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# Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

EVIDENCE

**NUMBER 047**

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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg





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• (1555)

[Translation]

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

Welcome to meeting number 47 of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. We have a number of witnesses with us this afternoon.

[English]

We have the opportunity to go until six o'clock. If witnesses would like to break for five minutes, because I know you've been here since three o'clock, just let me know and we'll adjust that.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on Monday, October 3, 2022, the committee is resuming its study on the experience of women veterans.

[Translation]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format.

[English]

Before we welcome our witnesses, I would like to provide a trigger warning. We may be discussing experiences related to general health and mental health. This may be triggering to viewers, members or staff with similar experiences. If you feel distressed or need help, please advise the clerk.

[Translation]

I would like to remind all the witnesses and members of the committee to please address their comments through the chair.

I would like to introduce the witnesses that we are pleased to welcome.

[English]

From Coding for Veterans, we have Mr. Jeff Musson, executive director; and Elena Vazquez, master warrant officer, retired, student. From Helmets to Hardhats, we have Joseph Maloney, executive director; and Cora Saunders, outreach specialist, women and LGBTQ2+. From the National Association of Career Colleges, we have Michael Sangster, chief executive officer, and we have Patricia Henry, the military and veterans partnership program connect coordinator from Willis College. From Prince's Trust Canada, we have Kathleen Kilgour, senior program manager, and Kristin Topping, program ambassador.

I'd like to tell the witnesses that each group will have five minutes for their opening remarks. If you have much to say, let me

know, and I will ask the members of the committee for unanimous consent to allow you to continue with your opening remarks.

We will start right away with Coding for Veterans.

Mr. Musson, you have the floor for five minutes. Please go ahead.

• (1600)

**Mr. Jeff Musson (Executive Director, Coding for Veterans):** Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you.

I'm the executive director of Coding for Veterans, an organization that partners with the University of Ottawa to deliver software development and cybersecurity retraining. The program is delivered 100% online.

Earlier this year, we had an economic impact study done on our program by Accenture. There were some great findings that came from that report, which I've circulated amongst members.

First of all, someone who leaves the military and gets a job versus someone who leaves the military and comes to our program and then gets employment will typically see an increase of about \$30,000 a year in their annual salary. In addition, it puts them on a trajectory similar to someone who has a four-year university degree. The government, through either the ETB fund or other mechanisms to fund tuition, will actually see a return on their investment for that veteran in under two years. What's interesting is that the average age of someone in our program is 39 years old. By the time they retire, they will have pumped an additional \$1.3 million into Canada's GDP.

There are really two key recommendations that we'd like the committee to consider, not only for female veterans but for veterans in general. First, can veterans access their education transition benefit after they have secured a date of release? Secondly, can Veterans Affairs Canada hold security clearances while students are in the retraining program to then be given to employers? Both of those recommendations are regulatory in nature and don't require a law to be passed.

I brought one of our superstar students along, Elena Vazquez, to talk about her release from the military.

**Ms. Elena Vazquez (Master Warrant Officer (Retired), Student, Coding for Veterans):** Good day, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. I was invited here today by Coding for Veterans to address the committee as a woman veteran who has just transitioned from the service to civilian life.

I am currently a student with Coding for Veterans in the cybersecurity program. After a full career in the Canadian Armed Forces in the administration and human resources field, I decided to go in a totally different direction. I would say that the CAF played a role in helping me find a new purpose.

My military experience as a soldier was gained through my time in the reserve force and the regular force in Canada and abroad. I proudly wore the army uniform for 35 years, and I had an exciting and fulfilling career during those years. I believe that the military has impacted me positively, and it helped me to transition with the confidence and tools to succeed in my post-military life.

Two years prior to retiring, I knew I was going to be released medically as I was no longer physically fit. In those last two years I attended a second career assistance network seminar, which is commonly known as a SCAN seminar. There is so much valuable information provided at these seminars that I actually did it twice in those two years. The SCAN seminar does a good job of preparing CAF members and providing all the resources necessary for retirement.

Attending those seminars really made me reflect on what I had accomplished and think about what could be next. I needed a new purpose, something that would be as exciting and challenging as the CAF.

I knew one thing: I didn't want to go back to administration or to manage personnel. From what I learned during the SCAN seminar, I carefully considered my passions and interests, and from that information technology seemed to be a good fit. Within the IT field, cybersecurity looked to be the right choice for me as it is a field that can be rewarding as well as challenging, and it's a field where there's a need to protect and defend the information and systems upon which everyone relies. It is not very different from one of the core responsibilities that CAF has in defending Canada and its interests, something with which I am very familiar.

I cannot speak for everyone, but my transition out of the military went very smoothly. The only thing that caused me some degree of anxiety was finding a family doctor. For the duration of your career you know that the CAF has you completely covered medically, but once you become a civilian, you are on your own. It's an eye-opener.

I was fortunate to have found a doctor 19 months after my release. I know many who have not been so lucky and I also know it is a national problem. This is, for me, the one area in which I would recommend a change. For many, leaving the military is difficult enough without the additional stress of finding a family doctor.

I am now well on the way to becoming a cybersecurity specialist. I have been studying for the last two years and I'm enjoying this

new chapter. Although at times it's difficult, I keep soldiering on at my own pace.

Thank you.

● (1605)

**The Chair:** Thank you, master warrant officer, retired, Ms. Vazquez.

Now let's go to Helmets to Hardhats, and I'd like to invite Mr. Maloney, executive director, to speak for five minutes or less.

Please, go ahead.

**Mr. Joseph Maloney (Executive Director, Helmets to Hardhats):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee.

My name is Joe Maloney. I am the founder of the Helmets to Hardhats program, both in the United States and in Canada. I have been the executive director for Helmets to Hardhats in Canada for the past 10 years. I am not a military person. I'm a boilermaker by trade and also a lifelong trade unionist.

I started the Helmets to Hardhats program when I saw a large number of veterans transitioning from the military and not having a viable second career to pursue in civilian life to continue to support themselves and their families. Knowing that many of their soft skills and technical skills could be transferable into the skilled trades, I created the Helmets to Hardhats program with the intention to ease the transition process for veterans and the military community into a second career in a unionized construction industry that offered the highest wages, pension plans, excellent benefits and the safest work sites.

When a woman veteran joins a unionized skilled trade, she is immediately treated like an equal. Working under a collective agreement ensures that women are receiving the same pay, the same benefit package and the same safe working conditions as all their male counterparts. At Helmets to Hardhats, our program is open to all veterans, meaning that if you have completed basic training and have been honourably discharged, we will help you find a new career with one of the trades. Our program has always been available to women, and over the past 10 years we have referred almost 2,500 veterans overall, with 453 of them being women veterans who are interested in joining the trades.

Most recently, we've been able to expand our outreach into the veteran community, specifically recruiting female veterans. This work has been made possible with the support of Veterans Affairs Canada funding through the veteran and family well-being fund. We've been able to hire two female outreach advisers: Cora, my colleague who is with me today, a veteran herself, and Jamie McMillan, a journeyman ironworker.

Helmets to Hardhats recognizes that many females leaving the military might be concerned about joining another profession that is typically male dominated. However, Canada's unionized construction industry continues to break down barriers and biases to ensure that all women and gender-diverse individuals have the chance to find success in the skilled trades.

Helmets to Hardhats is also ensuring that our program is becoming more inclusive. We've continued to partner with like-minded organizations such as the Office to Advance Women Apprentices; In The Trades, a career pathway magazine; and apprenticesearch.com to ensure that our group's combined efforts are developing a diverse and inclusive skilled trades workforce, including outreach directed towards female veterans.

On top of expanding our recruitment efforts into the female veteran demographic, we're also exploring new opportunities to create mentorship programs to ensure that our female clients have allies and mentors as they transition into the skilled trades. As I said, Helmets to Hardhats has been very successful over the past 10 years, and we hope to continue to grow our program and reach more women veterans. One way we hope to do this is to follow a program that we did in Ontario recently to have female veterans and all veterans be pre-qualified for specific safety training programs that allow them to get on a construction site, things like WHMIS, Fall Arrest and confined space training, because right now you can't get on a construction site unless you have that training and that training can cost an employer up to about \$2,800. If we could have veterans complete that training before they leave the military, that would assist them in getting hired quicker and starting their second careers a lot faster. It would also help our employer community.

With that, I'd like to hand this over now, Mr. Chairman, to my colleague, Cora, who can speak to some of her lived experiences as a women veteran and share some success stories of veterans who have recently joined our program.

Thank you.

• (1610)

**Ms. Cora Saunders (Outreach Specialist, Women and LGBTQ2+, Helmets to Hardhats):** Thank you, Joe.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to Veterans Affairs Canada for having us here to discuss the important topic of the experiences of women veterans.

As Joe said, I was hired just over a year ago, along with Jamie McMillan, to act as an outreach specialist for women and members of the LGBTQ2+ community within the military. May I say that it has been an honour this past year to work with Joe and the H2H team.

For background, I am a veteran with 32 years of combined service with the regular force and the reserve force, both of which I found very rewarding. Joe has already given you a snapshot of what H2H does to help veterans and their family members transition into civilian careers in the building trades, but I wanted to share a couple of success stories with you, including my son's.

My son's father was also—

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Ms. Saunders. I'm sorry to interrupt you.

We already have more than five minutes, so I will ask members if I have unanimous consent to allow Ms. Saunders three or four minutes to complete her remarks. I know that we already have her speech. Is it okay?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** Ms. Saunders, please go ahead.

**Ms. Cora Saunders:** My son's father was also a veteran and did at least three peacekeeping tours during his 28 years of service. Not very long after his last tour—a year or so maybe—he was killed in a traffic accident. We were divorced at the time. My son was 11 years old. My son experienced a lot of trials and tribulations throughout his teenage years and wasn't able to find steady employment, but with H2H, my son—who would be considered a military dependant—is now a member of the millwright union in Calgary, Alberta and is doing amazing. He is an advocate of H2H and tells as many people as he can about us.

Joe mentioned that we have partnered with organizations such as the Office to Advance Women Apprentices. Through that office, one of our clients, Diana Scott, a woman veteran, found our organization. She's an advocate for H2H and all women veterans as she encourages others that it's never too late in life to learn new things such as joining the skilled trades. We are currently assisting Diana in finding a rewarding career as a millwright in the unionized construction industry.

In my personal experiences, there were times when I wondered what my military experience would have been had I identified as a man or if I was married to someone of a much higher rank than me. One moment where I felt let down by my country was when I had completed five years of a posting and my son was struggling with no family around. I requested for us to be posted back to his home town of St. John's, Newfoundland. I made a formal request, as did another member of the unit at the time because his son was also not adjusting very well to the new location. This person was two ranks higher than me and was a man, but had only spent one year in this location. His request was granted and mine was denied.

I was told that I was not experiencing anything different from any other parent. Quite frankly, I was shocked and disappointed. The situation made me reflect on all my identities as a CAF member, a woman and a single mother. Not getting the support that I needed made me vulnerable. Why was my family being treated differently from my male colleague?

I had other moments in my career where things didn't go in my favour, including being involved in a sexual assault misconduct lawsuit. I don't want to get into detail today, but in 2011 after transferring through the reserve in my own province, I was assaulted. I was blindsided; it came out of nowhere. That incident made me question everything about the military and about people in uniform. I always hear people say that it happened because of the way she was dressed. Well, I was wearing my uniform at the time and I was going to one of my favourite functions, which was the soldiers' Christmas dinner. That night was ruined for me.

This incident will stay with me forever, but like many of the other women involved in the class action lawsuit, we will not let these experiences define us. No system or organization is perfect and we still have a lot of work to do. That is why I'm committed to working for organizations like H2H and communicating with VAC daily about what can be done better to assist women in the military.

Over the past couple of years, I have seen major improvements and I want to continue to be part of the solution, so that other women CAF members and veterans can continue to have more positive experiences and look back on their time in the military with pride.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1615)

**The Chair:** Thank you for your opening statement.

Now let's go to the National Association of Career Colleges. I'd like to invite Mr. Michael Sangster to present for five minutes or less, please.

**Mr. Michael Sangster (Chief Executive Officer, National Association of Career Colleges):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, committee members and fellow witnesses.

I'm pleased to be joining you again today to contribute to this committee's ongoing commitment to bettering the lives of veterans across Canada.

I commend MP Blaney for suggesting this study and for focusing us all on this issue. Studies like this bring attention to national associations like ours and force us to stop and think for a moment. We greatly appreciate it.

I'd like to take a moment before I get started to thank all of those who are currently serving in Canada's armed forces and the four women veterans who have joined us today to share their own personal stories. It's greatly appreciated. You have our complete support and thanks. Your commitment to our nation is truly inspiring.

Let me start by asking Patricia Henry, a retired colonel from the Canadian Armed Forces, to speak to you about her own personal experiences as a veteran accessing VAC educational programs and now as the leader of a NACC member institution supporting retired and retiring members.

**Colonel (Retired) Patricia Henry (Military and Veterans Partnership Program Connect Coordinator, Willis College, National Association of Career Colleges):** Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to speak today.

My name is Patricia Henry. I served in the Canadian Armed Forces for over 37 years and retired as a colonel in 2019. Since my retirement, I've had the opportunity to go back to school and access programs from Veterans Affairs Canada, or VAC—in particular the VAC education and training benefit.

I joined a team of veterans, at Willis College here in Ottawa and nationally online, called the military and veterans partnership team, or MVP. The role of the MVP team is to assist veterans back at school. We are a team of three veterans on staff whose sole function is to help the admissions advisers, financial advisers and instructors, but most importantly to help the veterans with anything and everything that might be a barrier to their graduation.

Through our research, we know that female veterans prefer to speak to other female veterans, which is part of my role. We also know that a flexible schedule is important for female veterans. That is built right into all our programs, whether it be face to face, remotely or online. We connect with veterans during the admissions process and stay with them throughout their time back at school, offering peer support.

Veterans back at school reach out to us for assistance on a wide variety of issues. That includes helping veterans navigate their time at school during a family crisis, addressing issues that might arise in the classroom and assisting veterans in understanding and accessing support from VAC, just to name a few.

Finally, we have worked extensively with all the staff at our colleges on how to work effectively with veterans to help ensure that our schools are veteran-friendly. In the end, we have worked with hundreds of veterans back at school to help them complete their educations and find meaningful and gainful employment following their military service.

Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the invitation to speak today.

**Mr. Michael Sangster:** Thank you, Patricia, for those words and for sharing your own experiences.

Willis College and Cape Breton career college are leading from the front on best practices supporting women veterans in our sector. I felt it was important to hear from a college on what they are doing today to offer specialized and focused support for women veterans. They have an extensive veterans support program, but I need to reinforce that they offer additional focused support for women veterans specifically.

With my remaining time, I'd like to focus on what we've done to support veterans since our last appearance before this committee, and we want to do more. Our last appearance sparked our thinking and led to our participation in national round tables and departmental discussions on how to better support veterans and active military. In the coming month, NACC and our members will be launching two new initiatives to support veterans and active military as they transition from services, and for the families of currently serving members. We'll be extending invitations to all of you to learn more about that when the news comes out.

Every day, employers, businesses, associations and trade groups are calling on us for well-trained, skilled workers. We believe from our experiences, and from the experiences of our colleges, that women veterans are the perfect solution for these employers.

To build on my last appearance, I would again strongly recommend that the government convene an ongoing veterans skills and training table, including regulated career colleges and employers, to keep everyone working and focused on these issues all year long, and that we ensure that a gender-informed, evidence-based lens be applied to ensure equitable outcomes for women veterans. Establishing a regular and ongoing working table is one way to ensure collaboration and keep us all focused on what matters most, which is getting more veterans into more jobs through the best training possible.

With that, Mr. Chair, I will conclude my remarks and await questions.

• (1620)

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Mr. Sangster.

Now we will go to the final group, which is Prince's Trust Canada.

Ms. Kathleen Kilgour, senior program manager, you have five minutes or less, please.

**Ms. Kathleen Kilgour (Senior Program Manager, Prince's Trust Canada):** Thank you for having us here once again today.

Over the past 11 years, we have been collaborating with Veteran Affairs Canada and the Canadian Armed Forces, helping transitioning members and veterans bridge the gap between military service and civilian life. For those unfamiliar with Prince's Trust Canada, we are the flagship charity for His Majesty the King. We focus on transforming lives and building sustainable communities.

Operation entrepreneur is a core program of Prince's Trust Canada. We provide the transitioning military and veteran community with the training, tools, resources and opportunities they need to build confidence, develop networks and, through entrepreneurship, move forward with their lives.

Through our business basics workshops, we help veterans explore entrepreneurship, and we help them assess if this is the second career option for them or the one they're interested in pursuing at this time. We also look at how this small business will fit into their lives and their own vision for their future. Then, for those who choose this path, we have an intensive seven-day boot camp, mentoring opportunities and wraparound support, plus an entrepreneurial ecosystem necessary to make the business a reality.

Since 2012, more than 4,500 still-serving members and veterans have learned the basics of starting a business and discovering their own entrepreneurial mindset through our programs. More than 700 businesses have been started in every corner of Canada, from construction to consulting to horse therapy and everything in between.

Veterans who have graduated from our programs and veteran entrepreneurs everywhere have created jobs, and they've also used entrepreneurship to take control of their lives. For veterans, as we know, entrepreneurship provides three key elements necessary for a successful transition to civilian life: a new life purpose, a new group identity and a new opportunity to serve. Self-employment and entrepreneurship are very attractive second-career options for veterans, as they can leverage their military experience and skills in new ways. Additionally, it can accommodate mental or physical health challenges and offers a flexible alternative to traditional employment.

The average age of today's veteran is in the low forties, around 41 years old. That is very young and mid-career for most people, with their best years still ahead of them. However, in some cases, including for many women, the impact of military service and military culture has taken a devastating toll on their bodies and minds. For women especially, this has resulted in a post-service future very different from the one they imagined for themselves and, by choice or by necessity, a disproportionate number of women veterans, 25%, are turning to entrepreneurship.

Prince's Trust Canada is very proud to be creating these opportunities and spaces for our veterans to succeed. We will continue to advocate and invest in veterans who want or need to make entrepreneurship their next career and choose to take this path. This is a population of Canadians who are ready and waiting for attention, more help and your support.

I will now turn it over to Major Kristin Topping.

**Ms. Kristin Topping (Program Ambassador, Prince's Trust Canada):** Mr. Chairman and committee members, thank you for inviting us here today.

I was medically released from the CAF in July 2020, following 22 years of service. I suffered a traumatic brain injury in December 2016, and during the initial part of my recovery, I was diagnosed with a rare debilitating and progressive genetic condition. The cumulative effects of my medical situation resulted not only in medical and physical deficits, but in a complete loss of self and community, and a sense of institutional abandonment and betrayal.

In 2018, when I was told that I was being medically released, I panicked. I had no idea what I was going to do. I joined the military when I was 17. I grew up in the CAF and didn't know any different. I'm an environmental engineer by academic training, with a unique specialty that I thought only rendered my skills attractive to employers within DND, the RCMP or companies that produced military equipment solutions.

I've always had a passion for horticulture, and I've curated an extensive rare tropical plant collection. My friend convinced me to consider turning this passion into an avenue of self-employment.

Enter the Prince's Trust Canada.

Over the course of a one-day orientation and a seven-day entrepreneurial boot camp, I decided that starting a business was what I wanted to do. The operation entrepreneur program showed me that I had skills that would directly translate into my own successful business. They were skills that were innate and skills that were trained into people who have successful military careers. These skills include leadership, time management, project management, effective written and oral communication, task delegation and budgeting, just to name a few.

The Prince's Trust Canada provided me with the supplemental training, mentorship and, most importantly, confidence to turn an idea into a business. In June 2019, Sweetlife Flora, an e-commerce shop for tropical plants and plant care products, was opened.

Owning my own business has maintained my sense of purpose, and I found a community of like-minded people in both the entrepreneurship and plant enthusiast spaces. It took me years to realize how unhealthy the CAF environment was, specifically as a woman, due to normalized toxic masculinity and the ingrained acceptance of misogynistic behaviour.

Many women leaving the military lack the confidence to start their own business, oftentimes because of systematic mistreatment. The transitional training offered by the Prince's Trust Canada, for me, has been life-affirming, and I believe women veterans need this program to truly understand their full potential for a successful transition.

Thank you very much.

• (1625)

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

Thank you to all of the witnesses for your opening remarks and the work that you're doing to give more opportunities to veterans.

Now we're going to start the first round of questions. It's going to be six minutes for each member.

I'd like to invite Mrs. Cathay Wagantall for six minutes.

Please, go ahead.

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

Through the chair, thank you all for being here today and for what you're contributing to this study.

I heard of three different areas where I feel there are barriers that VAC and the Canadian Armed Forces need to work on to better facilitate what I was hearing today.

First of all, I thank you, Mr. Sangster, for mentioning.... We've had you all here before. You indicated that since then, you're beginning to put far more of a real emphasis on reaching out to women veterans. I appreciate your frankness in that, and I think we're in a good space if we move forward in that way.

A number of you talked about the adjustments in moving from full-time service into the reserves first, before moving on to something else, and that it was a bit of a softer landing or a direction that you chose to take. However, as it stands, CAF members who do this are not eligible for the education and training benefit.

To the women who are here, did any of you experience that yourselves, because you've talked about serving in the reserves prior to...?

Go ahead, Cora.

**Ms. Cora Saunders:** With the education benefit, there's a big pot of money and they're saying, "If you have so many years in the military, when you get out...". That's over and above vocational rehab if you're medically released.

In my pot, because I spent 20-plus years there, there is actually \$80,000 for me to retrain and do pretty much any course that I want at a college or university, which I have taken advantage of in the last two or three years.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Was it available to you as you left and went into the reserves?

**Ms. Cora Saunders:** Yes, they counted my time. I came out with a 27-year pension, so I had 20 years-plus service.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Was there a timeline on having to initiate that?



• (1630)

**Ms. Cora Saunders:** I was late out of the gate in starting that. I don't know if I was 100% aware of it when I got out. When I got out, I released from the regular force, so I sat down with VAC and they said that if I could amalgamate my trade into a civilian trade at a college, they would fund it, which they did and which I didn't do.

Later on, I discovered that there was an extra pot of money there. I think I have until 2028 to spend that money. I started to spend it maybe two years ago, and I'm going to spend as much as I can.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** That awareness of what's available to you is really key in trying to make those plans.

**Ms. Cora Saunders:** Yes.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** You also mentioned something else. This is something that we've heard from others who've come, although not in this women's study. A veteran is trained in a particular trade during their time in the Canadian Armed Forces, and you become highly competent in those areas. However, when you're released, you're unable to find work in a civilian-equivalent industry simply because you don't have the written qualifications that are in the civilian world for all of that work that you have done within your service for this country.

Is this something that should definitely be changed in the way that Canadian Armed Forces and VAC operate? Should there be an equivalent as you're studying where you have that paperwork when you release?

Mr. Maloney.

**Mr. Joseph Maloney:** When a veteran registers with Helmets to Hardhats and they decide they'd like to become a pipefitter, an electrician or a carpenter, we refer them to that geographic area they want to live in. They meet with that trade union and the apprentice coordinator, and they go over the experience they had in the military. Then they compare it to what the civilian apprenticeship program looks like, and they're credited so many hours toward that apprenticeship program.

There's only one trade right now that, when you leave the military—I forget the code name—you can join the millwright union as a full journey person and write your Red Seal.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Thank you. I appreciate hearing that.

I have one more brief question in regard to entrepreneurship. We did have another witness come and testify who has a remarkable business, I think, already in the works. However, they commented that this is not something that Veterans Affairs and the Canadian Armed Forces have seen as a high priority, enabling women to take on those business opportunities, which I think—sorry, guys—we're really good at. It's not that you aren't. I'm digging a hole and I'm not going to get out of it.

Patricia, can you share a little about the women who do come? How many succeed? How good of an opportunity is this for those who are saying this is a direction they'd really like to go?

**Col (Ret'd) Patricia Henry:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Do you mean specifically in the area of business?

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Yes.

**Col (Ret'd) Patricia Henry:** That is one thing that we have found at Willis where I am working. That is what women want. They're not interested in cyber, which a lot of people are focused on, but the female veterans do want business. That's consistent with what everyone else here has said.

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

I have one minute.

Perhaps I'll go to Prince's Trust Canada. Would one of you would like to speak to that?

**Ms. Kathleen Kilgour:** Absolutely.

We have found that a disproportionate number of women veterans—25%—are interested in adding entrepreneurship to their post-release life, whether that is a part-time business or full-time business, and incorporating it in some way.

We have found that, with the education and training benefit and with the focus on veterans, employment and the needs of the transitioning member, it is important to provide transitioning training when it is able to have the most impact, which is during their time of service. One to two years before they release is the time when they need transitioning programming—whether it be entrepreneurship or some sort—in order for them to build confidence so they can make a plan to have a positive attitude toward their future.

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

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

Now we will go to Mrs. Rechie Valdez.

You have the floor for six minutes or less. Please, go ahead.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.):** Thank you to the witnesses who have joined us today, particularly those who have served this country. I appreciate your sacrifice.

Mr. Chair, I'm going to direct my questions first to Coding for Veterans. As a former coder myself, I remember graduating with a handful of women in the class for my computer science degree. Ms. Vazquez, I'm happy to hear that it has really helped you with transitioning into your civilian life.

To either of you, can you clarify how many women veterans have entered the program thus far since you started it?

• (1635)

**Mr. Jeff Musson:** There are currently 400 veterans in our program. About 15% are female.

We've had a number of military families, spouses and others approach us to come in the program, but there was no funding mechanism to cover their tuition, so we have engaged with the Province of Ontario, and they have given us funding for 100 positions in our program through Minister McNaughton's ministry of labour, training and skills development in order to increase that number.

I think our 15% is higher than the gender breakdown in the military.

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

With that funding or with all the initiatives you have, do you see a rise in popularity with regard to coding?

**Mr. Jeff Musson:** Absolutely. The mere fact that Canada has a projected deficit of 147,000 IT jobs that are going to go unfilled is very enticing, because it gives a good, solid career and financial stability. Quite frankly, females make some of the best coders out there, so it's win-win across the board.

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

I'll direct my next questions to Mrs. Saunders.

Can you share some of the challenges you have heard from women and LGBTQ+ veterans in your role at Helmets to Hardhats?

**Ms. Cora Saunders:** I attended the women's forum there in February. I wasn't able to attend in person because of the weather in Newfoundland, but some of the things I heard in that forum from the LGBTQ community.... The level of trust is not there, especially for the LGBTQ community, because of the purge that happened some years ago. One of the ladies said to the team there, "We don't trust you."

With Helmets to Hardhats, that's fair enough. There is that level of trust that we need to establish with women and members of the LGBTQ community who are applying. That's up to our team when it comes to diversity, inclusion and safe space. I've been in this job just one year. We're trying to get the word out there that we're a safe space. There is a lot of stigma and a lot of stereotypes attached to the building trades. A big part of my job is to help break that down and help educate where the education needs to be.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** You mentioned trust. What recommendations can you make for this committee to help us continue to build that?

**Ms. Cora Saunders:** Within the military, I worked in the recruiting sector of the military for a total of 10 years. Even when I was in there, we had things in place. We had the training, the SHARP training and the sensitivity training.

Every time we interviewed a male person entering the military, we asked, "How do you feel about working with women? Do you have any issues with that?" It was always, "No, no," but we are still seeing that clearly there are some men who have issues with women.

Again, to build that trust, it's to promote it more.

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

I'll turn with my next questions to Mrs. Henry.

Can you tell us how many women have enrolled in the program you mentioned earlier and how many women were entitled to a nomination with Willis College?

**Col (Ret'd) Patricia Henry:** I don't have the specific number for the business program that you mentioned, but I know that we have dealt with approximately 60 female veterans. I don't have the breakdown of the numbers.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** That's no problem.

With Willis College, what are you doing to ensure that women can have the same opportunities as men when it comes to the program or enticing more women veterans to join?

**Col (Ret'd) Patricia Henry:** As I mentioned before, we do have the MVP team that is specifically there to attract veterans of all types, males and females. One thing that we find with veterans, which might go back to one of the questions you mentioned earlier, is the issue of family. To help out family members....

I should mention that my husband was also in the military, so we have two members. At Willis, we have what is called a working together program. If I take a program at Willis, my husband can go for free. He can apply for a bursary. We have 40 of those bursaries available. That means that he can get his tuition paid for up to the same amount as whatever program I am in. He may have to cover his own books or other things like that.

We do try to encourage that. We find that we have a lot of ex-military males in cyber, which is what they are interested in, so we can provide that support for their wives. They don't have to be ex-military either, by the way. It's more of a total-family, cohesive program.

• (1640)

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

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mrs. Valdez.

[Translation]

I now invite the committee's second vice-chair, Luc Desilets, to take the floor for the next six minutes.

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

I acknowledge my colleagues, but I especially want to acknowledge the interpreters, as they work behind the scenes and are often forgotten.

I thank our respected guests for being here; it is rare to see as many witnesses as there are members around the table. Finally, I thank those who have served in the military.

Ms. Vazquez, we obviously get a lot of witnesses in the committee, but it is rare to hear them talk about their transition in a positive way, which you did earlier. That surprised me, but I was glad to hear that it's not all negative, as we often hear negative comments about the transition. Why do you think you experienced that transition in a positive way?

**Ms. Elena Vazquez:** I have to say that it's probably because of my preparation. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, I knew two years before I retired that I was going to have to leave the forces. So I had time to prepare for the transition, to think about what I wanted to do. I also had access to the training that was available.

In my opinion, attitude is also at play. I had a very positive attitude, so it wasn't hard for me to leave the forces. It's kind of like college graduation, when you throw your graduate cap up in the air and move on to the next stage of your life.

For me, preparation and attitude were the key elements.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** That's very nice to hear.

You also mentioned the fact that you had attended the preparatory training twice. This is indeed a two-day training, is it not?

**Ms. Elena Vazquez:** In the case of a medical release, the training can last up to four days.

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

Do you have any suggestions for women leaving the forces? Should training be improved or added to, so that women can prepare properly for the transition and go through it with confidence?

**Ms. Elena Vazquez:** As I mentioned earlier, I attended a second career assistance network seminar two years in a row. Honestly, I got so much information that I don't know what else could be added to it. Surely, things will be added over time and things will change. However, in my experience, the seminar is perfect for now.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Did you attend it a second time because you failed it the first time?

**Ms. Elena Vazquez:** No, not at all.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** That was a joke, Ms. Vazquez. Thank you very much.

Mr. Musson, we had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Blais, who told us about this fascinating program. I was going to call it extraordinary, but I'll hold back. That said, it is a really interesting program that I am sure meets the needs of the clientele, which is constantly growing.

However, I have one complaint: the Coding for Veterans website is not in French. In fact, Mr. Blais and I discussed this. It would be very beneficial for Quebecers if the site were available in French. This would enable veterans to take greater advantage of the services you offer. Do you plan to have your site translated into French?

• (1645)

[English]

**Mr. Jeff Musson:** Yes. Unfortunately, I don't speak French, but to answer your question, by the end of this year, our program is go-

ing to be fully bilingual, not only on the website but also in the course content.

Another thing that's important to note is that in the tech industry—no different from, say, airline air traffic control—a lot of the terminology is English. We can deliver, and we'll have the ability by the end of this year to deliver and have instruction. Our website and curriculum will all be in French.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Okay. Thank you very much.

Mr. Maloney, you also have a very interesting website. I won't talk to you about French in this case, but about something else. There are a lot of very interesting testimonials on your site. I don't understand why there are no testimonials from women, except maybe two. How can this be explained?

[English]

**Mr. Joseph Maloney:** We ask veterans, when we refer them out to a particular trade or employer, if they could give us a testimonial in their own words. Some do and some don't. It's all on the honour system.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Yet your organization represents a high percentage of women.

[English]

**Mr. Joseph Maloney:** Yes.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Okay. That was not a criticism, but an observation. I'm curious about that, because I wonder why women don't want to express their satisfaction.

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

I will now give the floor to Rachel Blaney for six minutes.

[English]

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

I thank all of our witnesses today. It's been interesting testimony. I thank all of you who have served our country. I deeply appreciate your service, in whatever form it took.

Ms. Topping, if I can come to you first, I'm just trying to clarify the process for you. You talked about a lot of important things.

I'm wondering when you became aware of the Prince's Trust. Was it prior to leaving service, or was it after service? Could you, as a female veteran, explain to us what made the process and the training you took so helpful, and in what ways were they supportive for you?

**Ms. Kristin Topping:** To answer your first question—brain injury, a bit slow sometimes—I was still in the military, and I feel very lucky that I was still in the military when I found out about the Prince's Trust. One of the reasons was those SCAN seminars. Also, I had friends who were in the personnel selection trade as well as the public affairs trade. It was just luck, really.

The community that's provided by the Prince's Trust Canada is one of the most supportive communities I have ever been in. I was at a very low point in my recovery when, frankly, my friends had an intervention and told me to stop applying for jobs with the RCMP and DND, because I couldn't do them. When I went to operation entrepreneur, the group of people there were so positive and supportive, and I didn't get gaslit. It was enlightening. That's what it was for me. It was something that I didn't have at that time but that I needed.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I think this is an important point to pick up on. What we know is that the numbers in the CAF have not done well. We're not seeing anywhere near the goal we've set for ourselves as a country to see those numbers increase. Also, we're not quite clear, but we know that female veterans are falling off at some point. There is still not enough research about what's happening and what isn't working.

I'm coming back to you, Ms. Topping. You talked about some of the things that you, as a woman, felt were unhealthy and about systemic mistreatment. It sounds as if there was a whole process there. I think we're trying to have a very honest conversation. I accept that some systems work for some people and some systems don't work for some people, and I don't think we can compare. It's very important that we listen to the people who struggle, so that we can make those processes more holistic.

I'm wondering if you could talk about what didn't work and what you found in your new life, with the supports that you have, that did work, so that we can start to have that conversation about how VAC can improve when they receive female veterans and how, perhaps, the CAF can reflect on the work they're doing and how to change that.

• (1650)

**Ms. Kristin Topping:** First off, I should also point out that I was part of the MST lawsuit as well. I was sexually assaulted by a peer when I was 17. From that point on, I felt a need to adopt a sort of male-like way to act. Also, I didn't want my reputation to be affected by coming forward with what happened to me, so I didn't for 20 years.

As to the things that could be done better for women, this could be because my brain injury is so specific, but the research that goes into my health issues is male-dominated. All the studies are done on male patients, so nothing seems to correlate. I'm very lucky that I had a doctor in the military—not a military doctor but a veteran—who took the time to research what was going on with me and then kept me on in his civilian practice afterwards. I am one of the lucky ones to have a doctor.

I panicked because I felt as though I didn't have the support I needed from my chain of command, all male but for one female, who, I will point out, sexually harassed me and asked me to be

more feminine in my interactions with individuals even as I was dealing with a brain injury. It's not isolated to just men.

I think that a lot of training should be focused on dealing with not only mental health but also brain trauma, because it comes in all forms, and on how your brain trauma will affect your mental health as well. That's where I did not have the support I needed, even though there are so many people in the military with brain injuries.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you for that.

I don't have a lot of time, Ms. Saunders, so I will ask you a question and give you more time to answer.

I'm really impressed with the innovation by H2H around hiring people specifically to do outreach and to work with women and LGBT communities. I'm curious to know whether there are any processes that you notice or any patterns that happen again and again with women veterans as you're trying to attract them.

**Ms. Cora Saunders:** When I took the role, I knew that it would not be an easy sell because of things that happened to women veterans and the LGBTQ community in the military. It goes back to the level of trust. It's not a hard job for me, because I've worked in the recruiting sector. I am a social person. I love meeting people. I love doing the trade shows and the conferences, but it's a hard sell.

Women keep coming back to how it's a male-dominated world. Even some tradeswomen that I've met say that there's harassment within the trades. I'm familiar with that, because I'm a veteran. I come from the military. We know it's happened. We know of the misconduct. We always have to be aware. We have to be vigilant. Like Joe says, there's....

I was reading online just a little while ago about all the training they do with their people within the trades. It's not like it's building trades and they don't do any training for diversity, inclusion or LGBTQ. They do all of that. We've done all of that in the military, but it's one of those things that I think will always be there, which is sad. We're trying to change this.

I know that, for a small population, 10% of the tradespeople in Newfoundland are women. I think that's one of the highest percentages in Canada. That's because we're so resilient and tough.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**Ms. Cora Saunders:** It does help.

● (1655)

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, and thank you, Ms. Blaney.

As I said at the beginning, I'd like to ask the witnesses if they would like to break for five minutes or if we can continue.

We have a lot of questions that we'd like to ask, so let's go for a second round of questions.

I'd like to invite the first vice-chair of the committee, Mr. Blake Richards, to go ahead for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC):** Thank you.

Thank you to all of our witnesses for your excellent contributions to this study today. In particular, to those of you who have served this country, thank you for your service. To those of you who have shared your personal stories of traumatic situations that you've endured, thank you for having the courage to share those because that is important to us in our work as well. I know it's not easy to do and I want to thank you for that.

I'm going to apologize in advance. I'm going to move a motion and I'll explain to our witnesses in a second.

I'm going to move the following motion:

That the committee invite the Minister of Veterans Affairs to appear before the committee for no less than two hours, on or before Monday, May 1st, 2023, to answer questions about what plans the department has in place to ensure there is no disruption in services provided to Veterans and their families.

I'll move that motion. The notice of it was duly given.

I just want to apologize to our witnesses. I do hope that we can dispose of the motion quite quickly. I hope that will enable us to get back to what we're here to do today. I want to be really clear: I have a number of questions I wanted to ask. That's why I wanted to move the motion as quickly as I could in the five minutes that I have so that the vast majority of that time remains and I'll be able to ask some questions when we're finished with the motion.

I won't talk long on the motion. I will just briefly speak to it. I hope that all members can keep it brief if they need to intervene on it, so we can vote on the motion and get back to this because you have a lot of great perspectives to offer us. I want to make sure we can get back to it quickly.

Obviously, with what we're seeing right now, there are some concerns out there about the ability for services to be maintained for our veterans and their families with the labour disruption that is ongoing at the present time. I think it's important for us as a committee to address that.

I'm just going to quote really quickly from an article that I was reading that I think tells a little bit about this and I think is important.

I know that nobody wants to see a disruption. Certainly the union itself is prime amongst those who don't want to see any disruptions to our veterans, but there's an article I saw from the Canadian Press where a senior Veterans Affairs official indicated that:

...those applying for new benefits or trying to contact the department with questions or concerns can expect delays.

Those on strike include hundreds of adjudicators who are responsible for approving disability claims from veterans, as well as case managers who work with ill and injured veterans to help them find medical and retraining services.

There are also fewer staff to respond to questions through the department's national call centre and online portal...

Based on those remarks, it's fairly clear that there are concerns about why there might be service disruptions. I know that organizations like the Royal Canadian Legion, for example, have indicated their concern about the possibility of collateral damage. They've indicated that they are watching it closely and are ready to be there to help veterans if they face struggles as a result. That tells me they're concerned that there may be struggles that veterans and their families could face.

Also, Brian Forbes, who is the chairman of the National Council of Veteran Associations, indicated he's particularly worried about those with mental or psychological conditions and what might be made available to them in this circumstance.

I think that it's safe to say that wait times for veterans are the largest and most frustrating source of anger for those in the veteran community already. I hear every day from former service members who are talking about having to wait months and in some cases years to get their claims processed. Anything that might add to those delays and those waits is something that we all need to be really concerned about in this committee, and as Canadians broadly.

I think it's important that we hear what the plans are to make sure that veterans and their families continue to receive the services they need during this time. That's why we need to hear from the minister as to what the department is doing to ensure that happens and have an opportunity to question him accordingly.

● (1700)

I'll just say, again, that I apologize to our witnesses. This is, obviously, an urgent situation and one in which we all would want to ensure that veterans are getting the services they need. Because it is an urgent situation, I did have to disrupt today and I apologize for that.

I hope we can move forward and vote on this quickly and have this happen so that the committee can do, what I think, is incredibly important for it to do.

I'll just close with a plea to all of my fellow members on this committee. Our job is to ensure that everything that can possibly be done to help to serve our veterans and their families is being done. That is, really, what I see as our job as committee members here. I think in order to do that, when we hear a situation where there may be further delays and waits for our veterans and their families as a result of a situation that's ongoing and immediate, we absolutely must do everything we can to make sure it's addressed. Failure to support this motion is really a failure to our veterans and their families.

I really hope that everyone will support this, and we can move on quickly and get back to our witnesses.

Thank you for that, Mr. Chair.

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

On your five minutes, you already have used 42 seconds, so you have minutes left.

I'd also like to apologize to the witnesses. It's in our routine procedures so we have to deal with the motion. I hope it won't be long.

On the list I have Ms. Blaney and after that Mr. Desilets would like to intervene on the motion.

Please, Ms. Blaney.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I, too, apologize and I want to say I will not be supporting this motion. I would be interested in entertaining it, maybe, at a later date. We are at a point where this strike has not been going on an extensive amount of time. We also know, from the union, that a lot of workers have been deemed essential workers, and we also know that the union is working very hard to connect to the minister's office to make sure that there is nobody blocking any veteran from getting services right now.

I would be interested, maybe later, if there was a cause, but right now, we know that women veterans have never had a study done on them, ever, in the history of this place. I'm making room for women veterans, and I will fight for that in solidarity with the brave women who have served this country.

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

[*Translation*]

I now give the floor to Mr. Desilets.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** For once, Ms. Blaney is reading my mind.

I'm totally against—

**The Chair:** I apologize for interrupting, Mr. Desilets.

Unfortunately, the bells are ringing to announce a vote in the House in 30 minutes. So I would like to ask for the committee members' agreement to continue our deliberations until five minutes before the vote. I also remind you that we can use our cell-phones to vote, as well.

Do I have the consent of the committee members to continue the meeting?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Desilets, please continue.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I was saying that Ms. Blaney read my mind. It would be nice if that happened more often.

I am absolutely against this motion. On the one hand, the minister would really not be the best person to answer these questions. On the other hand, and not to diminish the importance of services to veterans by saying this, I think we should only call the minister to appear on extremely important matters.

Moreover, we are only on the fourth day of the strike, and negotiations with this union have never lasted long. So I am opposed to this motion and, if there is no further input, I would like to move to a vote.

• (1705)

**The Chair:** Darrell Samson, you have the floor.

**Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.):** I also wanted to request a vote.

**The Chair:** Okay. We will vote on Mr. Richards' motion.

(Motion negated: nays 7; yeas 4)

**The Chair:** So we will continue.

Mr. Richards, as I told you before, you've used 42 seconds of your five minutes. You have the floor.

[*English*]

**Mr. Blake Richards:** That's great. Thank you.

Again, I apologize for the interruption.

I'm glad we were able to dispose of the motion quickly. I'm obviously disappointed that we couldn't get the support of the other parties in the room. I think it's important to ensure that the services are maintained and not wait until they're disrupted and then try to deal with it. It's unfortunate, but I'm pleased that we were at least able to move back to the witnesses quickly. That's good.

Let me start with Helmets to Hardhats.

Mr. Maloney, you had mentioned, in response to an earlier question, the qualifications of veterans, about taking their qualifications from their military service and applying them to the private sector. Some of the work that you have done in Helmets to Hardhats ensures that there's opportunity in the trades, in particular, for those things to happen for veterans. I commend you for the work that you've done in that area.

Can you maybe just tell us if you have any barriers to being able to do that? Are there things that are preventing it from being done on a broader scale, even beyond the work that you guys do at Veterans Affairs, or at the Canadian Armed Forces level as well? Are there things that could be done differently or better to make sure that there is the ability for veterans to have those qualifications harmonized as they come out of the forces so they are able to access private sector employment?

Certainly, I've heard from veterans over the last while, for sure, about some of the challenges they seem to have in terms of having their skills and qualifications from the armed forces recognized. Obviously, the work you're doing has to be helpful in that regard. Is there anything that the Canadian Armed Forces or Veterans Affairs could do to better enable those skills to be transferred over, so veterans are able to access private sector employment?

**Mr. Joseph Maloney:** Thank you.

The way it works now, when a veteran registers with Helmets to Hardhats they basically tell us when they're being released, where they're going to be living and what they want to do. They can basically say they'd like to become an ironworker in Newfoundland or a carpenter in Calgary. We make that connection for them.

Now, a lot of them will carry the skills that they learned in the military and try to follow that same pathway in civilian life. Some of them will do that. When they do that, the veteran will meet with the apprentice coordinator in that particular area, in that trade, and they discuss that experience. Then they match it to the curriculum in that apprenticeship program for that trade. Many times, hours are credited to that program for them.

The curriculum in the military and the curriculum in civilian life are different. You have to test to Red Seal status in the construction trades in order to get a Red Seal certificate to allow you mobility across the country.

Then we get lots of veterans who just say they were doing that in the military, and they don't want to continue that.

• (1710)

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I'm sorry, but I hate to interrupt you there. I'm short on time, obviously. We only have five minutes.

I wanted to specifically get into the ones who do want to be able to transfer those skills over. Maybe we can stick to that.

Do you have any suggestions on anything that the armed forces or Veterans Affairs could do—changes to their processes or information provided, etc.—that would help to further that?

**Mr. Joseph Maloney:** I know the transitional groups are working on this stuff. One area that would help a lot is to try to align what you do in the military to the construction industry curriculums. Right now, you're assigned a military code to do specific work in the military. Lots of times it does not align with what goes on in the construction trades and their curriculums. If you could get matched up a little closer, then that would make life a lot easier for a lot of people.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** That's great. Thank you. I appreciate that.

Ms. Henry, you mentioned, in response to a question earlier as well, a program that you have that enables spouses of veterans to access some of the same programs. I really love that. I would love to see that be more broadly applied. Is there anything that you can suggest to us that Veterans Affairs could do to better ensure that spouses are considered in these kinds of things too?

One thing that we've heard from veterans in particular, for example, is with education and training benefits. When a veteran is disabled and not able to maybe access those in the same way, could they be transferable to a spouse?

That's one suggestion, but maybe you have others. What do you think of that suggestion?

**Col (Ret'd) Patricia Henry:** I think it's an interesting suggestion. I think they'd have to look at the demographics and look at it. Yes, if you do have someone who is severely disabled, then why couldn't the spouse pick up on that if the veteran can't do that be-

cause the spouse will have to provide for the family if the veteran is disabled to such an extent that they can't? It makes sense.

One of the things I was going to suggest, and I'm not sure if it's exactly in line with what you were saying, is that they used to have something they were working on that was a skills translator. That's really what we're talking about here. This is what I did in the military. What does it mean on the civilian side? We do that at Willis College, but that is something that Veterans Affairs should be doing because you do have things.... I just wrote down a few examples: your leadership, your organization, your decision-making. How does that translate into civilian skill sets?

That is really what most veterans need: How do I take what I did and put it in civilian terms so that I can get employment and future training, or whatever it is that they desire? That would be the main thing.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Now I invite Mr. Churence Rogers for five minutes.

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

Thanks to all of our guests here today.

I have a certain number of questions I want to ask, but I seem to be all over the place here in my own mind. I'll try to get to some of the points.

When we started this study as a committee I had high hopes, great expectations, that we would uncover many things going on with women veterans across this country, and many of the challenges they face transitioning to civilian life and to jobs they want to pursue, and that we would also identify many of the opportunities that some of you talk about and we could make sure that we got that information communicated to these people.

We often heard that they weren't aware of some of the opportunities and challenges. That's why my expectation is, my hope is, that we're going to be able to go down that road, that we're going to present a study that's going to be filled with recommendations like the one Joseph just made about connecting military and civilian job skill sets so that it doesn't become a problem in the future, and that we can, hopefully with your assistance, provide solutions for many of these veterans.

First of all, Michael and Patricia, in your experience, what are the key areas that women veterans tend to gravitate towards in their military experience?

Patricia, you mentioned they want to do business or they focus on entrepreneurship. Do you want to comment on that?

• (1715)

**Col (Ret'd) Patricia Henry:** I'd like to explain why they do that. Most of the women, and not all of them but a large percentage of those who are in the Canadian Forces, tend to do administrative or personnel, which I think is most of us who are here, other than the engineer across from me—and a lot of them are in caring-type positions, like in the medical field.

When they get out, as Elena mentioned, they don't want to do that. They're tired of helping people, so they want to do something else.

This is why they're drawn more to business, so they're doing something for themselves, as Kristin mentioned, that they can control themselves. That's what we've found. That's what they want to do. They want to do something for themselves where they're controlling it and they're going to make it happen on their own without having to rely on others.

That's been our experience at Willis.

**Mr. Churence Rogers:** That's the main question you tend to hear from these veterans when they contact you in terms of where they want to go in the future and things they want to do.

**Col (Ret'd) Patricia Henry:** I'm not sure that's the case with Kristin. Perhaps she could expand upon that, but a lot of it is about controlling their time and having flexibility. For a lot of us, we have families we have to take care of. In my case, I have a special needs child, so I do need flexibility. I have to be able to take care of him when required and be able to get him to the hospital or whatever else we have to do.

Like Kristin, he has a brain injury, so it's a lot of challenges. That's what a lot of the women are looking for, a little bit of flexibility so they can balance their lives. We don't have the option of just taking on the career and doing whatever we want. We have to make sure the food is on the table. We have to manage the house, take care of the kids. Again, I'm not speaking for everybody, but for the most part that's why the women you'll find have a lot more mental health issues, because of that pressure. That never goes away. Even when you get out of the military, all those family pressures are still there. You're still responsible for all of that.

**Mr. Churence Rogers:** Of course, being from Newfoundland and Labrador, I can't not ask Ms. Saunders a question.

In terms of how many veterans and people you reach out to, what are the key things you hear? Can you give us the benefit of the responses you hear when you reach out to them for education, training and programs?

**Ms. Cora Saunders:** As I said earlier, when I left the military, I sat down with Veterans Affairs, and I was approved for retraining right from the get-go. I chose not to do that at that time. There were other challenges going on in my life with my son and the challenges that he had.

Yes, there are a lot of things in place.

I released as non-medical, and I know that there are a lot of benefits there when you medically release. There's vocational rehabilitation. You get two years of full pay when you retire medically. I didn't get that. I remember the first question they asked me when I

sat down in the release office was, "Is there any reason you can be medically released?" I said, "No," right away. I had fractured my foot less than a year before that, and I said, "No, I'm good," so I missed out on a lot of those financial benefits, and I could have probably been retrained.

Now in this job, I'm seeing younger veterans leaving after they do their five-year period of service. They just don't want to stay in. I was going to say that I don't know why. It served me well overall. The military served me well. I'm not going to say that it didn't, because it did. As a single parent, I was very fortunate to have that job as opposed to a single parent working on civvy street in a minimum wage job.

Getting back to the schooling and things, even for a veteran with six years in, if they get out, there's money from Veterans Affairs that will pay for them to go back to school and do their retraining. Again, with Helmets to Hardhats, you can come in like me.... I was a clerk my whole career, and I could have gone in. I said to Joe that, if I had known about this in 2012 when I retired the final time, I could be a tradeswoman now. I feel that in myself. My father worked in the woods his whole life. When he retired at 65, he built his retirement home, so I feel like that's in me.

I really enjoy this job because I get to talk to these young veterans and say, "Why wouldn't you want to help construct something, to build something?" There are 14 building trades and 60 trades within those 14 building trades. Why would you not want to be involved in that? The stigma is still attached to it. You don't need any new training to come in. They train you. They pay you right from the get-go and offer all kinds of benefits. It's amazing.

• (1720)

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

Thank you, everyone.

It's about 13 minutes to the vote, so I have no choice but to stop here.

I'm sorry, but I have some members who said that they're not going to vote with the app, so they have to go there. By the time they come back here, we will have only five minutes left, so I'm sorry. I have to stop right here.

On behalf of the members of the committee, I'd like to say thank you for your presentations. I'd like to offer you the opportunity to send any briefs to our clerk, if you have additional information you would like us to have on this important study.

On that, I'd like to say thank you to all of the technicians, the interpreters, the clerk and the analysts.



[*Translation*]

I would also like to acknowledge the witnesses. From Coding for Veterans, we had with us Jeff Musson, executive director, and Elena Vazquez, retired master warrant officer and student. From Helmets to Hardhats, we welcomed Joseph Maloney, executive direc-

tor, and Cora Saunders. From the National Association of Career Colleges, we heard from Michael Sangster. From Prince's Trust Canada, we had Kathleen Kilgour and Kristin Topping.

With that, ladies and gentlemen, the meeting is adjourned.

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