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# Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg





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Friday, May 6, 2022

• (1300)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)):** I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to the thirteenth meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[*English*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), the committee is undertaking the study of the main estimates 2022-23. A number of votes were referred to the committee on Tuesday, March 1, 2022: votes 1 and 5 under the Department of Veterans Affairs; vote 1 under the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, minus the adoption of the interim supply on March 24, 2022, in the amount of three-twelfths of the total amount.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of November 25, 2021. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website.

Today's meeting is also taking place in the webinar format. Webinars are for public committee meetings and are available only to members, their staff and witnesses. Members enter immediately as active participants. All functionalities for active participants remain the same. Staff will be non-active participants and can therefore only view the meeting in gallery view.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute your mike. For those in the room, your microphone will be controlled as normal by the proceedings and verification officer. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

As a reminder, all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

[*Translation*]

Today, we are pleased to have the Minister of Veterans Affairs with us for the first hour, and we will then have representatives of the department. I will introduce them at the beginning of the second hour.

To begin, I am very pleased to welcome the Honourable Lawrence MacAulay, Minister of Veterans Affairs.

You have the floor, Minister.

[*English*]

You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Please go ahead.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay (Minister of Veterans Affairs):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Members, thank you for your invitation to update the committee on what our government is doing to support Canada's veteran community.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the tragic deaths last week of four military officer cadets at the Royal Military College in Kingston. On behalf of the government, I extend my heartfelt condolences to the family and friends of the four young adults and to the entire RMC community.

It's always a pleasure to appear before you, and I want to thank you for your recent work on veterans monuments, service dogs and other important issues for Canadian veterans and their families.

Mr. Chair, along with some colleagues on this committee, I was honoured over the past few weeks to pay my respects at the war cemeteries and monuments in France, Belgium and the Netherlands. From Vimy to Passchendaele to Holten, I was reminded of the enormous sacrifice that Canadians have made in the service of peace around the world. Seeing the Canadian flag flying overseas is a touching reminder that the people of Europe have not forgotten the Canadians who went to fight in the First and Second World Wars.

Along with my colleagues here, we met with the Juno Beach Centre, the local mayor and people from the community to discuss the proposed condo development in the area of the Juno Beach Centre. I also met with my French counterpart to discuss our concerns about this proposed construction. We agreed on the importance to honour the sacrifice of Canadian soldiers who landed at Juno Beach and to never forget the 359 Canadians who fell on the beach on June 6, 1944. We resolved to work together to find a solution to the dispute, making sure that Juno Beach Centre is not negatively impacted, and to guarantee that we protect this historic site for Canada and France.

As you may have heard, the Duke of Sussex announced at the closing ceremonies that Vancouver and Whistler will host the 2025 Invictus games, which is a big deal for Canada. Like all Canadians, I look forward to watching our teams compete on home soil in three years' time.

In terms of service delivery to Canada's veterans, I think it's important to restate that the Government of Canada is fully committed to the health and well-being of veterans and their families. This includes making sure that they're getting answers as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Since February when I was last here, the government confirmed that it will provide nearly \$140 million to extend more than 350 staff to work on the backlog. This is great news for the veterans. It will allow us to keep investing in our employees so that we can keep getting decisions out to veterans as quickly as possible.

As of April 29, there were 10,937 applications that were over the standard time. That's more than a 50% decline from the high of over 23,000 when we began investing in the backlog. That is good progress, but we know there's still more work to do, and we are committed to doing it.

As a government we're committed to addressing the backlog and turnaround times. The \$5.5 billion of funding in this year's main estimates and an additional commitment made through the 2022 budget will help us meet this goal.

The main estimates reflect nearly \$2 billion more in annual spending for Veterans Affairs Canada than when we formed the government in 2015. This is nearly \$2 billion more going into the pockets of veterans and, while there is more work to do, that is something we can be proud of.

Let me turn to another issue that is very important to our government. That is veteran homelessness. Simply put, one homeless veteran is too many.

- (1305)

Budget 2022 announced an additional \$62.2 million to launch a new veteran homelessness program. This program will provide services and rent supplements to veterans experiencing homelessness and help them get back on their feet. Our programs, like the veterans emergency fund and veteran and family well-being fund, are also key supports to homeless and at-risk veterans.

- (1310)

**The Chair:** Minister, thank you so much. Your time is up.

We're going to start a round of questions. We will start with the first vice-chair of the committee, Mr. Frank Caputo.

The floor is yours for six minutes. Please go ahead.

**Mr. Frank Caputo (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC):** Thank you very much, Chair, and through you, thank you to the minister for appearing. I hope you have had a good time back home in Canada since arriving back here.

I want to pick up where the minister left off with respect to the save Juno Beach matter. I'm wondering if the minister could please update this committee about what has happened since his visit in relation to the campaign to save Juno Beach.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Mr. Chair, I appreciate the question.

My honourable colleague is fully aware of the importance because he was with me and other members on the committee when we landed there. He would fully agree that our presence there as a

group was vitally important. It is fair to say that we highlighted the issue that is vitally important for Canada.

Especially when we came out of the first meeting, we all saw that Juno Beach was pretty well filled up with younger people. They were speaking French, so they were from France, I would guess. That was vitally important.

We went out for the interview. We had national, regional and local media. We had a lot of news media there. I think Frank would agree and Rachel and Luc would, too. They were with me and I appreciated it so much. It was a combined effort of everybody in the Parliament of Canada to indicate how important we felt it was. The interview was vitally important. I think Frank would agree that when the lady at the centre got out right on the highway and indicated quite clearly what this would do to the traffic and all that, having it on the media made it so much better for me when I went to meet my counterpart in Paris. It was obvious that it was highlighted. In fact, as a group, that's what we wanted to do.

I had a great meeting. I think it's thanks to the effort of us all. We had a meeting with my counterpart. I actually spent over an hour with her. She indicated that she was going to start the process with the regional political officials in the area in order to put a group together to sit down and see if we could come to a proper resolution for Juno Beach.

Without a doubt, that news conference with us all there was vitally important. Now I understand that Juno Beach, the town and the contractor—I'm not sure if I have everybody—will all sit down and try to come to a resolution. It is so vitally important.

Of course, money came up too. My colleagues are fully aware that we don't buy property. We would like to. I know all of us there would like to have just fixed it all up right then, but if there was ever a time for working together as the Government of Canada—and I've been around a long time—that was a prime example of what everybody pulling together can do.

It's not resolved yet. Of course, Frank, you're fully aware that it is under French law. We can't dictate what's going to happen, but I believe, with the way it was put together, it looks very good. I don't think even the contractor really understood what a delicate situation he was dealing with. We never spoke to the contractor, but I don't think there was much of a protest. In fact, I don't think there was much of a protest until we arrived. There was some, but we certainly highlighted it as a group.

Again, I would emphasize the Parliament of Canada working together. That was a prime example and hopefully it will be a great result for Juno Beach and for our veterans, because we all viewed what they were doing. It wasn't put on. These people were right there trying to understand exactly what Canadians did. That's what it's all about. It really would bring you to tears, if you want to know the honest truth. That was basically what happened.

• (1315)

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Thank you so much for that.

I have just one minute, so I'll ask you a very important question. It relates to the backlog, and you probably aren't surprised to hear me ask about this.

There was roughly \$139 million earmarked for temporary staff to address the backlog. Can you confirm whether all temporary staff have had their contracts renewed and whether this \$139 million has been distributed?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Yes, Frank, it's a very important question. You highlighted that issue before it came into play, and it made an interesting discussion the last time we sat down, but that helps, truly.

We got the funding. My understanding is that the full contingent is there to deal with the backlog.

I might turn it over to Steven to give—no, that's the way it is. Yes, they have been hired. That's important, because it gives us a chance to reduce the backlog. That's what we want to continue to do, and now we're on the track of doing it.

Perhaps the deputy might like to comment on that. It's a pretty important issue.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister, but the time is over.

I have to thank Mr. Caputo and now go to Mr. Miao for six minutes.

**Mr. Wilson Miao (Richmond Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for your appearance today at our committee.

A colleague asked you some questions about the Juno Beach Centre visit. I want to read a statement from the Juno Beach Centre:

We are not generally opposed to projects like these on former battlegrounds; the French deserve to enjoy the freedoms our veterans' sacrifice brought them.

Have you heard of any local citizens who live around the Juno Beach Centre who are against the project? As you mentioned it in your update, can you share a bit more on that insight?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Yes, without question, we met with the mayor in the town. It's hard to get it all in, but we met with the mayor and concerned citizens from the area. I guess that would be the proper way to word it.

Without question, it's obvious that the town itself isn't against a development or anything else, but it's the way this is laid out. In many ways, it was so fortunate that we had the Parliament of Canada represented there. It certainly put a strong voice to it.

We had the mayor of the town and the people who were concerned about Juno Beach. They're not against development or anything at all like that, but the fact is when you look at this and see the way it's developed.... We were there as a group and it was explained so clearly what it would do with the one highway, just one street into Juno Beach. If you're going to have a lot of traffic and a lot of condominium development, the safety factor could come into play too. It was well explained in the news conference, which was a great help to me when I met my counterpart in Paris. It would also indicate that if we're not careful, it could reduce the number of bus tours and such that go there.

Without question, I think we're doing better in this country.

Without question, it's so important and they truly care. If you go to France, Belgium, the Netherlands and other places, too, you'll see how important it is for their school children to learn exactly what took place in the Second World War.

It is quite a thing. They tell me that young men and women from away over the sea, as we used to say, came over and kicked the Nazis out, and all they said to them was, "Live your life the way you wish to live it." I've had the privilege of being around veterans affairs for a number of years and it's pretty heartwarming to hear that.

Without question, this is why the people who are connected to Juno Beach are so concerned that the facility is wide open and widely used. I think my colleague would agree that the day we were there it was used. As I said before, when we came out of the meeting, there were a lot of young people there, and that's pretty nice to see.

• (1320)

**Mr. Wilson Miao:** Thank you for sharing that with us.

In your remarks, you mentioned this year's budget on helping with veterans homelessness.

How will a homeless veteran benefit from the new veteran homelessness program, which has \$62.2 million in this year's budget, building on the \$45 million in last year's budget? What more is being done by Veterans Affairs Canada to resolve the issue of veterans homelessness?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I appreciate your question. I appreciate all questions.

Of course, one homeless veteran, as everybody would agree around this table, is one too many. That's why it's so important that now over \$100 million is allocated to make sure we can put the program in place, working with Ahmed Hussen and his budget. There's \$70 billion, I believe, in that budget. We know it's there.

Our goal is to make sure there are no homeless veterans in this country. It's not an easy thing to do. Over the years, in dealing with veterans and veterans homelessness, things can happen. For many of us, it's hard to realize what veterans go through. Some of them don't want to deal with us. They don't want to see a politician or a bureaucrat from Veterans Affairs. They do not want to see them at all. In fact, sometimes they tell me, if they go into a shelter, the homeless people go out the back door just so they don't have to talk to them. It's unfortunate, but if you can put programs in place to get them to feel a bit better about themselves, you can basically bring them back into society.

Rachel was with me last night in Toronto. Helmets to Hardhats is a prime example of what can take place when you have groups that work hard to basically help people get back into society. That's in fact what we're trying to do.

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

[*Translation*]

I would now like to turn the floor over to a member of the committee who accompanied the minister on that trip and who is also the second co-chair of the committee.

Mr. Desilets, the floor is yours for six minutes.

**Mr. Luc Desilets (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being with us, Mr. MacAulay. It is always a pleasure to see you.

I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to watch you a bit and give you a certain amount of time to answer me, because I have several questions to ask you, Minister.

First, I'd like to thank you very much for replying to the letter written so magnificently by our chair and answering within the very respectable time allowed.

From what I understand, it is never, or only rarely, the same kind of data being compared. There are different analyses. The main reason why we have all gone a bit astray is that sometimes the numbers are for veterans' first applications and sometimes they're for completed applications. So we can see that there are backlogs and we don't really know what they include.

In the upcoming meetings, I'm going to put a lot of emphasis on the first application. The ombudsman told us clearly that the first application was the most important one and was the key element in the process. The figures show that there has been no significant improvement when it comes to the first application.

Minister, can you tell us briefly about the importance of the first application?

The figures we have show that there has been no improvement when it comes to processing applications from francophones as compared to applications from anglophones.

• (1325)

[*English*]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much for the question. You've asked it of me before.

First of all, I want to thank you for your participation in Juno Beach and what you did. It all helped so much.

On the question you asked, I can assure you that wait times have decreased for female veterans and francophone veterans, and perhaps the deputy could give the overall breakdown. There is a difference. There is an improvement of about five weeks or so, but I'll let the deputy give you the exact figures.

[*Translation*]

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

**Mr. Paul Ledwell (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Can I say something, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair:** You have the floor, Mr. Ledwell.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Thank you for the question, Mr. Desilets.

You're correct, that first applications are very important. We make sure those applications are handled rigorously. We know that this is important for veterans.

Year over year, we are seeing an improvement in processing times for all first applications, including applications by francophones and women.

In 2020-2021, the processing time for first applications made by francophones was approximately 52.3 weeks. For 2021-2022, that time was approximately 45.2 weeks.

We have figures and we are always read to provide them. We follow up very carefully on these questions.

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

Because I'm a visual person, I made myself a graphic using the department's figures. I don't see any improvement for francophones. There are changes when it comes to anglophones, which created a discrepancy, but for francophones, there has been no movement since 2018: processing time is still between 40 and 60 weeks.

I know you're making efforts and a lot of money is being injected into human resources.

How can we do more? We seem to have a common goal, that is, that it concerns first applications.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Thank you for the question.

As I said, Mr. Desilets, we put a lot of emphasis on processing applications for services made to the department by veterans for the first time, including by francophones and women. The department is constantly trying to improve the overall process by investing in human resources.

We create graphics that contain the figures, and we send them to you three times a year, to make sure that the committee has up-to-date information and that we are talking about the same figures.

I know that's very important to you.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Yes, it is very important to us.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Desilets. You will have a chance to come back to the question later.

I have to give our next colleague the floor.

[English]

I'd like to invite MP Rachel Blaney for six minutes, please.

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

Hello, Minister.

Hello, Mr. Ledwell.

It's good to see both of you here today.

I did appreciate seeing you yesterday, Minister, at Helmets to Hardhats, an amazing organization. I was sitting with my friends from the Canadian Labour Congress. I really enjoyed my time with them and really enjoyed hearing from so many veterans who moved from one place to another, and it was such a smooth transition. I was happy to see you and happy, of course, to support the important work they are doing.

My questions for you today are around my bill, Bill C-221, which addresses the issue of marriage after 60. As you know, Minister, this is something I'm very passionate about. You may know that the committee has just started a study. Last week we had some tremendous witnesses before us here.

One of the things that I found very concerning, Minister, is how hurt these veterans and retired RCMP members were by this reality. In one case, we heard a story from someone who married after 60 and did not know that his partner would not receive the pension after his passing. It's a devastating conversation to have to inform your loved one of that reality.

We also heard from a couple who had been married for 17 years. They are both in good health, so I hope to see them married for many more years, Minister.

I want to quote a few things that Walter said. He said:

It's shameful that I have to stand here and talk to people like you about trying to justify my finances after death....

I felt kind of insignificant with this whole thing.

Basically, how I feel is that she has been a good caregiver to not only me but this community. She's well respected, and it's almost like an insult that I would leave this earth and not have anything to leave.

He also mentioned later on that he felt that the government was saying she was not worth it.

I hope, Minister, you agree with me that after 17 years of marriage she is definitely worth having some sort of supports after he is no longer with her.

Could you tell the committee—and I will interrupt you, as you know, Minister, with deep respect—what steps are being taken internally within the department to start to address this issue in a meaningful way? We know there are some funds that are available through the veterans survivors fund.

I would like also to hear if there's any money moving from that to support women—largely women; sometimes it's men—who no longer have their partners with them and have absolutely no survivors benefits after they lose that person they may have been married to. In one case I have heard from somebody who has been married now over 30 years.

Go ahead, Minister.

• (1330)

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you, Rachel.

Yes, you will interrupt me. I know you will, and that's okay.

I want to thank you so much, too. I think it's only fair that I take time to thank you. I think you know that we did a good deed together last night and at Juno Beach. I also echo what you had to say about last night. It is touching to see. There are hardships and there are great things. Last night was victory.

I know I have told you before that we have been working with Stats Canada and the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research. We do have that information, and we're analyzing it. I know you understand the total situation. On our part, we will use the results to research how to best support veterans.

I understand that you are going to be dealing with this at the committee. I would also be very interested in what results will come from the committee.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you so much, Minister. Here's the interruption that you were expecting.

If there are any numbers, I would really like them passed on to the committee. We do need to see them. They would especially be relevant for our study.

As you know, Minister, veterans who marry after 60, RCMP officers and federal civil service workers can put between 30% to 50% of their pension away every single month to build a bit of a nest egg to support that loved one. This is very concerning to me, of course, because that means our people who served us in many different ways are now in a poor state for their whole retirement. That's something we should all be concerned about.

We heard a story about a veteran who put aside \$153,000 for their loved one after years and years. Unfortunately, she is not well, and it doesn't look like she's going to make it. It looks like he will be losing her before she loses him. All of that money, \$153,000, is completely gone. They do not get it back.

Minister, I'm wondering if you could talk to us about why, when somebody would take a part of their pension, make that choice because of the system we have in place, submit that money to make sure their loved one has that nest egg, and if they lose that loved one, not only do they lose that person, but they lose all of those historic savings.

• (1335)

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Rachel, are you talking about a personal investment?

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** No, Minister. I'm talking about people who married after 60, and who know they will not be able to leave a survivor's benefit for their loved ones because they were married after 60. They take part of their—

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Yes, and they saved them—

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** They take part of their own pension and put it aside. They put between 30% and 50% aside. In this case, it was \$153,000 over the last many years, which they saved in a nest egg for their loved one out of their own pension—something for which they filled out a form from your department. Now that the loved one is dying, they will not receive any of that money back.

We want to know where that money is going and why it isn't returned to the person. It's their pension money.

**The Chair:** Minister, you have 15 seconds.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Mr. Chair, I appreciate that you're very stern, but the truth is that I will get the information and make sure you have it. Yes, I certainly will.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Let's now go to a five-minute round of questions. I invite MP Anna Roberts to open her mike, please.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts (King—Vaughan, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question for the minister is regarding funds allocated for PTSD service dogs. What organizations will be receiving these funds and how will the department guarantee they are utilized responsibly? Who will be accountable for that?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Of course, service dogs are of great interest and we feel they can help veterans with a mental condition. That's why we funded a pilot project to evaluate the safety and efficiency of service dogs. As you're likely aware, we funded Wounded Warriors Canada for a project in 2019, I believe.

One of the big problems we have with this issue is, quite simply, that no set of national standards has been put in place. We tried to bring everybody together a few years ago to achieve standards, but unfortunately, there is not very much agreement among people on how to put these standards together. It's something I can assure you we will continue to work on, but that's simply where we are on this issue.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** Thank you for that response.

You said you funded a pilot project through Wounded Warriors. How much were they funded and what did they do with the money? Were they able to support more dogs for the veterans? I'd like to understand this in more detail.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I'll let the deputy minister expand on the service dog issue. It's quite an issue, really, and I appreciate the question.

**The Chair:** Please go ahead, Mr. Ledwell.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** *Merci*, Mr. Chair.

Thanks for the question.

Yes, there was funding in 2019 for Wounded Warriors through the veteran and family well-being fund. They received funding directly to expand their PTSD service dog program. A single investment took place at that time. We do provide support, I should say, for veterans who have costs associated with the care and maintenance of vision guide dogs. We provide support of up to \$1,500 for that.

The Wounded Warriors program was a single-year grant of \$245,000. As the minister indicated, we are still trying to ascertain the standards that will be associated with this before we can develop anything further with respect to support for service dogs.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** Maybe you could elaborate on this pilot project.

Did you also have the opportunity to hear from witnesses or individuals from the veterans community who already had a service dog, and work with them on how to assist in the training, so we ensure the service dogs are trained for the purpose of helping our veterans?

• (1340)

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Thank you for that follow-up question.

We have relied on Wounded Warriors themselves to come forward with that report. We note that they were tracking the placement of 63 PTSD service dogs through a certified service dog provider. At the end of the 2021-22 fiscal year, there remained approximately 101 individuals on the wait-list. That's information we received from Wounded Warriors. We are tracking that through the one-year investment and relying on reports back from Wounded Warriors themselves on the use of those service dogs.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** It's pretty important to indicate too that the standards are a problem here, Deputy, for us to continue and to expand the service. It's to get the standard. We're working on that, but it's hard to bring the parties together and establish a national standard. That's really what we need.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** Wouldn't it be more advantageous for us to ask our veterans who have service dogs to participate in a national standard? I'm sorry that I wasn't here in the last Parliament, but I have spoken to several veterans and pain management doctors. Would it not be advantageous that we receive some information or do a pilot project with them?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Yes. You're right, but there was a little problem with reaching agreement in that area too, of course, so I'll let the deputy expand on that. He has all the stats on that issue. We have had a problem getting a national standard and some agreement on just what they should do.

Deputy, I'll leave it to you, but I think that's one of our problems.



**The Chair:** Deputy, you have 15 seconds.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As the minister has indicated, we do have a challenge with a national standard. It has not been established yet. Currently, there are clear service dog standards in only three provinces in the country, in British Columbia, Alberta and Nova Scotia. We want to see a national standard and really see this applied across the country so that we can serve all veterans in all parts of the country.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much. Your time has expired.

I'd like to invite MP Rechie Valdez for five minutes. Please go ahead.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister MacAulay and Mr. Ledwell, thank you so much for your time today in answering all of our questions.

Minister, in your opening statement you provided an update on the backlogs. We recently heard about some challenges that female veterans face with the backlogs. They shared their testimony with us. Can you provide an update on what's being done to address the backlog specifically for female veterans?

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

I think it's appropriate for me to say that we had a national women's conference for veterans. The first one was in 2019, I believe. I had just become minister and had indicated at the time that it would become an annual event. I think that's part of the way to understand this. We had some problems. Women veterans have different requirements from men veterans, and of course we have been working on all of these things over the last number of years.

That said, the investment of nearly \$340 million gives the department the finances to basically do the research and find out just exactly what's needed and the people to deal with the files along with it. That's basically what we've done.

As you know, we have reduced the backlog by basically 50% or a little more, but again, that's not good enough, as everybody agrees. We have to continue to do that. Moreover, we have to continue to do research, and that's why this conference was put in place.

There are a number of veterans who have some different requirements, such as women and aboriginal veterans. After the Second World War, the majority of veterans were male. Of course, now things have changed substantially and the department is adjusting to that. We have a dedicated team—I think they call it a “spike team”—working on female applications, which is helping.

Luc asked a question on francophones. With francophone and women veterans we also have spike teams in place to help bring the numbers down.

Perhaps the deputy would like to add to that, but that's basically what we have been doing.

• (1345)

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Mr. Chair, I could just add one item to what the minister has underlined, and that is we are modernizing the ta-

ble of disabilities so that it reflects female veterans. We have a legacy issue with the table of disabilities, as much of it was established during a time when the overwhelming majority of those who had served were male. We're modernizing that table to make sure it truly reflects the needs of all veterans, especially female veterans.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** Thank you.

Minister MacAulay, I'm going to do a selfish plug and ask that the next time you host that women's veterans event, you invite all of us from this committee to join you.

The next question I have is more about providing an update on the progress that's being done specifically for indigenous veterans accessing services. Have you made any changes or updates regarding outreach to indigenous veterans?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** We've invested, as you're probably aware, \$30 million to recognize Second World War Métis veterans. We've developed a strategy on outreach to veterans and their families living in northern communities, including indigenous veterans living in the north. I do believe that we have a group from Veterans Affairs Canada with a regular schedule to go up north to make sure that they're dealing with veterans and that the department is on-site to deal with that.

Of course, increasingly we're partnering with organizations across the country, which has been so helpful, including with Indigenous Services Canada, to increase the awareness of our programs and services. Some of the problems that you see with veterans.... Even with regard to our education and training program, honestly it's hard to believe, but sometimes people are not aware of these programs and it's so important that they be aware of them. Number one, these programs help them get back into the workforce. Last night Rachel and I were at a meeting like that. These kinds of things are so important. We're also reaching out in indigenous languages.

In all of this, as the deputy indicated quite clearly, we're working to rearrange the table to make sure that we're adjusting to the requirements for Veterans Affairs Canada. We are and will continue to do that.

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

Next is Mr. Luc Desilets.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets, the floor is yours for two and a half minutes.

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

I have a brief question and I hope to get an equally brief answer.

In the budget planning, the funds appropriated for 2022-2023 are \$811 million less than the funds appropriated for 2021-2022.

How do you explain this significant 12% drop?

[English]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much, colleague, for that question. I do get asked why fund money is returned. What has to take place, number one, is that we have enough funding in place to make sure we're able to pay for the remuneration of veterans who have received benefits.

Also, as you know, this meeting is on the estimates. In this regard, there's one example of \$140 million that went for hiring more people, which in the end will mean there will be more applications approved, which means that the department will be putting out more money, which means that the estimates in the fall, in my guess, will be somewhat different.

I'm well aware, my honourable colleague, that you're very dedicated to this task and I can assure you that the dollars will be there to make sure that we provide the support for the veterans who truly deserve it. I appreciate your question on that.

• (1350)

[Translation]

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

In the present circumstances, I'm having a hard time understanding. This is money not spent over a year. There is a significant increase in funding for francophone human resources, among other things. Logically, we should at least be spending the same amount as the year before.

The table shows a significant drop of \$800 million under the heading "Benefits, Services and Support". In fact, that represents virtually all of the \$811 million decline I referred to.

I don't have a lot of time left, Minister. The question was asked earlier. You know that Juno Beach is very important to me. Efforts have been made there. I have done other interviews here in Quebec on this subject.

I know everything that has been done to date.

Where are we on this? Are there possible solutions being considered? What are the new facts since last week?

[English]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Are you talking about the programs or Juno Beach?

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I'm talking about the problem with the condominiums at Juno Beach.

Have there been new facts in the last week?

**The Chair:** There are less than 15 seconds left, Minister.

[English]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Could I get 15 seconds, Mr. Chair, please?

He's a tough chair, this fellow.

Anyhow, there's a mediation process in place. Luc, we can't be involved in that. It's all the groups that are there. The French government is fully involved. What we did there, we started a process,

the only process that we could do, because it's French land, under French law and all of that. I'll keep you informed of any development, for sure, but what we did was a big help, and hopefully, it will be resolved properly.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the indulgence.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister MacAulay. You know I have to deal with that. I have no choice.

I would now like to invite MP Rachel Blaney for two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you, and I always appreciate how well our chair keeps us on time, so I thank him for that.

Minister, just so you understand the appropriate language around the pensions, it is called the optional survivor benefit, which is in correlation with the marriage after 60 clause. Specifically, what I'm trying to understand is.... We know that if they fill out this form, if they contribute that money—and in this one particular case, over \$150,000 was contributed—if their loved one dies before they do, that nest egg they've put away for themselves is gone.

What I'm trying to clarify is, does that money go back to the government? Does that money just go back to general revenue? We know it is not going back to veterans, RCMP officers, or federal civil servants.

Could you let us know where that money goes, when it doesn't go to the people who should have it?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Rachel, my colleague, I thank you very much for your question.

The truth is, I will be in contact with you after this, and my office will be as well, in order to answer the question.

Is this money that the veteran has saved from their own pension? If it is, it belongs to either the person who invested it or the estate, but I don't think that's what you're asking me.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** No, it is absolutely what I am asking you. I appreciate your saying that. I do believe it belongs to the person or the estate, so thank you for saying that—

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Well, I don't know.

No, no—

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** —and I thank you for looking into that.

Minister, if you could also let me know, the director general of the RCMP compensation services has told my office that the pensioner must take a medical examination to determine whether he or she is suffering from terminal illness, and must live for a minimum of 12 months from the time the monthly contributions commence for the optional survivor benefit.

Can we just confirm from VAC whether this policy is in place for veterans who want to take part in the OSB program?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I will make sure that you receive an appropriate response, Rachel, but we have to find out what's exactly taking place, where the money came from directly, where it's invested and what takes place afterward.

That will happen, I assure you, but we have to get a full understanding of what—

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you so much, Minister. I look forward to seeing that.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much. The chair will be after us anyhow.

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

Minister, we are going to have two other interventions. This means we are going until 2:05 instead of 2 p.m.

For five minutes, we will have Mrs. Cathay Wagantall and Mr. Fraser Tolmie.

Please go ahead, Mrs. Wagantall.

• (1355)

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

It's so good to see you again, Minister, and you, Mr. Ledwell. I appreciate your being here.

I hear from you that we have a problem in regard to national standards for service dogs. That problem developed...it imploded, actually, that committee, because of a conflict of interest that existed extensively across the board with not enough arm's length from those who were engaged in making those standards take place. I'm actually glad it's defunct. We do need another one. That's certainly something we're working on here as a committee. We're looking forward to presenting recommendations to VAC on that.

In the meantime, you did give funding to Wounded Warriors Canada. I did call them and talk to them, because they were part of that committee. They have a vested interest themselves as an organization in providing service dogs and training them. I saw that as a little bit disconcerting because of the dysfunctional state of that team.

I would like to ask you this. In that funding that was provided to them, they did use it to develop their own program and also did provide some funding to other organizations, but not to all. Again, I see that we really need to come up with standards that are fair across this nation for all of the providers.

Sir, I would just like to ask you if you can guarantee—not knowing what will work best, and hopefully looking at our recommendations—a standards board that is arm's length to take information from our veterans and these organizations. We need that decision-making to happen outside of the veterans service dog funding community. Can you assure me that the standards board will be arm's length from VAC and from the providers of service dogs?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I think the chair is going to let me take the floor.

**The Chair:** Yes. Go ahead, please.

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

Were you concerned about the Wounded Warriors and the funding they received? I just want to clarify that.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** I understand that you gave them funding in the midst of the whole process of that particular standards committee falling apart. That's what I was told. They received funding. But he also did say that they're very excited about developing a program themselves, which at that point puts them in a situation where they don't have arm's length either. They have a vested interest in the programming and in the providing of service dogs. The standard board has to be separate from the individuals and organizations that have a vested interest themselves.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Well, of course in terms of what we are going to try to do, and I'll let the deputy elaborate on this, is that first you're going to look at this at the committee.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** We are.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** You're going to bring witnesses forward. You're going to have recommendations. We need that. We look forward to your recommendations and we look forward to putting the standards in place. We want to see national standards. We have to look at the best way of achieving that.

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

I just want to again assure that these will be done at arm's length without intervention directly from service dog providers.

I will concede my time to my colleague.

**The Chair:** Mr. Fraser Tolmie, you have about one minute and a half, please.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC):** I can talk fast. Thank you.

Thank you, Minister, for your presentation earlier on.

Reading through some notes here, your department is receiving significantly less in this year's main estimates compared with last year. Is that because Veterans Affairs didn't spend everything it was allotted last year? If so, do you think the unspent money could have gone towards addressing the backlog and addressing the imbalance in services offered between men, women, anglophones and francophones, or any number of issues this committee has raised over the last several months?

• (1400)

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** It's a good question, and one I'm asked every time I come. I think we understand that these are estimates. As I indicated previously in a response, there has been, for example, \$140 million allocated since the estimates in order to make sure we hire more people. Of course, when they start approving applications, that's going to mean more dollars still.

In the end, I can assure you, my good colleague, there will always be the dollars there. Whatever remuneration is allocated to a veteran, there will always be the dollars there to make sure that it's done. I would say there will always be dollars that will be refunded back to treasury from that particular program, because you can't estimate to the dollar. You have to make sure you have money there, and we always will, I can assure you of that.

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

For the last intervention for five minutes, I'd like to invite the PS for VAC, Mr. Darrell Samson, to please go ahead.

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

Thank you, Minister, for being with us today. We heard some really good stories about the work you people have done in your visits in Europe, of course, at Juno Beach. Thank you for that work.

There are a couple of very important things that I want to lay out.

One is to thank you for the hard work in getting monies through the budget for Veterans Affairs. I think people sometimes forget the role that ministers play. We needed \$140 million to keep the employees in place so that we could make headway on the wait times, and we needed \$140 million to help veterans with mental health. As you know, that program announced on April 1 is so important, and it's immediate.

Can you talk to us a bit about those two major investments?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I have the floor.

**The Chair:** Yes.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** You have to be careful of the chair.

On the \$140 million for mental health, I know that all colleagues around the table fully support that.

Also, the \$140 million for staff is vitally important. It means we will be approving more applications. Of course, I can go on at length and say that we have no control about the applications. We have no control on what comes in. We just have to deal with everything that comes in.

On the mental health side, I want to be sure, and I'm sure everybody at the table understands too, when you apply for certain mental health programs, immediately you have access to funding. This is so vitally important. We know about the problems surrounding mental health. This, I felt, was pretty important, and I'm sure the committee fully agrees with me that this type of funding is so important so that people can get help.

We know what happens so many times. There are so many horrible stories about what takes place with mental health. This money is allocated. They can access it. They can start receiving, hopefully, some treatment right away. That is what's vitally important.

I thank you for that. I should have mentioned that, too, but I forgot.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Minister, thank you. It was nice seeing the large number of people, including MPs, you and the Minister of DND, at the Sam Sharpe reception for mental health on Tuesday morning for breakfast.

I have a quick question on the veterans employment strategy. I think this is really important for those veterans who leave the forces, the CAF. On leaving the forces, that strategy is important. Can you talk to us about your vision around that?

I've talked to Irving Shipbuilding in Halifax. They have a cohort and they're looking at hiring more veterans. We need to do more to help veterans in the transition. Can you talk a bit about what you see in the veterans employment strategy that's in your mandate letter?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** The veterans employment strategy is a vitally important thing, not only, of course, for the veteran, but also for society and industry in general.

What I find is that so many things.... I think I mentioned it once: the education program. Many people are not accessing that. That's there for people to upgrade themselves to be more valuable. Every walk of life is in the military. Every walk of life wants to do things—or most everybody does—and this gives them the opportunity to upgrade.

I haven't...well, virtually I have, but really, these career fair programs that we have, that's a prime example of what industry is looking for in the veteran field. It also gives an opportunity for, I think it would be fair to say, Veterans Affairs Canada, the committee and anybody else on what in fact we actually need to be doing to get these people back into a meaningful job.

The education program.... I'm a bit older. Well, I wasn't around then, but after the Second World War, these things were put in place. For people who had no chance at all to become engineers, doctors, lawyers and all this, what it does is it gives those people a chance to be valuable to society. That's why these programs are so vitally important. That's why the career fairs are important: to fully understand what is required. We're doing our best to understand that, but again, we're open to the committee for recommendations. We just want to do better.

• (1405)

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Thank you, Minister.

I think I might have a few seconds, but just—I don't, the chair says—to finish off on the education and training, I spoke to a couple of universities in Nova Scotia. We need to try to get communication between our department and the universities across Canada to try to give more information and to get those opportunities for as many veterans as we can who want to do education and training.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** It's not overly complicated: six years, \$40,000; 12 years, \$80,000. It's available for upgrading your skills. It's so important that this [get used—

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

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** It's the chair again.

**The Chair:** Yes, Minister MacAulay, I have no choice. Now I'd like to thank you so much for being here in the committee and answering all the questions.

[*Translation*]

I also want to tell you, Minister, that this committee is yours. Don't hesitate to come back to see us. The chair isn't evil, he just has to monitor the time to give all members of the committee the chance to speak.

[English]

I'd like to invite Mr. Ledwell to stay with us.

I know you're going to leave, Mr. MacAulay, so on behalf of the committee, I once again thank you for your appearance today.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** It was kind of fun with you, Mr. Chair. Take care. I appreciate it so much. You certainly keep a firm hand on things, and that's good. Thank you to everybody for their help.

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

Members of the committee, I'm going to suspend for a few minutes to permit the other witnesses to be here at the meeting. The committee is suspended.

• (1405) \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

• (1415)

[Translation]

**The Chair:** We will now reconvene the meeting.

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

[English]

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses.

When you are ready to speak, you can click on your microphone to activate your mike.

As a reminder, all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[Translation]

The interpretation services offered for this videoconference are about the same as for ordinary meetings of the committee. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of floor, English or French.

When you speak, speak slowly and clearly. When it is not your turn to speak, put your microphone on mute.

I would now like to welcome the witnesses.

[English]

From the Department of Veterans Affairs, we have Mr. Steven Harris, assistant deputy minister, service delivery branch; Ms. Sara Lantz, acting assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and corporate services branch; and Ms. Amy Meunier, assistant deputy minister, strategic policy and commemoration.

[Translation]

I don't think there will be any opening remarks, so we will go to the question period.

I would ask committee members to address their questions to one of the three witnesses who are with us.

Mr. Caputo, the floor is yours for five minutes.

[English]

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's a pleasure to see all of our witnesses here today. I was on a phone call with them yesterday and had the pleasure and honour of travelling with two of them. It's wonderful to see them again.

I'm going to pick up on a question that I asked the minister. This would likely be for the deputy minister and the assistant deputy minister, whoever feels free to answer it.

It's with respect to the \$139 million to deal with the backlog and the staff. That money was spread over two years. Has the money that was earmarked for 2022 been distributed, as in have all the contracts that needed to be renewed to address the backlog been renewed?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Mr. Chair, I'll start off, if that's okay.

**The Chair:** Yes.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** I'll ask my colleague Steven Harris to also weigh in on this.

Mr. Caputo, the funds that were identified were very, very important, in terms of the timeliness to allow us to extend the contracts for those who were already in place. We saw a number of our staff members leave during a period of time, so there is a process to hire in to ensure we have the complement that is needed. That's a process that is under way right now, while all of the processing is taking place.

On the one hand, it allowed for a confirmation and extension of the bulk of the contracts for our staff members who are already there. However, there are a number we're hiring in, and perhaps Steven can give some detail on that. All of the funds are identified. All of the funds are being expended. All of the work is necessarily being undertaken and is showing some real return on this investment.

Steven can give some further detail on this.

• (1420)

**Mr. Steven Harris (Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Thanks, Deputy.

It is essentially all salary dollars that have been funded as part of the \$140 million. As the deputy indicated, we've renewed those people who were temporarily with us, with term employment expected to expire on March 31 of this year. In the cases where we have vacancies because people left for other employment or permanent employment elsewhere, we've started the process of hiring additional folks. That would include nurses and others who help us with the disability adjudication decisions. We're putting those people in place and making sure that they're trained as quickly as possible.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Thank you, Mr. Harris.

Perhaps you could answer about how many adjudicators we are down now.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Adjudicators are a particular position amongst the overall capacity of individuals. Adjudicators are typically nurses, although we have other people who help in the disability adjudication process, preparing claims, making sure they are paid as well, as part of the process. We were down about 50 nurses at the end of the two-year period that just ended, and we are in the midst of already hiring back those nurses at this point in time.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** I have two questions, and they're related.

Are we still on track? I believe that the department had forecast the backlog to be at about 9,000 disability benefit applications by the end of June. Are we on track to meet that?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I apologize. Our forecast is for about 9,500 in the backlog. Those are beyond our 16-week service standard in November of this year.

We expect to get to about 5,000 by the end of this fiscal year. In other words, that will be at the end of March 2023.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Are we on track for those estimates?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** That's correct.

The benefit that we have right now is we have a large number and complement of trained staff who were working as of day one on April 1, 2022, to continue the work of reducing the backlog. As the minister noted, we've cut the backlog number in half in the last little bit, so we're down now under 11,000. We'll continue that work and that progress.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** That's perfect. I appreciate that.

We received some statistics here about median wait times and average wait times. The median wait time and the average will obviously be affected by outlier cases.

What number of cases at the disability adjudication stage are typically settled within, say, 16 weeks?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I can give you an exact figure on that. For 2021-22, the fiscal year that just ended, the number of applications that were completed within the 16-week service standard was 54%. That's up from 36% the year before, so it's up about 18% from the year previous. Again, that reflects the additional capacity that we've had to be able to make decisions more quickly.

That 54% is still well short of our service standard of 80% of applications processed within that 16-week service standard. That's reflective of the volume and the backlog that we've had, but we are getting to, and we will get to, a position where we'll be able to get to that standard of 80% of decisions being made within the 16-week service standard. We've made some good strides over the course of the last year and, again, I expect that to continue this year in much the same way.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Okay. I think my time is probably up.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Yes, exactly, Mr. Caputo.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Casey, you have the floor for six minutes.

[*English*]

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

Welcome to the senior bureaucrats of the Department of Veterans Affairs. I give a special welcome to Ms. Meunier, and congratulations to her on her promotion to these ranks.

I'll start with an easy one. Has the associate deputy minister position been filled on a permanent or interim basis yet?

• (1425)

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** No, it has not. That position still remains vacant. As you and the committee might know, this is a Governor-in-Council appointment, so it goes through that process.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Has a decision yet been made as to whether that position will be based at the national headquarters or in Ottawa?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** No decision has been taken on that yet. There's been some identification, but no decision.

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

In the briefing notes that we received from the Library of Parliament in preparation for today's meeting, there's a reference to the full-time equivalents at Veterans Affairs. It indicates that this year, there's an expectation that VAC will have 3,106 full-time equivalents, which is a decrease of 566 from the current year, 2021-22. The plan over the next 12 months, as I understand it or if the information I've received is correct, is to decrease the workforce at VAC by 566 full-time equivalents.

Where will those reductions come from?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** I believe, Mr. Casey, that those numbers reflect the fact that when those figures were produced, there was no conception of our service excellence work continuing, so the positions that we've just spoken about for the reinvestment—the \$140 million in staff—are not reflected in those numbers.

I might ask my colleague Sara Lantz to speak to our FTE overall component, but I can tell you that there's no current plan to decrease our numbers at Veterans Affairs Canada. Rather, we will maintain those numbers and ensure that we're maintaining the service for veterans.

Perhaps Sara could speak to our FTE complement.

**The Chair:** Please go ahead, Ms. Lantz.

**Ms. Sara Lantz (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Chief Financial Officer and Corporate Services Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Thank you.

The deputy minister is correct. It's not reflecting the extension of our recent terms beyond fiscal year 2021-22.

Currently, our FTE count is around 3,600. It's always a little bit below or above that with the service excellence complements. It was up to 599, having been extended through service excellence, when 168 previously were. A little over 400 would come in with that new funding.

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

The information I've cited comes from the departmental plan for 2022-23, which indicates an expectation of 3,105 full-time equivalents in the upcoming year and that it is a decrease from the current year. It also indicates that it does take into account the 200 temporary human resources positions that will be kept on with the initiative to address the backlog.

If, after this meeting, you go back and review the departmental plan and you have some additional or changed information to answer my question, I'd appreciate receiving that in writing. It is, with respect, completely at odds with the information that we're receiving from the Library of Parliament.

My next question also relates directly to the estimates. The pain and suffering compensation contained in the estimates is just north of \$1.5 billion, but that represents a 35% decrease from last year. It's a decrease of \$812 million. There doesn't appear to be any explanation for why there would be a 35% decrease in pain and suffering compensation.

Can you provide us with one?

• (1430)

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Mr. Chair, the nub of that is that when the estimates were produced at the end of last calendar year and beginning of this calendar year, it did not incorporate the investment of the service excellence positions and funding around the supports for that, nor did it incorporate the expectation of the decision of supports and thus the payment of supports that would result through that increased investment in staff complement to allow for the processing.

That is the overwhelming amount that is the difference between the estimates you have before you. We should anticipate that those estimates will be readjusted through this coming calendar year.

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

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Casey.

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

Good afternoon, Mr. Harris, Mr. Ledwell, and Ms. Meunier.

I'm going to continue on from Mr. Tolmie's question. I, too, don't understand the 566 reduction, or 15%, in the number of employees that appears in the 2022-2023 Departmental Plan. I think I understand that the information will be sent to all members of the committee to enlighten us on that, but I have a series of related questions to ask.

Who will be affected?

Will the new positions put in place for francophones be affected by it?

Do you have any comments on this, Mr. Ledwell?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Mr. Chair, regarding Mr. Casey's request, I just want to add that we are going to review the departmental plan and explain exactly why there is a difference between the figures.

So we are going to provide the exact reason, Mr. Desilets, to explain the difference between what is presented, that is, the figures you referred to, and the figures in our plan, which have changed because of certain amounts that were confirmed just before the budget was announced.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** That's perfect.

There is a point on which we never manage to agree, and that's the reduction in wait times for applications made by francophones. No matter what angle I come at the figures from, the fact remains that since 2018, wait time for applications by francophones varies between 40 and 60 weeks.

I'm a visual person and maybe I'm the one who doesn't understand what's going on. To make it easier to interpret the data, I created a graphic showing all wait times for applications by francophones, anglophones, women, men, and so on.

To summarize, since 2018, wait times have remained constant. It was said that measures would be taken and we wouldn't see the results for a few months.

Is that how I am to understand it, Mr. Ledwell?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** I can tell you there has really been an improvement. We really are concerned about this. The past and present figures have to be clear and we have to report the results and what we are planning to do. The department is making efforts to improve the situation.

Mr. Harris, do you want to comment?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Thank you, Mr. Ledwell.

I'm going to try to answer the question quickly.

A little earlier, Mr. Desilets, you asked questions about the francophone employees who were hired to help us reduce wait times. I first want to confirm that we are going to be keeping those employees.

Second, from 2020-2021 to 2021-2022, there was a seven-week reduction in the average wait time for first applications associated with applications by francophones. That shows a definite improvement. The average is now 45 weeks. However, we still have a lot of work to do.

As I have explained in other meetings and discussions, a lot of applications from francophones had been in the backlog for a long time. When we make decisions on those applications, it has an impact on the resources available to us.

Hiring additional francophone personnel is going to allow us to further reduce the discrepancy in processing times between applications from anglophones and applications from francophones.

• (1435)

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I'm looking forward to seeing that. We're hoping there will be an improvement and we are all working for the same outcome.

For several months, the same terms haven't been used in the information sent to us. It would be to all our benefit to pay attention to that. Sometimes figures on backlogs are being compared with figures on first applications. That is what created a lot of confusion when I raised the question of the 77-week wait time, a month or two ago.

How much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair:** You have 45 seconds left.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I would now like to draw attention to something that seems obvious to me.

In a document published by the department, there is a table entitled "Total number of pending disability benefit applications". One of the columns is entitled "Incomplete applications needing more information".

For the last quarter, there were 12,381 incomplete applications and 2,147 applications ready for assignment. I'd like to draw attention to this difference.

What is going on? Is this discrepancy explained by the fact that the computer system is too complex and the bureaucracy doesn't allow all applications to be processed?

There are six times more incomplete applications than applications ready for assignment. That isn't a question, it's an observation. Our employees' time is being wasted and it's appalling for our military members.

**The Chair:** Mr. Desilets, your speaking time is up.

Ms. Blaney, the floor is yours for six minutes.

[*English*]

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

Thank you to all of you for being here today.

My first question is on the office of women and LGBTQ2 veterans. I'm wondering if you could tell the committee how much is in the budget for this office and how many staff are working in this office.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Mr. Chair, if I could, I'm going to ask Ms. Blaney if my colleague Steven Harris could address that issue, because it's an office that he works with very closely.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I always want to hear from Mr. Harris. Thank you.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I don't mean to pass this as well, but actually Ms. Meunier would be best positioned to give you an answer.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Could somebody answer the question?

**The Chair:** Ms. Meunier, are you going to answer? You're not going to pass it....

**Ms. Amy Meunier (Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy and Commemoration, Department of Veterans Affairs):** No.

First, I just want to thank the chair and the committee for having me here. I hope the more I come, the more comfortable it will all feel.

Thank you for the question, Ms. Blaney. I'm new in my role here, but there are about six substantive employees in that office. There are others who support the effort throughout the department and not on a full-time basis as we undertake initiatives, whether those are in research or in-service delivery in the corporate services area. There are about five to six full-time employees.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I did ask about the budget, so I'm going to ask for that again, but I also am curious. What are some of the current research projects this office is working on? Just to preface that, if you don't have an answer for me, could you get that information to the committee?

**Ms. Amy Meunier:** Sure. I don't have the specific dollar amount associated with that office. I'm sure I might have it here somewhere in the background in my notes. I might look to the research elements first.

We are focused on looking towards disaggregated data and better understanding elements associated with veteran marginalized or vulnerable populations, such as women or LGBTQ2. We are, as part of our research agenda, really focusing on those areas over the next year or year and a half.

● (1440)

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I will look forward to hearing more specifics. I understand you're looking into those groups, but it would be interesting to hear what the key issues are that you're finding and addressing.

My next question is about VAC's new rehabilitation contract. Once this program starts, will veterans be able to continue to see their own psychiatrists and medical professionals, or will they be forced to go to a provider sourced by the professional?

Maybe I'll give that to Mr. Ledwell.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Ms. Blaney, thank you.

Mr. Chair, if I could, this is an important undertaking, of course, because it ensures that veterans have access to the medical, psychological and other supports they need. The intention with this is to ensure that they have the supports in the locations where they need them as well through the means that are provided—so through their personal provisions—but also to fill in gaps where it is not possible and is sometimes challenging for veterans to get access. So we also build provisions to allow for access to specialists through these kinds of programs.

I will ask Mr. Harris if he could provide some detail—

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** No, that's okay. I'll let that one go. Maybe the next question I'll have Mr. Harris answer.

I'm trying to figure this out. I know there is a pilot that VAC is running right now. When this happens, what I'm hearing is that the case manager doesn't finish working with the veteran. Instead, the veteran is pushed into guided support given by a veterans service agent.



What I'm trying to understand is what the difference is between these two roles and what the checks and balances are to make sure that, when that person is moved out of case management and into guided support, they are still doing well. I'm just curious, because it sounds to me as though this is really pushing people through the system.

I'm wondering if there is a bonus paid to the provider to get the veterans off those services sooner. If there is a bonus, what does that look like?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Thank you again for the question. Maybe I can provide a bit of an answer.

The case manager and the veterans service agent actually work together. People who are in a case management situation are usually going through a rehabilitation program. That—

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Just so you know, Mr. Harris, that is not what I am hearing at all. I'm surprised that you're saying that. I'm just putting that on the record. That is not at all what I'm hearing. I'm hearing that they leave the case manager, that they go to the veteran service agent, and that there is no continuation of care between the two.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** They do work together. It is a continuum of care with respect to how Veterans Affairs manages it.

When a veteran is going through a rehabilitation program, they are assigned a case manager. As the veteran completes the rehabilitation program, in other words, achieves the goals that have been set out as part of that program, the case manager will have discussions with them around where they are in terms of their rehabilitation. If they've achieved those goals and can be self-sufficient, and there are a number of checks and balances in the course of having that conversation—

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Could we get a copy of what those checks and balances are? Those would be really helpful. Then, if you—

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Sure, absolutely.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I have only a few seconds left.

Is there a bonus paid to the provider that is there to show that veterans get off the services sooner?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** No, there is no bonus. There's a bit of a mix in terms of what you're asking, in terms of rehabilitation service contracts with some specialists who help above and beyond the rehabilitation and the discussions that happen with the case manager.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Blaney. Your speaking time is up.

Members of the committee, Mr. Ledwell had to leave at the same time as the minister. However, he stayed until the start of the second part of this meeting to answer a few questions. He now has to leave the meeting.

I would therefore like to thank him on behalf of the committee members and myself.

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Ledwell, deputy minister of Veterans Affairs, thank you for being with us this afternoon.

[*Translation*]

We're going to continue the meeting with three witnesses, Mr. Harris, Ms. Meunier and Ms. Lantz. We are in good hands.

Ms. Roberts, you now have the floor for five minutes.

• (1445)

[*English*]

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a question. I'm trying to understand this. It was stated there are 3,600 employees. We have 11,000 backlogs. Each case takes—and maybe I'm misunderstanding this, so help me, please—45 weeks from start to finish. Is that correct?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** For the first applications that came in last year, the average turnaround time was 38 weeks.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** If we take 11,000 backlogs and divide... Let me take a step back. There are 3,600 employees. How many of those employees are caseworkers?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Of the 3,600 employees, there are 476 caseworkers. The caseworkers don't work on the disability adjudication claims, though.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** If we have 476 caseworkers, and we have 11,000 cases in the backlog, we are not going to get through this, in my estimation. Is that correct?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Again, you're somewhat mixing two different elements.

We have about 15,000 veterans who are undergoing a rehabilitation program. They're served by case managers. They're served by the 476 case managers. Of the 11,000 files that are in backlog, we have a separate unit that is responsible for disability adjudication. It consists of any number of folks who work on the intake of those applications, the review and processing of those applications and the payment of those applications. It's not the caseworkers who work on those particular files.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** If it takes 38 weeks to come up with a decision to help our veterans, would you say that's a reasonable amount of time?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** According to our service standard, it's clearly not a reasonable amount of time. That's why the government has invested additional resources to be able to help us process those in the backlog, reduce the backlog, which we've been able to do by about 50% over the course of the last 18 months or so, to get it to a state where we'll be in a position to meet our service standard of 16 weeks for a disability adjudication decision 80% of the time.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** You want to reduce it from 38 weeks to 16 weeks.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** That is our published service standard, yes.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** How many individuals are we going to need over and above what we currently have to get to that standard?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** The minister and the deputy spoke about this in the first hour, with the additional hiring. The \$140 million that we were speaking about earlier is to hire additional disability adjudication processing staff. Over the course of the next two years and the past two years, we will have hired overall another 518 people above our existing complement to be able to help us reduce the wait times and reduce the files that are pending beyond our service standard. With the 518 folks whom we've been able to add for another two years, I'm confident that we are going to continue to reduce the backlog and have many more of those files adjudicated within the 16-week service standard.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** I'm sorry for pounding on this. I come from a business world where FTEs are very important, because we plan for it and we budget for it. Therefore, I need to understand this because it's a little confusing. We have 518 new employees on top of the 476 new employees to help with the backlog. Am I understanding that?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Not quite. The 518 employees are on top of the existing disability adjudication staff. I don't have the number of existing disability adjudication staff in front of me. One of my colleagues might be able to help me. It's 518 additional staff to disability adjudication. The 476 case managers that you're referring to is a separate line of business. Everybody works toward the benefit and the well-being of the veteran, but it's a bit of a separate business item.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** How long, with your estimation of the FTEs, will it take to ensure that this backlog is finally dealt with?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** We are projecting that we'll be down to about 5,000 files beyond our 16-week service standard at the end of this fiscal year. What we'd like to be able to do is make sure that we can maintain the 16-week service standard 80% of the time, which is the service standard, for at least a year to declare that we've actually accomplished what we've set out to do, which is get back to meeting our service standard and reducing wait times for veterans who've applied. Within a year we'll be down under 5,000.

It will never be zero beyond the 16-week service standard because it is a 16-week service standard 80% of the time. Sometimes files take longer because of a need to get additional medical information. They're incomplete and a process must be put in place that helps support those individuals.

• (1450)

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** I think my time is up.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** That's right.

Thank you, Ms. Roberts.

Mr. Miao, the floor is now yours for five minutes.

[*English*]

**Mr. Wilson Miao:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses attending today's meeting.

I'd like to ask a question regarding the offices. Over the last two years, I understand offices across the nation serving our veterans have been closed due to the pandemic. Is there a current timeline on when these offices will be reopened to serve our veterans?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I can take that question to start and then maybe my colleague, Sara Lantz, would like to join in.

Obviously, the offices have been closed as a result of the COVID pandemic for the safety of veterans and for the safety of Veterans Affairs employees. What I would offer is that even before the pandemic, the vast majority of our interactions with veterans were done virtually, via the phone, via our online service My VAC Account and others. While we have offices across the country, not everybody needed to come into the office and not everybody wanted to come into the office, so we had a very extensive virtual network even before this. We've been able to enhance that over the course of the last little while.

Specifically to your question, we are starting the reoccupancy of our offices across the country at lower-level amounts to start, making sure we're in keeping with the local health provisions and things of that nature. We'll have people back in the offices this month and next and then expand with additional capacity and resource in the offices in the months of July and August, and start up with by-appointment visits from veterans during that time frame as well. Sometime in July and August, the offices will take appointments from veterans to come in and see them.

**Mr. Wilson Miao:** Do you feel that reopening these offices will help with the backlog and allow VAC to serve our veterans and meet the 80% of the 16-week service standard?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I don't know that opening the offices specifically has an impact on the ability of the department to meet the backlog. What it does allow us to do is provide another opportunity to provide in-person service to veterans to be able to meet them. We've been doing that virtually through things like Zoom and MS Teams to be able to assess their needs and speak with them and address any concerns that they have, but it's always good for our case managers and our front-line staff to be able to see veterans in person and talk to them. They can bring in concerns that they have as well, so it's another service channel that provides improved service.

**Mr. Wilson Miao:** Earlier, Mr. Ledwell mentioned that 34% of last year's budget went to service excellence. What is service excellence going toward? Is it salary or made out as a payment? Can we have a breakdown of how that portion of the budget was spent?

Further to that, if the 34% is not being spent this year, is it available to be spent in other areas?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Sara, did you want to take that question?

**Ms. Sara Lantz:** Yes. Service excellence is the term that we use for the hiring of additional staff to tackle the backlog, majorly. In the previous two years, it was the 518 new employees to directly support and address the backlog. There is a small portion that we've also dedicated in previous years to automation, to some innovation on automating some of our processes and gaining some efficiencies in the process, so that, as Mr. Harris mentioned earlier, as we tackle the backlog and reduce it to a manageable level, we can sustain that into the future, not just with manpower but through technology.

As for continuing the percentage of spending, we expect that, because of the extension of those 518 employees into this new fiscal year... They are fully trained. They will have a few new employees, because of some of the departures we experienced. They're expecting the same percentage of spending on the backlog, if that was your question.

• (1455)

**Mr. Wilson Miao:** I understand the \$140-million budget will allow VAC to hire more staff to address the backlog. Do you feel there are any other areas we can look at to minimize that process and speed it up, so that we can help more veterans throughout the process, not just by only hiring more staff?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** That's a really great question. I'm happy to reassure you and the committee as a whole, Mr. Chair, that's exactly what we're doing.

We're working through innovation and automation in all aspects of the disability adjudication process to make sure that if there are system changes that we can make, we make it easier. To the earlier point that the other member made about incomplete applications, there are things that we can do to help veterans make sure they are able to do that. There is a range of additional measures that we're taking beyond just the additional staff being brought in to help with the reduction of the backlog.

**Mr. Wilson Miao:** Thank you very much.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Miao.

We are now going to continue with two short speaking times.

Mr. Desilets, the floor is yours for two and a half minutes.

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

My question is for Ms. Meunier. Given how very sensible she is, I'm sure she will be able to give me an intelligent answer.

I'm coming back to the table setting out the total number of disability benefits waiting for a decision. I ended my last comment by saying that there were 2,147 applications ready for assignment, and, at the same time, 12,381 incomplete applications that were sent back to the veterans.

Ms. Meunier, can you help me understand this significant discrepancy?

[English]

**Ms. Amy Meunier:** I'm happy to take this question, although it does fall under my colleague's responsibility now.

We actually undertook.... You're right to say there is a large volume of applications that are incomplete. The incompleteness can range from a missing signature, sections not filled out, medical questionnaires missing. There is a range of reasons an application might be incomplete.

We did undertake a consultation with veterans recently through our Let's Talk Veterans platform to better understand what is happening, and why we're receiving so many incomplete applications. There were a number of findings, and I may have touched on this briefly the last time I was here. Many applicants didn't know about the My VAC Account, which does provide an opportunity to prompt people and remind them to fill out each section.

Additionally, we may have thought we were providing a sufficient amount of information in a clear and easy to understand manner up front in terms of the full process for applying. That consultation has helped us to see that we need to do a better job of clearly laying out the process.

Those are some of the insights into why we do see so many incomplete applications. We are also taking steps at the front end with our intake officers to reduce and identify incomplete applications early on, so individuals can be made aware there are missing pieces of information in one to two weeks versus a much longer or protracted period of time.

[Translation]

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Mr. Chair, may I add a comment?

**The Chair:** I'll allow you 20 seconds, Mr. Harris.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I'd like to make a quick clarification.

There aren't just 2,000 applications that are ready for assignment. At the moment, there are 11,000 applications that are overdue, but there are others that are ready for assignment so we can make a decision. That is what we're working on.

It isn't just 2,000 applications, it's about 15,000 applications that are ready for assignment for a decision to be made. However, yes, there are about 12,000 incomplete applications.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Harris.

Mr. Desilets, you'll have an opportunity to return to this question in the next round of questions.

Ms. Blaney, the floor is now yours for two and a half minutes.

[English]

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

I guess my question has to go to Mr. Harris now. I always enjoy that, as he well knows.

I'm wondering if he could tell us what the standards of care for veterans are with this new rehab contract and if we can have a copy of the standards of care.

• (1500)

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I'm not specifically clear on the standards of care. The new contract is not yet in place. It will only go into place in November. We're in an interim period whereby the existing contract is still being used, and there will be a transitional element to the new contract that was procured.

In terms of the operations of the contract and the kinds of expectations we would have of the contractor, I'd be happy to share that with you.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** All right. I'll let you know if I like it. If I want something else, I'm sure you'll hear from our office, as you know.

In the conclusion pilot, I'm just wondering, what the process is of determining when the veteran moves from case management to a veterans service agent. You talked about what you were looking for, but I also know that sometimes people do better for a while and then they struggle again. I'm wondering how that relationship works between those two roles, and if the veteran has to see a new person.

This is something that I am very concerned about. A veteran has a case manager or may have a veterans service agent, but some changes and they have to go back to the case manager. Do they have to go to a new one, or do they get to stay with the one they already know, and vice versa as they move through the transitional period?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I'll try to answer as quickly as I can. There were a couple of questions.

Very quickly, in terms of a conclusion, what we want to see is if the veteran has successfully met his or her rehabilitation goals and if they are in a good place, that their well-being is assured. It doesn't mean they will not need assistance from Veterans Affairs in the future, that they may not need to call in and get some guidance or seek additional supports, but they don't need the high level of touch that a case manager is able to provide.

With respect to whether they can come back, of course they can come back. If their needs change and need to be reassessed and they need to come back to a case-managed situation, that's a possibility. Whether they would go back to the same one will depend on the caseloads in those offices and whether those case managers are still there—

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I'm sorry to interrupt, but I only have 10 seconds.

Have you done any work on what happens to a veteran when they have to retell their story to whomever they are getting their supports from? We definitely heard about this for caseworkers not understanding about what happened to the queer community prior to that.

I'm just wondering if there is any research within your department around that specifically, what it does to veterans when they have to retell their stories to yet another worker.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I wouldn't say there is specific research. In this case there is a lot of evidence, as you've noted, that people can become frustrated having to respond or tell their story again. It's

known, and so that's why we try to minimize it and ensure that there is consistency in terms of the supports for veterans.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Blaney and Mr. Harris.

Ms. Wagantall, the floor is yours for five minutes.

[*English*]

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Thank you so much, Chair.

I'm really pleased to have you here. I have a number of questions, 10 of them. Don't let that scare you off. They should be fairly succinct answers to these.

Who would I get the best results from to ask specifically about the VAC benefits navigator tool? Are you familiar with it?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I could answer those question, yes.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Could Ms. Meunier as well? Okay, great.

Can you tell me on what date it was established? If you can't answer these right now, feel free to come back with the answers. That's fine. We'll keep the list.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I don't think I have the date that it was established right with me, but it's been up for about 10 years.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Actually, I believe it was established just as this government took power in 2016, but regardless, there are circumstances and decisions that led to it being established. Do you have any insight into how it came about?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** It was actually a pilot project from the veterans ombudsperson's office. They had originally set up and started to do work on a benefits navigator. It was slightly different at the time. It's been enhanced by the department.

The ombudsperson's office asked if we could take it over and actually make it a practical piece of our own published information.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** That's a different perspective than what I was told by veterans when Deb Lowther spoke at committee. She said that we need an entrance tool that veterans can use that can cover all the areas they need to give information for to move things along in a very appropriate and faster way, so that these backlogs don't develop.

My understanding was that this actually came from veterans themselves in particular, following an agreement prior to this government taking place.

Since coming online, has it ever been taken off-line? Answer with just a yes or no.

• (1505)

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I think the only reason we've been taken off-line would be for maintenance or upgrades.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** It wasn't off-line for any long periods of time. Do you have any idea?

No. Okay, great.

According to the web page, I see that it was last modified on April 27. Could you provide us with the details as to what changes were made and why?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I would have to come back with that.

I expect it was updated to reflect the changes to the mental health benefit program that just came live on April 1, but I would have to confirm.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Yes, if you could, that would be excellent.

Along the same lines, how has the navigator been changed over the years? What questions have been added or removed and why? Is there a history of that?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I'm not sure there is a specific history in that. I haven't been able to confirm. It was first launched in 2014.

It's there for informational opportunities for veterans to be able to go on, answer a few short questions and get information about the programs and services that they may be eligible and entitled for. That would have changed over the course of this period of time to reflect changes in programming. We've changed from a disability award to things like pain and suffering compensation, for example. It would have been updated as programs changed.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Are veterans aware of when that happens? I have heard from them that it disappeared and that it wasn't available. Perhaps there's a communication problem.

In what ways has VAC gone about promoting the existence of the benefits navigator tool to veterans?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** It think it has been promoted regularly through things like social media and in information that has gone out through things like the Salute! newsletter.

I can tell you that about 26,000 people have accessed this in the last 12 months.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Great. That was one of my questions.

Is it available on the My VAC Account? As they sign up for a My VAC Account, is it clearly there for them to use?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** It's actually available in both places. It's available through My VAC Account and on our website.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Okay.

What did you say as far as how popular it has been with prospective applicants? Is it reused or is it just a one-time tool?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** On My VAC Account, 26,000 people have used it in the last 12 months. An additional 6,000 have used it on our website.

We don't specifically track people coming back to use it again, because that's their data and we don't keep that data on hand.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Okay. Let's see if I can make it through these.

How many individual veterans have actually applied for benefits as a result of this? Is there any record of that type of information to know how beneficial it actually is?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I don't think there's a straight line connection we can make to people doing that. People would become aware of, perhaps, additional programs and services that they hadn't seen and they could come forward and apply to those.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** It would be great to find out from veterans how many have actually received benefits recommended to them by the navigator. I think that would be a good tool to determine how effective it has been. That's just a comment.

Has a navigator ever been a standard component of VAC's intake process for benefit applicants? In this whole process of trying to streamline them, especially this first time, is there a concerted effort of the people employed at VAC to use it?

Oh, no. I have one more question, Chair.

**The Chair:** Yes, Mrs. Wagantall, I'm sorry. Your name is on the list for the next round, so you'll be able to ask questions for five more minutes.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Well, there you go. I did not know that.

Thank you, Chair.

**The Chair:** You're welcome.

Now I'd like to invite Mrs. Rechie Valdez for five minutes, please.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** Thank you, Chair.

I'm just going to take the opportunity to cede my questions to the MP for Bonavista—Burin—Trinity and then I will go after him.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** That's fine.

Is it Mr. Churence Rogers? Okay, go ahead.

**Mr. Churence Rogers (Bonavista—Burin—Trinity, Lib.):** Thanks, Chair.

Welcome to the officials and thank you for being with us today. I'm not sure who would want to answer this question, but I'll put it there for either of you to respond to.

At a previous meeting we had two constituents from my riding of Bonavista—Burin—Trinity, Walter and Norma Pinsent, appear and talk about the marriage after 60 issue. Ms. Blaney was asking questions about that today, and I want to follow up on that because I've still got some concerns about this.

When I asked Norma why she decided not to participate in the survivor pension fund, she explained that she had decided not to after much consideration because, first of all, they were required to pay over \$500 a month to build up the pension fund for her, which took a lot of money out of their retirement income. Second, she explained that if she passed before Walter did, they'd be out whatever money they had put into the program, so they would get zero dollars back.

I was a bit flabbergasted by that, quite frankly, and that's why I wanted to come back to this line of questioning. What I'd like the officials to outline for us at the committee is the makeup of the survivor pension fund program. How is it designed? What is the end result here? Given what Norma said, I'm not surprised that she made the decision she did.

Could the officials comment on that survivor pension fund program, how it's set up and outline some of the issues with it for the entire committee to understand?

• (1510)

**Ms. Amy Meunier:** For your clarification, and Ms. Blaney's as well, the Canadian Armed Forces superannuation pension plan, which includes that optional survivor benefit, doesn't fall within the jurisdiction of Veterans Affairs Canada. It is a superannuation plan led by our colleagues in the Canadian Armed Forces and Treasury Board Secretariat.

We will be coming back to this committee in a few weeks, along with those partners, who may be better positioned to describe the details and the evolution of that. I would not have the historical information about the evolution of that element. I think this is an important distinction or clarification to make.

What I can say, though, is that the Government of Canada, through Veterans Affairs Canada, is very interested in making sure that families and survivors of veterans have the supports they need. Ms. Blaney mentioned earlier that government did infuse money, the \$150 million, into a veterans survivor fund. What we've done since that time is undertaken research along with Statistics Canada and the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research. We have some preliminary results and, when we come back in two weeks, hopefully we can dive into those a little more.

What I can tell you about this group of individuals who may fall into the category of marrying a member after the age of 60 is that there are just under 5,000 living survivors who would have entered into a relationship post age 60. Virtually all were female. Most, or approximately 90%, were of the age of 70 years or older. Overall, their incomes were just slightly higher than similarly aged Canadian females' income. Of those close to 5,000 individuals, there were approximately 850 who had incomes below the low income measure, and about 1,200 who were in receipt of the guaranteed income supplement.

We're taking this information into account, as well as the increase in the old age security that will come into effect in July 2022, which will infuse additional funds for those aged over 75. We want to take into account the risk level of this population so that we can put into place a program and supports that will meet those needs. I hope to come back and talk with you more about that in the coming weeks with our partners.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Meunier.

**Mr. Churence Rogers:** I look forward to that particular visit.

Do I have more time, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair:** Your time is up. I'm so sorry, Mr. Rogers.

**Mr. Churence Rogers:** Thanks for that explanation. I really appreciate it.

**The Chair:** I have to say that I just made the calculation of the time, and because we have to vote on the estimates at the end of the meeting, I have to tell Mrs. Wagantall that I don't think she's going to be able to intervene.

I am so sorry, Mrs. Wagantall, but maybe you could ask Mr. Tolmie or Frank Caputo to share their time

Mr. Fraser Tolmie, it is your time for five minutes.

• (1515)

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Okay, and I'll be very happy to share my time with Mrs. Wagantall.

I have a couple of comments.

I know that Mr. Desilets circled back on the question that I brought up earlier with regard to the spending. I think one of the things the minister brought up was that there was always going to be money in the pot for remuneration and, if not, then it would be returned.

The question I have with that statement is: Did we not have enough employees, and was there money returned based on that comment?

**Ms. Sara Lantz:** Just to clarify the word "returned", I would point out that when we establish new benefits or make policy changes to a veterans program, we estimate the long-term obligation of meeting the needs of those programs. That estimate acts like a kind of a bank account from which we draw on annually. In the last fiscal year where we did lapse, or where we have unspent money in the program area, that money was effectively returned to the bank account—on which we can redraw when people do come forward for those benefits.

I believe that is what the minister was referring to when he said "returned". That money does not, effectively, lapse. It may lapsed under the accounting terms and on our books, but it is available for veterans when they come forward.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Thank you, Ms. Lantz. I appreciate that.

Another observation is that we keep talking about full-time employees and this backlog. What I kind of see in the time frame that I've been here is an accordion effect where we are reacting and then there's an inconsistency that's created. Furthermore, when we look at new hires, a previous witness told us that it would take up to a year to recruit and train.

Based on Mr. Harris's comments that we want to get this completed within two years, or the backlog down to two years, is it not fair to say that a realistic goal would actually be three years? If you have a year where you're training someone and then you have them up and running, you actually have two good years with them afterwards. Is that not a better standard to set for ourselves and be realistic, rather than over-promise and under-deliver, and vice versa.

Do you have comments on that?

**Ms. Sara Lantz:** I'll just make one comment and then maybe Mr. Harris can step in.

When we were talking about the new funding, the \$140 million recently approved in budget 2022, we sometimes talked about hiring employees. The majority of those employees are being extended. Therefore, the majority of those employees have had their year of training and are up to the productivity level that we expect, and so we have a more predictable level of what we'll need in funding and what they can produce to address the backlog.

We did have some departures. You are right that with accordion effect of giving us temporary money for two years and then extending again for another year or two years, we do lose people, because they find jobs elsewhere or don't want to go through this. We do have some hiring and some training up to do, but we don't think it will have a significant impact. I would leave that to Mr. Harris to speak to.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I think my colleague has actually explained it quite well.

We've done significant work. Ms. Meunier, in a previous position, did amazing work to compress the amount of time required for training. It did used to take about a year to train somebody fully on all aspects of this. We've targeted that training now so it can be done much more quickly.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Okay, thank you.

That's all the time I have, folks.

Mrs. Wagantall would like to—

**The Chair:** Yes.

Mrs. Wagantall, you have one minute and 15 seconds.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** That sounds great, and then I'll talk to Frank.

Ms. Meunier, has the navigator ever been a standard component of VAC's intake process for benefit applicants? I know you're working hard to streamline and improve the way things work. Is it a tool that you encourage the new employees to use in working with veterans?

• (1520)

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Mr. Chair, if I may, I'd answer that question and say that essentially it is a similar intake process. It is the kind of thing we walk through with veterans when we speak to them. Whether that's through our client contact centre, when they speak to people who are veteran service agents or even case managers, we do a bit of an intake process to see what their needs might be. It's very similar to the process that's used there.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Why not just use one method so there's consistency and the ability to see how effective it is going through the process?

Regardless, is there a plan to integrate it as a mandatory first point of entry for all applicants so there is that consistency?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** We encourage people to use it, and lots of people are using it. We encourage our Canadian Armed Forces members, as they go through transition. We've integrated in a much stronger way the kinds of transition tools that are in place and that are available to Canadian Armed Forces members as they go through that transition process, and these are some of those tools.

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

Are veterans organizations that provide VAC-approved services and supports informed about this benefit, the online navigator tool for veterans to use? It was pretty clear that Ms. Lowther with VETS Canada, who is very engaged, was not aware this tool existed.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I'll certainly follow up with Ms. Lowther. I know, for example, that our veterans service offices that exist in the Legion use it quite regularly, as do some other stakeholders who help us in assisting veterans.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Okay. Thank you very much.

That's good, Chair.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Wagantall. It's my pleasure.

Ms. Valdez, the floor is now yours for five minutes.

[*English*]

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for all of your time today.

I have a variety of questions, so bear with me. I'll try to direct them accordingly.

First, Ms. Meunier, congratulations on your role.

This year marks the 77th anniversary of the liberation of the Netherlands. Could you inform this committee on what kinds of commemorative events are being planned?

**Ms. Amy Meunier:** Yes.

Actually, I believe there's an event happening this weekend. As you know, we were just in the Netherlands as part of the delegation the minister was just speaking about. We talked with a variety of organizations over there, along with our European operations to do a number of local events in that region. There's also another event happening in Ottawa. There are also smaller events happening across the country.

Was there anything in particular or any event in particular?

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** No, that was perfect. Thank you.

Mr. Harris and Ms. Lantz, I was a project and change manager for years, supporting a North American call centre, so I understand the challenges with training and consistency of services with staff, especially when there's such high turnover.

We heard a lot of pain points when conversing with veterans from the LGBTQ2 community and the organizations that support them. Could you shed some light on how you coach your team that services them and what steps you're taking to make it fairer for LGBTQ2 veterans?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Yes.

There are lots of things we do with respect to training. Thank you for pointing out the requirement to do this and to do it well. We've learned lots of things over the course of stakeholder consultations.

Ms. Meunier spoke earlier about the office of women and LGBTQ2 veterans, which does extensive stakeholder consultations. We have a stakeholder team that speaks regularly with members from a broad spectrum of communities, including the LGBTQ2 community. Over the course of a number of class action settlements—including the Canadian Armed Forces purge settlement, from the public service point of view, and the Merlo/Davidson settlement with respect to the RCMP—we've trained our staff. We actually set up a dedicated unit to be able to respond to claims that were coming in with respect to these class actions.

That training and the experience they've had in terms of interacting with members of, perhaps, communities that have been affected or impacted by military sexual trauma, through the purge or other things, have been expanded and extended to other front-line staff as well. The experience they've had, in terms of learning how some of these concerns are being brought forward from the veterans community, is now being used to help case managers, our veterans service agents and our call centre employees. We are making sure it is being spread so that experience and that sensitivity can be brought through the entire organization.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** We heard from the witnesses quite a bit that empathy is really needed when having conversations, especially because it brings up their pain from the past. Thank you for that.

I'm switching gears.

A substantial part of the ministry's budget, as you know, goes towards the veterans independence program, which provides veterans with care at home. Could you share with us a bit more about that program and whether you've received any positive feedback from veterans thus far?

• (1525)

**Mr. Steven Harris:** This is a program that's been in place for many years. It was originally designed to help World War I veterans who were aging rapidly. We wanted to make sure they could stay in their homes. Research has shown, not only among veterans but also among the general population, that staying in your home is a means of staying healthier and well longer. If we can assist you in your home, that's much better for everybody.

The kinds of services provided include things like housekeeping, groundskeeping and snow removal. We may have people come in to help with things like cleaning, washing or meal preparation. This allows people to stay in their homes longer and also provides a bit of respite for other individuals in the family, who may have some responsibilities with respect to caring for a veteran with those requirements, as well.

It's a program that's been in place for a long period of time, quite successfully. In fact, as we move into a postpandemic environment with some of the challenges we face regarding long-term COVID care, there are many conversations around how we can help people stay healthier in their homes longer. Other jurisdictions at the provincial level are looking at something similar to the veterans in-

dependence program to do that same sort of thing for populations across Canada.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** Speaking of the pandemic, we know the impact it's had on our veterans from a mental health perspective. I just saw in the budget that we announced \$140 million over five years.

Could you quickly share with us the plans for those funds?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** The mental health benefit will allow people to access treatment for mental health immediately upon application. In the past, people had to wait for a decision to come from Veterans Affairs. As we've spoken about, sometimes those decisions take too long. We recognize that immediate access to mental health is important. Any time spent waiting for mental health approaches, services or treatment can be too long and allows for somebody to get worse, frankly, in terms of their mental health. This will allow people, upon application, to immediately access mental health treatment. While that decision is being made, they'll still be able to access treatment to ensure that their conditions are being treated immediately.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** Thanks for answering the spectrum.

Thank you.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Valdez.

Mr. Desilets, the floor is now yours for two and a half minutes.

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

My question is for Ms. Meunier or Mr. Harris.

The Department of Veterans Affairs is not really the most visible or the most appealing, but it is one of the only ones working directly with human beings, human beings who are often having trouble. We can't be indifferent to that.

We all know that the case managers are doing everything they can, and we understand that they are snowed under. However, the human beings we're talking about need support and they need tools and guidance. A few months ago, a witness presented us with the idea of creating liaison officer positions. Their role would be to help veterans and connect them with the case managers. They would help veterans to understand where they stand, what they have to do, what stage their case is at, and so on.

I would like to get your opinion on that.

Might creating that kind of position be useful? Could this liaison officer play a supplemental role?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Thank you for the question.

I think the officers currently working in veteran services already play that role to some degree. It may not be as defined as the liaison officer role you described, but I think this kind of role exists in various areas in the department.

We are always on the lookout for any new idea that could help us support veterans and offer them the best possible service. If there is another way of providing services, we would like to consider it.



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

We have received some information relating to commemoration activities over the summer.

Is something being planned?

We are in the process of planning our vacation.

• (1530)

[*English*]

**Ms. Amy Meunier:** With regard to commemoration, we are always planning. Of course, we are coming upon the 80th anniversary of Dieppe in August.

We're also looking to commemorate and recognize more peacetime or modern operations. We're looking at activities to recognize the Red River flood. We have a variety of activities. We do keep an up-to-date calendar on our website, and we'd be happy to keep you informed of larger events and activities happening throughout your region and across the country.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Meunier.

Mr. Desilets, your speaking time is up.

Ms. Blaney, the floor is yours for two and a half minutes.

[*English*]

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

I want to start off by saying that I disagree with Ms. Meunier. I want to point out to everybody at this table that, in fact, in 2015 and 2017, the letter to the Minister of Veterans Affairs from the Prime Minister said directly to address this issue, and then it disappeared. I'm not going to allow it to disappear.

I also want to point out that VAC does in fact oversee both the OSB and the pension clause, so I understand that there are multiple ministries that are involved in this, but the fact that so many veterans across this country who have served our country and so many RCMP who have served our country worry about their partners being able to live in the same house when they die is unacceptable.

This question is for Mr. Harris.

The veterans survivor pension does not in fact apply to RCMP officers, and those veterans do fall under the minister's mandate. What is VAC doing to accommodate the needs of survivors of the RCMP veterans?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Well, there are survivor pensions, so when we speak of pensions that are in place to support disabilities that have been received as a result of their service, whether that is with the RCMP or whether that's through service with the Canadian Armed Forces, there are benefits for survivors that apply in that instance. I think that's.... Survivors and dependants can receive benefits as a result of that.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I'm talking about survivor benefits, so I will say that at this point there is not anything for RCMP. In fact, in my conversations with the amazing veterans from the RCMP, who do tremendous work in fundraising to support women who have been left—largely women—who have lost their husbands and now have

very little.... I just want to point out as well that we had a conversation...and more are coming. I just want to say that my office is inundated with these stories, and when I hear these stories, I just know that it's an injustice. That is my job: to voice that.

I think of Norma, who presented to us and who will be looking after her granddaughter who has special needs. When he passes, she will be living on significantly less, so part of their plan is how they're going to face those challenges.

I just want to correct the record, that there are not the supports for the RCMP who retire and that there are supports for the veterans. There's a huge gap there and it is absolutely under this department to fix it, and I certainly hope you do.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I do apologize about my having misspoke about the RCMP.

**The Chair:** There are 10 seconds left.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I think that's good for me.

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

Let's go back to Mr. Frank Caputo for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Thank you, Chair. I'll be giving my time to MP Wagantall.

**The Chair:** Okay.

Mrs. Wagantall, you have five minutes. Please go ahead.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I really appreciate the feedback I'm getting today on this benefits navigator online program.

I want to clarify something. Mr. Harris, you indicated that downtime has been very minimal and it's whenever there needs to be changes to what is offered on there. I would appreciate it if I could get a log of those downtimes and the reason for each of them, not going into great detail about whatever change was made, but so that we have clarity.

The timeline isn't making sense to me. From what I've heard from veterans who are directly involved with it, it came about when the court case around the new veterans charter with the Afghan veterans was put in abeyance before the 2015 election. This was part of the agreement with all of that, and this program went live online in 2016.

I'm not sure if we're comparing the same thing at this point. If we could get clarity on that, I would really appreciate it if you could bring that to committee.

I appreciate that these tools are there, and I think they're really important. However, if there's no follow-up to get any sense of when a veteran goes through this process and sees that they think these are things they would qualify for and then they don't.... There would need to be changes made, I would think, to make that clearer to them when they're applying. It's one thing for a program to say, "This is something you deserve," and there's the other side of that whole coin, which you guys have to deal with, and that is getting the proof required from those veterans.

I've heard a lot about benefit of the doubt and how much more it's being applied now than it was in the past, specifically because of the backlogs. Is there any way of monitoring that as well? Say someone lifts 100 pounds of gas in multiple containers onto a truck over and over again, and has back injuries, but they have no proof of that. They were a reservist at 16, 17 or 18 years old, and now they're hitting their late seventies or eighties.

How is that being implemented in our programs at VAC to improve the way we're treating our veterans in their circumstances?

Ms. Meunier, did you want to respond?

• (1535)

**Ms. Amy Meunier:** I'm happy to, if my colleague is all right with that.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Sure. Go ahead.

**Ms. Amy Meunier:** We certainly take that into account now. You talked about the benefit of doubt, which is a principle laid out in our legislation and regulation. What you're talking about is how we use the evidence that someone may experience by virtue of their repetitive job or the nature of their work over a period of time. We have tools, which we refer to as entitlement eligibility guidelines. That is precisely what they do. They take positions or military occupations and the physical or mental elements connected to that type of trade over periods of time, whether it's five or 10 years. Our officers are able to use those.

You gave a great example. For someone carrying a rucksack, a paratrooper jumping or parachuting for 20 years, these injuries would be highly probable; therefore, we apply the benefit of the doubt to award proactively. We also have some related to cumulative joint trauma tools.

We are definitely moving in that direction. We have quite a few of those EEGs and we'll continue to build more.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** There are a lot of different injuries. I learned from one veteran who had a helicopter accident and got treatment for his back. He did not realize that the back is split into four different areas, and if you only apply for one area, you do not get support for the others.

Is there not a way to make this more accessible to veterans who would not know that they have to make sure that they and their doctors have to apply for the entire back?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** There are a couple of things. One is that we use the diagnosis that doctors give us. A veteran will have a diagnosis from a doctor as to the extent of their injuries. If they've put in applications, we'll look at what we can do to respond to the injuries or illness that they may have suffered on that front.

It goes back to what the deputy spoke about in the first hour about a modernization of a table of disabilities. We use an extensive document of a table of disabilities that touches on all various aspects of the human body. It is a very intricate and complex piece that we need to simplify to make it easier for veterans and for doctors.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** That would be awesome. Thank you so much.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

The last intervention is going to come from Mr. Darrell Samson for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Samson, please open your mike.

• (1540)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** I'm sorry. I had unplugged my headphones for a moment, because that gave me clearer sound.

**The Chair:** Right.

The floor is yours.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Thank you for your understanding.

[*English*]

Thank you, all, for being here. It's been a long session. I wish I could give you a little pause, but I won't be able to. The chair is hard on tasks today.

Thank you all for showing up today and giving the information, and providing key insight on the many questions that were put to you. It's been a very good session for sure, for all of us.

I'd like to talk about the transition services suite. We haven't talked about that a lot, and I hear about it often from military individuals who are looking toward retiring and becoming a veteran, or those who are released. It's a big issue.

I know that we've done a lot of work, Veterans Affairs as well as DND, in trying to facilitate the process, which is so crucial. I'm a believer that before they leave, veterans should have all the information that is required.

Could you speak about what we've done so far and where you see us going in order to improve that process?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Thanks very much for the question. I think we have made a lot of progress.

We work very, very closely with the Canadian Armed Forces, and in particular with the transition group that's been established to help military members transition professionally and effectively out of the military, whether that's due to a retirement or related to medical issues and conditions.

What we've started to do in a much better way over the course of the last couple of years is to integrate those services and make sure that the information around Veterans Affairs—what priorities and accessibility Canadian Armed Forces members may have and what programs and services—is provided to them as early as possible. That's so that they can understand it, make applications, get decisions and actually make decisions around where they want to go.

Somebody transitioning out of the military may have concerns around a post-military employment career. We offer things like a career transition service, which will help military members who are transitioning to a post-military life build job skills, understand how their skills from the military may translate into the private sector, or even the public sector, and ensure that's in place. People can access that a year ahead of their release out of the Canadian Armed Forces, to understand what skills they might be able to get; what employment they might be most suited for; and to actually get job preparation skills, interview skills and other things, as military members don't often go through interview processes.

Veterans Affairs does transition interviews with Canadian Armed Forces members who are leaving the forces, to assess their needs, assess their state of readiness and well-being, and to assess what needs they might have. That might be issues with medical elements. They may need to continue physiotherapy that they started in the Canadian Armed Forces and transition that to their post-military life. We may need to help them on that front.

Some of them have more severe medical needs and are maybe being released medically by the military. We want to make sure that all of the benefits and services they might require are in place as well. That would include disability benefits, things like treatment, access to prescription drugs or other things as well, and in addition to that, rehabilitation. If they require some rehabilitation, whether that's from a job-skills point of view, from a physical point of view, we can put all of these things in place.

What we've started to do is intervene earlier and earlier in the system, with the support of our Canadian Armed Forces colleagues, to make sure that veterans have a full opportunity to plan for what their post-military life will be and what they want it to look like, and to know that the department can support them.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Thank you for that very complete answer.

As a follow-up, in terms of My VAC Account, I'm hearing more and more about how positive it is for both those serving and those who are veterans now.

Are we able to indicate whether there is a big uptake or increase in active members? The sooner the active members provide and receive information, the better off we're going to be in the transition. Have we seen a bigger uptake from those who are still within the Canadian Armed Forces?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** It forms a part of the transition process as well. We'd love to have people on the My VAC Account as early as possible, while recognizing that if you're perhaps still 10 years out from releasing from the Canadian Armed Forces, maybe that's too soon. We're trying to find the sweet spot of having active members sign up as they get closer to a transition point of view so that they can get access to all of their benefits and services and—

• (1545)

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Have we seen an increase?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** We have seen an increase in the amount of both the people and the Canadian Armed Forces members who've—

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** I have about 10 seconds left, but this is just a little advice I'm hearing from speaking to some universities. I made reference to that with the minister earlier in the meeting.

I would like to see some real and concrete strategies put in place where VAC...and maybe it's happening. I don't know. Maybe you could add to that at another time. What can we do, in conversations with the universities, to try to blend the information and have better outreach to veterans who could access that? The universities are excited, but they don't have all the info on how they could identify the veterans and make contact with them. So that's an idea.

Thanks.

**The Chair:** You have 15 seconds, Mr. Harris, if you'd like to say something.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** We continue our outreach and work with universities and colleges with respect to the education and training benefit. We want to see them understand it well and promote it well amongst our veteran community. That would be great.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Harris.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have to conclude the meeting, because we have votes to hold.

On behalf of the committee members and myself, I would like to thank the witnesses for being with us today. I would particularly like to thank the representatives of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

[English]

Thank you to Mr. Steven Harris, assistant deputy minister, service delivery branch; Ms. Sara Lantz, acting assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and corporate services branch; and Ms. Amy Meunier, assistant deputy minister, strategic policy and commemoration.

[Translation]

Thank you very much.

Before moving on to the votes, I am going to ask the witnesses to please disconnect.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** You're welcome, Mr. Harris.

Members of the committee, we are continuing the meeting.

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), the committee will now examine the Main Estimates for the year ending on March 31, 2023.

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$1,248,089,396

Vote 5—Grants and contributions.....\$4,220,894,997

(Votes 1 and 5 carried on division.)

VETERANS REVIEW AND APPEAL BOARD

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$9,906,136

(Vote 1 carried on division)

**The Chair:** Shall Votes 1 and 5 under Department of Veterans and Affairs and Vote 1 under Veterans Review and Appeal Board be reported to the House, less the amounts granted in Interim Supply?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

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

• (1550)

[*English*]

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** Mr. Chair, I just want to wish all women, mothers and mothers-in-law a happy Mother's Day.

**The Chair:** Yes.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Mr. Chair, I think the clerk was trying—

**The Chair:** —to say something?

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** —to send us a message.

**The Chair:** Okay, thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Taquet, do you have something to say?

**The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Cédric Taquet):** No, I have nothing to add. I was just trying to tell Ms. Roberts simply to give you the message.

**The Chair:** Right.

Thank you, Ms. Roberts. We join you in wishing all mothers a happy Mother's Day on Sunday and thanking them for everything they do for us.

Thank you and have a good weekend, ladies and gentlemen.

The meeting is adjourned.

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