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Chair

Mr. Tom Lukiwski

Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC)): Colleagues, I'll call this meeting to order. I have one quick housekeeping item before we commence with our witnesses.

We anticipate bells to start ringing at 5:15 this afternoon. Normally, our practice, once the bells start, is to immediately suspend or adjourn and go to the vote. However, since we have a full complement of witnesses, both in person and by video conference, I'm looking for unanimous consent, if we can achieve that, to extend our meeting by perhaps up to 10 minutes. In other words, to go from 4:30 p.m. to 5:25 p.m. That should still give us 20 minutes to get from our meeting room here to West Block for votes.

Do I have unanimous consent to extend the meeting, if needed, for an extra 10 minutes?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Colleagues, we do have a number of witnesses in both our first and second hour, some by video conference and some in person. Without further ado, I would ask our first witness, Mr. Brian McKenna, from Equitas to give an opening statement.

Gentleman and lady, I understand your statements will be approximately five minutes in length.

Mr. McKenna, the floor is yours.

Mr. Brian McKenna (Director, Equitas Disabled Soldiers Funding Society): Thank you for the opportunity.

I'm Brian McKenna and I'm a retired warrant officer. I'll offer my advice, but I'll describe a situation first.

I have a friend who was in a reconnaissance platoon in the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. He taught on mountain operations courses. I watched him once for over an hour, as he and three others built a rope installation over a river that would eventually be traversed by a company. More than a hundred soldiers would cross that. That responsibility was enormous.

His ability to do math during his inspections and figure out which riggings could handle which number of kilonewtons of force, while he was harnessed and suspended in air, was impressive. This is all on top of his ability and proven capacity to lead a group of eight men

and a multi-million dollar fighting vehicle in a war zone. He has administered health care to them, counselled them on shortcomings and supported warriors in their family struggles. He has led them in every aspect of their 24-hour lives in combat, for six months straight. He has a high school education.

Every department of this government that deals with stress, risk assessment and personnel management should ideally be fighting over who gets him. We spoke last week. He's still looking for work. What are we going to do about it?

I think one of the issues for transition, and in this regard, possibly transitioning to a job in other federal departments, is often that the policy seems to create a two-team presentation. There's the civil service and there's the Canadian Forces. Whether true or not, it can appear that a transition from fisheries to CBSA, or for someone working at the Canada Revenue Agency who decides to join, and is hired by, the Mounties, is done one way, with benefits and time served counted one for one.

Yet for someone transitioning from the military to another department of the federal civil service, there are formulas, considerations and decisions to be rendered. One of the things that would ease transition would be to ease peace of mind on transfer values. If working at Foreign Affairs for eight years means eight years of civil service time if you get taken on by Health Canada, service in the military for a continuous eight years should require no more calculations than that. Yet there are calculations and formulas, and that creates doubt and hesitation.

Next, I'd like to speak about equivalency, or in this regard, the objective versus the subjective. A natural place for hiring veterans, for example, should be Veterans Affairs. When veterans look at hiring opportunities, often their biggest hurdle is education. Certainly, we have folks in the military with multiple diplomas and degrees, but we also have folks who have managed some of the toughest and most challenging situations in life and may have actually taken more courses in the military than most civilian programs. On paper, though, they have a high school diploma.

Job descriptions generally say that you need a degree, with some mention that military experience may be considered equivalent. However, coming from the government, soldiers know that the objective is easier to score than the subjective. Who decides if a 20-year warrant officer in the infantry has the experience necessary to meet an unknown person's subjective standard of what "may be equivalent"?

I suggest to you that for releasing members of the Canadian Forces, particularly the injured, part of the release six months out should be an assessment and a real answer to that question. Exactly what is it that I have? Exactly what does someone reading my application believe I have? Where do I score on the “may be equivalent” chart? Perhaps this solution exists.

There's a post-secondary institute in B.C., BCIT, which has a program working with the Legion to assess a soldier's current skills and see what credit they can write off for their business program. That soldier is then advised of how many more credits are needed. This idea would be a great start, but embedded in the military chain of command, through the chief of military personnel.

● (1535)

I think our goal should be that the retiring soldier and the hiring staff of the department know exactly what it is this soldier's experience and training are worth before the soldier applies.

I'll make one more point before I end. It's on terminology.

As a soldier, I hated it when a concept would stay the same, but the next year it was called something different because someone had a great idea about terminology. If you ask an infantryman and an engineer and a chemical weapons detection specialist to clear a building, you'll get different action on the word “clear”. Lexicon matters, especially in the world of human resources vetting and algorithms, some of which is done by machines.

Perhaps military courses such as the advanced leadership qualification should be called project management, because that's one of the things it is. The military prefers the term “leadership” over “management”, because that's what commanders do; they lead. However, “management” is the term the real world uses when it describes a capacity to supervise, teach and administer subordinates.

I also think we need an honest review of education requirements and whether they match the job description or prohibit application from veterans who've served since they were 18. Does every job you are advertising really need that education qualification that is specified, or is there a chance it needs updating?

For example, again at Veterans Affairs, the job of a veterans case manager requires a degree in the study and assessment of human behaviour, whereas their biggest role is understanding military medical information and helping that veteran access benefits from the federal government. A qualification as a military medic or a military resource management specialist ought to be the most highly sought after qualification for that job. Those that have worked in the joint personnel support unit, for example, have worked with these exact clients, these exact veterans and their issues in uniform. Why is a social work degree considered better than that qualification?

There are around 100 different jobs in the military. The human resource specialists in the other federal departments should be ordered to look at each of those job tasks to see if it is the mirror image of a job in their own department. If so, an exemption for those personnel should be granted.

Currently, there seems no shortage of places that a colonel or an admiral can get hired. Everyone seems to grasp what they do. We need to develop realistic goals to have the same opportunities for

healthy master seaman who have led boarding party teams and wounded sergeants who have cared for and led soldiers as they build rope bridges and breach wire obstacles. We need the human resources departments to understand why they want that veteran, and we want that veteran to retire from the forces knowing exactly what it is the rest of the federal government thinks they are qualified for.

Thank you for your time.

The Chair: Thank you.

Before we go to our next testimony, I want to ask all of our witnesses to keep their opening statements to approximately five minutes if possible—and I'm going to give some latitude here. That will allow our committee members more opportunity to ask questions.

Mr. McKenna, there's no malice intended here, but that was considerably more than five minutes. I'll just issue this suggestion to all of our witnesses for their opening statements.

We'll now go to our second witness here with us in person, Monsieur Fauteux from VIA Rail Canada.

Sir, the floor is yours.

● (1540)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Fauteux (Director, Government and Community Relations, VIA Rail Canada Inc.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Jacques Fauteux and I am the director of government and community relations at VIA Rail. I am also a lieutenant-commander in the Canadian Forces. I have also had the honour and pleasure of serving other veterans in the Canadian Forces, the Department of National Defence and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

I am pleased to appear today with my colleague Ziad Nader, director of human resources and information. He is joining us in this session by videoconference.

[*English*]

As a non-agent Crown corporation, VIA Rail provides Canadian travellers with a safe, efficient and environmentally responsible rail service. Thanks to our customer-centric approach, we've seen unprecedented revenue and ridership growth. I would say that some of this is by virtue of the work we do with the military and the veterans community.

In 2018, more than 4.8 million Canadians chose to leave their cars behind to take the train, a million more than four and a half years ago. This increase of over a million passengers, or 30% in ridership growth, is directly related to our commitment to employees. I would again include people like me, who have served in the Canadian Armed Forces and are veterans. Last year, we celebrated our 40th anniversary of service to Canadians, and service is what brought me to VIA: serving my country.

Since the beginning, VIA Rail has maintained a tradition of supporting our military community, and these ties grow stronger every day. Today, VIA works to improve the well-being of active military members, veterans and their families, and members of the defence department, with a strategy that is based on three pillars: train ticket-based rebates, partnerships and veteran and reservist employment, on which I will speak.

These three pillars are supporting each other with respect to the strategy for us to improve the state of those people who protect our values here at home and abroad. This strategy is how we deliver concrete actions to make a positive impact for that community.

[*Translation*]

The first pillar is to provide a 25% discount on the best available fare to Canadian Forces members, veterans and their families so they can travel anywhere in the country at a lower cost. The result is that 300,000 trips have been completed since the initiative was launched. In 2018, there was a 25% increase across the country.

With respect to our partnerships, which is our second pillar, VIA Rail actively participates in the activities of the approximately 40 organizations with which we work. Some of them, including Treble Victor Group, help military members find jobs, while others, such as Wounded Warriors Canada, help them make the transition to civilian life.

The missions of these groups are diverse. They range from promoting the development and well-being of military families to training and transition to civilian life. There is also the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research, which promotes the advancement of women in the Canadian Forces.

[*English*]

In the spirit of the chair's desire to get to the point, I will point to the fact that we've recently been awarded a celebration of service award from a multi-parliamentarian group that recognized the work we do as tangible steps in helping military community members join our ranks, the ranks of a civilian organization that still serves Canadians.

Today, VIA Rail is proud to report that we have four times more military members and veterans than we had in 2014. Whether veterans or reservists, these 87 VIA Rail employees—and I'm one of them—form a true community within our organization.

These military members and veterans are making a difference. My colleagues, and I'm talking about my civilian, non-veteran, non-military colleagues, have nothing but praise—and I would hope you would ask questions to Monsieur Nader about this—as far as their performance is related.

Thanks to the June 2016 adoption of a policy for military reservists, which we have also won an award for from the Canadian Forces, we've been able to bring some of that expertise to serving members who will eventually become veterans when they decide to leave the reserve force.

These benefits and this investment in our men and women are unparalleled. I'll give you one example. We have one person who is a reservist, who works in Montreal with vehicles. He works on tanks and armoured personnel carriers. He brought us this small technology. He basically said it's an iPhone. It has open software technology that enables us now—after we transferred it to VIA Rail—to better manage our fleet of trains. It gives our locomotive engineers all the data they could have had previously in a legal-sized case, which any military or political staffer brings on Parliament Hill, in an iPhone.

Guess what. That was \$300,000 in savings for a \$50,000 investment in technology. That one week of leave that we gave to that person cost us \$1,200. The return on investment is unparalleled.

• (1545)

Our staffing needs are considerable and we are looking to hire 600 to 800 new employees per year. Given the nature of our operations, we value military skills in several positions that are a great fit for veterans who want to continue to serve Canadians.

[*Translation*]

I would like to highlight our recent partnerships with the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, Women in Defence and Security, and the new Canadian Armed Forces Transition Group led by General Misener.

Together with them and with the Department of Veterans Affairs, we can make a difference. We have already begun to encourage other crown corporations to do the same, and we are working with BDC and EDC to share our knowledge.

[*English*]

As a veteran, I'm very grateful that the Crown has given me an opportunity to serve, and on behalf of all the employees at VIA Rail and my colleague Ziad Nader, I'd like to thank you for your time.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Again, if possible, I'll remind all our witnesses that if they could to keep to five minutes or less for their opening statements, that would be extremely appreciated by the chair.

We'll now go by video conference to Mr. Matthew Harris in St. Catharines, Ontario.

Mr. Harris, welcome. The floor is yours.

Sergeant Matthew Harris (As an Individual): Good day and thanks for having me. I am truly humbled.

I'll begin by saying a few things about myself. My name is Sergeant Matt Harris. I'm 47 years old. I'm married with two teenage children. I'm currently a reservist and a veteran. I joined the reserves right after high school. My plan was to be a reservist in college, and I was going to join the regular force or get out of the army all together after college.

About 27 years later, I still serve as a reservist. I'm an infanteer and I began instructing when college was over in 1995. I did class A and class B work for the military. I then deployed to Bosnia for six months in 1998 after completing four months of selection, which was for class C. I came home after that tour, taught some more in the infantry to pass on my experiences and got married.

In March of 2001 I was hired on by CCRA, Canada Customs and Revenue Agency, now known as CBSA or Canada Border Services Agency. I also remained a reservist, being promoted to the rank of sergeant. I like to believe that my experiences in the reserves and my time in Bosnia helped me get the job as a customs inspector, although I'm not entirely sure.

The leadership at CBSA had no issues with my maintaining my second job as an infantry sergeant. They allowed me to change shifts and take military leave from time to time to maintain my skill set.

In September 2007 I asked for extended military leave to go on tour to Afghanistan. I had no problems at all getting that leave. I returned home in April 2009 and went right back to work with CBSA. Then in May 2010, I left again to go back to Afghanistan. I returned from that third tour in December 2010. CBSA seemed proud of my time away. My leaders and colleagues kept in touch and helped out my wife during Christmas. I maintained my seniority by paying for benefits and my pension.

I continued my military training as a class A reservist and still do this to this day. I do still get support from CBSA. The support I've received and continue to receive from my CBSA family, peers and managers alike, has been great. I like to believe that my experience with the military has not only helped me but has also helped out CBSA.

In 2012, your soldiers were given a bit of a bonus when we were told that some of our time as class B or class C reservists was added on to our time and we were granted more vacation and seniority. However, in June 2018, seniority for your soldiers was taken away. Your former and current soldiers serving in the CBSA have all been affected.

For me as a soldier, serving my country has always seemed like the most honourable thing to do. It gives me great pride to continue to serve, regardless of my age and my weary bones. As a soldier, I've seen and experienced great inspiration, gut-bursting laughter, incredible fear and soul-destroying sadness.

I tell people that I've served with the military and that being part of CBSA has been fantastic. If there is one area in which I believe it could improve and it could bring in more veterans to serve in the public service, it would be to respect the time we have served in the Canadian Armed Forces, which means regular force and classes A, B or C, and by allowing us to have that time recognized for vacation, as well as seniority. The public service seems like a natural extension of the service we provide Canada. One of the biggest incentives for veterans would be to have that time recognized.

There are hundreds of former and current members of the Canadian Armed Forces who have dedicated and continue to dedicate their lives and free time to contribute to the safety and security of Canadians at home and of our interests abroad. All we ask for is a small but important change to the policy that allows us to

be equals with our colleagues within the public service who can carry over service and seniority.

I'll sign off by quoting my regimental motto, *Non nobis sed patriae*, which is Latin for "Not for us, but for our country".

Thank you very much.

● (1550)

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

Finally, we have via video conference from Fort Erie, Ontario, Madam Emily Rowe.

Madam Rowe, the floor is yours.

Ms. Emily Rowe (As an Individual): First and foremost, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak this afternoon.

My name is Emily Rowe. I've been employed by CBSA for the last five years.

At the end of my grade 12 year, I witnessed a Griffon helicopter land on the football field of my high school as part of a recruiting campaign for the infantry reserves. It didn't take a month before I convinced my mother to sign on the dotted line to allow me the honour of becoming an infanteer. I stayed in the reserves for five years, after which I joined the Royal Canadian Navy regular force and was employed as a naval combat information operator. I completed 12 years of service and received a Canadian Forces Decoration medal for service.

In 2014, I made the move from the military to the public service. This transition was not easy, nor was the decision to leave the military. I was in search of a more stable life and being closer to family, and I had a desire to have a career that would be an extension to my service in the military.

I've noted some issues that would make hiring CAF members less stressful and entice great candidates to the CBSA.

The hardships of training in Rigaud are a turnoff for many people. To leave a \$70,000 to \$80,000 career is a risk. People in dual-income families cannot afford the sacrifice. Unpaid training is very difficult, and the \$125 per week allowance that the recruiting promises comes only every six weeks, so it is very misleading and prevents recruits from being able to plan financially for a period of absence from their families. Also, the random process for port selection is intimidating for members who are striving to achieve more stability for their families.

In the Canadian Armed Forces, 25 years of service provides a full pension with no penalty. This was a huge consideration for me. I had to give up many years of pensionable time to transfer. As well, I am five years in with the public service and I was told that my transfer was not a priority as I will not be retiring soon. Knowing the amount of time transferred is valuable for me in creating a financial plan for my future.

I have always been proud of my military service. When I arrived at my port of entry, I learned that I could submit my MPRR—record of service—to receive the same level of vacation that I had worked for in the military and to enhance my seniority number on the vacation leave and line selection bidding lists. This was a huge bonus, as I had worked very hard to achieve a rank and record with the federal government.

What I'm about to share with you now is the most egregious of all deficiencies. In 2014, I was hired with someone with whom I've become friends. He transferred from the Coast Guard. He and I were afforded the same respect, and I took my place right behind him on the seniority list. Four years later, in June 2018, seniority for soldiers was taken away. My peer retains his position on the seniority list, but I have fallen over 50 positions on a list of 120 people.

I am constantly approached by comrades I served with who are looking for more information about my new career with CBSA. I tell them that I am happy with my career change. I also have to tell them, with shame, that their service doesn't count. It doesn't count for seniority and it doesn't equate pension-wise, and they may be uprooted once again, with their families, to a remote isolated port.

I have recommendations.

Provide an environment for solid candidates to learn in and to not have worry about incidental costs while training. At a minimum, pay the indicated \$125 per week every week.

Entice members of the Canadian Armed Forces with an edge on port selection. Signing bonuses are often offered in lower-staffed occupations within the government. Offer the first three choices to veterans.

Realize that CBSA is a law enforcement service and our pensions should be in line with those of other law enforcement services. Strengthen the response to pension transfers to allow responsible financial planning for Canadian Armed Forces members who have a transfer value.

The main reason why I have made this committee appearance a priority is to ask for respect for our time that we served in the Canadian Armed Forces—regular forces and reserve classes A, B and C—by allowing us to have the time recognized for vacation and seniority. We have served and continue to serve this country. A change in policy would allow us to feel equal to our peers, those who transferred from other departments of the public service and can carry over their service and seniority.

Thank you for your time.

•(1555)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thanks to all of our witnesses who are here today.

Colleagues, because of the shortness of time, we won't have enough time for a full round of questions, but we certainly will have at least a complete first round of seven-minute interventions. We'll play it by ear after that.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.): Can we do five minutes?

The Chair: If the wish of the committee is to cut it down to five minutes each, we might get—

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: That's so everybody gets a chance.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: It will be five minutes then for interventions and we will start with Mr. Drouin.

You have five minutes, please.

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and for those who have served, I want to thank you for your service.

Mr. McKenna, you've enumerated some recommendations that we can make, and I'm hearing a theme, first, to recognize one for one, so that one year in the military should equal one year in the public service. I'm just wondering what you heard on the ground from some of your other colleagues about their experiences in trying to reintegrate into the public service for jobs, and whether they've received any help from the military, knowing that once it's their time they will either move on. Has there been any help?

We've also heard about skill sets, understanding and transferring the skill sets to new terminology so that the public service understands what you guys do. Has there been any help for this in terms of your experience and your colleagues' experiences?

Mr. Brian McKenna: In my personal experience and among the folks around me who I speak with there have been some advancements. I'm speaking to you today, and one of the things the veterans have been asking, for years, is for access to other departments that affect us. The fact we're here is part of that progress.

I just want to caution people whenever they have another idea for Defence that Defence is real busy. This town right now is under water. We have people all across the globe, and every time I think I know where we're going next I'm generally wrong. It might be a country we don't even have on a radar right now. Defence has to be obsessed with the next problem in that regard. To be fair to them with what they have to do around the globe, and what they're doing around the block from you right now, they're real busy and anything in this regard is going to be a distant priority.

It kind of has to be. I'm not trying to say they're giving it lip service. They're doing what they can, but they also need direction and assistance from people like us to let them know what's missing. I'm suggesting that as the process for being released happens there are noticeable benchmarks. Without knowing every case across the forces, I can tell you that they don't release people without at least six months of warning, particularly if it's a medical release. That's not a lot of time, but that is some time to do some of the things that I've mentioned. That's where I would like to see progress.

In answer to your question, sir, I have seen them do things, but I'm also very aware of where their priorities have to be. It should be managed by Veterans Affairs, but I believe this should also be something in the mandate letter of whichever minister gets the file on intergovernmental affairs. You have to see that, as a soldier, it's good that Defence is aware of us, but that's looking in the past. In helping us look to the future whether it's jobs or housing, or anything along those lines, we generally need involvement from there as well. That's my opinion on that, sir.

• (1600)

[Translation]

Mr. Francis Drouin: Okay.

Mr. Fauteux, you talked about VIA Rail's success in hiring veterans. You said that there are four times more veterans in your workforce than in 2014.

How has VIA Rail been able to hire and assist veterans in this transition?

The question can be for your colleague as well.

Mr. Jacques Fauteux: I think it's really a matter of working with people who have already done the work in the past.

We have learned from Amtrak, from the resources the company had put in place. We have found partners such as the defunct Canada Company, which is being replaced by a group of various organizations.

We have to spread the word.

[English]

The reason we did it at VIA Rail was that VIA can't be dictated to by the government with respect to its independent Crown corporation role. We can't dictate like the law for departments with respect to hiring of military members, but we surely can lead the way so that we can encourage, from a public policy perspective, other federal organizations to get into the same space. I think that's what's happening with other departments.

The military members normally have a pretty tight network. That's why it works in platoons, or whatever system that we have in the navy, army or air force, but when you get the word across it's just about being able to translate what a military member's expertise is. That's where Mr. Nader comes in with his team in translating that information to the HR process. There is some measure of willingness.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. McCauley, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Thanks, everyone.

Mr. McKenna, it's good to see you again.

I have a question for you. Who do you think is best to determine the transferable skills, the equivalency? This comes up. I hear it from a lot of the veterans I chat with in Edmonton. They reach a stone wall. We had Veterans Affairs here. Every government department comes forward, hand over heart, saying they're doing their best, but then we hear from the veterans that's it's not happening.

As a cynic at heart, I have a hard time believing that our bureaucracy is doing a good job getting the vets in. One of the issues is that they build up walls based on the skill set. Who's best to say that this in the military is equivalent to this in public service, so we can break down that wall?

Mr. Brian McKenna: I would like to see something that is a combination of specialists from admissions from post-secondary institutions, because they generally wind up working in this space. I also think that a little bit of a review, department by department, could go along with that.

I mentioned in my comments, for a reason, the advantage we see with something like the folks at BCIT, but then also there's the limitation that it is one program, one school and one province. I would data mine those people right now. That is a program that works very well, and it works very well for what it does. I think the Legion was one of the anchors behind it. I have to give them credit for that, so something along those lines....

We do need to make sure accreditation in this country is still respected. That's what the military member wants. Members want to know that their plumbing ticket counts. They're not trying to discredit the concept of accreditation in their field.

I'm reticent to hand it to business. While I respect business, often business just comes from the perspective of its own business. We've seen that before with a lot of different... Folks come forward knowing their particular background of how to get someone hired at a sugar refinery or whatever it may be. I really think we need to combine the skill that's already there and the people who are already doing this, and approach it from that point of view.

I also think buy-in needs to be had at the unions of the different places we're looking for these folks to be hired. It is something we have to be aware of, that you can have acceptance through the hierarchy and yet push-back at that level, too.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: The hiring priority, five years from medical release, what they can activate and get in.... We've heard feedback that maybe it should be moved to 10 years. Is that something you would agree with?

Mr. Brian McKenna: It's not an area I have any expertise in answering, to be fair. I don't know that. That might go best to one of the other panellists.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks.

Mr. Harris and Ms. Rowe, can you comment on this issue of the change in the seniority since June 2018? I have to apologize. I'm not at all familiar with that. I haven't heard of that before. Can you give some feedback on where this came from? Was it a published directive within the government where you lost the seniority?

• (1605)

Sgt Matthew Harris: It's from our collective agreement, the union, PSAC. That changed it.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: You're PSAC.

Ms. Rowe, are you PSAC as well?

You're both CBSA, is that right?

Sgt Matthew Harris: Yes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Have you heard back from the union about this? Did this just come out of the bargaining?

Sgt Matthew Harris: At first they took it out. The union took it out of the last round of bargaining, which happened in June 2018 when we finally signed a contract. It was discreetly taken out.

I don't really know how to confirm how it all came about, but there was a vote within the union, as well, where they voted on this single... It was an unprecedented vote. There was this issue—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I would suspect there's a smaller number of you than the others.

Sgt Matthew Harris: Yes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Mr. McKenna—and I'll ask Ms. Rowe and Mr. Harris—can I assume there's a general agreement within the veteran community that a day served in the army is no different from a day served in the public service, for seniority?

Mr. Brian McKenna: It's certainly our view that it ought to be—

The Chair: Just because of time, a very quick answer would be appreciated.

Mr. Brian McKenna: It's my view that it ought to be. I'll leave it at that.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Is there a general consensus, though?

Mr. Brian McKenna: Yes. I'll never claim to have worked harder than anyone every day, but I'm struggling to find someone else who finds that their day of work was harder than mine, so it's one for one.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Blaikie, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): First of all, I just want to say thank you to everybody for appearing before the committee and sharing your experiences with us.

[Translation]

I have a question for the VIA Rail representatives.

One of the problems we have heard about is the equivalency between the various types of military training and other types of training.

How did you establish a system to find the equivalency between military training and VIA Rail's work requirements?

Mr. Jacques Fauteux: My answer is short: information technology.

We have disseminated information on social media and created partnerships with organizations with expertise, such as Veterans Affairs Canada and the Canadian Forces.

[English]

The most important, however, has been our own military people. We have a great resource in our own agency. If I want to know what a combat engineer does, I just go see somebody else within VIA Rail who was a combat engineer, and I'll tell you, that that person's going to validate that CV really quickly.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Would you say, then, that there's a culture you've managed to successfully develop within VIA Rail?

One of the things we've heard is that sometimes, even if a department has a good policy, at the hiring level, the hiring manager may not have that expertise or access to that expertise. It ends up being extra work for them, and then that's work that may not end up getting done. Then they make a decision about hiring based on what they know and what they're comfortable with, as opposed to doing that work every time.

If we're trying to recommend to government departments how to do this well—"Look at VIA Rail"—what more can we say other than that VIA has successfully developed a good culture? What can we tell them that they need to do in order to be able to get the person who's doing the hiring to feel more at ease with the information that they're getting off a military person's CV?

Mr. Jacques Fauteux: First of all, as I mentioned in my opening statement, I think exposure to military members' success is an example of success breeding success, and when that happens it is good to see the reservists.

My colleague Ziad Nader agreed to go on an ExecuTrek, which is a trip to enable non-military people to be exposed to the military environment. What better occasion to actually create a rapprochement between two groups, precisely to enable them to better understand the dualities.

In the end, we realize that we both serve Canada, and though one learned it in a very harsh environment—be in it Constance Bay here in Ottawa or in Afghanistan—when it's time to move the train, safety is a priority, leadership is a priority and service to clients is a priority, and you wear a uniform as well.

[Translation]

I'm not sure whether Ziad Nader wants to add anything else, but that's what I'm proposing to the president.

Mr. Ziad Nader (Director, Human Resources and Information, VIA Rail Canada Inc.): On our side, as recruiters, we ask people to especially look beyond competency, title, experience or degree. It is a question of seeing which skills are transferable to work. For example, for a person who has held certain positions in the military and has developed certain skills, it is a matter of determining how those can be put to good use in the position they are seeking.

When we went to experience a day in military training, we brought managers with us—since they are the ones who hire—in order to expose them to the life and skills of a military member on the ground. For example, in terms of safety, they can learn what the training, the military exercise, is when there are chemicals in the environment. This shows the rigour with which military members must proceed. Those are all transferable skills. That's what we're looking for.

● (1610)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Of course, it would be great if public service managers spent some time with military members.

Would it also be a good thing if they spent some time with people like you who work in non-military organizations and who have successfully hired veterans?

Mr. Ziad Nader: When the time comes to hire military members, the people involved co-operate.

We all want to hire the best people and help the military members transition to civilian life. Clearly, companies that are trying to transform their culture communicate and talk to each other. We are trying to see what the best way is and how best to support the cause.

[English]

The Chair: Madam Ratansi, you have five minutes.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Thank you very much, and thank you all for being here.

As we are studying the hiring of veterans into the public service, we have been listening to many veterans and one of the challenges they talk about is getting a buy-in from the union for an equivalence. I'm trying to figure out, for our study, what sort of a recommendation we could make so that we can be proactive, because there is an equivalence for service in the military.

Ms. Rowe, you talked about training. We had officials from Veterans Affairs here on Monday and they talked about the career transition services and the education fund. Were you aware of this training and the dollars available for training purposes for veterans?

Ms. Emily Rowe: No.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: So, they have not advertised it enough.

On another issue, you have a friend, Mr. McKenna, who doesn't have a job. The director general of human resources at Veterans Affairs said that at the Invictus Games applications were brought and people who were hired didn't want to be employed with whatever department it was.

Is there some gap in understanding what a veteran needs and the skill sets that could be translated to whatever jobs. When you leave the military, you receive six months advance notice, is there any career counselling that takes place to say, "Here is how you can transition"? Does VIA Rail come and say, "Come to me", or does anybody come and say, "Here is what's available", whether in the private sector or elsewhere?

The skill sets you talked about, anybody would die for the skill sets that were accumulated. There is a huge disconnect. What would you suggest?

Mr. Brian McKenna: I'll say two things on that. There is a process, the SCAN seminar does occur. It occurs across the country on various bases. First of all, reservists aren't on various bases. When you look at something that is regular force only, you're knocking off a third of the military. They won't get access to that.

While I remain a huge fan of the Invictus Games, there's one Invictus Games yet we're in every community across this country. I routinely even remind the government, when I speak to other committees, just putting something on the Internet, for example, is still a limiting answer when you go to our brothers in indigenous communities and northern communities that are still working to get a proper Internet connection.

It is not an easy solution to get information out. I would look to our brothers and sisters and organizations like the Legion. There should be a yellow pages-style directory at every organization that qualifies itself as a veterans' group. This is one of the things that's needed because it's very difficult to actually reach out and pass that message.

• (1615)

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Ms. Rowe and Mr. Harris, when you left the military, were you aware of the training available? Were you aware there was a job fair, a career fair, that was done, according to Veterans Affairs, and that it actually tried to get people to sign up for jobs. Were you aware of that?

Sgt Matthew Harris: I'm just going to start off by saying I am still a reservist. I'm still serving. I got this job with CBSA while I was still serving in the military as a reservist, so I don't think that pertains to me so much.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: How about Ms. Rowe?

Ms. Emily Rowe: I was not aware either. I was still currently serving when I got a job at CBSA as well, but I had no knowledge of that, no.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: It behooves us to ensure that everybody is informed. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Mr. McCauley for five minutes, please.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks for the feedback you're giving us. It's very helpful.

Mr. Harris and Ms. Rowe, just quickly, a lot of the witnesses whom we've had come forward who were able to leave the military and enter the public service were from CBSA. It looks as if maybe they're doing it better than the other departments.

Do you think that's a cultural thing, or do you get feedback maybe from other veterans that CBSA is doing it better than other departments? It may just be anecdotal information, of course.

Sgt Matthew Harris: I can't speak for other people on why they joined. To me, it seemed like a very natural transition. I joined CBSA just before 9/11, and I already had about nine years in the military at the time. I was really looking for a strong career that would help me support my wife and family, and I happened to find this job. I'm from the Niagara region, so there's a lot of people—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: The reason I asked is that we had Veterans Affairs here who said there is no hiring quota. Every department is left on its own. No one is in charge of enforcing the rules that require us to give priorities to veteran hiring. Some departments seem to be doing it better than others, but there is no one really in charge within the government to say, "Get these vets hired". I'm just curious.

Again, most of the witnesses we had who said they'd been able to transition into work in the public service.... It was a small sample, but it has been CBSA. I was just curious, anecdotally, if you've heard from any of the others, you or Ms. Rowe.

Ms. Emily Rowe: I think probably one of the reasons you've seen a larger turnout of CBSA members for this committee specifically is that we are one of the few agencies that don't have the one for one, so it is a hot topic for us. As I mentioned, I had a friend who was in the Coast Guard and he has his service counted, so I don't think you would see him wanting to speak necessarily or having anything to add today. Maybe that's one of the reasons you've seen more CBSA members wanting to participate in this.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Great.

This is a question for any of you, because you've all served. When we had Veterans Affairs here, they said one of the difficulties getting veterans into jobs is that they aren't willing to move. When I think of a veteran leaving the service, I think of someone leaving Petawawa, Cold Lake or other more remote areas. I found it difficult to believe they weren't willing to move, or weren't wanting to move to the major cities in Canada.

I'm wondering, and again it might just be anecdotal, but it sounded to me more of an excuse rather than a reason why the government is having difficulty hiring veterans.

Mr. Fauteux, do you want to speak?

Mr. Jacques Fauteux: What's not known by a lot of companies is that, if a member has served for more than 10 years—I think, but remind me—he or she is allowed to have an all-expenses-paid move back to the place of origin where they were recruited. Can you imagine if a business has a need in either Cold Lake or anywhere else? The Government of Canada will help that member relocate, but there are two solitudes. Does the Department of Veterans Affairs speak to the Department of National Defence on that transition? I think the reason they created the transition group in National Defence was to address those very questions.

•(1620)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Mr. McKenna, can you add to that?

Mr. Brian McKenna: I have nothing to add on, my friend.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Mr. Harris or Ms. Rowe...?

Ms. Emily Rowe: In this process with CBSA, when you get hired, it takes about three months within the four-month training process to get the port you're going to, and it's a random process. It's not merit-based. In other words, you can't get to the top of the class and pick the place you want to go. A lot of the postings that are available are very isolated positions, and that's the risk you are taking when you apply to CBSA. That is well known at the beginning of the hiring process, but I think that's why you're probably not getting as many as you'd like coming in the door in the first place.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I just have 30 seconds, so I'll just skip over to Mr. Blaikie.

Oh, have you finished? Okay.

The Chair: Well, you have only—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm sorry. I'm not going to be able to ask a question in 30 seconds.

The Chair: It's nice to see where your allegiances are. That's comforting.

Mr. Jowhari, you will be our final intervenor. You have five minutes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I just wanted to hear a good question.

Mr. Majid Jowhari (Richmond Hill, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. McCauley. I'll remember that.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I apologize.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: First, I thank all of you for your service.

I'm sitting back here listening to all of you who have given so much for our country. As you are stepping out of your military service, how do you determine what you want to do and how do you determine what you're qualified for?

Any one of you can answer that question.

Mr. Brian McKenna: I'll take a stab at that.

First of all, why you join the military is exceptionally different from why you stay. The people who generally stay and join for the same reason tend to get out pretty quickly.

There are those who have done multiple years, such as the gentleman on the screen here. The lady has done multiple years in different parts of it. She fell in love with some part of that system, as I did. Folks such as these, and such as me, actually really like wearing a maple leaf on our arms. It's not something that just passes into the back of our minds when we retire. We go searching for other things we can do to wear that maple leaf. We go searching for other things we can do to help veterans, whether it's through advocacy or working for something else that has the maple leaf.

I absolutely believe people leave the military satisfied with their service but still wanting that. They still want to be connected to that. It's a big deal, and the rest of the government should be taking advantage of that.

Mr. Jacques Fauteux: I feel the same way. I left the Armed Forces at 24 and a half years, short of a full pension, because I had an opportunity in government that I couldn't refuse and I wanted to serve my country. VIA Rail did the same thing for me, and I'm proud to say that I've pretty much served Canadians for over 30 years.

Like you, it drives me.

Sgt Matthew Harris: You hit the nail on the head, especially for CBSA. You can feel it and you can see it as a sense of defending Canada, stopping bad people from coming in. That's very basic, but it still touches the emotional part of you.

Take advantage of that.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Great.

I have an idea that I want to bounce off you.

My background is in consulting. I look at issues and then I ask whether there is a solution that I could put forward.

I'm listening to the transfer of values. I'm listening to equivalency, education. I am seeing a set of skills on one side and a set of requirements and job availability on the other side within the Crown corporations.

Do you think it's value-added if a mapping exercise is done that says that veterans with this qualification fit into jobs such as this, and we create the pool? Then we create a concept that we've used in our government before, such as the pods concept, where we pair ex-military veterans with the HR manager who's doing the hiring and uses this pool of veterans that are coming in, uses that mapping and tries to make sure that the priority is then adhered to, therefore making it much easier for the veterans to not only get the equivalency but also get the jobs.

What are your thoughts on that?

●(1625)

Mr. Brian McKenna: I think that's one of the ways to go. Also, on top of that, you will find throughout the federal government that we all obey the same Treasury Board laws. We all have the same equitable hiring practices.

You'll also find—I'll take a guess here—that the other folks on the screen with me here, probably this gentleman here, have done a purchasing course for the government at some time, because it's the same one. They've probably done a harassment prevention course, which is the same one. They've done all these things.

Something that does what you're speaking of, sir, would be very helpful, but also the fact that there are resource management specialists in the branch at which these folks work. Why wouldn't they, almost from a predatory point of view, be trying to hire people with that skill set from defence?

Therefore, yes, it's really a struggle when you look at how this is still being held back.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Great.

I don't know how much time is left.

The Chair: That's it.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

To all our witness, first of all, thank you for your appearance here today. Secondly and quite obviously, thank you for your service to our country. It is greatly appreciated, always has been and always will be.

Lastly, should you have additional information that you think would be useful to our committee as we continue our study on the hiring practices to get more veterans into the public service, any suggestions would be very much appreciated. I would encourage you to submit those directly to our clerk. Those suggestions or recommendations, should you have additional ones, will help form part of our final report.

Once again, thank you for being here.

Colleagues, we will suspend for just a few moments while we set up for our next video conference and our next panel of witnesses.

The meeting is suspended.

●(1625)

_____ (Pause) _____

●(1630)

The Chair: We are having some difficulty locating a few of our witnesses. Two were supposed to be here in person—we haven't located them yet—and two by video conference. So far, we have only one by video conference. From Burnaby, British Columbia, we have Madam Kerry Gibson, president of EcoCentury Technologies.

I suggest we start with Madam Gibson's opening statement and if we still have no other witnesses before us we'll go directly into questions. If more witnesses appear by video conference or in person, we'll just adapt as they come before us.

Madam Gibson, thank you very much for being here. I hope you can hear us all right.

You have five minutes or so for your opening statement. After that we'll go directly into questions from our committee.

The floor is yours.

Ms. Kerry Gibson (President, EcoCentury Technologies, As an Individual): Thank you very much.

After their history of service, Canadian veterans deserve the opportunity to transition with ease and full government support into civilian life, which includes suitable and satisfying employment. Employment, in particular, serves more benefit than simply financial gain. It offers purpose, support and social connection—all of which offer greater care to our deserving veterans than simply offering medical provisions. In fact, fulfilling employment offers a proactive approach to countering the negative ramifications of a person experiencing trauma. This not only adds to their economic contribution, but diminishes external resource requirements.

Veterans may not return to civilian life as they had left it. They may possibly be compromised physically and/or emotionally. After sustaining such injuries, veterans would require additional considerations to transition into a future world of work.

It is those who have sustained disabilities from service who have been primarily left behind. Federal officials have been candid in realizing this deficit. Therefore, we have this committee assessment. As these disabilities have been attained through service to our government, it is, therefore, our government's honourable duty to rectify and remediate those deficits as best they can. Gender nuance has been somewhat addressed and accepted, and ableism requires similar attention.

Limited services to help assess skill sets to aid in this transition are being launched in academia with the initiative and guidance of people like Dr. Kevin Wainwright, whose tools can be used at BCIT to adapt military learning to civilian vocations. He has shown that such skills are indeed transferable, with accessible and moderate upgrades in training.

Current hiring practices in both public and private sectors refuse to address the intersectionality of employment of persons with disabilities, specifically physical disabilities due to injury. There is limited acceptance of the belief that these persons are indeed capable of productivity. Such discriminatory bias is deeply cultural as there is little example to prove otherwise. Without encouraging this sector of employable individuals, there is resistance to investing in the modifications required to accommodate.

Therefore, it is the public sector's duty to lead in example and in the practical development of modified infrastructure that encourages inclusion, both in the design and execution of change in space and culture. It is always a government obligation to lead in such forms of social justice. Private sector can then be encouraged to follow suit through example and proof of success.

What this would look like in implementation would be that public workplaces should be required to be upgraded to accommodate varying levels of physical ability. They would be HR trained to be cognizant of such things as sensitivities and triggers and to gain understanding of PTSD, for example.

There are many benefits to employers, employees and those served by the public sector when building on inclusive hiring practices that hire those of differing abilities and life experiences, such as veterans. For instance, public sector occupation offers stability and support, including medical benefits, for healthy futures and participation in civilian economies. The structure and hierarchy of the public sector is well suited to a military-trained mindset. Established public sector systems readily provide training opportunities within each context, which are ideally adaptable for ease of transition. Veterans might potentially experience continued pride in serving one's country.

The public would see employees with varying abilities and the culture of work would normalize the presence of the otherwise abled, leading to other inclusive actions. This would continue to shift perspective regarding usefulness, thus offering the private sector a subsequent understanding of the resources available through optimizing the skills of retired service personnel.

Government would benefit from having those who they service more effectively served by those who reflect them, their needs and their experiences through shared understanding and empathy.

Also, data suggests that such efforts mimic similar data on gender inclusion, which reflects increased productivity and profitability for the inclusive employer. Until inclusive hiring practices are commonplace, those given the chance to prove their worth in public service tend to show heightened commitment and loyalty. Practically speaking, initial training was at great investment and that investment will not wash away if redirected.

Career transition services are expected to budget millions annually, with the number of those affected multiplying exponentially year by year. With thousands readying to return to the workforce, thousands will be available for placement. It is radically pigeonholing to assume that persons with disabilities can only manage simple tasks. That is overwhelmingly false. It is merely that those abilities have not had the opportunity to be proven in a larger context.

● (1635)

Studies show that it is necessary to educate employers on the abilities of the disabled, as current stigmas lead to misinformation and inaccurate understandings. This leads to the failure to hire qualified candidates, due to perceived lack of qualification. In the end, beyond raising the GDP, deterring unhealthy behaviours that may manifest in profound medical costs, and promoting diverse and productive communities with a place for all—beyond all that—it is just the right thing to do.

Thank you to the committee members for your attention to this concern.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Colleagues, just before we move on, unfortunately, as much as we appreciate Ms. Gibson's presence with us here today, she may be the only witness we have.

We've experienced great difficulty getting Master Corporal Grabowski from Whitehorse via video conference. We're still attempting that, but it doesn't look like we're going to be very successful. We just got word that Madam Sadler, from the office of the assistant deputy minister at National Defence, will not be able to join us today, and we have not yet located Mr. Crego.

What I'm saying, colleagues, is that the witness before us may be the only witness we have. Having said that, we'll go into seven-minute rounds of questioning. We'll go as long as we have questions for the one witness we have with us.

We'll start with Mr. Peterson for seven minutes.

Mr. Peterson, we have you on our list as number one.

Mr. Kyle Peterson (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): Okay. Madam Yip is going to take my space, because she missed hers the last time. I'll be second on the list.

The Chair: That's fine.

Madam Yip, you have seven minutes.

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): It's nice to see you on the screen.

You talked about gender nuance. Do you find it's easier for women with military backgrounds to get access to or have jobs in the public service?

● (1640)

Ms. Kerry Gibson: Not at all. I was referring to gender nuance as the reflection of our government's efforts for inclusivity in gender equality overall, since military veterans are presented with the same struggles in employment as in any other sector.

Ms. Jean Yip: You talked about the physically disabled being quite capable of being productive. What can we do to change these beliefs with employers?

Ms. Kerry Gibson: As mentioned, I believe it's leading by example.

You can't see under the table, but I come with a set of wheels myself, and I've done fairly okay in my world of work. However, many of my peers have struggled to find their place. They have struggled despite Ph.D.s, master's degrees and other such qualifications to be considered. In fact, according to Ontario statistics, I am currently valued at 44¢ on the dollar, which I find rather objectionable, as I believe that my worth is far more than the value of my legs.

Veterans coming out of the military context and into the civilian context would benefit quite strongly from offerings from the public service of a more welcoming culture, and that's exactly what it is—a changing culture—that needs to happen. Our government needs to be the first to step forward and say that these millions of people across Canada, who perhaps have different abilities that you can see a little more readily than others, are worthy to contribute to our economies.

Ms. Jean Yip: Do you feel that the change in culture is enough, or do you think there needs to be stronger enforcement, such as, perhaps, quotas?

Ms. Kerry Gibson: It's an interesting question. I know that the NRC, for instance, has very strong quotas trying to boost women in STEM, for instance, getting women hired in STEM to fill those roles fifty-fifty within government. Perhaps that's something we need to look at. We definitely need to build in infrastructure. For example, the last video conferencing centre, when we tried to meet the last time, was incredibly inaccessible when I tried to enter it, even though this was being used for a federal purpose. It was inaccessible on multiple levels—entrances, parking, washroom facilities—and this was being used by the government.

So take a look at the physical infrastructure that needs to be built to accommodate those of us who are wheelchair-bound, for instance, and then perhaps look at the technologies that are available for those who have hearing issues or blindness or any other multitude of varying abilities. If that infrastructure is built out, I think that is an actual statement that perhaps they might be welcome into that workplace. Quite often when I enter meetings, my physical inabilities get grouped with intellectual inabilities and people speak slowly to me. Perhaps there could be training as well within these organizations to understand that disabilities are not something to be scared of and that people should not be ostracized or relegated to, as I mentioned, “simple tasks”.

I just got back from an ILO conference in Iceland and that was a question they wanted to discuss—how the disabled could be set simple tasks, as if we're only useful to run the recycling centres.

Ms. Jean Yip: You mentioned HR needing to be trained to recognize triggers and sensitivities. Could you elaborate on that?

•(1645)

Ms. Kerry Gibson: Absolutely. Coming out of a military context, there will be multiple variables of distress. PTSD is incredibly commonplace. As we've seen with our millennial population, they seem to be prone to acquiring PTSD as well. Moving forward, I think HR would really need to have a cognizance of what that is and what that means in the future world of work. I think it would just be sensible for them to have that understanding and training.

Ms. Jean Yip: You mentioned that millennials are more apt to acquire PTSD. What do you mean by that? Are they different from somebody my age, for instance?

Ms. Kerry Gibson: There's been an increase in anxiety and triggers with that age group. It's been attributed to the lack of coping mechanisms they've acquired through upbringing and whatnot. As to whether or not that's entirely the case, I don't want to overgeneralize, but we have seen an increase. Perhaps it's an increase in reporting for those with acquired PTSD.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Colleagues, it appears we have resolved some of our technical difficulties. I believe we have with us now, via video conference from Whitehorse, Master Corporal Terence Grabowski.

Sir, we apologize for the technical difficulties that affected us originally. You're here now and we are pleased to have you with us. I believe you have an opening statement. After you deliver that, sir, we'll go directly into questions.

Mr. Terence Grabowski (Master Corporal (Retired), As an Individual): First, I would like to thank the standing committee members and staff for the opportunity to appear today by video conference.

I feel I have a distinct and unique perspective coming from the north, specifically from Whitehorse, Yukon.

I'm going to speak today on behalf of myself as an individual, a veteran and my experiences trying to gain employment through the federal Public Service Commission.

I have expertise in both the regular and reserve force of the Canadian Armed Forces as a junior leader, with service over 10 years. Professionally, I have 22 professional years being in one form of the public service or another. Municipally, I worked with the Government of Yukon and with the Canadian government.

I've been a private and a master corporal in the military, a customs officer, a full-time police officer all the way up to an acting assistant deputy minister with the Government of Yukon. I feel I have a breadth of depth and knowledge, competencies, formal education, training and courses.

I think one challenge that modern-day veterans have is considering themselves, first off, as a veteran. It took me a long time to acknowledge that I was a veteran. I always thought about my grandfather who served in World War II, or those in Korea, or older persons who have served, as veterans. That can certainly be a challenge.

Are you a veteran? When that question is asked, you will probably find that a lot of the answers would be no. The better question probably is, did you serve? Have you served Canada? From that point, I would consider respectfully that people would say yes they have or no they haven't.

My experience applying online for federal positions is that it's a complex process. For veterans without any physical or mental operational stress injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, it can be a frustrating application process in and of itself. It's long and overly laborious. There's a lot of redundancy as well in the federal application process online. There are sometimes 10 to 12 steps, and I can get into that probably a little later.

Those with post-traumatic stress disorder like me find the application process very challenging. It can be frustrating so that at certain points you almost want to hit the close button in the corner of the screen and just walk away. Again, there is a lot of redundancy that I believe doesn't need to be there. That's definitely one consideration.

In the Yukon, my understanding is that there are approximately 250 federal public service employees. On the job board, I have what's called mobility hiring, but I don't have priority hiring because back when I released originally, there was no such thing as the Veterans Hiring Act. It is my understanding there were amendments in 2015.

•(1650)

Although I have mobility hiring and I can see now internal federal positions, there is very little in the Yukon. I believe there are lots of people who come to the Yukon for various reasons, who seek employment with the federal government and they retain their employment. Therefore, the opportunities, certainly from my perspective, at least in the Yukon, and it would likely be comparable to the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, are limited. Being here, there would be a desire for the Public Service Commission to look at how they can hire local veterans or those within the community.

I know that Veterans Affairs Canada certainly has an interest in hiring veterans, both former RCMP officers and military members. I know that there's a backlog of over 40,000 disability award and disability pension applications that need urgent processing. A fellow like me, as I mentioned, based on my experience, for whatever reason cannot get screened in to the very basic entry-level positions with Veterans Affairs Canada. That's one example. That can be frustrating.

I will finish quickly but I want to talk about about the redundancy aspect within the application process. One of the first steps is to upload your CV or resumé online. With a lot of work and craft, that is done, but further on in the process there's an additional education tab where an applicant can spend a lot of time updating or providing their educational background, which university or formal institution they attended, when, where, whether they were a graduate, what credentials they received. That's a second component within the application process.

One of the most frustrating experiences is the screening questions in and of themselves. They can be quite long and be asking for a lot of information that has already been provided. Again, this is separate from the resumé and this is separate from the education tab, which is full of information. These are almost a third step in the application process online where it says, "Have you graduated from a recognized post-secondary institution?" There are questions like, "Do you have experience as a member of the Canadian Armed Forces?"

•(1655)

The Chair: I'm sorry, my abject apologies, Mr. Grabowski, for interrupting.

I wanted to find out, because I didn't have the benefit of seeing your opening statement, how much longer your statement would be, sir. We have a limited time for questions, and I'm wondering if we can get you to, if possible, wrap up quickly, sir.

Mr. Terence Grabowski: I will, very quickly. Thank you.

Again, "Have you graduated with a degree from a recognized post-secondary institution? If yes, please provide an example to clearly demonstrate where, when and what you did to obtain this experience." There's just a lot of redundancy that can cause frustration.

Thank you very much. I would like to thank the committee for having me attend in person. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir.

We'll now go to our seven-minute round, or a continuation of our seven-minute round, starting with Mr. McCauley.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm glad that we were finally able to beam you in from up north, and I appreciate the information.

Do you mind if I ask a couple of questions that you may have covered? You said you have 10 years of regular service and reserve service, is that correct?

Mr. Terence Grabowski: Yes, sir, I have 10 years.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: What's the breakdown between the two?

Mr. Terence Grabowski: I have three years of regular force experience and seven years of reserve force experience.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Have you left the reserves as well?

Mr. Terence Grabowski: I left the reserves in 2007; however, I have signed up again as a Ranger in the north.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: That's fantastic. Maybe in about another 20 years we'll be able to swap out the Lee-Enfields for you.

Obviously you mentioned the change about the priority hiring. I'm asking all the vets who are appearing before us about it. Some of the ones I deal with back home have served like you. Then they leave and then eight, nine or 10 years later they say they want to get into the public service but there's the five-year cut-off. Is five years too soon? Should it be 10, 15 or indefinite for a priority hire for either medical or non-medical release? Have you any thoughts on that?

Mr. Terence Grabowski: Yes, I do. I think the five-year cut-off is too short. In August of last year I applied to Veterans Affairs Canada to try to qualify for priority hiring. I received a letter of rejection stating that I had been out five years from my original release date, and thus was not qualified.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: You served at least three full years, though, in regular service, did you not?

Mr. Terence Grabowski: Yes, sir.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Okay. My understanding is that medical discharge puts you at the very top. The next level of priority after that, ahead of all other equity hires, is if you have left honourably for any reason after three years. I would think you would still be eligible for that priority hire, not for medical discharge but the regular. Did that come up, or am I wrong about that?

Mr. Terence Grabowski: No, I have to contact the Department of National Defence-Canadian Forces transition services to find out if I was entitled to priority hiring of my own accord. It was based on doing my own research and hearing about others who have certainly received priority entitlement hiring, but my application to Veterans Affairs was denied due to the five-year limitation.

I feel it should be indefinite, without any limitation, to allow them to have the opportunity to come to the top of the pile, if you will, at whatever appropriate time in their lives.

• (1700)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: That's a good point. Because some of the feedback we're hearing at committee I'm also hearing in Edmonton. Issues, whether injuries or hearing loss, etc., are not necessarily popping up within a five-year period. Quite often you activate your priority and it takes more than five years to get through the process.

You mentioned you have applied for jobs with Veterans Affairs. Have you applied for other jobs within the public service? Because you mentioned you had gone online. Was that just for Veterans Affairs? I'm just curious about what else because we're hearing that different departments have different success rates in hiring. I'm wondering if it's systemic throughout our public service that they are not, perhaps, looking after it as well as they should.

Mr. Terence Grabowski: I have applied not just to Veterans Affairs. There is no Veterans Affairs office in Whitehorse. There is Service Canada. I have applied to CIRNAC, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Canada Border Services Agency. I have applied to be a member of the refugee protection division with the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. That's quite a number of different departments.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I can imagine that.

Are you getting any feedback? Perhaps they are not recognizing the skills you have developed, the training you received in the military. Perhaps they are stonewalling you, for lack of better words, or using that as an excuse.

I don't want to put words in your mouth.

Mr. Terence Grabowski: I can't comment on being stonewalled but certainly when I receive emails that I am not accepted further in a process or a board has decided not to pursue me any further, there is no detailed rationale or reasons why I was unsuccessful. Again, based on my background as an acting assistant deputy minister, I have vast experience in budget, HR administration, etc.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thank you very much for your time. I appreciate it.

Mr. Terence Grabowski: Thank you, sir.

The Chair: We'll now go to Mr. Blaikie for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you.

Thank you very much to you both for your testimony here today.

I just want to follow up on that last point very quickly, Mr. Grabowski, and just ask the question.

Do you think it would be helpful, when a veteran applies for a job and isn't hired, if they were able to contact the department and ask for a reason or what they might have done differently on their application in order to see more success? At what level should that happen?

Would it be helpful if they could do that on the initial screening process if they didn't screen through? If they weren't contacted for an interview, would it help if they might be able to contact the department as to why they didn't screen through, and so on, through the process? Could you give us a sense of how feedback might enable veterans to increase their odds at success in future applications?

Mr. Terence Grabowski: I think certainly any feedback is better than receiving nothing at all. Certainly, constructive feedback of where you went astray or what you were not strong enough in would only help, because a veteran's understanding of where they may have gone astray in a process can only grow their capacity from there.

My understanding is that there is, through Veterans Affairs Canada, some ability to take career development courses in terms of resume building, interview techniques and that sort of thing, which is very helpful for those who are making the transition from a military culture into civilian life in the public service. Any feedback, certainly from my perspective, would be greatly appreciated. To grow and learn from it, to ultimately become a successful hire, would be great.

• (1705)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: You said that you learned about the priority hiring for veterans on your own initiative and through your own personal network. Is there a moment when you're leaving the forces when it would be appropriate to communicate to veterans that this is available to them? If they are considering a career in the public service, they should know about that program. It just seems like an odd situation to have the onus be on veterans to know that there's a priority hire program for them.

Is there a point in the process when it would make sense to have the onus on the forces and on government to ensure that veterans leaving the forces know that's an option for them?

Mr. Terence Grabowski: Yes, definitely. There's an old saying that you don't know what you don't know.

Back when I served and when I released initially, there was no such thing as a joint personnel support unit, JPSU. These units came to be certainly after my time. My understanding is that these units do explain and provide these types of services. To what extent, I don't know.

When I released, I had no idea that there even was a Veterans Affairs Canada. I was basically out cleared and that was it. I was sent back to Whitehorse, Yukon, where I originally came from. There wasn't anything in place at that time.

I firmly believe that it's incumbent on the Canadian Forces or the government to give as much information as possible so a retiring member of the Canadian Forces can make their best-educated and informed decision on the information that they have at hand.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much.

I think I have a little bit of time left.

The Chair: You have two minutes.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I just want to ask Ms. Gibson something really quickly.

Earlier in this Parliament, we passed Bill C-81, an act to ensure a barrier-free Canada. In this latest budget, the government made a commitment to hire 5,000 people with disabilities over the next five years.

I'm just wondering, in order to make good on that commitment and in order to try to incorporate veterans living with disabilities into those numbers, what do you think is needed beyond Bill C-81 and beyond that commitment, in order to ensure that it's made real?

Ms. Kerry Gibson: I think it's a wonderful start. I think Bill C-81 is.... Technically, it's 27 years overdue. The U.S. had the ADA 27 years ago. Even then, they're still scrambling to catch up.

I think that a lot of this will be about reporting and enforcement and providing the tool box necessary for everybody to comply with Bill C-81. It's a lot to throw on people all at once. I live in Vancouver. Even in Vancouver, at a current budget, I believe it's 320 years before we have curb cuts throughout Vancouver in all places. There are all these little nuances of what the expression of Bill C-81 will be. I think it will be necessary to throw a whole lot of money at it in order to catch up.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Okay. Thank you.

Thanks very much to both of you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blaikie.

Colleagues, I'm still anticipating bells to start ringing in about five minutes. If that is the case, I think this will be our final intervention.

We're going to go to Mr. Peterson, please, for seven minutes.

Mr. Kyle Peterson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's always nice to speak just before the bells are ringing. It's almost as if the angels are singing after hearing what I have to say, maybe.

Voices: Oh, oh!

• (1710)

Mr. Kyle Peterson: We'll leave that up to others to determine.

I want to thank the witnesses, both of you, for being here today. This is a very important study, and you are raising some important issues.

Ms. Gibson, I want to talk to you because I think your organization is tapping into what is going to be a growing circumstance in which veterans are coming back with either mental health problems or physical health problems upon their release. You mentioned that with the millennial generation there are probably

going to be more occurrences of PTSD. They're more prone to those types of things. I think that just the general awareness of PTSD in society, our ability to diagnose it now and, to some extent, the destigmatization mean that there are going to be more cases of it, because now we're more aware of it and we're able to tell.

What trends do you see, or what sorts of tools should the federal government be using? Generally, we're speaking about how we can get veterans hired into the public service, but specifically, when we're talking about veterans who may have mental or physical health issues as well, I think it may be doubly hard for them to be hired.

How can we address those issues? What sort of role do you see your organization playing as an outsider to government that is able to give that advice and make some connections to the less governmental role, the role outside of government?

Ms. Kerry Gibson: From the private sector's perspective...?

Mr. Kyle Peterson: Yes.

Ms. Kerry Gibson: The private sector always leads by example from the government. It's not necessarily known to throw a lot of money at a situation or a shift without realizing, I suppose, that it's necessary. Within my own situation, with my own company, even just hiring women, period, I hire engineers and I fight to find female engineers. There are always obstacles to actually achieving this.

Yes, there has been a statistical spike in certain demographics such as millennials with PTSD, which makes it necessary to acknowledge that these things are a reality. They are part of our society and must be provided the means to integrate and to understand that these are not insurmountable obstacles, that there are tools out there. For instance, Israel leads in integrating the disabled into their communities. They have to. Their economy would fail if they hadn't. They provide the disabled with whatever tools are necessary to overcome their challenges so they can get back to work.

I think our government would see the economic benefits of having that intellectual capacity thrown into the workforce. Can you imagine all those people who aren't then supported by social services and all the benefits that can enable in our budgeting?

From a private sector perspective, I offer a lot of creative solutions in the work that I do. I am currently working on various files including equal pay and finding ways around the bureaucracy. I think the public sector has the ability to be a little more fluid where government has far more linear constraints. If there is some way we can work together to provide tools and mechanisms for the private sector to adopt C-81, for instance, I'd be fully on board to see that through.

Mr. Kyle Peterson: I appreciate that. Thanks for the response.

I think C-81 is a step in the right direction.

I am fortunate enough to have an employee who's in a wheelchair, so I'm happy to be a sort of advocate for that. Mitch is here now. You can't see him because he's not on the screen but I can assure you he's a very eager and an efficient employee of mine. I'm happy to have him as part of my team.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: He's the brains and the looks.

Mr. Kyle Peterson: He's the brains and the looks behind the operation, absolutely.

Master Corporal Grabowski, thank you for being here, and thank you for your service to our country.

I think you're an example of what happens too often when releases come from the military and from defence. In my opinion, we need to get to a point where the transition from National Defence to Veterans Affairs is seamless. It clearly isn't, and in fact, it's probably more cumbersome than it ought to be. It probably trends towards cumbersome as opposed to seamless.

A lot of it, I think, is just information, awareness and sharing of information. Sharing of information, sharing of best practices and maybe just some talking between the two departments may go a long way to help overcome some of those obstacles. Do you agree with that assessment?

• (1715)

Mr. Terence Grabowski: I agree 100% with that statement. The more seamless and easier the process upon release for information, so much the better—definitely.

Mr. Kyle Peterson: Do you continue to talk to your colleagues, your former military defence colleagues? Did some have better

experiences than you or different experiences? Are there things that we can learn? Do some things work that we should be highlighting, or is everybody kind of in the same boat?

Mr. Terence Grabowski: In talking with colleagues, my view is that there are very few of them. For my peers from the Canadian Forces who are within the federal Public Service Commission, I think there can be improvement. Certainly with the JPSU, there's more information coming out all the time to veterans, but I think there's more that can be done to streamline the process.

Mr. Kyle Peterson: Okay, I appreciate your service, as I said, and I appreciate both of you being here and answering our questions today.

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

To both of you, thank you again for being here.

Master Corporal Grabowski, thank you for your years of service to our country.

Should either of you have any additional information that you think would be beneficial to our committee as we continue our study on the hiring of veterans in the public service, I would encourage you to send whatever recommendations or suggestions you have directly to our clerk, and I can assure you they will help form part of our final report.

Sorry for the difficulties technically, Mr. Grabowski.

With that, again, thank you. The meeting is adjourned.

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