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# Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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Chair: Mr. Bryan May





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• (1540)  
[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 18 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, as we're all used to now, pursuant to the House order of January 25, 2021. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website.

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), the committee is undertaking the study of the main estimates, 2021-22.

We are pleased to welcome with us today the Minister of Veterans Affairs and department officials. I will introduce the department officials in the second hour.

To start us off today, I'm pleased to welcome the Honourable Lawrence MacAulay, Minister of Veterans Affairs.

Sir, the floor is all yours.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay (Minister of Veterans Affairs):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and committee members, for having me here today to speak about our main estimates.

It's always a pleasure to join you, and I appreciate the important work you've been doing on the backlog and on supports for the veterans organizations and our veterans' families and caregivers.

As I've told you before, reducing wait times has been my absolute top priority as minister. I'm confident that we're on the right track to meet our goal of having the backlog under control next year. The backlog is currently down to about 15,000 applications from around 23,000 this time last year. More and more decisions are being made every single day.

Last June we presented a plan to tackle the backlog, using everything from new hires to digitization. In the 2020 fiscal update, we committed nearly \$200 million in additional funding to put this plan into action. This plan has been making progress.

We have hired and trained the veteran benefit teams. This next quarter will be the first when they all will be up and running for the whole time, and we expect to see increased numbers of decisions month after month.

There is certainly a lot still to do, and too many veterans are still waiting too long, but the number of decisions being made and the

decrease we've seen in the backlog—15,000 today, down from 23,000 last year—show that we're moving in the right direction.

You'll see that the main estimates are over \$1 billion higher than last year's. This includes an increase of nearly \$870 million for disability benefits and nearly \$175 million for income support.

We need this funding largely because we're making faster decisions, approving more applications and getting benefits to veterans faster. That is nearly \$1 billion more than last year going directly to the veterans, and well over \$2 billion more than in 2014-15. There's still more to do, but I'm sure that all of us here can agree that this is important progress.

It's also worth noting that this work on wait times has taken place during a global pandemic. Since the pandemic started, employees at Veterans Affairs have been reaching out directly to veterans to check in and make sure they're okay. We'll continue to reach out in the weeks and months to come.

Because it affects our veterans just like it affects our serving members, I want to briefly address the reports that we have been hearing about sexual misconduct in our armed forces. Like you, I have been deeply troubled by the stories we've been hearing. Signing up to serve with the flag on your shoulder comes with its own risks. An unsafe workplace should never be one of them. No matter the rank, there is no place for the kind of misconduct we've been hearing about.

I want to stress how important it is for those who may be impacted to reach out. We've been working regularly with veterans and advocates on this issue of support for victims of military sexual trauma. We have services and support available through Veterans Affairs. No one should face these issues alone. We set up the Office of Women and LGBTQ2 Veterans and we've held women veterans forums to help identify and address the unique needs of the women who have served Canada in uniform.

Veterans Affairs Canada exists to offer support and assistance. Whether that relates to sexual misconduct, a post-traumatic stress injury or any other issue that one of our veterans may be facing, we want to help. We recently funded McMaster University through the veteran and family well-being fund for an intervention strategy for veterans who have PTSD after experiencing sexual misconduct during service. We always need to do more, and this is certainly an issue that we will continue to work on.

In conclusion, the main estimates are critical for the department to deliver on its mandate to serve our veterans and their families.

Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

First up for questions is MP Brassard for six minutes.

**Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being with us again today. I would agree that the committee has been doing some pretty good work in discussing the backlogs, looking at veteran service organizations and many other issues.

I do want to focus for a minute on some of your remarks here as the Associate Minister of National Defence. Some people may not know that you hold that title as well. You said, “Like you, I’ve been deeply troubled by the stories we’ve been hearing. Signing up to serve with the flag on your shoulder comes with its own risks. An unsafe workplace should never be one of them. No matter the rank, there is no place for the kind of misconduct we’ve been hearing about.”

Minister, by now you’ve probably heard that the national defence committee was shut down by members of the Liberal Party today, so my question for you is this. When it really matters, why are you, the defence minister and your government turning your backs on women in the military by shutting down that committee and the probe into sexual misconduct?

• (1545)

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** John, I can assure you that, number one, the committee is a body within itself and makes its own decisions. I have nothing to do with what they do at the national defence committee if I’m not there, and you’re fully aware of that. I can tell you one thing for sure: This issue has to be dealt with and there is absolutely no place for this in Canada. It’s totally unacceptable.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Well you see, Minister, here’s the difference. The committee was dealing with it, yet it was members of your own government, the members of that committee, who moved a motion to shut it down. How do you reconcile the fact that you said in your remarks you want to stress how important it is to reach out, but the message to women in the military today is, “We’re not interested in hearing about it and are going to shut it down”? How do you reconcile that, Minister?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** John, as you’re fully aware, I was not at the committee, but the fact is, with Veterans Affairs, we certainly and absolutely deal with those issues. We take the word of the veteran when they come forward to make sure the issue is dealt

with appropriately at Veterans Affairs, and we will continue to do that. What the national defence committee does is the national defence committee’s business, but I will do my best as Minister of Veterans Affairs to make sure that every veteran receives the service and remuneration they deserve. That is why we work so hard and that’s why your committee works so hard to make sure that we’re able to provide these benefits. We have and will continue to do so, and I think you know that.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Sir, I want focus on the backlog numbers for a second. The ACVA report “Clearing the Jam: Addressing the Backlog of Disability Benefit Claims at Veterans Affairs Canada”, listed the backlog as of June 30, 2020, as 21,572 files, with an additional pending number of 23,724 files for a total of 45,296. In your address you provided a backlog number of 15,000. Can you also provide to us what the additional pending files are that are not assigned and under the 16 weeks of wait time, which is the normal standard?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Well, John, as I indicated clearly, the backlog is a major issue and we all agree on that. It dropped from 23,000 to 15,000, and we will continue to do that.

I’m not sure what files you want, but we’re going to make sure at Veterans Affairs Canada that all of the files are addressed [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] back. Now, in the situation with files coming in about as fast as they were before the pandemic hit, as you know, there’s been a dramatic increase in applications to Veterans Affairs. We have done an enormous amount of work in order to [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] and spent just under \$200 million on this issue alone to hire 350 people, plus train about 175 or 180 more people in the department to make sure that these people are able to deal with the backlog. They are indeed dealing with the backlog. I indicated to you previously that the backlog was my number one priority, and we are dealing with it and will continue to deal with it and make sure within a year the backlog has been addressed.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Thank you, Minister.

Next I want to talk about the pension for life scheme. The Veterans Affairs Canada departmental plan for 2021-22 states, “the number of Veterans choosing lump-sum payments over monthly payments for the new Pain and Suffering Compensation has resulted in increased planned spending.”

The whole point of the pension for life was to replace the lump sum payments that had been made since 2006. In your opinion, has this scheme been a failure and has it not achieved its desired goal, which was to spread out monthly payments rather than have veterans accept lump sum payments?

**The Chair:** Minister, you have time for a brief answer, please.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I think my honourable colleague is fully aware that the veteran has the decision to make on whether they want to take the lump sum payment or the monthly payment. That's a decision that was made previously and is in place. It's a decision that's made by the veteran.

• (1550)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Now we go over to Will Amos, please, for six minutes.

**Mr. William Amos (Pontiac, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, you've come before this committee on several occasions and have been transparent on every occasion, supported by our most senior public servants at Veterans Affairs. It's clear that the effort has been there to achieve necessary improvements. The challenges have been acknowledged. The problems are being confronted head-on.

I think Canadians are looking for this committee to get as clear as possible a sense not only of what the improvements are but also of what additional measures are being taken. You've given us some indication of that.

I'm wondering if you can provide some additional detail on how, over the course of a year, Veterans Affairs public servants are working through a pandemic, as well as how the overall department and its team are functioning. What are the challenges as you and your department try to get this wait-list down as much as possible?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much, William.

The truth is that when the pandemic happened, it was a great test for everybody. Without a doubt the department certainly came to the table and responded very well. In fact, veterans funds going out the door are now, I believe, at previous levels or above the previous level.

On the departmental side, I'll let the deputy give more detail on that, but it's important that people realize that the public servants in Veterans Affairs have answered the call. They've provided the benefits for veterans.

I'll let my deputy say a few words on that. I think he's quite pleased with what took place.

**General (Retired) Walter Natynczyk (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Sure. Thanks very much for that.

Right from when the pandemic hit on March 13 last year the department went to a remote working environment. I'm pleased to say that within a month we were back up to over 90% effective; that is, people had the right IT equipment and secure access.

Automatically we started to reach out to vulnerable veterans, those who we believed were on the verge of homelessness and veterans who were in long-term care, and we linked with their families. We reached out to women veterans, indigenous veterans and anyone with an illness or ailment that, as deemed by our folks, made them vulnerable, including case-managed veterans.

We continue to provide service daily. We receive about 1,600 phone calls a day and hundreds of texts a day. It is interesting that

in some areas, like our phone service, we actually became more efficient in answering calls, certainly within the two-minute standard. We started piloting the use of tools such as this and Microsoft Teams to do virtual meetings with veterans. Our mental health supports went virtual almost immediately. We are very proud of the operational stress injury clinics and our clinicians across the country.

At the same time, for cases in which our veterans were in very difficult palliative or frail circumstances, we still had employees who did home visits, occupational therapists and other professionals, in order to ensure seamlessness in support. We created a COVID-19 working group with veteran stakeholders so that we could hear from them and see ways and means whereby we could improve what we were doing. We continue to learn, having these meetings on a regular basis across the board. The fact that we were able to hire over 350 employees and train them during this environment in a virtual workspace was commendable for the team.

I will stop there, sir.

• (1555)

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** William, I think that explains pretty well how efficient the public servants have been at Veterans Affairs Canada here and right across the country. That is so important, because the pandemic is a time for mental stress, and without question, as the deputy has indicated, the department has addressed the call to make sure we provide the appropriate service for veterans to the best of our ability.

For that I am very thankful to all of our public servants here at Veterans Affairs. I've been at this business a long time, and in Veterans Affairs, we have the finest public servants in the country. They are dedicated to the task and they have certainly shown that since this pandemic started. Again, I want to thank them publicly for that.

**Mr. William Amos:** Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Deputy Minister, and through you, I would like to thank the public servants at Veterans Affairs for their incredible hard work in such stressful circumstances.

Thank you, Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Up next for six minutes is MP Desilets.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ):** Good afternoon, fellow members and guests.

Minister MacAulay, I'm a little surprised and disappointed by your remarks. I was expecting to hear you speak about women and the services provided to francophones. You spoke about the Office of Women and LGBTQ Veterans. However, based on the feedback that we're getting right now, the office isn't running and is having issues.

I would also have liked to hear you talk about mental health.

One person told me outright that the department suggested that she ask her questions or make her requests in English rather than in French, for three reasons. First, her request would be processed more quickly. Second, it would be easier for her to win her case. I doubt that very much. It's almost impossible. Third, the data in English would be slightly different and more up to date.

Minister MacAulay, do you acknowledge that the services provided in English and French at Veterans Affairs aren't equal?

[English]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Luc, thank you very much. The last thing I ever want to do is disappoint you.

The fact is, yes, we do.... We understand quite clearly, and we had to hire more francophone and bilingual staff in order to make sure that the French applications were processed properly and more quickly.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Mr. Chair, the interpretation isn't working.

[English]

**The Chair:** Sorry, Monsieur Desilets.

Is there translation now? Can you hear me?

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Mr. Chair, I can hear you and I can hear the French interpretation very well.

However, I want to ask Minister MacAulay to start his comments again.

[English]

**The Chair:** I'll ask the minister to repeat his answers.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Can the time be taken into account?

[English]

**The Chair:** Absolutely.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Bryan, can you hear me properly?

**The Chair:** We can hear you just fine.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Very good.

Luc, as I said, the last thing I would ever want to do is disappoint you. The fact is, we were aware, and that's why we hired more francophone assistants and more bilingual assistants in order to make sure we could reduce the wait time. There's absolutely no reason for anybody in this country to not be able to file an application in English or in French to the Department of Veterans Affairs. That is and must be the way that things are handled at Veterans Affairs.

We understood that with regard to women and LGBTQ veterans we had to do more. That's why, in 2020, we had a first conference to make sure that—or I think it was 2019. The first one was in 2019. I had the privilege of announcing and putting it in place, in order to make sure we understood exactly how to deal with the problems that women and other veterans have when they apply for assistance. I think it's vitally important, and we will continue—

• (1600)

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you, Minister MacAulay.

I want to focus on the situation of francophones, for whom this is a recurring issue. This situation is dragging on and isn't improving. How can this issue be resolved in a concrete manner?

I'll give you an example. One of my constituents applied in English for additional pain and suffering compensation on behalf of a French-speaking veteran in Ottawa. She received a response after seven weeks. You know as well as I do that it usually takes between 6 and 12 months to get a response to this type of claim in French. The people who are waiting are suffering and yet aren't receiving the money owed to them.

What concrete steps will you take to address this issue and when will you take action?

[English]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Luc, what we were going to do with the situation overall is to make sure we hired more people, that we digitized the system, made sure that the applications moved more quickly.

We understood that we needed to hire more francophone assistants, and we did, to make sure that we addressed those claims in an appropriate time. I think we're all aware that there was too long of a wait time, too long for veterans to wait.

However, Luc, you also understand, and I know you do, that the number was at 23,000 and it's now down to 15,000. We're working to make sure that we address this problem appropriately. We have addressed the hiring of more francophone assistants.

Luc, if you have an individual who's having a difficulty, please contact me and I'll do whatever I can to address that issue. Without question, in Veterans Affairs Canada, you can apply in English or in French, and you should. However, I would like to hear from you on the individual issue you're dealing with and I will try to help.

**The Chair:** You have 15 seconds.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Mr. MacAulay, you know that I like you. Unfortunately, I tried to make an appointment with you in November and never heard back. We were supposed to discuss veterans' issues. I still like you though. I know that you have a very busy schedule. However, I would be happy to talk to you about a specific case if I get an answer from your office.

[English]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Mr. Chair, I have to tell Luc that I will get back to him.

I will call you, Luc.

**The Chair:** That sounds good.

We go over to MP Blaney for six minutes.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here with us today. I hope you do address this issue, because I know that veterans who are applying to get the services they need in French are not getting them, and they are having to wait longer than English-speaking veterans are. I hope that's addressed very soon.

My first question for you today, Minister, is on the marriage after 60 clause. In 2015, your government promised to remove this clause. It was in previous veterans ministers' mandate letters, but I noticed it was not in yours. However, I recognize that in 2019 there was \$150 million committed over five years for survivors of veterans who married after 60. What I cannot find, Minister, is anything in public accounts or estimates that shows that any money at all was spent, so I have two questions for you today.

One, when will this clause finally be removed, considering that many veterans live well into their eighties and their partners are caring for them during that time? Two, why was this money not spent? If it was, will you provide the committee with the relevant documentation to prove that it has been spent?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much, Ms. Blaney. I appreciate your question. I also always appreciate your concern.

On this issue, my department has been working with Statistics Canada and the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research to learn about the characteristics and needs of these survivors. Over the coming months the department will use the results of this research to inform how best to support these survivors.

First, we need to get the data and the information on just how many of these people are out there, where they're located and anything else we can find out about them. That is what we are doing and will continue to do.

• (1605)

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Okay, so the money has not actually been sent to those folks. I can promise you, Minister, that what's happening for them is they are living in more poverty because they're not getting the support that they well deserve. When someone marries someone or commits their life to someone, I certainly hope that Veterans Affairs will accept that. I didn't hear an answer at all about

when that's going to be changed, so I'm going to assume that this is no longer a priority for this government.

Let's move on to the next question, Minister, if you don't mind.

I would like to clarify with you something on the RCMP. The fact is that at this time, RCMP do not qualify for the veterans independence program. I understand that they do in fact qualify for the attendance allowance to support them with indoor tasks, but the outdoor tasks covered by the VIP are simply not provided.

When we ask the RCMP to serve us, I think it's important that we return the favour when members get to that age, and I'm just wondering if that will be fixed for our RCMP.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much, Ms. Blaney.

My understanding is that the RCMP, like the department, works to make sure that the support is provided to them.

I'll let my deputy handle that.

**Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk:** What is unique to our service to the RCMP is that we have a memorandum of understanding, which we provide to the RCMP under the RCMP Act. The RCMP leadership have decided to continue with the pension scheme, so we administer the pension scheme for them. We include the RCMP, stakeholders, and their veterans associations in all of our meetings—in fact, we had a meeting just last week with them—and provide them briefings and total transparency on the host of benefits that we provide Canadian Armed Forces members. However, it is the leadership of the RCMP who then decide what programs they will sign on to and whether to include the veterans independence program or long-term care, or other programs that are being provided to the Canadian Armed Forces veterans, but the RCMP, from a leadership standpoint, have not pursued those benefits.

We are in a provision of services situation with the RCMP and we did receive additional funding for them. They have access to all of our mental health care and supports, and that includes access to the operational stress injury clinics and clinicians.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you so much, General. I really appreciate your answer, and will follow up on that again.

Minister, I will go back to the disability benefit backlog. You keep mentioning the money that you're putting towards that. I recognize that. The problem is the veterans are not getting the services they need. We're hearing that again and again. The backlogs continue to be long. You've hired temporary workers. We're still not clear if those are temporary workers or if they're actually going to become permanent workers.

I don't think this is a short-term problem. I think it's a long-term problem. Money only matters when services are being delivered, so right now there's this huge challenge, and I'm just wondering when the department is going to hire enough people to actually care for veterans the way that they deserve to be cared for.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Ms. Blaney, I know that you're committed to these issues, and I appreciate your support.

Without question, I think it's fair to say that the government and the department have done a substantial amount. Have we done enough? No. However, in the last year, we put just under \$200 million into making sure that the backlog was addressed, around 500 employees, 350 of whom are new employees, making sure that they were trained in order to address the backlog.

We took the backlog from 23,000 to 15,000. Is it good enough? No, it's not. We need to make sure we address it properly, and we're on that path. We have to make sure the veterans receive the funding that they should receive, in an appropriate manner—I said that—and within a year, I indicated that we will have addressed the backlog issue.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** It is an important issue to address, and we have to make sure that we do that. I understand that veterans are waiting, but there's a lot more money being delivered to veterans—not enough, but a lot more.

Thank you.

• (1610)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

That ends the first round. We're going to move on quickly to the second round.

First up we have MP Wagantall for five minutes.

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

Thank you, Minister, for being with us again this morning.

Minister, in addition to serving as the Minister of Veterans Affairs, you are also the Associate Minister of National Defence. With the recent exposure of the depth of damage that military sexual trauma has inflicted on current members of the Canadian Armed Forces, as well as veterans who experienced military sexual trauma during their service, I have to ask, have you reached out, or has the minister of defence reached out, and have you met with him specifically in this regard?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Mr. Chair, I will tell my honourable colleague that the Minister of National Defence has addressed this issue properly. We have discussions basically every week. The minister—

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** You've met specifically on this issue with him.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I have met him many times on many, many issues. However, he is the Minister of National Defence, and he has addressed this problem appropriately, as you're fully aware, and to make sure—

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Thank you.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** As I have indicated, we're going to make sure that this issue is addressed properly.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Okay, you've answered my question. Thank you so much. Basically what I'm hearing is that you haven't met with him specifically on this issue.

Of course, we know that both the Minister of National Defence and the Prime Minister have said that they believe those bravely coming forward in regard to their testimonies about what they've experienced. I believe you said the same today. However, the proof will be in the pudding when it comes down to them having to go through the hoops to prove what they have gone through. I certainly hope that belief is extended extensively so they don't become other victims of the current backlog in all that they're experiencing.

With regard to that backlog, you indicated that the workforce has been built up over the last four years to 900 new positions, but over the course of the next two years, 750 of those positions will no longer be there. That's a remainder of 150 full-time positions, not even the 400 that the Conservative government had ready to go with the financing when you formed government.

At the rate you're describing dealing with the backlog, it will take a minimum of two more years to deal with that backlog, and that won't deal with those pileups of pending applications that you aren't including in the current backlog numbers.

Why are you not responding to the Parliamentary Budget Officer's recommendation that these positions remain in place for the coming years? This issue is going to compound itself again when you remove all of those positions within the public service over the next two years.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I can assure you that when somebody comes forward to the Department of Veterans Affairs with a sexual trauma issue, they're taken at their word.

I don't think you want to discuss what it was like before 2014-15, when you fired 1,000 people—

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Sir, I want to hear what you're dealing with.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** No, no, give me a minute now to answer. You asked a question; I'll give an answer.

The fact of the matter is that what the Conservative Party of Canada did was to fire 1,000 employees, cut the money to Veterans Affairs, hurt veterans and hurt Veterans Affairs Canada.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** All right. Thank you for that feedback.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** The changes we have made are putting about two and a half billion dollars more at the end of this year into the pockets of veterans.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** That's a great answer—

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** That is why we want to and will take care of veterans. That's what is fair—



**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** I appreciate what you've just said. Thank you so much.

We were dealing in the midst of a significant recession. You have created one, so here we are.

You indicate between two billion and three billion dollars' worth of new spending, yet you continually say, even in the House of Commons, that you've invested \$10 billion more. Where is that money and how has it been spent?

I do not see the removal of these particular.... If you're doing a better job than we did, why are you removing 750 positions over the next two years when we are still in a backlog situation for those two years? Can you answer that, please?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I think it's awfully important to re-align that compared to 2014-15 and today there's over \$2 billion more going into the pockets of veterans. What you, your department and your government did before 2014-15, you fired them. You took money out of the pockets of veterans. You hurt veterans and the department—

• (1615)

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Sir, you're removing 750 positions.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** —and we had to start at the bottom to put the thing back together.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** You're removing 750 positions. What do you call that?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** We always hire people—

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** What do you call removing 750 positions?

**The Chair:** I'm afraid that—

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** [*Inaudible—Editor*] become very efficient.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to answer it. The fact of the matter is—

**The Chair:** Very briefly, sir.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Yes. What we strived to do here and are doing is making sure that we run an efficient department, making sure we take care of our veterans and making sure they receive the proper remuneration that they should. We have done that and will continue to do that.

I thank you.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** With 150 new positions—

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Sean Casey, you have five minutes.

**Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, first of all, let me thank you for recognizing the work of the dedicated public servants who have increased the level of efficiency in such difficult circumstances and who are doing yeoman's service to address the backlog.

Minister, I want to give you a fair chance to answer, without being interrupted, on the topic that Ms. Wagantall raised. In your

opening remarks, you talked about the fact that this year's estimates are a billion dollars higher than last year's, but they're \$2 billion higher than 2014-15. I found it interesting that you chose that year because, as you know, the former ministers of veterans affairs in 2014-15 were Julian Fantino and Erin O'Toole.

Here we are, looking at estimates that are \$2 billion higher than what they were then. You and I both remember well the situation within the Department of Veterans Affairs: the deep cuts that preceded that, the fact that the cuts outside of the national capital region were significantly higher or significantly deeper and, of course, the closing of the district offices and the like.

While in your opening remarks you did talk about where the \$1 billion in additional funding is coming from for next year, I wonder if you could talk about the \$2 billion from the days of ministers Fantino and O'Toole up to now, where that is coming from and the difference that's making in the lives of veterans.

Thank you.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Well, I thank you, Mr. Casey. The fact of the matter is that nearly \$2 billion of that is going into the pockets of veterans. That's so important, and that's what we're here for—to make sure.

With that, we also established many other things. There's the veteran and family well-being fund. I think most people are aware of what that does for the groups that work so hard to support veterans and veterans organizations right across the country. They speak on behalf of veterans. They tell me, the government and the department what the needs of veterans are. It's so important that we keep these people in place.

We've established a centre of excellence for PTSD. We reopened nine of the offices that the Conservative Party closed. We've hired over 1,000 employees and we will continue to hire. We established an education fund, which is so vitally important for veterans when they come out of the military. The Canadian military has basically every walk of life.... The economy and the business community in this nation need those people. We put a training program in place so that they can become much more efficient. It's good for themselves, good for the veterans, good for the country and good for our economy. Also, as you know, we invested just under \$200 million to deal with the backlog, and that's why it's down from 23,000 to 15,000.

The fact is, it's our job—and your job—to make sure that we put more money into the pockets of veterans who need it. Do we need to do more? Yes. Is there more to do? Yes. We will continue to do that.

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

If I may, I want to come back to the exchange that you had with Ms. Blaney. After you answered her question, she indicated that she presumed the situation of survivors and family members of veterans who marry after 60 is no longer a priority for the government, but she didn't give you a chance to respond. Would you like to do so?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I think I responded quite clearly. What we're doing is evaluating the situation, and gathering the information to make sure that we understand exactly what the situation is, how we deal with it and what measures need to be taken. In fact, that is what we are doing. When we have that, decisions will be made, but you have to know where to go. That's why we do studies on things like this and that's why we are where we are, to make sure that we do better for veterans. Do we do enough for veterans? No, but we have certainly improved the situation, and we want to do more.

• (1620)

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Minister, the next study that the committee is going to undertake is to have a look at commemoration. I can tell you that my most memorable experience as a parliamentarian was to accompany a group of veterans to Korea to mark a significant anniversary there and to see young Korean kids hug those veterans when they got off the bus, kids who, of course, wouldn't have been around when they had so bravely defended.

Can you give us a brief snapshot of the 10-year strategic plan for commemoration within the department?

Thank you, sir.

**The Chair:** Please give us a very, very brief answer, sir.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Of course, I have had the privilege over the years of commemorating events of the First World War, the Second World War and the Korean War, which is vitally important to do, and which we will continue to do, but we have to work with the modern veteran. You know how many places they have been. They've preserved democracy around the world. We're going to work with veterans, armed forces, veterans organizations, educators and business people right across the country to make sure we commemorate what these men and women have done. We will do that and make sure that we commemorate it appropriately. It's so important to commemorate what took place in the military action, and we have to make sure that we continue to do that.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

We now go to MP Desilets for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister MacAulay, you're a member of cabinet. So you know better than anyone that Canada should be receiving 44 million doses of vaccine in the coming months.

Have you considered giving Quebec and other provinces the opportunity to ask veterans with health care experience to participate

in the vaccination process? Often the issue isn't the number of vaccines but the work force.

[*English*]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much, Luc.

It's so important that we use anybody who is available in order to make sure that the vaccines are administered into the arms of people right across the country. But I think, Luc, you're fully aware of where the responsibility is for administering the vaccine to Canadians. That is a provincial jurisdiction, but I would be open to listening to anything that anybody would have to say in order to make sure that we make this thing move faster. It would be important, but I'm not about to give an indication that I want to overrule any province.

Thank you, Luc.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** We don't want to interfere in provincial jurisdictions, but we do want to work together, as do you. This type of offer would be a possibility. I would strongly suggest it, because some provinces lack workers.

I have another suggestion, should you decide to make this offer to the provinces. I would suggest that you remove the \$20,000 maximum that veterans can earn each year without having their benefits reduced. A veteran in my constituency came to lend a hand to the health care system and earned \$26,000. We don't know what the amount will be yet, but she'll need to pay it back.

Should you decide to use the services of veterans, I would encourage you to reach an agreement with the provinces to remove this harmful provision.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Could we have a brief answer, please.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you, Luc. The point is well taken.

Of course, we have worked with the provinces very well during the pandemic and are still working with the provinces very well and will continue to work with the provinces to make sure that we address this issue and bring this pandemic to an end and get back to whatever normal is.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Minister.

We now go to MP Blaney for two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Hello again, Minister.

As you well know, our committee is currently doing a study on caregivers. One of the concerns we've heard again and again from families and caregivers is that they're still feeling there's a lack of support for them and for the mental health and well-being of children and for the caregivers themselves.

It's especially concerning when they're dealing with veterans who have PTSD. We're hearing a lot about how they're modifying their behaviour and trying to be supportive, but they don't know how to support people well with PTSD. They're doing the best they can, but they certainly don't receive any training from Veterans Affairs to support them and to help their families.

Now we have caregivers and often partners who are dealing with children who are frustrated and exhausted. They are exhausted. Also, in some cases they're not able to work as much, and sometimes not at all, because they're supporting this person who is really struggling.

We know there is the caregiver recognition benefit, but this is not enough, especially for partners who are now unable to earn a living because of the reality that they are living with in their own home and dealing with those mental health supports.

I'm wondering if VAC will step up and start to support family members with actual resources, therapy and supports to address the issues the veterans and their families are facing.

• (1625)

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Ms. Blaney, I'm sure you're fully aware that we have done that, and you're one who pushed hard for this. You mentioned the caregiver recognition benefit, which is so vitally important, and it has to help some. Of course, there's always more to do.

The caregiver recognition benefit gives over \$12,500 tax-free to the caregivers. That's helpful, but of course, we're always open to more options that will make it better for veterans and veterans' families. That's what we're about; that's why we have the committee, and that's why we have so many round tables to listen.

I fully agree with you. Anything more we can do within the mandate, I would be very open to seeing happen.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Minister.

We now go to MP Doherty for five minutes.

**Mr. Todd Doherty (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, back on May 3 last year the Prime Minister announced \$240 million for his Wellness Together website. Can you tell us if your department had anything to do with how Homewood Health was chosen to administer this program? Does Veterans Affairs have any contract with Homewood or Schlegel health care?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much. I'll let my deputy respond to that.

**Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk:** Thank you very much for the question, Mr. Chair

I am not aware of Wellness Together in terms of the greater whole-of-government approach with regard to Homewood. What I

can say to you is that we have referred our veterans to Homewood for their therapy, as we have to other mental health practitioners in other locations across the country, such as at Ste. Anne's Hospital. It is one of the residential mental health facilities.

I think you are speaking to Homewood in Guelph, Ontario, sir.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Thank you.

Minister, I'm going to read you excerpts from two emails I received from a female veteran.

This is the first one: "Mr. Doherty, I just got off the phone with a very unhelpful person at the 1-866 number of Veterans Affairs. This is to give you an idea how difficult it is to talk to anyone. Yesterday I received a letter stating that my diminished earnings capacity amount request has been found inconclusive and that I have to have an assessment by a contractor in order to check to see if I deserve it or not. I just did this last year, December 9th, 2019, to March 20th, 2020. I did it all. Two days' physical testing that crippled me for a week, mental health questionnaires and wanting me to talk to their psychiatrist or equivalent. Please note I'm rated 60% disabled due to my PTSD. I am a suicide and self-harm risk. I didn't want to have to go through with this process again when I just did it only months earlier. Today I bit the bullet and I phoned, and I tried to talk to somebody in that unit. I'm not allowed to speak to them. I'm not even allowed to talk to the supervisor in order to talk to someone in that unit. Apparently they have no numbers for any unit. I was told repeatedly that I need to talk to my case manager. I repeatedly replied, 'I have. He can't do anything about it so I am trying to contact the person who sent me the letter.' Nothing. Simply, 'You need to talk to your case manager,' to which I said, 'I have. He cannot do anything.' This is frustrating, rude and wrong, wrong at every level. People making these decisions need to be able to qualify them and have recourse to answer any questions. It states directly in my letter to call the 1-866 number in order to talk to somebody. I did and there was no help."

Minister, now I'm going to read the second letter that I received just yesterday: "I just got a phone call from the contractor this afternoon. She basically told me that all the stuff just one year ago is nothing. 'Oh that,' she said, 'the psychiatric part—not acceptable.' I started to fail at this point, went into full distress. I started to self-harm and my husband took me to mental health intake where they did an assessment on me, drugged me up enough to go home and told me they don't have anyone qualified in any sort of military PTSD, and felt that they couldn't help me. This is what happened to me. This is what's happening to vets all around Canada. One minute we're safe. A new person walks in the door and then we're denied. It's always a fight. The only way to win is to no longer be under the control, and to that I mean commit suicide. I was at this point today."

Minister, you've been in this position for over 800 days. Does that sound like how we should treat somebody who served our country?

• (1630)

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Number one, if you have an individual case—I think you have two of them—it would be good to give my office a call and we can help you out—

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** It's the same person.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** It's the same person. Okay. Listen, I truly care, and if something happened that we can rectify and make sure it is done.... But I can't discuss that here. We place the highest priority on issues like this, and I'm sure the deputy would love to touch on it with you. The fact is, we want to make sure they have the appropriate support they need, but on an individual case, if you would get hold of my office, I can assure you that we'll do anything we can to help.

Deputy, do you want to say something?

**Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk:** Again, sir, our culture is one of care, compassion and respect, and where there's an issue—

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** I'm sorry. Does that sound like care, compassion and respect?

**Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk:** That's why, sir, if there's an issue, we'll need to do a deep dive on it, because, again, our culture is one of caring, of exercising compassion and respect. I do appreciate that this has been the experience of the veteran, and we need to make it better, absolutely, sir.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Thank you.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Todd, I want you to be sure to get back to my office on that.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** I will for sure, Minister. Thank you.

**The Chair:** We'll go to MP Lalonde for five minutes.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Minister MacAulay. It's a pleasure to have you here today.

[English]

I want to discuss with you the veteran and family well-being fund. We know that veterans receive a great deal of support from their families and friends, and certainly from Veterans Affairs Canada, but veterans organizations are an important factor in providing support. Having spoken to a number of these organizations right here at this committee, we've heard and seen first-hand what crucial work they are doing.

As we all know, the pandemic has only made things a little more challenging for our veterans and the organizations that provide them with support. In 2018, the government began funding many veterans organizations through the veteran and family well-being fund. The groups that are receiving this funding are doing a wide range of work and research on veterans' homelessness, mental health and transitioning to civilian life and on supporting women veterans and so much more.

Minister, you and your department recently announced the 2021 recipients of the veteran and family well-being fund. I would like you to speak a bit more about the importance of this fund and the announcement you recently made.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much, Ms. Lalonde.

Veterans organizations, big and small, are working on behalf of veterans and their families right across this country, and everybody on the committee knows that. Since 2018, we've been incredibly proud to provide support to 60 organizations throughout Canada. This was done in order to provide a better life for veterans.

Last month we announced that 23 organizations throughout Canada would be receiving funding through the well-being fund to either start or expand their veterans support activities. This year recipients are doing things like supporting the social and emotional well-being of veterans' families and caregivers, honouring our indigenous veterans and helping in developing resources to assist former homeless veterans to live independently. We all know what a big issue the homeless issue is with veterans, and we're working hard on that. We support new approaches to the wellness of women veterans, which is, again, a big issue.

Everyone knows how important these organizations are to our veterans and their families and their communities, like the Legion and many other organizations. This funding is going to do a lot. I'm incredibly proud that we're able to provide them with the funding that they need to make a difference.

You also know that these organizations throughout the country work so hard in their own communities to provide funding for themselves, and all that they do with the funding they receive is to help veterans. Along with it, a lot of these organizations have facilities that are the meeting place for not only veterans but communities right across the country.

It's so vitally important. Again, we're emphasizing the importance of veterans. However, the organizations we've helped do a lot for veterans and they do a lot for the communities they're in.

I appreciate the question. I certainly appreciate the veteran and family well-being fund. It's a wonderful fund and helps out so much. It does a lot for the veterans, and for that I couldn't be more proud. I thank you for the question.

• (1635)

**Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde:** Thank you very much.

Very briefly—I have one minute—I want to talk to you about the Vimy and Juno Beach Centre funding.

The government provided funding to the Juno Beach Centre and the Vimy Foundation. Would you please elaborate on this and speak a little bit about the funding?

There was something very important that we were not able to celebrate between the 9th and the 12th of this month. Certainly we hoped that we could have.... I had the pleasure of representing you on a few events, but this pandemic has certainly changed things.

Minister, I would like to hear about our commitment to the Juno Beach Centre and the Vimy Foundation.

**The Chair:** Could we have a brief answer, please.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much.

The chair is going to cut me off, but with Juno Beach, of course, we know what happened. Canadians landed there.

We were able to announce \$500,000 extra funding, over two years, with the \$500,000 they get a year. It's so vitally important. It's so important for Canada. Everybody sees that.

The Vimy Foundation does an awful lot of great work. We know what happened at Vimy Ridge. Really, they say, it's the day the nation was born.

The money we provide to Vimy is so important. It provides an online portal for people to virtually view Vimy and its surroundings. Also, it provides an application that can be used by visitors. It explains exactly what took place at Vimy. It's our own Canadian history that took place at Vimy Ridge.

It's so important that Canadians young and old understand exactly what took place at Vimy Ridge, how bravely our soldiers operated there and the lives that were lost—a lot of lives, indeed.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister. That wraps up this round.

I believe you need to depart at this point. I want to take the opportunity, on behalf of the committee, to thank you for attending today and answering questions.

We will be continuing on with your deputy and officials, but I will extend my thanks, sir, for being with us today.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I want to thank you, Mr. Chair, and the committee, and urge you to stay sitting. It's a trying time for everybody.

Take care of yourselves, and thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll soldier on here. I will backtrack a little bit and introduce the officials.

Of course, we've already heard from someone who is no stranger to this committee, General (Retired) Walter Natynczyk, deputy minister.

Welcome again, sir, officially.

We are also joined by Charlotte Bastien, assistant deputy minister, strategic oversight and communications; Rick Christopher, assistant deputy minister, strategic policy and commemoration; Steven Harris, assistant deputy minister, service delivery; and Sara Lantz, acting assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and corporate services branch.

I believe, Ms. Lantz, you have an opening statement to start us off for the second hour.

• (1640)

**Ms. Sara Lantz (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Chief Financial Officer and Corporate Services Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Yes. Thank you and good afternoon, Mr. Chair and committee members.

As the chair just introduced me, my name is Sara Lantz. I'm the acting assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and corporate services at Veterans Affairs Canada. It's a pleasure to be with you here today to discuss the 2021-22 main estimates for Veterans Affairs Canada and to answer any questions you may have.

Before I speak directly to the main estimates for the new year, I would like to take a moment to reflect on the past year. As has been highlighted many times before, this has been a difficult period of time for all Canadians. The pandemic has impacted all of us in different ways, and yet I'm very proud of how Veterans Affairs Canada staff have worked together over the past year to manage all of the different and complex challenges, which has allowed Veterans Affairs Canada to maintain our services and supports across the country when they have needed us most.

[Translation]

Through our work and achievements prior to the pandemic to become a more digital organization, we were able to quickly and efficiently equip our employees across the country to work remotely. This ensured that there was no disruption in the services provided to our veterans and their families.

In that first month of April, we provided over \$350 million worth of benefits and services. Over 12 months, we provided \$4.3 billion in benefits and services for fiscal year 2020-2021.

[English]

In addition, in response to the pandemic, Veterans Affairs Canada was able to increase the budgets for the veterans emergency fund and the veteran and family well-being fund and to secure an additional \$20 million in new funding to provide emergency COVID-19 relief to veterans organizations hard hit by the pandemic, such as some of our Royal Canadian Legions.

Also, in 2020, as we have previously communicated to this committee, we were able to secure an additional \$192 million in funding over two years in support of improving our turnaround times for decisions on disability benefits. The department moved quickly to retain, recruit and train over 700 employees, and now we are starting to realize the positive impacts of this increased departmental capacity.

[Translation]

That said, while our service levels were maintained, as a result of the public health and safety measures implemented across the country, we did experience some lower than projected use of in-person services such as home care, dental services, massage therapy or other similar services. Collectively, this resulted in expenditures of 10% less than the amount originally projected before the pandemic.

[English]

Now, as we start a new fiscal year, assuming some level of return to normal in 2021-22 due to vaccinations, and taking into account our increased capacity for disability adjudication, you will note that the 2021-22 main estimates provide Veteran Affairs Canada an opening budget of \$6.3 billion, which represents an increase of \$1 billion, or 20%, compared to last year's main estimates.

[Translation]

We're currently forecasting that approximately \$870 million of this \$1 billion increase is primarily attributable to the increased capacity and improved turnaround times for disability decisions.

[English]

These estimates also include key increases for our income replacement benefit, our health purchase services and veterans independence programs to ensure sufficient funding is available to meet growing demand for these programs.

● (1645)

[Translation]

Lastly, it's always worthwhile to note that over 90% of Veterans Affairs Canada's budget goes towards providing payments and services to our veterans and their families. This funding goes directly

to critical programs such as disability benefits, income replacement, rehabilitation, caregiver recognition benefits, education and training, and more.

[English]

Mr. Chair, I thank you for the opportunity to provide these opening comments.

I and my colleagues with me here today will be pleased to address any questions that you or other committees may have about these 2021-22 main estimates.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Lantz.

Before we move on, I want a show of hands of anybody else on the call who was having some difficulty with interpretation, with the volume being the same. Yes?

We're going to pause for a second and let the technicians see if they can fix this. I was hearing you, Ms. Lantz, but I was hearing the interpreter at the same volume. I was able to make out what you were saying through the interpreter, but it wasn't ideal.

We're going to suspend until they figure this out.

● (1645)

(Pause)

● (1650)

**The Chair:** I think we're just going to soldier on with round three. If we do want to come back to this, maybe at committee business the next time, we can discuss this format and change it, but traditionally we just keep moving forward.

First up we have MP Doherty for five minutes.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank our witnesses for being here.

I don't know who can best answer this. Could somebody please tell me how many of the shuttered Veterans Affairs offices are currently open and servicing veterans?

**Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk:** Sir, thanks very much.

There were nine offices that were reopened in the time frame of, I believe, 2015 to 2016. A total of nine offices were opened across the country.

● (1655)

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** How many were closed?

**Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk:** It was those same nine.

In addition to the nine, we opened a 10th office in Surrey, British Columbia, and, in addition to that, created a capacity for our service delivery operations people to visit northern communities across the country, not fixed in any one location but actually moving across the country.

If you want a bit more information, I can ask Steven Harris to address it, sir.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Could you tell me if they all have been fully staffed?

**Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk:** To my absolute knowledge, they have been fully staffed and continue to be staffed across the board.

Steven, do you want to make a comment in that regard?

**Mr. Steven Harris (Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Yes, exactly. They have been fully staffed since they were opened. There are, of course, departures on occasion. People move on; they get promoted and other things. We've replaced people as they have departed, so yes, they would be staffed.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Have they been open during COVID?

**Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk:** Sir, all of our offices remain accessible across the country. Again, we want to adhere to the local public health protocols in each location, but they are accessible for our employees.

In terms of in-person access, that is on an exceptional basis only, again, both in following the occupational health and safety guidelines of the public service and in adhering to the public service guidelines in each jurisdiction.

Steven, did you want to talk more on that?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Yes, that's correct, Deputy.

What we've done is shift to a virtual environment where we're using, as the deputy noted earlier, not only our call centre, our on-line service from My VAC Account and text messages, but also things like this—Zoom and MS Teams—to be able to reach out and communicate with our veterans, those who may have questions about this. For those who are case managed, we have a variety of ways to continue to support and connect with them. Many people didn't come into the office before this. We were serving them remotely before now. That's something that has continued during this period as well.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** How does that work in rural and remote communities with our veterans who are struggling with connectivity?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** There are multiple ways in which people can continue to connect with us, be it by phone or by text message, or by using the Internet and MS Teams and things of that nature as well. We have a variety of ways for people to be able to connect with us, including written communication or fax communication as well.

**The Chair:** I'm really sorry to do this, guys, but I'm going to have to suspend again. We've apparently lost the phone line, so anybody listening in and staffing and others have all been dropped.

Todd, we're going to pause your time. In fact, we're probably going to give you a little time back, because I think they've been dropped for a few seconds here.

We're going to suspend and try to get the technical stuff dealt with.

• (1655)

(Pause)

• (1705)

**The Chair:** Sorry about the disruption, Todd. Go ahead.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** First, I just want to make a comment.

For those who have been listening in and were listening to the last session with the minister, there was somebody actually listening from our local Veterans Affairs office regarding the issue with the female veteran. They have contacted my office and we will be putting them in touch with the veteran. I just wanted to say thank you to that person who is listening in. Give kudos where kudos are due.

General, I just want to be very clear. Is it your testimony today that the nine offices that were shuttered, and indeed one more, have been open during COVID?

**Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk:** They're accessible. All of the offices are accessible in the same way that our headquarters buildings are accessible. We're not providing services out of those facilities, but our employees can come and go. We are using multiple channels to provide services to our veterans, but a walk-in service is not being provided at our locations. Really, from a service provision standpoint, we're able to meet the needs through all these other low-touch capabilities.

Steven, do you want to mention a bit about what we've been doing?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Absolutely.

From a call centre point of view, we're taking more than 1,500 calls a day. We're getting more than 600 contacts from a My VAC secure message point of view. We're doing the outreach the minister and deputy spoke to earlier. We're including in that people who are able to do in-home visits and occupational therapy assessments in emergency situations, with all the proper protocols in place.

There's an enormous amount of outreach; there's an enormous amount of contact and there are many touchpoints between our veteran clients, their case managers and the staff at Veterans Affairs at this stage.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** They're not open, but they're accessible through the different communication lines. A veteran today could not walk into a local Veterans Affairs office. They have to go through My VAC or the 1-866 number or other means.

**Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk:** That is correct, sir.

**Mr. Todd Doherty:** Okay. I guess the question I have for the general is: In the foreseeable future, is this the level of communication that will continue for our veterans?

• (1710)

**Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk:** Sir, we're going to adjust our position based upon the local health protocols in all the areas. Again, Veterans Affairs doesn't own any real property. We're the tenant everywhere we go. All we own is two cemeteries, just so you know, and Vimy Ridge. Besides that, we work with PSPC, as a department. As soon as the local health authority has indicated that it's all green lights and we can move forward and we've reached that level of safety, then we will provide greater access—the 10% and the 25%—into our offices going forward.

However, what we are hearing—again, through stakeholder meetings, and we're having a lot of them—is that we are generally meeting the needs across the country through all of these multiple channels Mr. Harris laid out.

**The Chair:** Thank you, General.

Now over to MP Samson for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.):** Thank you very much.

I'm glad to have the opportunity to speak. It's been a busy day.

I'd like to, first of all, thank the deputy and staff for their hard work through this pandemic. I know that working remotely when COVID hit us was very challenging, but in a very short period of time you were able to get 90% of the staff working remotely, equipped and capable of delivering. I know we were delivering at par or better, but I also realize there were fewer applications as well during a certain amount of time.

I also appreciate all the briefing I get, because it can be tough out there, but you guys are handling it quite well. I'm happy for that, and thank you.

During the first session, the minister shared something I thought we should come back to. We've seen the backlog move from 23,000 down to 15,000, which, if I do my calculation correctly, is about a 30% to 35% drop. I realize there may be fewer applicants throughout this process because of timing and during COVID and all, but those are really good numbers. I'd really appreciate it if you could share with Canadians some of the key things you've noticed—the areas in your plan that are really making a difference right now in helping us move the backlog forward.

**Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk:** Sir, thanks very much. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the committee for the recommendations that have come before and that have assisted us in getting the horsepower—the staff horsepower—and developing the plan, as we did, in order to move forward. I'll ask Steven to address those, under all four pillars, if he would.

Steven, thank you.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Thanks, Deputy.

Thanks very much for the question.

I think we've seen progress on a number of levels. Clearly, as the minister mentioned earlier, there has been the additional hiring we've done over the course of the pandemic with the money we received through the supplementary estimates. That has meant an additional 350 people who are now fully trained and working inde-

pendently and making decisions on files that are beyond our service standard, files that have continued to come in, in terms of applications, over the course of the last little while.

We've organized ourselves differently. We've organized ourselves into veterans benefit teams that put all of the elements required to make decisions on behalf of veterans into one team. We've organized those teams amongst both our long-term staff and staff that we've just received through some of these spike and surge hires as well. They have coalesced into units that are able to make decisions and organize themselves to be able to do so on a quick basis.

We're also looking at changes to the way in which we both receive and process applications, making the process as easy as possible on behalf of the veteran and also getting the information into the hands of decision-makers as quickly as possible. That can include how we obtain service records from either the Canadian Armed Forces or areas such as Library and Archives Canada or other areas of DND. We've streamlined the process. We've been able to accelerate that as much as possible, even in the time of COVID-19, to ensure that information can come in as quickly as possible.

We're also looking at automation, in terms of the way in which the process and the systems work, to look at the most effective tools we can use to search the information that comes in and to identify the pertinent information for making a decision. Often when a medical file comes in for review, it can be substantial and lengthy. We need to be able to go through it as quickly as possible to make decisions and find the pertinent information to allow our team to make a decision as quickly as possible. Those are a couple of examples that have helped us to move in the right direction. There is more work to do.

• (1715)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Thank you, Mr. Harris. This information is very important to Canadians.

Let's now discuss commemoration activities. As mentioned earlier, the committee is preparing a study on this extremely important topic. I know that the government wants to invest in the commemoration and recognition of our veterans.

Last Friday was Vimy Ridge Day, and I participated in an activity.

What major commemorative celebrations will Veterans Affairs Canada be promoting this summer?

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Could we have a very brief answer, please.



**Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk:** I'll just say, sir, that we certainly are working with the veteran stakeholders and the commemoration advisory group in recognizing a number of events. This is the year when the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Kapyong is coming up, on April 22 and 23. We have National Peacekeepers' Day on August 9 this summer. In between, there is Beaumont-Hamel coming up on July 1. I should probably sum it up there, and Christopher can perhaps address some on a subsequent question.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Now we'll go over to MP Desilets for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Natynczyk, could you confirm what I heard about veterans being able to get answers over the telephone in two minutes? Did I hear that right?

[English]

**Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk:** Sir, we have found that the efficiency of our call centres has actually improved during the pandemic. With our employees working from home, they have actually been reaching a higher level of productivity than we saw prior to the pandemic. We're learning in this regard. I'll ask Mr. Harris to address this point.

[Translation]

**Mr. Steven Harris:** You're right that people get an answer in two minutes. The standard is two minutes, and over 80% of callers get an answer in less than two minutes.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** If this is the case—and I'm not questioning it—I'm really impressed, because the slowness and the poor quality of the telephone system have been discussed at length in this committee.

There were reports of wait times of up to half a day at times, poor responses and coordination difficulties.

Is this data recorded and available?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Yes, the data is included in reports distributed each year. We can certainly provide these reports to the committee.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I would be very grateful. That's nice of you.

I have one last question for Mr. Natynczyk.

Earlier, I shared with the minister the case of a nurse from Quebec, who had retired from the military and who answered the call to work as a nurse during the pandemic. From March to June, she worked in the midst of the pandemic and exceeded the \$20,000 income replacement benefit limit by \$6,000. Now your department is asking her for that money.

I want to know how many veterans are in the same situation and are being forced to pay back that money for their service. Are you planning to change this \$20,000 cap rule so that veterans can give us a hand during the pandemic?

• (1720)

[English]

**The Chair:** That's it for your time, General, but I'll give you an opportunity to answer briefly.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you.

[English]

**Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk:** I really appreciate the information. This is for veterans who are on the income replacement benefit. They're allowed to make \$20,000, as an incentive to find purpose. I'm thrilled to hear that people are using it to its best advantage.

This is the first I've heard of a case of this nature. Again, generally under the regulation and legislation, we're allowed to give them that first \$20,000 without any clawback. I appreciate this information, sir.

**The Chair:** Thank you, General.

MP Blaney, go ahead for two and a half minutes, please.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you, Chair.

I'm going to come back to the marriage after 60 clause. I think we all know that it was put into law in 1901. It was nicknamed the "gold-digger clause" because the idea at the time, of course, was that young women were marrying men when they were older and getting their pensions. I'm very frustrated that the sexism in place in those days—and hopefully we think we are doing a bit better now—certainly continues today.

The minister has said that research is happening to help identify these spouses. I want to be really clear that a lot of these spouses have reached out to our office and asked about this, especially once they heard about the 2019 budget announcement. They wanted to sign up. Now it is over two years later and the study is just starting. My office has been asking again and again for information and really has nothing to tell people.

Could there be a process that people could apply to? I'm sure that many of these people, largely women, can self-identify quite clearly. This is something that, in my opinion, they desperately need and deserve. That's one question. How is this process going to unfold? How are people going to be able to access the supports that they desperately need?

As for the second question, when is this clause going to be removed? This is an old clause that has nothing to do with what's happening today. It's been over 100 years. It needs to be gone. I'm wondering when it will actually be removed. When will we start treating people who marry our military veterans respectfully? These people are loving them. This is a beautiful thing, and we should not be punishing people for falling in love at 60.

**Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk:** The marriage after 60 clause is a really challenging policy. Again, it is directly linked to the superannuation of the Canadian Armed Forces. What the department has been given through the budget process is the creation of the veterans survivor benefit, which is, I believe, as you've indicated before, \$150 million.

The challenge we had that came out of the budget was to fully understand the depth, the gap and the needs across the board. That's why we went to the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research and Statistics Canada to have them assist us in developing the evidence base upon which to build the policy. In the case of CIMVHR, the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research, they went to the University of British Columbia to do the research. That research was impacted significantly by COVID, and thus we only received the information more recently.

I'll now ask Rick Christopher to weigh in and indicate how we're moving forward with a policy.

**The Chair:** Very briefly, please.

**Mr. Rick Christopher (Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy and Commemoration, Department of Veterans Affairs):** I'll be brief.

Thank you, Deputy.

Mr. Chair, we finally got the information. As the deputy said, there was delay due to the pandemic. We're compiling that information, and we will be developing recommendations for the minister on how to proceed with a policy.

**The Chair:** Excellent. Thank you very much.

We do need to wrap up. We have some votes in front of us.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank the witnesses for their appearance, and more importantly for their service to our country in these incredibly challenging and difficult times.

We appreciate the work that you're doing. We see the momentum. I think we can all agree there's a lot more work to do, but I extend a heartfelt thank you from us.

I will invite you to log off now, as we have some votes before us.

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), the committee will now consider the main estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2022.

There are two options here. We can either put the question of the credits together in one motion or dispose of the credits individually. My preference is to do it all at once.

Is there unanimous consent to dispose of the credits together?

• (1725)

**Mr. John Brassard:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** Excellent. I see heads nodding.

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$1,302,127,308

Vote 5—Grants and Contributions.....\$4,944,822,846

(Votes 1 and 5 agreed to on division)

VETERANS REVIEW AND APPEAL BOARD

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$9,884,732

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

**The Chair:** Shall I report these votes to the House?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** Excellent. Thank you.

I'll just double-check with the clerk that I haven't missed a critical step here.

All right. Seeing no other business before us, do we have consent to adjourn today's meeting?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. It was good to see everybody.

We have some votes on Wednesday, so we'll be delayed a little bit, but we'll see you at our next meeting.

The meeting is adjourned.







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