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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg



Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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• (1550)

[*English*]

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

[*Translation*]

Welcome to meeting number 73 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[*English*]

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

[*Translation*]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, with witnesses appearing via videoconference.

Regarding interpretation, those using Zoom have a choice, at the bottom of their screen, between the English, French and floor audio. As for those in the room, they should use their earpieces.

It's true that the hall is equipped with a fairly sophisticated sound system. However, we must be careful not to place the earpiece too close to the microphone, because this causes interference and can cause harm to our interpreters.

I'd like to advise you that the connection tests have been completed.

Before we welcome the witnesses, I'd like to give you a warning. We're going to discuss experiences related to mental health. This may be a trigger for people here, viewers, MPs and their staff who have had similar experiences. If you're feeling upset or need help, please don't hesitate to let the clerk know.

[*English*]

Before we welcome our witnesses, I would like to provide this 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*]

This afternoon, we are pleased to welcome—

[*English*]

MP Hoback, who replaces Mrs. Wagantall.

Welcome.

MP Hanley, on Zoom, replaces Mr. Miao.

[*Translation*]

Colleagues,

[*English*]

we have with us this afternoon as an individual, Nina Charlene Usherwood, by video conference, and Vivienne Stewart, RCMP Veteran Women's Council, also by video conference.

We will start with you, Ms. Charlene Usherwood, for five minutes. Please go ahead.

Sergeant Nina Charlene Usherwood (As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good day.

I am Nina Usherwood, a 42-year veteran of the Canadian Armed Forces. I served from 1979 until 2022, when I was medically released.

Veterans Affairs Canada does not recognize that my service experience is different from the service experience of male members because, as a woman, I faced discrimination throughout my career.

Veterans Affairs does not accept the physical impacts of the discrimination I experienced during my military career. Assessments from both the Canadian Forces health service psychologist and an occupational stress clinical psychologist hired by Veterans Affairs document the physical toll of the decades of the career-long discrimination as well as the mental injury I suffered.

Veterans Affairs continues to deny my claim that my type 2 diabetes is attributable to my military service. Veterans Affairs does not acknowledge the impact that the military's discrimination and highly sexualized culture has on the physical health of female veterans.

Research has established that discrimination, both overt and covert, can have a mental as well as a physical toll on health. Harris et al., in their 12-year study of 12,000 Australian women, found that perceived stress is a strong risk factor for diabetes, regardless of the presence of other risk factors like hypertension, physical activities, smoking, diet or weight.

Power et al., in their meta-analysis on stress and diabetes, show that emotional stress increases the development of diabetes. Sharma et al., in their article “Stress-Induced Diabetes: A Review”, show the biological mechanism by which chronic stress impacts diabetes.

Veterans Affairs Canada does not accept that discrimination experienced by veterans can have a physical cost as well as a mental cost. The discrimination that gender and sexual minorities continue to experience in the Canadian Armed Forces has an impact on the physical health of current and future veterans.

Thank you for listening. I'll be happy to answer any questions you have.

Thank you.

• (1555)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Usherwood.

Now we're going to go to Ms. Vivienne Stewart, from the RCMP Veteran Women's Council. Please go ahead for five minutes.

Ms. Vivienne Stewart (RCMP Veteran Women's Council, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the committee for inviting me to contribute to the important work that you are doing in this study on the experiences of women veterans in the RCMP and CAF.

On June 6, 1977, I joined the RCMP at the age of 24 with a bachelor's degree from the University of Victoria. I joined 31 other women, the majority of whom also came with post-secondary degrees.

This was not the case with most of the male recruits at that time. I think that the bar was set higher for us, but our expectations were also higher. For me, the history and reputation of the RCMP promised adventure, the opportunity to engage in a wide variety of interesting work, a way to make a difference, as well as opportunities to advance in the organization and have, ultimately, a rewarding long-term career.

My goal was to become a foreign liaison officer or to join the then security service. I served in Quebec following training in Regina, and then transferred to Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, where I was living when I resigned in December, 1984.

During my time in the RCMP, I had a variety of assignments ranging from the enforcement of federal statutes to rural provincial policing duties. I think I was a good cop, and I do not regret my time in the force. It was certainly a learning experience.

I decided to leave when it became apparent that those in staffing at the headquarters in Halifax were making decisions affecting my career with which I disagreed. I later discovered that those decisions were likely related to their suspicion that I was gay.

After I had put in my papers, one of my colleagues—also a constable and a friend of mine—came to see me at home to ask if I really wanted to leave the force, and indicated that there were rumours circulating that I was gay. Perhaps if I had known about this before I put in my resignation, I might have stayed and pushed the issue. I don't know; probably not.

At that point, I was ready for something new, as I think I had already accepted that my career would never be the career I had hoped for. In any case, at the time, given the evident homophobia existing throughout the force—and indeed in society itself—I would not even admit it or come out to someone I considered a friend. Again, it reinforced for me that I had made the right decision to leave.

I do not recall being angry or frustrated at the time, just disappointed. I had believed that I had something of value to offer the RCMP and that I would go a lot farther, even to the officer level. I had to give up on that dream and move on.

In any case, there was no exit interview for me. My sergeant at the time just asked me if there was anything he had done that had caused me to resign. My answer was simply, “No.” I didn't really have much to add to that, at least nothing that I thought he would have understood. As the only female member in most of the postings I had, I found my male counterparts for the most part to be hard-working, collegial, helpful and supportive.

I eventually returned to B.C. to attend law school at UBC. I was called to the bar in 1991 and I practised until I retired at the end of August in 2022.

I was unaware that after leaving the force with less than 10 years of service, I became a veteran. When I was asked by Jane Hall, who spoke with you on Tuesday, to volunteer with the new council that was being formed within the RCMP Veterans' Association in 2013, I had to clarify with her that I was in fact a veteran in order to be able to serve on the council.

My dad was a veteran, having served in the navy in the Second World War. To me, that was a veteran.

My main focus with the the RCMP Veteran Women's Council has been on how often questionable legal interpretations have adversely affected women veterans, particularly those involved in the Merlo Davidson class action. I have not personally had an occasion to contact VAC or use its services. My current understanding of VAC and its dealings with RCMP female veterans therefore comes from the work our council has done over the last 10 years or so.

It is apparent from our council investigations that neither the legislation nor the VAC decision-making processes are clear enough so that our veterans can navigate the system on their own without assistance or running into procedural roadblocks and hostile gatekeepers. Anecdotally, our evidence shows that female veterans continue to mistrust and fear VAC and the power it wields, apparently arbitrarily, over their basic interests.

• (1600)

The minister's written responses to questions posed on the clawback issue, which were supplied on March 20, 2023, are for the most part unsatisfactory. At the March 20 meeting of this committee, the minister's representative stated that communications would be going out to the individuals to ensure that the practice is stopped. Whether this response was in reference to level one and two claimants only or to claimants of all levels is not particularly clear, which again highlights the transparency and communication issues at VAC.

Without transparency, there can be no accountability; without accountability, there will be no trust.

We are looking to this committee to recommend immediate amendments to the Pension Act to exclude settlement damages from the clawback provisions for the types of claims raised in the class action.

This committee should also do whatever it can to ensure that VAC streamlines and simplifies its processes and improves its transparency, communications and training for frontline staff so that they better understand women veterans' experiences and respond within the spirit and intent of the legislation, rather than as Canada's meanest insurance company.

I also have a number of recommendations that are set out in the written brief that I provided to the clerk earlier today.

I welcome any questions that you may have.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Stewart and Ms. Usherwood, for your opening remarks.

I'd like to offer to you that if you need to stop for a break of five minutes, just let me know, because we're going to go until 5:30.

Now we are going to start with the six-minute rounds of questions.

I'm pleased to start with MP Fraser Tolmie.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for your testimony. Thank you for service.

Welcome back, Sergeant Usherwood. I know we've interviewed you before. We appreciate your making another appearance.

Sometimes when we do some of the questioning, we get a little bit of a background. Ms. Stewart, could you please tell me the years that you were an RCMP officer? I missed that. You did share that in your testimony.

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: I joined in June 1977 and I left in December 1984.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: I apologize that these are just straightforward questions. I'm going to open up a little bit later on.

You said that once you had left, you were not made aware that you were allowed to access veterans benefits. Could you expand a little bit on that?

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: I left before the 10-year cut-off when the superannuation kicks in. It's no longer obtainable, basically. You're in, and that's part of your pension.

I had all of mine returned to me, and as far as I was concerned, that was the end of it. My only awareness of VAC at that time was that it was paying for my father's yardwork at home.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Okay.

Sometimes afterwards it's a little bit disappointing to find out that you were entitled to benefits, that you could have made some career decisions or, as you say, you could have stayed in a little bit longer.

One thing I understand is that as one of the first female RCMP officers, you did train to be in the iconic musical ride, but at some point you decided not take part in that. Could you elaborate a little bit more about that and about what was behind your decision?

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: Yes.

Maybe I'll just give you a little bit of background on how that all came about.

There were no women in the musical ride, or even thoughts of having women in the musical ride, until 1980. In 1980 somebody higher up decided that we have women in the force and we'd better show their faces in other aspects of the force as well. Certainly, as you say, the musical ride is iconic for the RCMP and also for Canada.

What happened early in 1980 was that somebody in the RCMP phoned every single female member across Canada and asked us if we were interested in trying out for the musical ride. Being a horse-crazy kid from way back, I jumped at the chance for that.

How it works is that there are two sessions of an equitation course, and in those days—I'm not sure how it works now—there were two months and two months. The first two months there were 16 members in that group, and two were women and 14 were men. In the second two-month group, which I was in, there were four women and 12 men. Generally what happens is that the musical ride is formed of a troop of 32 riders. Half were replaced every year, so it would be a two-year posting.

I went off to Ottawa in April 1980 to Rockcliffe to the stables, and it was quite the experience. We were there for two months, and as I say, there were four women and 12 men. This was, I think, probably the first experience I had in my time in the force—and at that point I was almost three years in—when I felt what I suppose would be an inkling of what we now call a “toxic work environment”.

There were hazing rituals, misogynistic jokes, the kinds of things that I think most of us probably ran into at the time and didn't think much of. For me, aside from the hazing ritual, which did not affect me personally as I was not the subject of it, the misogynistic jokes indicated what life would be like as a musical ride member out on tour, and that was not appealing to me. Also, one of the instructors we had who would also be accompanying us out on tour was someone who gave me a very uncomfortable and very creepy feeling.

In those days—it was in 1980, so we're looking at almost 44 years ago—there was nothing said about any of the inappropriateness of the conduct, but I am sure that if I felt it, my three female colleagues also felt it.

That kind of behaviour on the course was one thing, but it felt to me like it would be worse once we were out on tour and there would be just us and the people we were working with out there. At the end of the course, they went through the 16 trainees and asked us, if we had actually passed, if we were interested in joining the ride. I said no and I went back to Nova Scotia.

● (1605)

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Thank you, and thank you for sharing that with me. I appreciate that.

I think my time is up, Chair.

The Chair: Yes, exactly, Mr. Tolmie.

Now let's turn to Mr. Randeep Sarai for six minutes, please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to both of the witnesses.

Ms. Stewart, thank you for your service, and obviously for being here today.

I think that in 2019 Veterans Affairs Canada held its first Women Veterans Forum to discuss specific challenges women face after service. I think your colleague came to this committee and told us that you participated in the Women Veterans Forum.

In your opinion, what are the challenges facing women veterans with regard to their physical health, their mental health and safety concerns, and have these forums been helpful in that context?

● (1610)

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: Thank you for the question, Mr. Sarai.

I was not actually at the 2019 conference. I went to the conference that was organized this year in February, in Ottawa, that focused on women and LGBTQ2S+ issues, which was very interesting.

I think what we would like to see front and centre is better training for the people at VAC who deal with women veterans so that they develop a better understanding of women's issues in the overall context of the different kinds of things that women face during their careers, depending on the work they do.

I'm certainly speaking here primarily for the RCMP. I'm not aware of everything that goes on at CAF.

I think developing specialized...or subject matter experts on diverse communities within the organization would be helpful. Also,

I think what is key and what I understand is fairly lacking right now is trauma awareness. I understand there is training and education for that, which is very important.

I think it's probably easier dealing with the physical issues that women veterans have, rather than the psychological ones. When the representatives from the RCMP spoke with you back in October, I personally was surprised at the emphasis that they were putting on changes to kit and equipment. That's fine. That's probably the easy stuff. The hard stuff is actually dealing with the effects of toxic workplaces and toxic leadership on the people who are in those situations.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

I also wanted to ask you how we can improve programs and services for all the veterans, but especially for women veterans, in your experience. That's aside from the first part that you said about being told that you were a veteran and that therefore you were entitled to those services. It would be a good start, but I'm hoping that is now told.

What are the main issues that women veterans are facing when transitioning to civilian life, and specifically RCMP women veterans?

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: Not to belabour the point too much, but it really is a question of lack of information and lack of education on VAC, VAC programs, VAC services. It's quite amazing to see that things haven't progressed the way we would probably have hoped they would have, even in the last 10 years.

People don't know.... I mean, I think they now probably get it that yes, you are veterans, but I'm pretty sure there's still a lot of ignorance out there as to the benefits available to them through VAC as female veterans.

I have to point the finger at the RCMP here for a lack of information and really not taking the responsibility to inform members of what they can expect, what their rights are, what is available to them throughout their careers, so that they are prepared for a healthy and successful transition into civilian life.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

I have something to ask Sergeant Usherwood quickly. You said that you stayed hidden because of the extreme hostility you witnessed towards transgender service members. You felt safe only in 2009 to be yourself.

I'm sorry, first of all, that it took so long for you to feel safe. What changes in the armed forces made you feel safe at that time?

● (1615)

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: To be honest, partly it was my own career position. I was working with a very small number of people. I was not on a large crew. I was working directly for one supervisor. I trusted that person more than anything else.

I was aware of the changes that were happening, but I was also in contact with other trans people in the forces. Even after I came out and started living as myself and being accepted, I am well aware that other people continued to be driven out of the forces by the toxic culture.

I was in a place where I had been for seven years. As a consequence, I knew the environment and I felt safe with the people I worked with.

The Chair: Thank you for your interventions.

[*Translation*]

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

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

Good evening, colleagues.

I thank our witnesses for their presence and their service.

Ms. Usherwood, I'm delighted to see you back at the committee. I think your courage is fantastic. We hope that your testimony will enable us to document certain injustices a little more.

When you came out as a transgender woman, what was the immediate reaction of your work colleagues?

[*English*]

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I'm sorry. I'm not receiving the English translation of that question.

The Chair: I'm sorry. We're going to make sure everything is working.

[*Translation*]

I'm speaking French.

[*English*]

Ms. Usherwood, tell me if you have the translation...but I'm speaking in English.

[*Translation*]

We're doing a test to make sure the interpretation works.

We'll take a short break to sort this out.

• (1615) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1615)

The Chair: We are resuming the meeting.

I think the tests have been completed, and everything seems to be working now.

Mr. Desilets, I'd like to ask you to start again from the beginning, please.

• (1620)

Mr. Luc Desilets: With pleasure, Mr. Chair.

Good evening, colleagues.

I thank our guests for being here and sharing their experiences, which we know are not always pretty or easy.

Ms. Usherwood, my question is for you. I'm delighted to see you back at the committee. I remember what you said at your last appearance. Once again, I think you're very brave to appear before us like this. We all hope that your comments will add to our knowledge and highlight certain injustices and problems. Our recommendations will of course be aimed at remedying them.

When you came out as a transgender woman to your work colleagues, how was this initially perceived?

[*English*]

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: The same as parents and family, they didn't understand it, but they were willing to accept what I told them. I think that's the biggest thing. I know my immediate supervisor was very puzzled about some of the decisions I would make as time went by and did not really understand it.

As I said, acceptance is at least a starting point. Nobody has walked in my shoes. Even many trans people have not experienced the life I've experienced. To actually understand someone, you have to be them.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Based on all the experience you have, could you name some units where discrimination against LGBTQ+ people is higher, and others where it is lower?

[*English*]

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Well, at the time I was in the primary reserves in Comox, and the specific other places were army units associated with Kingston, Edmonton and Gagetown.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: In these units, have you felt more open-mindedness, at times?

[*English*]

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I generally experienced open-mindedness. There was a reluctance from some of the people who I felt did not agree with what was happening to actually voice it at the time, but I know that was not the case, as I said, in other units and in the experience of other trans people.

Definitely, in other places sometimes I actually thought, felt, listening to what happened.... I think the military's policy on accommodation at the time was called guidance for transsexual individuals and I think it was CF Mil 11/9. It was out in 2011, and it was guidance for commanders and their responsibilities with accommodation for transgender individuals in the forces. At the time, I felt, listening to it in some cases, that the units were actually using the policy to discriminate against the individuals.

The policy would later be replaced in 2017, and I was actually involved in some of the policy change that went forward. It didn't go as far as I felt it should to root the forces, but as in any bureaucracy, you compromise.

• (1625)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Do you feel that the reactions of your colleagues and the general population towards transgender people are due to misunderstanding, a lack of education and a lack of knowledge surrounding this situation?

[*English*]

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Well, I think this is what any minority experiences. When you don't know somebody, it's easier to not understand them, and the more you know, the more you understand they're just people, the same as you. My phrase that I like to use is, "It's easier to hate what you don't know."

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

[*English*]

Let's go to Ms. Rachel Blaney for six minutes, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you so much, Chair. As always, everything goes through the chair.

My first question is for Ms. Usherwood. It's very good to see you, my friend.

I want to come back to a bit of your testimony. You talked about how part of the reason you came out was that you felt a lot of trust for your leadership, and that it was safe. That particular person gave you a sense of comfort in taking the next step. I know—and you said as well in your testimony—that this is not often the reality for so many other people who serve.

I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit about what is needed within the military at that level to create systems that will provide more inclusive practices for the leadership so that we can see that safe environment increase.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: The military is actually trying to change its culture, as identified by Madame Deschamps in her report and in subsequent reports. It's trying to change it.

However, like anything in the government, there's a shortage of resources. There's a shortage of time and money. That's part of the problem. There are just so many things in the military that we're supposed to be getting training on, but actually we're not getting training.

For example, you're supposed to receive training in ethical behaviour every single year. Even though I was actually a trainer, I did not necessarily receive it every year.

This is a common thing in the military: There are not enough people, not enough time, not enough money, not enough resources, and there are too many missions.

One thing that I really think the military could do is get rid of some of the systemic discrimination that's in it. For example, in the Queen's Regulations and Orders, which are the regulations for the Canadian Armed Forces, in volume one, it says "he" 167 times. "She" is not in the volume in any way. There is a single sentence

saying that wherever it mentions the masculine gender, that also includes the female gender.

However, if I open the book and read about commanders—and this is the book that tells the responsibilities of commanders, from the vice-chief of defence staff all the way down to the lowest officer—it always says "he". It talks about "his" responsibility, and "he" will do this and "he" will do that.

It's a PDF. I could change the gendered nature of the book. I could probably do that myself in a couple of hours. If I just replaced it with "he/she", it would be even quicker. I could do that in minutes. Here we are, seven years after the forces agreed to use gender-based analysis plus. Why they haven't changed those references?

In my last year, I managed to change this on my base: When the base commander is leaving, they no longer give flowers to the wife. That's what it said in the process and how that was working. Why haven't they just—

• (1630)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much for that. That was very helpful.

I really appreciate the flower example. I think that really clears up some of those myths that should be over by now.

This is a study about what happens when people leave their service and go into the VAC system. I'm wondering if you could describe the discrimination and how it's translated into leaving the service and moving into VAC. Where are the challenges?

We talked about data collection in the last study. It was about having the appropriate information and how there's no measurement if that data isn't gathered.

I'm just wondering if you see any issues between those two now that you've gone through and are currently going through that process.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: One thing that I experience now that I've experienced dealing with VAC some more is kind of the same thing that Vivienne talked about. VAC is focused on and set up to treat people who have bullet wounds and limb amputations. Although for the last few years they've been accepting mental trauma, they still do not see how the mental trauma can have a life-long impact on a person's health. I think that's the biggest problem: VAC has a bias against accepting that mental trauma can cause a physical injury.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

I think that's an important point, and you've talked about this. It's how mental health impacts the physical health.

We've heard again and again that when you're in the CAF, if it's not recorded properly, then when you get to VAC, it's hard to claim the injury. Is that transfer of information part of the challenge? Is it not clear enough from CAF to VAC?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I would say for sure in the past, but right now.... When I was still in the forces, as I said in my opening statement, it was documented by a Canadian Forces health services psychologist that I had suffered a serious physical impact from the mental trauma that I dealt with.

VAC does not want to accept that it's linked, that there's a linkage with physical trauma, and I see that more as an issue from VAC's side. My sense, as I was leaving the military, was that the military is more accepting of mental trauma than VAC.

My diabetes was a factor in my medical release—that's for sure—but at the time, I was in no way penalized by the forces due to the fact that I was diabetic, other than the fact that I was released. I don't dispute that it was a factor, because I could no longer meet universality of service, and I do believe in that principle: Every person in the military has to be able to serve as required by the Canadian government. I do accept that.

It did lead to my medical release, at least partially. There were other physical problems that related to my career that were unrelated to mental trauma, but that was part of my reason for being released.

I think it's really on VAC's part to be more aware of the linkage. When I put my claim in to VAC, they basically denied it. They said there was no linkage.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Usherwood.

That's the end of the first round of questions, so now we're going to start a new one.

I'd like to invite MP Terry Dowdall for five minutes, please.

Mr. Terry Dowdall (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank both of our guests today for their testimony, and certainly as pioneers to hopefully have some changes happen since the time that they've served, so I thank you for your service.

My question now is to Ms. Stewart. I know that at the time you said there was no exit interview. I hope that's not common now, because I think it's quite important to do that so that we can see what we can improve on.

Congratulations on your retirement. You just said that you retired, and it's fantastic that you went from one career to another successful career. There's certainly lots of hard work there.

A couple of words popped up in your testimony that sort of caught my eye. You talked about the gatekeepers. I'm just wondering if you could perhaps elaborate a little bit more about that comment.

• (1635)

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: Yes, thank you.

I'd say it's based on my understanding of how VAC works, and as I've said before, I don't have any direct personal contact with VAC. However, it does seem to me, based on what our council has heard from the women veterans who were involved in the Merlo Davidson settlement and who also had occasion to seek assistance from

VAC and use services and obtain benefits, that the frontline workers often create more of a barrier than provide assistance.

They're supposed to be there to open the door to these people—to say, “Yes, we have programs and services to help you,” instead of looking at an application and denying it right off the bat because it doesn't—now I'm supposing something here—meet everything on somebody's checklist.

It does seem to me that the front line of VAC—especially for people who have suffered some trauma, especially in light of PTSD, which seems to be more common now than it ever has been—is now there to screen out rather than to assist in providing those resources to veterans that the Pension Act says VAC was created to provide.

Perhaps Nina can speak to this as well.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Thank you.

I don't know, Ms. Usherwood, if you want to make a couple of comments on that as well.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Yes.

I know someone, an RCMP member, who after 33 years just released officially as of yesterday, and I can compare their release to mine. Because I was being medically released, I had a nurse from the local military hospital take me, step by step, through how to apply and through everything related to VAC. Once I got to VAC, it was like, “Well, this wasn't mentioned,” because neither one of us thought of it, for whatever reason. Then I had to go through the same hoops.

An intake interview would be extremely useful, but my understanding is that for leaving the RCMP—as I said, I have a friend who has just released officially as of yesterday, according to her Facebook page—there's nothing. That's the difference from the release program in the military with, for example, the Departure with Dignity program and other events. It's a night-and-day difference, from what I hear from members of the RCMP.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: As a recommendation on this study we're doing, do you think it might be helpful for Veterans Affairs Canada to perhaps hire more women veterans and those from other communities? Maybe that would help in understanding some of the issues and the calls that are coming in.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I don't have any idea of their employment numbers. I'm not sure that....

Hiring more veterans would, I think, definitely help. As I said earlier, you can't understand how someone's life is if you don't know their life, if you haven't experienced it, so I think that would certainly be useful. However, my recommendation would be to have an intake interview, which I never had.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: The same question will go to Ms. Stewart.

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: I think that people who are, as Nina said, either doing an intake interview or are the first line that the claimants meet should have some awareness of the experiences and lives of women veterans in both the RCMP and CAF, obviously. Perhaps it could be a subject matter expert, or there could be additional training, just something to raise the level of—I don't want to say "professionalism", but I will say it—professionalism at that first stage.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now let's invite the Honourable Carolyn Bennett for five minutes, please.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (Toronto—St. Paul's, Lib.): Thank you both very much.

I think that throughout this study we've been hearing a lot about people feeling invisible or being judged instead of being believed. Throughout the movements around mental health and around people feeling looked after physically, mentally, spiritually, or whatever, being connected with a peer, and an appropriately chosen peer, can make it very much easier. I think a lot of what we're hearing is that people didn't even know what they were entitled to in that bridging. Would both of you comment on it?

It sounded on Tuesday that there ought to be an exit interview. However, I think what I'm hearing from you is there also should be an intake interview, a bridge between what somebody experienced and why sometimes they were leaving. It's also, then, a warm hand-off to the intake person, who could make sure that everybody gets everything they need. As Ms. Stewart said, I think it's not just whether you get your lawn cut or what people's perception is of what they're entitled to; I'd like to know whether you can see that there could be, in the recommendations, anything along those lines in terms of awareness.

Then I would also like to hear from Ms. Stewart. You did mention in your opening remarks that you think there are situations in which VAC's legal interpretation has negatively affected women vets. Would you comment on those things?

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: I'll go first on this one. Thank you.

Our council raised the whole idea of exit interviews back in 2014 in the report that we produced on the crisis in leadership in the RCMP. To my knowledge, and obviously given Nina's testimony just now, those don't exist yet. It seems to be such an important thing for the force, especially given the changes it says it is making, according to the chief human resources officer, which are being implemented supposedly as a result of Mr. Justice Bastarache's report.

I think exit interviews and an intake interview, or the hand-off, as you suggest, would probably be good. From my perspective, the exit interview should include information on VAC, its services and the benefits that are available. If there hasn't already been that education, that would be the time to provide that information to our retiring or leaving members.

I'll just jump quickly to the second part of your question on the problems that we've looked at in VAC's legal interpretations. This is primarily to do with the Merlo Davidson class action.

The first thing we looked at involved the case of Krista Carle, who was a member who put in a claim in Merlo Davidson, but before her claim was actually dealt with, she committed suicide, sadly.

The assessor at the time took the position that because she was not alive when her claim was coming up to be dealt with, they closed her file. That was part of how the settlement dealt with that.

Our council sent a letter to the minister of public safety at the time, Bill Blair, saying that this can't be. She got her claim. How is it that now they're denying her family the benefits they're entitled to and would receive under other legislation that the country has?

At the end of the day, that decision was formally reversed by way of a court order in the Federal Court.

When the Merlo Davidson settlement was approved by the court, the court retained jurisdiction over the settlement for its implementation, its interpretation and its enforcement, so from my perspective, that's also still a possibility here. As far as I know, it's still open to the court to deal with issues that arise out of the settlement agreement.

The second point comes down to the reductions in disability pensions that have been made by VAC, which we call the clawbacks, under section 25 of the Pension Act. On that one, we have also put our views forth and said that clearly an error was made in the drafting of the settlement agreement. The clause that deals with the ability of the government to reduce settlement awards is ambiguous.

I could go into that in great detail from a legal perspective. I'll just say that this is an issue that has not yet been resolved, despite the representations of the deputy minister, who was here before you last March as well.

• (1645)

The Chair: Thank you so much, Ms. Stewart.

Ms. Usherwood, I saw that you're a little bit anxious to take part in the conversation.

I can give you a minute to answer that if you want, please.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: In the military, there is an exit interview to do with your medical health if you are being medically released. I believe they were going to do that for all releases as well, but I'm not aware of that.

From the time I first put my application in to Veterans Affairs until someone actually, finally, did an interview with me on my current health, it was a year and a half, and that was not done by Veterans Affairs. It was actually done by PCVRS, the new company that's been hired to do that. I can't remember what exactly it stands for. To be honest, the communication with them since then has been relatively non-existent.

The interview on the application to Veterans Affairs should happen because, as Vivienne said, we don't know what we're entitled to. I still, to this day, do not know what a long-term disability is and what a disability is, as far as VAC is concerned.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

I now turn to Mr. Desilets, who has the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Ms. Stewart, I'm going to continue in the same vein. My question is related to the compensation claim that was made in the Merlo Davidson case.

What impact could this settlement agreement have, exactly?

• (1650)

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: Thank you for your question. I'll try to answer it in French, at least in part, if you'll allow me.

I have a copy of the settlement agreement. Article 8.02 of the agreement contains two points. The first specifies that the funds veterans will receive will not be reduced by the minister or the government. The second specifies that nothing in the settlement—

Mr. Luc Desilets: Don't feel obliged to speak in French, Ms. Stewart. I'm very grateful that you want to do so, that said, but please be comfortable

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: All right.

[*English*]

The second sentence in that article basically says that nothing in the settlement agreement will prevent the minister from making the reductions they're allowed to make under that act. From my perspective, what we are looking at is a very important clause or article in the settlement agreement that is inconsistent. First it says, "No, we won't." Then it says, "Yes, we might."

We have raised that point. The council has raised that issue in connection with section 25 and the reductions that have been made to some of the veterans who put in for disability pensions for PTSD, but the reaction we have is that this is the interpretation of section 25 that has been given, so there's nothing in the settlement agreement that says they can't do this.

That may be, but if that is the case, then our council would hope that one of the things this committee will do is push for an amendment to the Pension Act to make specific exclusions, and I'll give you some specific wording on that. Basically it would clarify that settlement awards for any kind of harm or injury resulting from inappropriate sexualized conduct of any kind—sexual assault, intimidation, bullying and aggression—are specifically excluded from the clawback provisions of the Pension Act. If that seems too broad, then we can make it specific to Merlo Davidson.

Another option, if I may quickly jump in, that has just arisen to my knowledge in the last day or so is related to the Krista Carle affair, which I mentioned earlier in my testimony. That change to the understanding and approach of the assessor to the date when claims were filed and could be assessed, as affecting a veteran's entitlement, was changed by consent of all the parties, by court order. The agreement itself was amended to clarify what the cut-off date

would be, and it went out too. If somebody was alive before the opt-out date, their claim would be assessed and their successors would receive that money.

• (1655)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Stewart. If you have more information like that settlement, you can send that to the clerk, and we'll take that into consideration.

I'd like to invite Ms. Rachel Blaney to take the floor for two and a half minutes, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much.

Ms. Stewart, I want to come back to you. Thank you so much for giving us that information. I know the Merlo Davidson class action was brought forward by so many brave women who were trying to obtain justice. Tragically, what we saw, of course, was that VAC's clawbacks not only defeated the purpose of that action and the objectives of the settlements; they also revictimized women.

Not only, in my opinion, did it revictimize; I think it also silenced other women who may otherwise have come forward. The whole point of these actions, I think, is to stop the behaviour, so I want to know your thoughts on whether this also blocked women from coming forward.

Second, you talked about the committee having a strong recommendation moving forward on this. Do you think a recommendation saying that the legislation should be changed to acknowledge...?

I actually don't think your definition is too broad. I think that any time a person is in the workplace and is violently attacked as a result of being in that workplace, especially in this context, we need to honour that.

Did it block other women from coming forward? Are we now missing a bunch of women who could have come forward? Is the legislation the smartest way for us to go forward as a committee in our recommendation?

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: On the first about whether it blocked women, yes, it did. It did. People talk, so if somebody has a bad experience, other women, other members, are going to hear about that and hear about it fairly quickly.

It's our information that one-third of claimants were not accepted under Merlo Davidson, and even those whose claims were accepted did not get assessed at the level they expected. Presumably they were in expecting to have their claims accepted at a higher level. They didn't get that.

Then there were other women that we know of who were affected and who could not even face putting a claim in, so yes, in our council's view, whatever numbers the RCMP or VAC have for claimants in the class action, they likely fall far short of those who were actually affected or suffered some kind of abuse during their service.

We also have anecdotal evidence of people who did go through the lengthy process of putting in a claim. They were shattered all over again, and in some cases suffered new PTSD that they hadn't even had before. As you said, there was retraumatizing all around.

The class action should not even have been necessary. The RCMP had known about these problems for years, but they did nothing. Certainly, for the women who were brave enough to come forward, I'm sure it was their expectation, as it was our expectation, that it would change things, that there would be behaviour correction. Money was not going to make them whole again.

Just briefly—

The Chair: Thank you.

Maybe you'll have a chance to come back.

I'll invite MP Blake Richards for five minutes, please.

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

I have some questions for each of you. A lot of them are about ground that you've covered a bit in either your opening statements or maybe in responses to other questions, but I think there's more room for you to go down the road on these things.

I'll start with you, Ms. Stewart. You've probably heard—it's quite a common saying amongst veterans—the triple-D policy of “Deny. Delay. Die.” You touched on this a little in your opening statement, I would say, because you talked about VAC processes not being clear enough and there being too many gatekeepers. I know you had a chance to respond to a question about this a bit earlier, so that, in my mind, speaks to the “delay” part of it.

I want to give you an opportunity to expand a little further on the “deny” part of it, because in your opening statement you also referred to Veterans Affairs Canada as Canada's meanest insurance agency. I'd never heard it put quite that way before, but I've certainly heard the sentiment from many veterans over the years. I want to give you an opportunity to elaborate on that. When you talk about VAC as being Canada's meanest insurance agency, explain to us what you're referring to there.

• (1700)

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: I cannot take credit for that. That was Christine Wood, who spoke to you on April 17. Those were her words.

I've gone back and listened to and watched a lot of the sessions that have taken place for this women's study. Clearly the sense that I have, the impression that's left with me—and I'm sure with the rest of the RCMP Veteran Women's Council—is that it does behave more like an insurance company than like the resource it was intended to be. That intention, I think, is reflected in the Pension Act in the preamble and right at the beginning.

What is the purpose and the object of the Pension Act? If your people are treating the claimants, who are the veterans, as, it seems, only bumps along the way and protecting the government's money to the detriment of a veteran, then that's pretty bad insurance behaviour. As a former lawyer practising complex civil litigation, some of which involved insurance claims, I would have been shocked if an insurer had come across to one of my clients and act-

ed in that way. An insurer in private industry, if this were to go to court, would be faced with a claim of acting in bad faith.

Mr. Blake Richards: When you hear it put that way, it's pretty shocking, isn't it? I'll give you an opportunity to elaborate on what it should look like.

I've often heard the idea that VAC does operate a bit more like an insurance company, trying to find a way to deny claims. I think the obvious counter to that, the expectation, would be to see VAC act more as a service provider that's there to provide services that veterans are entitled to and that they deserve.

Could you perhaps elaborate a bit on what you think it should look like? What should the process look like for a veteran, rather than being up against a tough, mean insurance agency?

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: That's obviously a very big question.

I guess it really comes down to.... Again, yes, they're a service provider. They're not paying out insurance claims.

At the intake, having people who can assist.... Certainly for RCMP and other veterans, I have to give a shout-out to the Royal Canadian Legion, which has service officers all across Canada and does help veterans, free of charge, to put their claims together, to make sure they have everything they need and to actually get them through the process.

When you look at it as a service provider for people who are veterans, why should veterans need somebody to help them go through it? The process should be streamlined. It should be simple. It should be easy for people who aren't lawyers and who haven't been through it before to understand.

• (1705)

Mr. Blake Richards: That was where my next question was going. I've often said that to some of the folks who do this work at the Legion. I've said that to them: “Thank you for being there for our veterans, but it's too bad that you even need to be there to do this work.”

It shouldn't be necessary for a veteran to need help to navigate that process. The process should be simple enough that a veteran can get through it quickly and easily. Would you agree? Is that the ultimate goal that we should be seeking when we talk about the services that Veterans Affairs provides: to provide service in a timely and efficient manner to veterans so that they don't have to engage others as they try to navigate the process?

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: The short answer to that is yes, yes, yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

Members, I think Ms. Usherwood would like to react to that for a few seconds, no?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Yes, actually. The whole “deny, deny and then die” is definitely a sense that everybody in the military has. I know personally that in my own case and in another case I was involved in helping to get approved, they did agree, and when it went before the pensions advocates review board, it was approved. Meanwhile, VAC was just outright denying, for the same reason. They understand a shotgun wound, a knife cut and stuff like that, but they don't work well with mental injuries.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we're going to go to MP Sean Casey for five minutes, please.

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

Ms. Stewart, I want to come back to the exchange that you had with Mr. Desilets and Ms. Blaney with respect to the Pension Act and the clawbacks.

As you were talking, I pulled up the Pension Act, and I think you were talking about paragraph 25(a).

Reading the room, I think there's an appetite here for making a recommendation to amend the legislation. If you could send along the wording that you mentioned, that would be helpful, or if there's a brief that it resides in, it would be nice to have that.

My sense of what I heard from you is that the amendment would look something like including the words that you had with respect to harm or injury, and then you said that if that was too broad, perhaps to exclude the claimants under the class action litigation. My suggestion would be to do both—to use the broad wording, and then say, “including but not limited to participants in the Merlo Davidson litigation”. If there are other class action litigants you think should be caught, I'd be interested to know about it, as I think the committee would, either in response to this question or by way of a follow-up brief. That would be quite helpful to us.

Feel free to react to that.

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: Yes, I have submitted a supplementary brief that does include the wording that I read out to you earlier, and I can certainly add to that anything else, because it's my understanding that there seem to be other class actions out there as well.

Mr. Sean Casey: Okay. Thank you.

I want to come to your experience with the RCMP Veteran Women's Council. Your colleague Jane Hall appeared before committee earlier this week, and one of the things she talked about and you touched upon is that there's work to do in terms of increasing the level of awareness among RCMP vets of what is available through Veterans Affairs.

I just want to give you a minute to maybe lay out for us what your suggestions would be to increase that awareness.

• (1710)

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: Thank you for the question.

I think what our council has been considering and what we've discussed is to basically put the onus on the RCMP here. As I understand it, the RCMP contracts out the administration of these

kinds of services to VAC, and VAC bills the RCMP for that administration of services annually.

It seems to me that this may be one of the things that have been kind of falling between those two entities, with the first thinking the other one will handle this because it's their members and the second thinking the former will handle it because it's their programs and services.

What we would like to see and would like to recommend is that the RCMP institute a program of educating members and informing them right from day one. At Depot in Regina, you take courses on all kinds of things, and there are information sessions on all kinds of things. This is the kind of thing that could start on day one and then be repeated at different stages of a member's career. Certainly there must be something at the end so that the transition can be an informed transition out into civilian life, and if there are benefits and programs and services available, you know what they are without having to wait 20 or 25 years to find out.

Mr. Sean Casey: I know you indicated that you're not a VAC client, but I expect that through your work with the women's council, you've heard lots about it. Do you have any advice for Veterans Affairs with respect to the training or experience of case managers who deal with RCMP vets?

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: The biggest thing I've heard is to have better awareness of trauma, of PTSD. That probably requires, as I said earlier, trauma training. I gather there are services out there that provide that, but certainly having that kind of education and training for those workers is important.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

This is the last round of questions, and I will invite—she's on the web—Mrs. Cathay Wagantall for five minutes, please.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Thank you so much, Chair. I hope that I can be heard.

The Chair: You're good.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you both so much for coming and for our being able to have a significant amount of time with you today.

I want to bring up the awareness. I did miss the first part of the meeting, so if I'm repeating something, just let me know.

The RCMP chose not to move over to the new veterans charter, so you are part of the old Pension Act. I know that there are some differences in services because of that.

I know that through the Merlo report, the RCMP indicated that they were responding to the four specific areas already, and that they were a priority: harassment prevention and resolution, addressing systemic barriers, recruitment, and onboarding. I've heard a bit from you today specifically about concerns. I'm curious as well about cadet training and leadership development.

So much of what we're dealing with here is due to poor behaviours, quite honestly, within the time that you were serving, which VAC now has a responsibility to deal with. I would like to hear your perspectives, maybe first of all from the CAF perspective, of how important you think it is that if we're going to bring about a true culture change, it has to start with the youngest generation and a very intentional effort to instill those values in the treatment of one another. Could you provide a comment or two in that regard?

• (1715)

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I think that's aimed at me.

Part of the problem, to be honest, is Canadian society itself. That's where recruits are drawn from, so part of it is that we need a change in Canadian society.

There is intention, but again, part of the problem that I see in my career is that even when there's intention, there isn't time and energy put to the intention of changing the culture. That is my first thought.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Can I ask you, then, as a follow-up—

The Chair: Excuse me, Mrs. Wagantall, but the interpreters have a problem with the sound because there was no sound check when you came.

Could you raise the microphone a bit and say a few words?

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Is this better if I raise it a bit?

The Chair: Yes, it's very good. Please go ahead.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you so much. Now I have to remember my train of thought.

In discussing that change needs to take place across society, in a lot of what I'm hearing today you're referring to things that have been discussed over and over again, even just in the eight years that I've been part of this committee. We do the really important report and the recommendations are created. They go to the government and they give a response, but from the committee perspective, there has never been follow-up on where we are at as CAF or as the RCMP with those recommendations.

Do you think that's something that is missing in this whole process? Do you feel like you've been here before as a witness and feel sometimes that you're on a wheel going around and around?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: The short answer is yes. CAF hasn't even acted on all of Madame Deschamps' recommendations, never mind what the committee does.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: It would be good for our committee to take some responsibility for that. In the meeting yesterday with Ms. Hall, it was mentioned that we have a duty as a committee to make sure these things are followed through on. That's pretty tough for a committee to do when we're dealing with a government that is responsible for those recommendations.

Would you find it helpful to mention a few recommendations that you feel have not been followed through on, and that you would encourage this committee to possibly follow up on by getting feedback or seeing where things are at, and whether we can make a difference in encouraging next steps?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: The more voices pointing out the fact that the government isn't doing what it's been recommended to do, the better. It helps, but we can look at a lot of reports. Frankly, a lot of the recommendations don't happen.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Yes, I hear you. That, unfortunately, is what our role is: attempting to put more light on those circumstances.

I'm sorry. I'm drawing a blank. This is to the other witness.

Do you have anything you'd like to add to my question?

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: Thank you for the question.

Yes, I do, quickly.

In the RCMP, there has been a culture change that they are attempting to implement now. Since 2007, we've had seven or eight reports and studies done. There have been over 100 recommendations made, but very few of them were followed up on.

I can see culture change being encouraged at the lower levels, among the people coming in, but it's up to the leadership to make that happen. Certainly in the RCMP, sometimes it's a top-down thing that forces stuff to change and actually happen.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you. I appreciate that, because that is what we have heard overall as well. A lot of the issues are at the top level, and at the same time, if you want to see that change take place, the upper level is where it needs to be enacted.

Do you have any recommendations on how we could go about seeing those changes take place in CAF and the RCMP? There is a lot of crossover.

The Chair: Go quickly, please. You have a few seconds.

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: Thank you for the question.

That's probably something we can include in a supplementary brief to the committee. I think it's probably going to take a bit longer than the chair is willing to give me.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you so much.

• (1720)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Stewart.

I'm juggling time, you see.

I thank you for sending any additional information to the clerk.

That said, we're not done yet.

[*English*]

MP Bryan May, go ahead for five minutes, please.

Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

First and foremost, thank you both for your service, and not just while you were with the RCMP and the Canadian Armed Forces; thanks also for your continued service up to and including today, and for helping us with this study.

I have questions for both of you, but I'll start with Sergeant Usherwood.

My first thought is this: During my time on the defence file, I had the privilege of visiting a number of our bases. I got to meet with very dedicated people within the diversity advisory groups.

Were those institutions available to you when you were serving?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I believe the first DAG was formed about 20 years after I joined the forces, as a result of the Employment Equity Act in 1995. I don't know when they were actually started in the forces, but I believe the Defence Aboriginal Advisory Group is probably now 22 or 23 years old.

Mr. Bryan May: Do you work with them at all? Have you had any involvement with them in trying to impel them toward providing a better environment for people?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: The purpose of the DAG is to act both as an advisory to the leadership and also—and yes, I did—to point out issues that the DAG members might see.

I don't feel that the leadership actually uses the DAG as much as they should. Mainly, frankly, in my experience, the DAGs are used to acknowledge the international day against racism or the international day of women, etc. It's more to highlight events than to actually make any change in the system.

I know that in some bases they're more active and there's more involvement, but from what I've seen, it's mostly initiated by the DAGs, and the DAGs are an advisory group. They are not an action group.

Mr. Bryan May: That's a very solid point. I guess my question to you, then, would be about what recommendations, if any, you would give to us to maybe improve upon them.

Specifically, the reason I bring it up here at the veterans affairs committee is that a number of folks I spoke with hoped that the DAGs could evolve to support people in a better way in the transition into civilian life. I'm wondering if you've given any thought to that and could maybe provide some recommendations to this committee in that regard.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Well, the simplest answer is that the Employment Equity Act has not been amended since 1995, the last time I looked at it, so maybe there needs to be an amendment to that. Frankly, it's almost like the government said, "Okay, we'll have employment equity. Okay, we passed the act and we've checked our box. We're done."

Mr. Bryan May: Excellent. Thank you.

In your opinion, how could VAC do a better job of collecting data about gender specifically, and would it help to better serve women and veterans from the 2SLGBTQIA+ communities?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I'm not an expert on privacy, so I don't feel that I could actually give any suggestions, because privacy comes into it and the whole Privacy Act is not even an act I've read. I can't speak to that.

Mr. Bryan May: That's fair enough.

Ms. Stewart, as you probably know, Veterans Affairs continues to integrate the work of gender-based analysis plus into the work of

the department to promote inclusion for all veterans. How can we strengthen the treatment, transition supports, recognition and care of women veterans from all backgrounds?

• (1725)

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: Thank you for the question. It's a far-reaching one, I have to say.

I think we've touched on a few of the points here today: basically, transitioning into a more welcoming environment if you're actually looking at what VAC is offering and, again, programs, services, better training and better awareness of women veterans' experiences and their particular issues relating to their service and the kinds of things that are different from what their their male colleagues experience.

I'm not sure I've answered your question. If you have a follow-up, I'm happy to deal with it.

Mr. Bryan May: I wish I had the time to do that, but I'm getting the look from the chair.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We have two last interventions, but they are two quick ones of about two minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets will ask the penultimate question.

You have the floor, Mr. Desilets.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Ms. Stewart, you said in one of your previous interventions that many recommendations came out of this committee, but few were implemented.

To reassure you, I can tell you that we're pretty much all on the same page.

That said, we must remain hopeful. I'm confident that you'll respond to Mr. Casey's earlier request, and please know that we'd all welcome a written version of the recommendation you'd like to see in our report in connection with the Merlo Davidson class action settlement.

If any other recommendation should come to mind, please be assured that it would be most welcome.

I'm going to ask you a question that may seem a little naive. I'm not a lawyer like Mr. Casey and yourself.

Could someone who experienced situations related to this action five years ago be able to benefit from it?

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: Could you repeat the question?

Mr. Luc Desilets: Yes, no problem.

Could the results of the current class action be used as case law, of sorts, after the death or suicide of a veteran who had experienced assault or similar problems, if his family wanted to take up the case?

Could this be seen or done retroactively?

[*English*]

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: My understanding is no. The class action has been closed, so for anybody to bring something new forward, they would probably have to either start their own lawsuit or start a new class action.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

[*English*]

To close those rounds of questions, Ms. Rachel Blaney, you have two and a half minutes, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you. I will return to Ms. Usherwood.

There was some discussion earlier about case managers and some of the work they need to do or training they may require.

In terms of service delivery—and I am going to be specific to the trans community at VAC—what kinds of skills do you think would open up their process to be a little bit more inclusive?

You spoke a lot about needing supports or needing VAC staff to understand mental health concerns. I am just wondering if you could talk specifically about what would be helpful in order for somebody to come forward and actually feel heard and to see action happen on their file. What kind of training would be supportive for those case workers on the other side?

• (1730)

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I'm not exactly sure what kind of training I could recommend.

One of the biggest problems is communication. I just find that communication is very slow, and frequently, for me—and I'm pretty sure I've heard this from other people—it's waiting to hear from

VAC acknowledging that they've even received your message in the first place.

It's slower than it was before. That's for sure. I think it is definitely slower. I send a message, and it doesn't even get forwarded to anybody for five days.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Okay, that's very helpful.

Ms. Stewart, I will just close very quickly with you.

We know that the Merlo Davidson class action resulted in money paid by the government to those who received such terrible harm. Does this provide enough incentive for the RCMP to actually change?

Ms. Vivienne Stewart: One might have thought so, but, sadly, I am not sure about that. I am not convinced, but I am keeping an open mind that they will do what they say they are going to do now.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. We're going to stop right here.

On behalf of all members of the committee, I'd like to thank our witnesses.

Today we've had, as an individual, Ms. Nina Charlene Usherwood; and also Ms. Vivienne Stewart from the RCMP Veteran Women's Council. Thank you very much for your participation.

Do not hesitate to send more information to the clerk.

Next week we're going to continue our study, but for now, I'd like to know if members would like to adjourn the meeting.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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