and responsibility is the health and well-being of the veteran. We know that, in the case where the veteran has a mental health injury, often it is compounded when a family member is also suffering, and there's a collateral issue in terms of mental health injury when the family is dealing with the veteran.

Again, the minister's responsibility and accountability under the Veterans Well-being Act is very much focused on the veteran, so our authority is to provide access—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm not understanding then. This is something that Veterans Affairs was graded on. I'm confused. Are you saying that the care of the veteran's family and children is not the purview of Veterans Affairs? I just want clarity.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: The service to family members and the service we are providing today to family members—to those who are supporting that veteran—is focused on the well-being of the veteran. Moreover, again, by policy we are not able to duplicate any other services that are provided by any other service, like a child support service and those kinds of things.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: How is the department going to move from having a failing grade to a passing grade on this?

The Chair: We're out of time, so could you make that about a 30-second answer, please?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I would just add that being sure to have the programs in place for the veterans, certainly, is an asset to the family, and that's what we have to do, but our focus is on the veteran.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: That's interesting.

The Chair: That ends our time for the minister today. I'd like to, on behalf of the committee, thank the minister and the deputy minister for appearing.

We will recess and break for a minute, and then get our next panel in front of us.

• (1700)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1705)

The Chair: We will get started. There are no presentations, so we're going to start with four-minute rounds and try to get as many people in as possible.

We'll start with Mr. McColeman. I'm sorry, you'll just have to introduce yourselves. We're going to ask questions. We're tight for time.

Mr. McColeman.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Thank you, Chair.

I believe all of you were in the room when you heard my questioning of the minister regarding Christopher Garnier, who is receiving benefits, is not a veteran and is a convicted murderer. I'm sure that somewhere along the line this was not the intention of the program, because if it was we're in big trouble.

I think there's probably a good answer in the process of what happened, or at least I hope there's a good answer about what happened in terms of this decision. I want to ask each of you, as individuals who are in the management team of Veterans Affairs, to describe to this committee and to me the process—in particular, if you can comment on it and if you're familiar with the Garnier application for benefits for PTSD suffered by him in the act of murdering Catherine Campbell. It was witnessed in the courtroom as the reason he would receive these benefits.

To correct the record, quite clearly, the minister—and I've had a follow-up conversation with him after his testimony—was not absolutely clear in terms of what had happened when the government voted on the motion that was before them. I'm sure you're familiar with it because you carry out the policies of the government.

The policy on the day of the debate changed. It changed in that every individual, from that point forward, who makes an application, who is a convicted murderer or convicted of a serious crime and is put into a penitentiary, would no longer qualify for such benefits even though he or she was a family member of a veteran, so that it would never happen again.

Again, this reinforces my contention to you—and I'd like your response individually, one or more—as to the process. It confirms the contention that somewhere a mistake was made along the line. Lead me through, if you can, as the top management team, from the time the application arrived, who evaluated it, who saw it and who made the final decision whether this murderer got benefits, because he has them. This government decided to maintain them. To this day they maintain them and this minister is unaware, so please answer.

Mr. Michel Doiron (Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery, Department of Veterans Affairs): I am quite aware, given that this falls under my responsibility—not the policy but the operation.

As you well know, I cannot discuss the case of an individual. I can talk to you about an individual who would have been in that type of context, but I cannot talk about this individual. I just want to be very clear that it's privacy and I can't get into that.

In a case such as this, as the deputy minister was alluding to, the benefits to an individual are always through the veteran, not in the individual's own right. If the parent was a veteran and the parent was dealing with mental health issues and it was recommended by a mental health professional that—for the parent, not the individual, and again, I can't talk about the case—supporting the family would be beneficial for the well-being of the individual, then a decision would be made to support that individual, because as the deputy said, when a veteran serves, everybody serves.

That decision is made by the case manager, if that person has a case manager, with a recommendation from the mental health professional the veteran is dealing with.

The Chair: Mr. Samson, you have four minutes.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I feel good today.

Thank you all for being here today. I apologize that our time is going to be short, so I guess I'd better be quick.

Can you expand on where we are going with marriage after 60. What needs to be...? When I read it in the budget pages, it says we're going to work with the community to identify the individuals that would have reached... Are we going backwards to make sure we capture everybody? How is it going to unfold? Can you share what you've done so far in that area?

Thank you.

• (1710)

Mr. Steven Harris (Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy and Commemoration, Department of Veterans Affairs): I'm Steven Harris. I'm the assistant deputy minister of strategic policy and commemoration.

I can't really expand very much on what is included in the budget now. As you would appreciate, we are in the process of reviewing how best to administer the fund that has been identified through the budget. We're working on that in consultation with partners, not only government partners but others as well, to make sure it could be the most effective. You can appreciate we want to hit the right target as it's intended.

At the moment, the most I can share is that the information is available in the budget, with more details to follow as we move forward.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thanks. It doesn't provide me with an answer, but I understand the position you're in.

If I go to my second question, I'll probably get the same kind of answer, but I'm going to try anyway.

We've included the education and training benefit to reservists in budget 2019. If the budget were passed tomorrow morning, how would that unfold so we could capture that as quickly as possible?

Mr. Steven Harris: The short answer to your question is that it was something that came up. I was fortunate enough to participate with our Canadian Armed Forces colleagues on a nationwide tour,

talking about transition groups and new Veterans Affairs programs. The supplementary reserves not being eligible for the ETB was one that came up quite regularly. We're very happy that it's been included in budget 2019.

That fix will be put into legislation. As soon as it is, supplementary reservists will be eligible to apply and benefit from the program.

That's a near-term answer to your question. It will be shortly, sir.

Mr. Darrell Samson: How do we make sure that the message is out to everyone who has the right to that benefit?

Mr. Steven Harris: I'm happy to answer that one too.

The education and training benefit has been a well-publicized benefit. It is one that has attracted a lot of interest. My colleague Mr. Doiron would talk about the number of people—and I know it came up earlier—who have already taken advantage of it. However, we will continue to expand on the communications to inform supplementary reservists, not only by our own communications but by leveraging those of the Canadian Armed Forces as well, to make sure that people will be well aware of the eligibility of supplementary reservists.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Can you give me the number of people who have taken advantage of that program since it was implemented? When did it come online and how many people are benefiting from it now?

Mr. Michel Doiron: It's been online for 14 months and 5,100 people have applied. It was favourable for over 2,600, and unfavourable for about 800. The other ones are what I'll call "waiting". The reason they're waiting is not that they're not approved. It's that they are still in uniform.

Mr. Darrell Samson: What do you mean by unfavourable?

Mr. Michel Doiron: It means they were told no. They didn't meet the criteria for what they applied for.

Mr. Darrell Samson: The criteria is anything before 2006?

Mr. Michel Doiron: It's six years or 12 years, depending, or the program was not a registered program.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Those before 2006 don't access...?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Yes, or before 2006. The other ones outstanding would be the ones who are still in uniform. We do evaluate it, but they can't take the program until they—

Mr. Darrell Samson: Wow, I'm impressed. That means that was a major request and need for veterans, when you see that 5,100 people applied for that program in the last year.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Samson.

Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you all so much for being here today.

One of the things I've heard repeatedly in my office from veterans is the frustration with the wait times. As I mentioned earlier, I get calls from my riding but also from across Canada. I heard from the deputy minister that the wait times are now about 32 weeks. One of the things we're hearing again is that they are told that on average this will be the wait time, when their case has often already gone past that amount of time. It's just adding to that frustration, which I would believe is not a very good feeling on both sides.

Are there any plans to change the way the department is communicating estimated times on their files to veterans to perhaps allay that on both sides?

Mr. Michel Doiron: I should have introduced myself, although I think I know most of the members. I've been here a few times. I'm Michel Doiron, ADM of service delivery.

You're right, and we are very frustrated by the fact that we have a backlog. We do communicate with the veteran through My VAC Account in terms of where their file is and the wait time. We are reporting the wait time per condition. Some conditions are faster. Hearing, for example, is done quite quickly. PTSD is done quite quickly. If you come in with a bad neck or a bad back, where we need a lot more doctor consultation, it will take much longer. We report wait times per condition. However, it's still frustrating for the veteran. You might be in adjudication for a long time and not know whether or not your file has moved.

With the new pension for life programs and the new system called "GC Case", implemented on April 1, working with My VAC Account, one of the functionalities that is coming—it's not there yet but it's coming—is clearer information on the actual status of your claim to resolve that frustration. Veterans have told us, "Just tell us the truth."

• (1715)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Yes. I've heard from veterans as well that sometimes they see that the process has just been standing still and that is extremely frustrating for them.

You know, I'm a member who represents a very rural and remote riding, and one of the challenges some of my communities have is very poor access to the Internet. I have places in my riding where people are still using dial-up. I know that a lot of people think that's over, but it's not. My VAC Account is all online. Could you speak to the challenges you might have with more rural and remote communities? What methodologies are you using to overcome some of those challenges?

Mr. Michel Doiron: I'll probably never have enough time to deal with all of this.

The Chair: You have a minute.

Mr. Michel Doiron: For sure it's a challenge across Canada, especially for people living in the more northern regions. The phone is still there and works quite well. At the NCCN call centre we answer all of the questions we can. We do understand that with dial-up and other issues.... You mentioned My VAC Account, but we also know that with mental health, telehealth and all the stuff that we use on a daily basis, it becomes an issue in certain areas where there are issues with connectivity.

We're not going to correct the connectivity, but we are trying to provide as many ways and venues as possible for the veteran to apply or to contact us. As an example, we are travelling to the north. We have added northern Quebec. I have people in northern Quebec for the first time this week. We go to the territories for those same reasons. We meet with veterans there. We publicize it through the Legion, Service Canada or whatever means we can to be able to outreach to them.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Eyolfson, you have four minutes.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to all of you for coming.

In regard to dealing with the backlog, you started with low numbers of staff and had to hire a lot of new staff. What are the challenges in finding qualified individuals? What kind of pool do we have to draw from of qualified individuals to hire?

Mr. Michel Doiron: It depends on what level. Some are just basic public servant employees, and others are nurses and doctors. There are different challenges for different levels. We do reach out to nursing schools. We do reach out to people. We do have to be careful not to.... In Charlottetown I've been accused of hiring probably everybody I could hire on the island to come and work with us. We do very aggressively reach out. However, on the issue you raise with regard to trying to find the people, because of the French issue especially—the ombudsman raised this as an issue—we have now opened a processing area in Montreal so that we can recruit more French-speaking people.

We do reach out. On the case management side, we have a long-term contract with CICan, Colleges and Institutes Canada. We will be taking their students for co-ops within our organization. "Co-op" might not be the right word. It's an internship within our organization. If they have the right skill sets, we will bridge the students into our organization as new employees to address that.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you.

As a follow-up to that question, when you find someone who has the right qualifications—I know it has to vary due to the position—what are the range of time frames for training the people you hire?

● (1720)

Mr. Michel Doiron: Typically, it's a minimum of six months. The more complex the position we're recruiting for, the longer the training. What we're seeing is that, on average, it's six months. Before somebody becomes proficient—and “proficient” may be a big word here—before they're able to do some of the work, it's six months.

If you look at my case management, I have 10.9% turnover a year. That means that at any given moment, I have 40 to 50 case managers in training who are not managing a full component. We're at 32 to 33. We seem to have been playing in that range for the past two years.

If I didn't have a 10% turnover... It's normal that people are leaving. People are retiring. People decide that it's not for them or people are promoted. We're always in this constant recruitment. That's why we have the schoolhouse that the deputy spoke about. That's why we pump people through it. We not only want them to have the culture we're looking for—care, compassion and respect, erring on the side of the veteran—but we also want to make sure we can train them faster.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you.

Changing gears a little, from what I understand, VAC is projecting expenditures of about \$44 million for the education and training benefit. How many veterans do you think would receive the \$40,000 after six years of service? Do you have any idea of the numbers?

Rear-Admiral (Retired) Elizabeth Stuart (Assistant Deputy Minister, Chief Financial Officer and Corporate Services Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs): I don't have the numbers down to that level of detail. I know our current projection, in accordance with what we're seeing in the main estimates, is an additional infusion of \$39 million for this year. We are estimating around 2,400 successful applicants.

I don't have a breakdown further than that, but I can get that.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Ludwig.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Thank you.

My question will start off with Mr. Doiron.

Following up on Mr. Eyolfson's question about hiring, we've heard from a number of veterans that they would like to see veterans on front-line services. When you are looking at qualifications, is there any extra tick box for a veteran, a spouse of a veteran or an active member, or an older child who has the qualifications?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Not for a child, but we do look for the veterans and, where we can, the spouses of veterans. The veteran still needs to meet the requirements of the job. A case manager is a case manager. It's a social worker. There are qualifications that are necessary.

We are working hard to recruit more veterans. We're still not at the numbers that Veterans Affairs would like to have when it comes to veterans. We have a unit that is working to recruit, not only with us but with other departments of government, and actually in the private

sector, to bring more attention to that. For us, we give preference to veterans if they meet the requirements of the job.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Thank you. That's good news.

Is there any preference at all for their spouses, because they've worked side by side...? We say that when a member serves, a family serves.

Mr. Michel Doiron: We don't have a program for spouses, but maybe—

RAdm (Ret'd) Elizabeth Stuart: If I may, our focus is with the Veterans Hiring Act coming into force in July 2015 and the statutory and regulatory obligations, in particular addressing the repurposing of individuals who were released from the Canadian Armed Forces due to injury and illness. That's our primary focus.

The deputy and the minister at the time in fact issued a challenge to their colleagues to increase veteran representation, and the Public Service Commission has some statistics to indicate we are doing quite well across the public service in that regard.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Okay.

RAdm (Ret'd) Elizabeth Stuart: I'm sorry, I should have introduced myself. I'm Elizabeth Stuart, ADM, CFO and corporate services, and a proud veteran of 32 years myself. It's a privilege to serve at VAC.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Thank you for your service.

Mr. Michel Doiron: If I may, though, on the families, we are working with the military resource family centres closest to bases, if we have jobs. We know of that transient... We do work hand in hand with some of their programming, to assist.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: My next question is actually on the military family resource centres.

Are you seeing an uptake in veterans using those services?

Mr. Michel Doiron: It would depend on the location. I think that's the best way I can answer that.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Right.

● (1725)

Mr. Michel Doiron: Some locations are very busy. I can think of a place like Trenton. I can think of Petawawa. Some other areas are not so busy, but we work with them to support them. The funding is there to get the people to come in and also to publicize it.

We did start a review of some of these locations. One of the issues we found out is that maybe the services were not publicized enough because there's a fair amount of services available, but every MFRC is an entity on its own. They're all a bit different in what they offer, and it's really because of the local flavour. Is it jobs? Is it family support? Do they need day care?

It's a little different but one of the things that came out of an initial review of them is that in some areas...and I do say "some", because some are like Trenton, which I know has a very well-known and well-run MFRC. However, for some other ones it's a publicity issue. It varies from MFRC to MFRC.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll end with Ms. Wagantall.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you, Chair.

Our colleagues at the government operations committee recently learned that the government bargained away seniority rights for veterans transitioning from the Canadian Armed Forces to the civil service. This took place in the last round of collective bargaining. Transition, as you know, is already a very difficult step for Canadian Armed Forces members to navigate. I'm just wondering, were you aware of this?

Mr. Michel Doiron: I was made aware of this I think maybe two weeks ago in another meeting.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay. Thank you.

Budget 2019 provides VAC with \$13.5 million to improve its transition services. I think this is a thing—the seamless transition between VAC and DND—that's so important. Several of the measures being considered will be developed in partnership with CAF and are under the authority of the Department of National Defence.

On the \$13.5 million, I don't know the spread—if that's per year, for the year or what—but that seems like peanuts to do what needs to be done here. Since the Department of National Defence has the authority, are they also putting a lot of money in there? What's happening?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Rear-Admiral Stuart will be able to talk about maybe the funding itself—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Just briefly on the funding, then, that's fine.

Mr. Michel Doiron: We will receive \$13.9 million. The Canadian Armed Forces have received an additional amount.

What we're doing is that we have a joint steering committee. I co-chair one of the committees. We're working hand in hand to advance this, but we each have our funds. The amount you mentioned is for our initiatives under the direction of some of us, depending on the initiative, but we are working very closely. I think General Misener appeared in front of your committee to talk about that. General Misener and Libby Douglas appeared together, I think, and are some of co-leads.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: That's fine, then. I won't worry about the amount; that is in agreement.

Mr. Michel Doiron: Okay.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: On the applications, you were talking about how some applications are longer and harder to process than others. If an individual has a bad back or a bad neck or whatever, are they able to provide up front the documents from their doctor in terms of diagnosis, prognosis and X-rays when they submit an application? Or do they have to wait until they apply and then start to get those things?

Mr. Michel Doiron: They can provide all the information up front.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay. That's great.

For the veterans caregiver recognition benefit, it indicates here that just over 500 people will receive it in 2019-20. I'm a little confused, because they increased the amount, but at the same time, individuals who received it previously somehow no longer qualified for it.

It's like Canada summer jobs. You say that you're going to do more jobs but you cut back on the number of hours. There are people who were receiving it and no longer receive it. Why do they no longer receive it?

Mr. Michel Doiron: I know of 26 or 28 cases that are no longer receiving it. The reason is that we had put them into the previous program that was prior to this in error. We didn't cut the program for them that year, but they were put there.... It was an administrative error on behalf of my unit. When the new program came in, the guidelines were very similar, which they no longer met. The reason for those 26 or 28—I stand to be corrected on the exact number—was that we had initially put them there in error, and it was an error from my group.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Does this number sound reasonable to you? Would there be only 500 caregivers across all of Canada who would qualify for support?

Mr. Michel Doiron: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay. Fine.

Here's a quick question as well. Let's talk about Veterans Affairs offices. They're open—great—10 of them. What did it cost to reopen them as far as getting them up and going is concerned, and are they fully staffed?

Mr. Michel Doiron: We'll have to get you the number of how much it cost. We do have it, but I just don't have it off the top of my head.

• (1730)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I'd like to know as well the cost per year to run each one and how many visits have been documented for each.

Mr. Michel Doiron: I have the visits, but I don't think I have time to give the information to you. I have the visits for every office. Last time, somebody asked me that.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Could you submit that?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Yes, we can submit that to the committee. I actually have it here.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: That would be great.

Mr. Michel Doiron: They are fully staffed, notwithstanding the fact that I have 10.9% turnover. They are fully staffed.

The Chair: That's our time for today. I would like to thank the witnesses for testifying today and for all that you do for our men and women who served.

Do I have a motion to adjourn, Mr. Bratina?

Mr. Bob Bratina: So moved.

The Chair: Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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