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Chair

Mr. Neil Ellis

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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• (1530)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman (Brantford—Brant, CPC)): Welcome to meeting number 103 of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs on Thursday, December 6, 2018.

Appearing before us in the first hour today we have the Honourable Seamus O'Regan, the Minister of Veterans Affairs. We have with him General Walt Natynczyk, the Deputy Minister.

Gentlemen, welcome. You have the floor at the start of the meeting.

Members, we are going to go to five-minute rounds all the way around because time is limited, as you know. On that point, I also would ask members to keep their questions concise and clear and to put them forth in a straightforward manner.

I'd ask the witnesses to do the same so that we can get in as many questions as possible.

Minister O'Regan, you have the floor.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and good afternoon to you and all the members of the committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear today to discuss the 2018-19 supplementary estimates.

At this midpoint in the fiscal year we are seeking a 1.2% increase in our funding. The majority of this is related to readying ourselves to implement the return of a lifelong pension, which I announced last December.

As you know, starting on April 1, 2019, veterans with service-related illness or injury will have the option of a tax-free monthly pension for life. As had been requested by our veterans and stakeholders, the pension for life includes recognition and compensation for the pain and suffering as a result of a service-related illness or injury.

I want to take a moment here to clear up a key misunderstanding. The new pain and suffering compensation under pension for life is not simply the former disability award split up on a monthly basis. It's not anywhere close, actually. When taken as a monthly benefit, the pain and suffering compensation offers up to a maximum of \$1,150 per month for life. A seriously disabled 25-year-old veteran who lives to the age of 75 would stand to receive \$690,000 in pain

and suffering compensation alone, well above the current disability award of \$360,000.

[Translation]

The pension for life program also includes additional compensation for the most seriously injured veterans and an income replacement of 90% of a veteran's pre-release salary for veterans who are in rehabilitation or who are permanently and severely disabled.

Regardless of the duration of their military career, all members of the Canadian Armed Forces will be released one day. Our job is to help them transition smoothly and successfully to life after military service. Our duty is also to commemorate and recognize the service of all military members.

[English]

It's important to remember that 93% of all Veterans Affairs' expenditures goes directly to programs and benefits for veterans and their families. This includes health and well-being benefits, transition to civilian life programs and supports for families.

On top of that, over the last three years we have significantly increased the support for veterans. For example, in 2017, the maximum disability award rose from \$314,000 to \$360,000, indexed to inflation. This alone meant approximately \$700 million for more than 67,000 veterans who had already received a disability award.

You may note, actually, that there appears in this year's estimates a slight decrease over last year. This is due directly to the amount we disbursed in topping up veterans with \$700 million in disability awards. Even if we hold that one-time payment off to one side, we are still providing more direct benefits to veterans than ever before.

We also increased the earnings loss benefit to 90% of a veteran's indexed salary at time of release, previously set at 75%.

We have also increased supports for families. On April 1 of this year we introduced the caregiver recognition benefit, a benefit that offers \$1,000 a month tax free, indexed annually, which is paid directly to the person who cares for an injured veteran.

We also know that the transition from Canadian Armed Forces member to veteran must always include their families, so we have ensured access to the veteran family program at all 32 military family resource centres for veterans who release medically and their families. This helps them establish successfully in their new community while retaining their connection to the military community.

For members with complex needs—for example, those transitioning for medical reasons—a case manager will help coordinate transition planning with the Canadian Armed Forces, side by side with Veterans Affairs Canada. Case managers can also refer veterans and their families to a network of 4,000 mental health professionals. Veterans and family members can receive assistance through our 24-hour toll-free helpline, with access to psychological counselling and other services.

On top of that, for veterans with a service-related illness or injury, there is a range of physical and mental health services available to them. A network of 11 operational stress injury clinics and satellite service sites across the country delivers services where veterans need them.

We can also provide access to mental health services for a veteran's family member if it can be shown that it would help the veteran achieve their rehabilitation goals, but let me be clear—treatment benefits will not be provided by Veterans Affairs if that family member is under the care or custody of a federal institution or correctional facility.

For veterans looking for a career after their military service, we offer qualified career counsellors to advise about labour markets, help prepare resumés and give job search training. In some cases, they can help a veteran find a job.

• (1535)

We also offer veterans access to funding for tuition at colleges and universities or professional training. Those with at least six years of service can be eligible for up to \$40,000. Veterans with more than 12 years of service can receive up to \$80,000. Since April, when we introduced this education and training benefit, over 1,600 veterans have been approved to get the education and training they want to improve their post-service lives.

I'd also like to take a moment now to discuss the new veterans emergency fund. Established in April of this year, the fund allows Veterans Affairs to provide emergency financial support to veterans, their families and survivors whose well-being is at risk due to an urgent and unexpected situation. The emergency fund is intended to ensure short-term relief while we work to identify long-term needs and provide solutions through our other programs and benefits. To date we have spent over \$600,000 to assist veterans and their families in emergency situations.

We also introduced the \$3-million veteran well-being fund, because we know there is an incredible amount of community interest in supporting Canada's veterans. I recently announced that there were 21 recipients of this fund, which supports private, public or academic organizations in conducting research and implementing initiatives and projects that support the well-being of veterans and their families. These organizations are tackling complex issues, from veterans' homelessness and transitioning out of the military to mental health and physical rehabilitation.

[Translation]

Over the past year, I've hosted 45 town halls, roundtables and summits. I've met with many veterans, their families and their advocates across the country.

In particular, I met with over 65 organizations during a roundtable on homelessness in Ottawa in June and during the national stakeholder summit in Ottawa in October. Veterans Affairs Canada staff have also held more than 100 outreach activities across Canada.

As a result of this increased engagement, veterans and their families are more aware of the full range of benefits and services that they're eligible for. Over the past two years, we've seen a 32% increase in the number of applications for disability benefits.

[English]

We've been listening to veterans. We've heard what they have to say, and we're acting on what we have heard. One of the things that we heard about from veterans was the need to expand the medical expense tax credit to recognize the costs for psychiatric service dogs. Starting this tax year, they can now do that. We also funded a pilot study to evaluate the effectiveness of using service dogs to assist veterans with PTSD.

Veterans also told us they want a tangible connection with the veteran community and a symbol of recognition of their service. We brought back the veteran's service card, now open to more veterans than ever before. We are increasing our capacity to deliver services. We reopened the nine field offices that had been closed. We opened a new one. We increased outreach and hired significantly more staff, including more case managers.

[Translation]

This year, we've invested an additional \$42.8 million to eliminate the backlog of applications pending for over 16 weeks. We've just introduced a new wait time tool so that veterans can see the average processing time for programs and services.

Canadians value the contribution and sacrifice of veterans and all those who died in service to our country. That's why remembrance plays an important role in what we do. As Minister of Veterans Affairs, I've participated in significant and moving commemorations. We've marked important milestones, such as the centennial of the First World War and the 65th anniversary of the Korean War armistice. Over the next two years, we'll mark the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

• (1540)

[English]

We are ensuring that every veteran and family member receives the benefits and services they are eligible for, no matter how they come forward for them. No veteran should ever be turned away from the benefits and services they are entitled to through their service. With the right resources in place, we can move forward toward our common goal of providing the care, support and respect that Canada's veterans deserve.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thank you, Minister. You're under time, actually.

Mr. Kitchen, you have five minutes.

Mr. Robert Kitchen (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister and General, thank you for being here today.

Minister, you talked about the backlog. According to the figures that your government released to CBC, as of November 3, there were 3,356 veterans whose claims have taken more than a year to be put through the system. That's an increase from the 3,110 cases in the last budget year. What are you getting from that \$42 million that you're spending? You're actually going up in numbers in the backlog, not going down.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: We have to do better. There's no question about it. Wait times are bigger. What's interesting, though, is that the number of actual veterans being processed is bigger as well. As I said in my opening statement, we've seen a 32% increase since 2015 in applications, and 60% of those, very interestingly, are for the first time. We know that many of these are veterans who, frankly, had given up on the system. They had given up on a culture that had consistently said no to them. Now it's a culture that more consistently says yes.

We have a large number of people who have come on board looking for services. As the general keeps reminding me, that is a good thing, and indeed it is, because it means that more people are putting up their hands and asking for help. The \$42 million we got in the last budget is meant to help us play catch-up.

One of the significant problems we have—we are literally hiring people as fast as we possibly can through the system we have in the federal government—is finding the qualified people. It's easy to lose them. It's easy to fire them. It is far harder to gain them back. A lot of these people are in demand. They're bilingual and they have very specific training for the task. Hiring them back has taken more time than we had hoped.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you.

Further to the backlog, two constituents come to mind. One young gentleman who's 28 years old—I coached him in hockey—stepped up to represent our country, not only here in Canada but in Afghanistan. We found out two days ago that this gentleman finally got his disability claim. It was 63 weeks—not 16 weeks but 63 weeks.

The second constituent has been waiting for over a year. In fact, his paperwork was in place as of December 14 of last year, and he was told that the department was working on files from June of 2017—a year ago. Even if things progress quickly, it will be a year for him on December 14. Let's say it's six months to get to where he is. It's still taken a year and a half to get to where he is.

Now, this young gentleman unfortunately had a mental health crisis. He phoned the assistance line, because he was given that by a caseworker. The assistance line basically said to him that they weren't there to help him. He was fortunate to have friends and family who talked him off of that cliff, but he had six other colleagues in his platoon who committed suicide. If those people had called that line and didn't get assistance, how is that acceptable to this department?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: It's not acceptable to this department. We continue to put more money and more resources into making sure that situations like that, sir, do not happen.

Walter, do you want to get into the minutiae of it?

General (Retired) Walter Natynczyk (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): Yes.

Sir, thank you very much for the question. Indeed, every time a veteran comes forward and needs help, we need to provide that help as quickly as we can.

When we drill down with regard to the 3,000 men and women who have made applications and try to figure out why this takes so long, in some cases it's because when the application came in the first time, we didn't have all the information. We have to go back to the veteran and ask them to please give us this or that. Then we go to the Canadian Armed Forces, and if the file is there we ask for the file, or we go to Library and Archives and ask for the file. Then we put it all together in order to land it.

We have tried to make the decision-making a lot faster in the department. For example, once we have all the information for mental health, we've tried to streamline it. Now we know that we're approving over 90% of all applications for mental health.

• (1545)

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Excuse me for interrupting, General, but I'm talking about this assistance line:

VAC delivers a 24 hours a day, seven days a week VAC Assistance Service (1-800-268-7708) or TDD (1-800-567-5803). This is a confidential counselling and referral service delivered through a nation-wide team of mental health professionals.

If that's what this is supposed to be, and this gentleman phoned and didn't get a mental health professional to be there, how can you sit there and say that this is acceptable? It's not. You're saying something and you're not providing that service. You are not helping our veterans or our soldiers in these situations.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): I'll have to ask you to respond to that later. We're at the time limit.

Mr. Eyolfson, you have five minutes.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia—Headingley, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, and thank you, General, for coming. It's good to see you again.

As you're aware, over the last couple of weeks we've been studying veterans' homelessness. I initiated the study. There are a number of initiatives the government has started as a whole, outside of Veterans Affairs. There's the national housing strategy and health transfers to the provinces that dedicate spending on mental health services, which, as we know, is a big issue for veterans. We also know that there are new programs from Veterans Affairs—the family well-being fund, the centre of excellence on PTSD and the veterans emergency fund.

Could you summarize how these programs together are helping improve the lives of veterans?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: There are a number of things that, combined together, we're really hoping are going to help us crack the problem of homelessness.

I created a full national round table on homelessness with some of the best groups in the country—right across the country—some of them regional, some of the national in scope. It was heartening for me to see them sharing best practices with one another, sharing business cards with one another.

There are some things that are going on in some parts of the country that are proving to be remarkably effective. What we're able to do now with the wellness fund is help to basically ramp them up so that they'll be able to help more people in their region or possibly be able to scope things a little more nationally.

While we are doing many things, the issue of homelessness—and I think anybody involved in the field would agree with this—is something that we have to tackle with groups that are close to the ground. I'm proud of the fact that we do that, whether it's VETS Canada or any number of organizations that exist across the country. The Legion is doing incredible work on this, and again, there are some very small, regionally based ones that are doing great work.

Pension for life, because it's a monthly contact with veterans, I think is going to prove to be a very important tool. Instead of getting a disability award and basically being written off the ledger, we will now have the ability to have monthly contact with the veteran and be able to check in with them more frequently than we can now.

There are other things, like the earnings loss benefit and the psychosocial vocational rehabilitation that comes with that. Many veterans now will be receiving 90% of their previous salary. There is the fact that we can offer career transition services that are more than just \$1,000 and “good luck with the job search”. We are proactively able to work with them. We're also able to match them up with private sector hiring.

All of that combined, I think, is going to go a long way to helping solve that problem with homelessness.

What I'm most heartened by, again, is listening to groups from across the country who are now working together.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: I can add that one of the key parts of preventing homelessness is actually pre-emptive, and that is overcoming the stigma of mental health injuries. That's why we've

taken on a much more presumptive approach to mental health disability claims.

We are working with the Canadian Armed Forces to work upstream while folks are still in uniform. If they are struggling, it's to ensure that they seek help while they are still in the Canadian Armed Forces. We know about their situation as they transition into civil society in Canada, in order to prevent that sense of hopelessness where they lose their sense of purpose and get into a situation.

Then, as the minister said, it's working with communities across the country, and indeed with veteran networks, because folks know where their battle buddies are. Going to Mr. Kitchen's point, it's battle buddies, shipmates, squadron mates, who are keeping tabs on each other and hopefully intervening early enough before someone gets to that point.

I would also want to reinforce the same point with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, for whom we provide some support. Those networks are so important.

Also, then, with regard to this emergency fund, there is the fact that we can now offer, for the first time, emergency funds to an individual without having to prove their total situation or eligibility. When I talked to the case managers across the country, what they said was, not only is it in the case of an emergency but it's bringing veterans in the door.

Veterans who would not otherwise come in are coming in the door and saying they have a need. Then, as we drill down, we find out that folks are eligible for much, much more.

• (1550)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): You have 15 seconds, sir.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: That's just enough time to say thank you very much.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Mr. Johns, you have five minutes.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Thank you, Minister, and thank you, General, for being here.

In the 2018-19 estimates, you asked Parliament to authorize expenditures not exceeding \$4,363,061,570, which is \$297 million or 6.4% less than you requested in the previous fiscal year.

We know that there's a tremendous backlog of applications for nearly every program administered by Veterans Affairs Canada. You're missing half of your own targets, including applications for the rehabilitation program, which is backlogged; applications for the long-term care program, backlogged; the career transition program, backlogged; earnings loss benefit, backlogged. The war veterans allowance is backlogged, and of course, there is the monster backlog in the processing of applications for disability benefits.

There are 3,000-plus who have been waiting for more than a year—as my friend Mr. Kitchen outlined—to get the help they need, while your own target is to process these applications in just 16 weeks.

Given these backlogs and the lack of basic services for veterans and their families, why did your department request less money from the treasury this year than last? Shouldn't you be asking the treasury for more money overall until these application backlogs are finally cleared?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: As the honourable member knows—and we had I think a very healthy discussion on lapsed funding in the House of Commons—first of all, it's very important to remember that 93% of our budget goes directly to veterans, either directly into their pockets or into benefits and services that they deserve.

Much of what we distribute in terms of money that goes into people's pockets is quasi-statutory, which means, as you know, that whether it's 10 veterans who raise their hands in any given year or 10,000, we will always have that money ready for them. Any money we see at the end of the year that's a little more than we had budgeted for, a little less than we had budgeted for, immediately goes back into the following year.

I would contest the issue of wait times. This gets back to Mr. Kitchen's point. This is not to take away from our impatience on this, but there is unfortunately, when you put even \$42 million into it in a very short amount of time, a significant ramp-up period in order for you to train the right people, to get the right people in place and to hire them, in order for you to significantly take some of those wait times away. It does require a significant amount of ramp-up time.

Mr. Gord Johns: Minister, I really appreciate that, and I think we appreciate that you've started hiring people back in terms of the thousand jobs that were cut. Why aren't you hiring the thousand people? If it's about HR and you're not able to get the talent that you need in the centre in which you're operating in Charlottetown, have you looked at and explored regional centres so that you can open up and change the way you're doing HR? This is urgent. This is a situation where veterans are falling through the cracks, and they can't wait any longer.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I couldn't agree more. In terms of regional centres, I think opening up the nine offices has been a tremendous help. I think opening up the 10th office in Surrey has been a help, and I think opening up a mobile office in the northern area has been a help. We are literally hiring people as quickly as we can. There's no number, for instance, such as a thousand. We are just literally hiring as many people as we can get to do very, very particular work that requires very specific training.

Maybe, Walt, you can get into that.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: On your first question, sir, can I just add that what is I think very beneficial in our budget process is that the quasi-statutory budget the minister mentioned is uncapped and demand driven? Again, through the estimates process and the supplementary estimates process we can ask for the additional money.

With regard to the drop of \$200 million, as you mentioned, that was captured with the minister's comment that the year before, with the top-up of the disability award, we—

Mr. Gord Johns: It's actually closer to \$300 million. I'm sorry, but I'm running out of time.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Sorry.

Mr. Gord Johns: I don't think it's the right time to not be asking for more money. I know that the minister talked about 93% going to benefits, but clearly 7% isn't doing it in terms of what you need to budget to serve veterans.

We talked about lapsed spending. Thank you for raising that, Minister.

The minister, veterans, their families, friends, advocates and everyone—indeed, all of us here today and in the House—broadly want better service for veterans. We know that.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer concluded there are three mechanisms for transferring lapsed spending from one year to the next in each department. On November 6, Parliament unanimously supported our opposition day motion to carry forward all lapsed spending at Veterans Affairs each year and to dedicate that additional money, about \$124 million per year on average, solely to provide better service for veterans and their families.

My question is simple. The PBO says it's possible, Parliament has unanimously approved the idea, and you personally, Minister, have approved of the idea by voting in favour of our motion. A simple yes or no is what I'm looking for. Will you be writing to the President of the Treasury Board and the Minister of Finance to request that all lapsed spending be carried forward in the coming year and dedicate that extra \$124 million—if that's what it is—per year to improving services to Canada's veterans until all 24 service standards are met, as agreed to in Parliament?

• (1555)

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: We will—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): If it's not a yes or a no, we don't have time. His question was for a yes or a no. Do you want to answer that?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: We will make sure that funding continues year over year to make sure that every veteran gets what they need and what they deserve.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Okay.

Madam Ludwig.

Ms. Karen Ludwig (New Brunswick Southwest, Lib.): Thank you, and thank you, Minister and General, for being here today.

We heard from a number of witnesses who were before the committee about the challenge with regard to the transition from the Canadian Armed Forces to being a veteran. I'm wondering, Minister, if you could speak directly to that.

I know that we've talked about the career transition benefit—the education and the training benefit—but we heard specifically from veterans about the challenge of the training they receive within the Canadian Armed Forces not being recognized by external bodies. Is there any work being done in that area, again, to help with the transition? Thank you.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: In fact, last evening I spent some time with a group called Seamless. They're doing very similar work, but their work is involved with making sure that even within Canada, and while they're still in service but moving from base to base, the qualifications of a spouse, for instance, are recognized from province to province, which, as you know, can get quite cumbersome. I know there are things we're trying to deal with in terms of internal economy, but these are really important matters, and again, not only for the veteran but also for the family that serves with them.

We have heard this time and again. My marching orders from the Prime Minister—and the same through my colleague, the Minister of National Defence—is to make sure that transition happens as smoothly as possible. Working with external bodies and with provinces to make sure qualifications are recognized is a top priority.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Thank you.

We have also heard at committee about veterans who are homeless. In terms of housing, can you share with us how veterans are priorities in the national housing strategy?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: As the national housing strategy is rolled out over the course of the next seven years, we're happy that veterans will be a priority group, which is as it should be, really. We're still fashioning this, but a lot of the groups that attended our round table on homelessness are the same groups that will be informing our decisions with the national housing strategy.

One item I wanted to mention that I think will also help in terms of homelessness is the ID card. For the first time, the flip side of the ID card will have numbers on it that will allow anybody who picks it up and reads it to see where help is being offered and how they can get direct help for the veteran—or how they themselves can receive help. More importantly, it allows for identification of a veteran. In most instances, when they self-identify that they are indeed a veteran when they go into a homeless shelter, etc., we are then able to tap into them as a department. There are instances where that hasn't happened, but it just allows things to be expedited.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Thank you.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: I might just add that a year and a bit ago, I did a foot patrol through Ottawa on a Sunday with a group called Soldiers Helping Soldiers, the Royal Canadian Legion and a number of Ottawa police officers who formerly had been in the Canadian Armed Forces. We visited the Mission. We visited the Shepherds of Good Hope. We visited the Salvation Army. I was taken not only by the fact that we were able to find some veterans, but when we sat down and counselled them, telling them about all the tools and the fact that we could help them do this or do that, none of them came forward. In addition to that, I know that, as we went in, a number of veterans left through the back door. They didn't want to be found yet.

This goes back to my earlier point about working with networks of veterans so that they feel safe to come forward, to get help and to

get down that road of mental health healing and resilience, and at some point in the future go into some kind of vocational rehab that will give them a purpose.

The minister and I were out in Victoria, again partnered with the Royal Canadian Legion, at a great facility called Cockrell House, where graduates, if I can use that word, of what I've just described are there counselling veterans who are coming in from the bush. We've also found that a lot of veterans don't want to be in Ontario or the prairie provinces in winter if they're homeless. They migrate from our offices to the west coast, so it's about how we can get these veterans to come forward and to present so that we can help them as soon as possible—when they want.

• (1600)

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Yes. I was going to say that in the case of these veterans, it's when they choose to.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): You have 30 seconds.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: No, thank you very much. I'm very pleased. I have heard from veterans in my area of New Brunswick Southwest about the additional services and certainly the difficult times over the last decade.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Mr. Samson, you have five minutes.

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

Thank you both for being here, and thank you, Minister, for your presentation.

First of all, on the homelessness piece, I want to thank you and the government for placing priority on veterans in terms of homelessness. There are also other vulnerable groups, of course, but veterans are a big piece. I think you said as well that the ID card will help identify some of those individuals, which is crucial. I'm looking at Irving Shipbuilding, and they've agreed now to hire 100 veterans through a program that they have.

Those are very big. We need to make sure we communicate all the benefits out there. There have been lots of benefits over the last two and half to three years. What are we doing to help with the awareness? I'm always afraid that people are not aware of all the benefits they have and deserve.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: We work with organizations like the Legion. They have been outstanding in helping to get the word out on the ground, aside from our own efforts. We still have a lot of work to do. There is communication and there is also receiving that communication, making sure that people hear what you're putting out there.

When we talk about this issue, as I think everybody in this room can appreciate, emotions can run high sometimes. It is an emotional issue. Social media just kind of exacerbates that. One of the real reasons I wanted to continue, and will continue, with the town halls we do across the country is that it allows you the opportunity to speak directly to people. These are people who are showing up at town halls. They're motivated.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Absolutely.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: They're usually leaders in the community. Some of them are quiet and just dealing with their own things, but many of them are people who help get the word out. It just allows us a larger forum to help explain beyond one or two bullet points what it is that we're trying to do.

Mr. Darrell Samson: That's what I wanted to touch on. Forty-five is a lot since you've been appointed minister. Can you tell us some of the key things that you're hearing in those public meetings?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: They hold our feet to the fire better than anybody. The first thing that comes to mind is something that I acknowledged earlier in the session: wait times. It is one thing to look at numbers, and it is quite another thing to be confronted with a veteran or a family member who has had to wait a long period of time. You hear that out, and you're more emboldened than you were before to make sure that you do something about it. That's the first thing that comes to mind. However, literally, a lot of what we are putting into place now are things that veterans have been talking about for quite some time, that they have brought up time and again in town halls. These are often opportunities for us to tweak new initiatives.

Mr. Darrell Samson: On that front, General, I'm leading to that question. You'll answer exactly where the minister is bringing us because that's exactly where I want to go. We have to keep in mind that there are 32% more applicants, and 60% are new applicants. There's an influx. The work that we're doing on the ground on awareness is helping; there's no question. You asked what we can do. When we spoke about going back because some of the materials are missing, or going back to CAF, is there something...?

I know that there's a joint committee between CAF and VAC. What can we do to improve that? It's so crucial for us to zero in on how we can make that more efficient. Maybe the ID card is going to give us some help. I know that the military veterans are telling me, as well, that not only the ID card, but some of the.... How can we make that process faster? What do we know now that we didn't know and that we can use to improve the time frame?

• (1605)

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: I kind of put down four factors. We're hiring, as the minister indicated, as fast as we can, and we're hiring the very best from communities coast to coast. We're also trying to create additional capability out in the regions: a francophone adjudication team in Montreal and another one in Winnipeg. We created a little cell in Campbellton, New Brunswick. We're creating capability because we know that in Charlottetown we have great folks. We're trying to hire them as fast as we can, too, but we're doing a shotgun approach. We're training them. We are providing a lot of resources because training is so important, not only for the individual but for standardization across the country. We're fixing our processes.

Again, what the minister heard in our town halls.... We have to realize that when men and women get hurt in the Canadian Armed Forces, often they don't go to the medics because they're great troopers. They want show up for PT the next day. They don't get their injuries documented. That is often the case, and I speak from experience. Therefore, actually putting the case together so that we know what happens to an infantryman, an artilleryman or a ship's bosun allow us to come up with an evidence model based upon their trade and their experience. Then finally there is digitization. We are leveraging digitization to the degree that we can, recognizing that some folks like to go the digital route, some folks like walking in the front door of the office and some folks want a phone call.

Again, we are trying to get stronger in all of those areas. We have this portal called My VAC Account. We have thousands of people who are signing up monthly, perhaps triggered by all these town halls. We have over 80,000 on My VAC Account now. In terms of new programs, the education and training benefit and the—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): I'm going to have to cut you off there, General. We're about a minute over time on that one.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): I wanted to take the time to give you as much as we could there.

Mr. Brassard, you have five minutes.

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

Minister, during the last election the Prime Minister said that no veteran shall have to fight the government in court for the benefits that he or she deserves. However, during the period between 2016 and 2018, \$38 million was spent on lawsuits. We have veterans who filed a class action lawsuit at Ste. Anne's Hospital because of a diminishment of service and a diminishment of staff that weren't supposed to be there when VAC transferred to the Quebec government the services that were to be provided at Ste. Anne's. I visited Ste. Anne's in June, and I saw it first-hand. I heard first-hand from those veterans in that facility.

We also have Mr. Bruyca. He questioned the government. He actually asked for a cost-benefit analysis on the pension-for-life scheme, and he was told that a cost-benefit analysis wasn't going to be done because it represented a less than one million dollars expenditure. The suggestion is that the pension-for-life scheme is a shell game being played by the government, that there's no additional cost and no additional benefit to our veterans. Mr. Bruyca got that information from your own finance department officials and you chose to attack him publicly. Why?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Apples and oranges.... I think it's very important that we make sure the information we get out there is as straightforward and as truthful as we can possibly make it. There are enough veterans out there who frankly—

Mr. John Brassard: It was confirmed by your own finance department officials, Minister.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: —get anxiety and are prone to anxiety, and we all know that anxiety can be a trigger for other mental health issues.

Mr. John Brassard: Why did you attack Mr. Bruyca?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: What I needed to do, not really in attacking but in clarifying what Mr. Bruyca had to say, was simply to say, “Look, this is what we're talking about. It's pension for life. It's a very different thing.”

I don't want to comment too much more on it because, to the point of how you began this question, it is before the courts at the moment. Certainly, given my druthers, would I go to court? Do I want to go to court? No, I do not, but obviously where something is initiated by a veteran or by any group—

Mr. John Brassard: Let me ask you this question, Minister, because you've had a lot of time. I asked the question and you've had ample time.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: —I have to make sure that our department and the interests of the Government of Canada are represented.

Mr. John Brassard: Why are veterans still being asked to go to court to fight their government? Why? After the Prime Minister made that promise, why is that happening?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Mr. Brassard, while you were talking over me about it, I think I answered the question fairly clearly. There are instances, and certainly I'm not one to say that veterans or any other organizations are incapable or should not be allowed to take the government to court. But where they do, I have to make sure that the government's interests and the interests of the department are well represented. Therefore, we need to make sure that we're represented in a court of law. It's not something that I choose to do or like to do, but where it's initiated by another party, regardless of the circumstance, I have to make sure that we're well represented.

Mr. John Brassard: I want to focus on service dogs for a second.

Minister, there was an efficacy study that was done by Université Laval. In almost every circumstance—I would suggest that in every circumstance—it was shown that service dogs improved the lives of veterans and their families. That study has been on your desk, from what I understand, yet on April 18, just eight months ago, your spokesman, Alex Wellstead, was quoted by CBC as saying, “We're working to put in place standards, rapidly, so that veterans have access to properly trained psychiatric service dogs”.

It's been over three years since you took office, eight months since the process collapsed and this renewed commitment was made. This study shows there is efficacy with respect to service dogs and the effect that it has on veterans. When will those standards be introduced?

•(1610)

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: The study, which is one that we funded, is very limited in its scope. It deals right now with about 18 veterans. It began with 22, I think, but four dropped out.

The unfortunate thing, too, is that we haven't had the time yet to analyze a few other crucial factors—where a caregiver is involved, or where one is not involved. Where a caregiver is involved it can, not skew but could perhaps affect the results of the study.

In other words, we have to be able to zone in particularly on the effect of the service dog, and we're doing that now, but we basically need more data.

You're quite right in saying that anecdotally, too, we know this. It all seems to be pointing in the right direction, so we didn't waste much time. With the medical expense tax credit in the last budget, we told the veterans that they could put some money aside and it would count towards the expenses. Whether it be for actually buying the dog or for feeding the dog, or veterinary bills, which can add up, they can apply that tax credit. We can do that right now for people who are either going to be purchasing a dog or....

But there is also, to be honest with you, a huge supply issue. Anybody who is familiar with these dogs understands that they are incredibly well trained and it takes time to train them and get them up to the standard that we need.

Mr. John Brassard: Minister, quickly, because I only have about 10 seconds, why has that tax credit not been initiated by the Department of Finance and the finance minister at this point?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: The tax credit will be initiated in the next tax year.

Mr. John Brassard: Okay, we'll see.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Mr. Bratina, you have five minutes.

Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.): Thanks very much.

Mr. Minister, I'd like to find out about the emergency fund. What would have happened with regard to these kinds of emergencies prior to bringing that fund into effect? What would have happened in an emergency situation, because this is new money, I understand. What would have happened previously, before that money was budgeted?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: It was an eye-opener for me on my first day as minister, being debriefed by the deputy, because basically if we found somebody, there wasn't a pot of money. We went to wills and bequeathments. I was frankly shocked by that.

Just to colour this a little, it means that there are people out there who will will or bequeath a portion of their estate to look after homeless veterans, but it's usually under particular circumstances. For instance, say I'm from Calgary and I decide that I want to leave some money for homeless veterans in the Calgary area, or I want to leave money for homeless veterans from the Afghan war. Then, once we've identified somebody, in order to get them the financial help that they need, we would have to go back into wills and bequeathments and find a match, and that could take time.

You're the one who told me this, so you go ahead.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Yes, thanks very much, sir, for the question.

The department has 23 of these funds. Over time, folks have provided these funds for specific reasons, so there are ones, for example, for folks living on Vancouver Island, and for Edmonton and Ste. Anne's Hospital, or restrictions on how the money could be used. Of the 23 funds, there was only one fund that was kind of open-ended, coast to coast and for emergencies, so case managers, veterans services agents and folks from across the country went to this fund. It was drained on a constant basis, and we did not have an authority under our legislation, regulation, to dispense public funds for requests that were in the grey zone.

We would partner with the Canadian Armed Forces morale and welfare services, which I know a lot about from my previous life. They have non-public funds. We would request funding from the Canadian Armed Forces to top up that specific emergency fund, which was less than adequate, and clearly a government has the responsibility to reach out to these veterans and their families when they are in crisis. It was terrific when we got this funding, and we're making our process as expeditious as possible. I find that things get swamped in bureaucracy, so to speak, but the aim is to enable the most junior case manager, a veterans service agent who is presented with an emergency on a Friday afternoon at four o'clock or five o'clock, to say, "We're going to get the money out to you."

In some of these cases, we're even doing the paperwork after the fact, and I'm okay with that, just to make sure that, if someone comes calling, we can put a roof over their heads, put some groceries on the table or address their no-kidding emergency.

We have found the difficulty is that what is an emergency in one location could be an enduring situation in another location, so every one of these cases is viewed on its own merits, but I'd also say that we have hired some of the best social workers, psychologists and nurses coast to coast who have a huge amount of experience, and we trust them to get on with supporting our veterans and their families.

• (1615)

Mr. Bob Bratina: With the money that has been brought in, would it be fair to say that the program will be reviewed for its efficacy and whether it seems to be enough to handle the situation? I would assume that, in the next budget year, there will be an allocation, so one would hope that it would be.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: I'm anticipating to have funding next year in this regard, sir.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Right. Do I have more time?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): You have one minute.

Mr. Bob Bratina: General Natynczyk and I were together with some great veterans of the Devil's Brigade not so long ago at a special event. There was a veteran from Hamilton, 95 years old, who made a great speech, and subsequently I spoke to the United Council of Veterans. I'm a member of the veterans committee and a sitting member of government, and they asked me to speak and I was delighted to. We had a wonderful evening.

General Natynczyk, you noticed that it's not always difficult questions being asked, and certainly the forum here today is to get to the bottom of issues, but isn't there a lot of good work being done on behalf of veterans?

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Sir, there is, but we can always improve. That's why, with these town halls, when we hear these reflections, in some cases we're doing all right and in some cases we aren't.

I would also say that the vast majority of veterans who leave the Canadian Armed Forces can transition relatively easily into civil society. Two-thirds do and we know that third that is having difficulty. Often they come from the combat arms—infantry, armour, artillery and perhaps some in the navy as boatswains—and we need to focus on them so that they as well can find purpose and so on moving into the future.

There's a huge amount of work being done, and what's interesting is that, when someone is happy, they go quiet. They come in. They whisper in the ear. They send notes. You know, we were just at a Legion event a couple of weeks ago—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): I'm going to have to cut you off. I'd love to hear the story of the Legion and going there, but we are over time on that significantly.

The next slot is a Conservative slot, and I'm going to begin it. As the chair, that's my prerogative. I'm just going to ask one question of the minister.

This committee did a study on transitioning from the military to civilian life and dealing with Veterans Affairs, and the report was unanimous. All recommendations were recommended. You received it, and you came back to refuse to accept one recommendation, and that was something that was advocated for by the former DND ombudsman, Gary Walbourne. You said no to what we recommended, which was that there should be an ability to get an attestation from the defence department that would confirm that a veteran's disability—if they were disabled—was attributable to their service.

Why did you say no to that?

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: The issue, sir, is that only about 25% of our clients come to us while they're still in service. The Canadian Armed Forces' surgeon general's responsibility is to get those men and women—those sailors, soldiers, airmen and airwomen—as healthy as possible and get them back to units right away. Working closely with the Canadian Armed Forces and the surgeon general, their view and our view was to have one standard of assessment of service, and non-service-related injury was the more appropriate way. Seventy-five per cent of our clients come to us after they've left service. To have two standards, so to speak, of judgment of whether it was service or non-service was less than efficient or effective.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Mr. Walbourne maintains that this could be a simple fix—no cost or very low cost—to speeding up decisions on claims if it could be attributed. That's why this committee put that recommendation to you in there. Were you aware of that, that this was the testimony we heard from witnesses? They said this is a good idea even though, as you say, it doesn't encompass everyone.

•(1620)

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Sir, I would just like to add that we are working very closely with the Canadian Armed Forces to get all of that work done while people are still in uniform. The effect that you heard as a committee will be achieved so that all the homework is done before people transition. As the chief of defence staff has mentioned, we need to ensure that prior to someone's release, if indeed they're coming forward for a medical release, be it service or non-service, we get all that work done as effectively and quickly as we can, sir.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Okay.

I'm going to yield the balance of my time to Mr. Johns.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you, Mr. McColeman.

I'm going to go back to case managers. Can you tell the committee how many job cuts the last government made in the department, and how many of those were case managers? It shouldn't be a long answer. It should be a short one.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Sir, I don't have the details of any of that. I would just say that again we're working very hard to find the best case managers—social workers—coast to coast. I know when I got into the job we had just under about 200 case managers. Over the past few years, we have hired such that we have more than 400 case managers today. My colleagues will be here at the table in a few minutes and they may have more detail. We'll have to come back to you—

Mr. Gord Johns: Is it my understanding there were 1,000 before?

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: I think it's important that we drill down on numbers because the transfer of Ste. Anne's Hospital involved a significant number of employees. There were also, through a whole number of exercises over the past few years, others.

I just want to clarify, Mr. Johns. From my understanding, they were not all at the front end of case management. There were corporate services. There were a number of areas. As well, when we leveraged civilian contractors with regard to—

Mr. Gord Johns: Clearly, we don't have enough right now. What is the current case manager to client ratio?

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: My understanding at this moment, sir, is that we're in the order of 32:1 or 33:1.

Mr. Gord Johns: Twenty-five is the target.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Our target remains 25:1. As I mentioned before, we have now more than 400 case managers. My understanding is that we're hiring another 50. I have met many of the new case managers coast to coast who have come in either from other departments or actually from the schoolhouses, from colleges and universities. What we try to do is ramp them up. I've met some case managers with higher numbers than others.

The other thing we're trying to do—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): I'm sorry. Time is up.

I'm going to put it out to the committee at this point because I'd like to stop the rotation, if that's okay. We have approximately seven minutes left. I'd like to put it out to the committee that I'll take a single question from any member on either side—if you have a single question. I'll offer the first single question to the Liberal side.

Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you.

Mr. Minister, you spoke about pension for life. I've heard from many veterans in my riding that they're very excited and waiting for their pension for life. You talked about the \$1,150 for pain and suffering, but I'd like you to talk about the other pieces. In actuality, depending on your needs, you could have the additional pain and suffering compensation or you could have the income replacement benefit, which would be even greater. You used the example of 25 years old to 75 years old, which is almost \$700,000. That's just under category one of pain and suffering. Could you just expand on the other two categories, please?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: In some categories, as opposed to what it was in 2015 when the maximum would have been about \$315,000, now you're looking at, for some, depending on circumstances, over the course of their lifetime, it being \$3 million.

We will continue to offer a certain amount of money, \$500, I think, one time, so that you can get financial assistance to determine that this is what you want to do. It's really important to point out. We keep saying “option”. As a default we're definitely going to be nudging people towards pension for life because we know as, I think, many Canadians knew when we were all grappling with the lump sum, that it is simply financially more stable to have a monthly amount. Walt could tell you stories about going to see an injured soldier in hospital and the family members saying, “Please don't give him that full amount”, but at the time, that's what he or she was entitled to.

Now we have a far more lucrative option for them, one that I think will add to wellness, because of that monthly...and because of all the other benefits and vocational rehabilitation that will come with it. It is a significant outlay. It is \$3.6 billion from the treasury that will be going towards pension for life. That's out of the \$10 billion that we have put towards new benefits and services since coming to office. This is significant.

•(1625)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thank you, Minister. That's two minutes. I hope to keep these under two minutes so we can get as many as we can in.

Mr. Brassard.

Mr. John Brassard: I'm going to take 30 seconds, and then I'm going to pass it over to Mr. Kitchen.

Minister, will you do me a favour and send a message to the Prime Minister? Will you do that for me? Tell him next time he tweets about \$50 million to Trevor Noah to think about the impact that has on veterans in this country who are fighting with their government for service dogs, who are living day by day with PTSD, their lives literally in the balance, and tell him to think about that next time he sends an irresponsible tweet like that. Maybe that money can be better spent on veterans and service dogs.

Mr. Kitchen.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thank you, John. I said one per member.

Mr. Johns.

Mr. Gord Johns: My question is when. When do you expect Veterans Affairs Canada to meet the 25:1 client to case manager ratio? When will that happen? What's the plan?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Mr. Johns, if I could give you a date, I would. All I can say is that we're working full forward on it. We are hiring people as quickly as we possibly can within the federal civil service. It is very easy to let these people go. It is very difficult to hire them back.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Can I also say, Mr. Johns, that what we're doing as well is hiring as quickly as we can and getting folks through a training school to standardize training.

The other thing we're doing is actually looking at each individual veteran. When I meet with case managers, I ask them how many of their cases—and often they have a number between 35 and 40—they actually have to engage with, to support on a weekly basis and so on. Generally the number is much lower than that higher number.

One of the things we have to do is to say who out there is at medium risk or high risk and how do we triage them? Sometimes, just through our processes, if somebody's on a vocational rehab program, we automatically give them a case manager when indeed they're doing really well. Some are master's students or Ph.D. students. We've met ordinary seamen who are going to university and we're providing them a case manager.

We are starting a new program. It will be coming out in the next little while. We've been piloting it for a little while. It's called guided support. We're taking veterans service agents who have a number of

files and saying we need to have them now support those veterans who are no longer at a high risk because they're graduating—they're actually moving forward—and provide them support to transition them until we know for certain that they're low risk, recognizing that things can turn around and if they do, we'll get them back to case management. It's a much more agile system than we have right now.

At the same time, we are hiring the best social workers we can. We're attracting them from the provinces, attracting them from anywhere and training them up. It's basically a multi-layered approach to addressing this need. We do know that with our case managers, the probability that someone will be re-established, have purpose and move on with their well-being is much higher.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thank you, gentlemen. That wraps up the hour. Thank you for coming. Thank you for responding under the gun. This is good for our democracy. We appreciate your being here.

Next time could you maybe consider two hours, Minister? It would send a great signal to the committee and to Parliament if you would. We were told today that these are independent committees, so let's make it independent and let's make it innovative by having a minister come in for two hours. It's just a suggestion but please consider it.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Done.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thank you, General Natynczyk, for your service to our country and for your continued guidance to our veterans.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Thanks very much.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): We will adjourn until the next panel.

•(1625)

(Pause)

•(1630)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): We'll resume the second half of the meeting.

Welcome, witnesses.

We welcome Ms. Charlotte Bastien, the Acting Assistant Deputy Minister of Strategic Oversight and Communications; Mr. Bernard Butler, the Assistant Deputy Minister of Strategic Policy and Commemoration; Mr. Michel Doiron, Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery Branch; and Ms. Elizabeth Stuart, Assistant Deputy Minister, Chief Financial Officer and Corporate Services Branch.

We have 10 minutes available for—

•(1635)

Mr. Michel Doiron (Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery, Department of Veterans Affairs): Mr. Chair, we have no opening comments, so we'll turn it right over to the questions.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Lovely. This is great.

Okay, we'll get started. Our first questioner shall be Mr. Kitchen, for five minutes.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for being here again to talk to us.

I brought up a question a couple of weeks ago dealing with the posters that are being done. I'm just wondering if I could get clarification on the budget. There's talk of \$180,000 allocated for funds related to government advertising programs. Is that the amount for these posters that are being sent out, which have phone numbers that take forever to get through to?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Thank you for the question, sir.

Just to clarify, by the posters, do you mean the articles that went into the newspapers and things like that, or is there another poster?

Mr. Robert Kitchen: No. It's the poster that is being sent out to organizations, and so on. It's a nice poster and it states that this is a crisis and gives a line number to call, but when you call that number you're on hold and people can't get through. I brought that up in committee here a couple of weeks ago, and I'm just wondering if this \$180,000 is allocated for that.

Ms. Charlotte Bastien (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Oversight and Communications, Department of Veterans Affairs): We do have a budget for advertising, and we do have a budget for producing communications material. I'm not sure of the specific reference, but I'll get back to you. We do have a budget to provide posters of that nature but also for other types of communications materials, whether it be for awareness of what's available regarding emergency assistance, some of the programs that were put in place last April, some of the programs that will be put in place next April, or some of the commemoration activity that has been under way.

Rear-Admiral (Retired) Elizabeth Stuart (Assistant Deputy Minister, Chief Financial Officer and Corporate Services, Department of Veterans Affairs): I'd like to add that, as it relates to the supplementary estimates (A), this funding is related to government advertising programs, and it's a horizontal item for the federal government writ large. It largely has to do with the remembrance campaign of the Government of Canada this fiscal year.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: It's more the remembrance campaign. The advertising that gets put out for these posters, then, would fall into which budget?

RAdm (Ret'd) Elizabeth Stuart: It would typically fall into either the outreach and communications budget, or specifically into one of the service delivery budgets, depending on the situation.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Because I'm not an accountant, please define what a horizontal item means.

RAdm (Ret'd) Elizabeth Stuart: Okay. I guess that is government-speak for initiatives that have a broad reach across several government agencies and departments. The lead for this one is actually the Treasury Board Secretariat. We have but one part that we play into the larger initiative.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: You may have heard my conversation earlier with the minister, dealing with the issue of the suicide hotline

or the assistance line. Obviously, I have some concerns, and Mr. Doiron and I have chatted a bit about that.

In the preamble of our study, "Mental Health of Canadian Veterans: A Family Purpose", we talked about improving the transitional support between Canadian Forces and Veterans Affairs, and including recommendations that could ultimately be used in the development of a coordinated suicide prevention program. Recommendation 13 was that VAC and Health Canada work together to make the Veterans Affairs Canada assistance service available through online chatting and accessible through multiple platforms.

There was great fanfare around this suicide prevention strategy that we have, and we have this line and we have this system. However, veterans have been contacting me and telling me this system doesn't work. We're spending money on this to try to talk people from that cliff edge they may be on.

I'm wondering, first, how much money we're spending on this line—because if we are, we're wasting it—and two, what we can do to make certain it isn't wasted.

● (1640)

Mr. Michel Doiron: We're spending approximately \$1 million a year on that line. I'm rounding the figures, but it is approximately \$1 million a year. Last year we had over 1,300 calls and referrals. This year it's around the 1,600 call mark.

Following your comments a couple of weeks ago at another committee meeting, they came back to me. We contacted Health Canada, because this emergency line is run by Health Canada. We relayed our concerns. I'm not debating the information you brought forward, but if that happened, I'm extremely concerned, because a person who's calling that line is supposed to get a certain level of service.

There are times of the day or certain points when the lines are busy, and they are given three different options. It's quite clear up front. You can wait, give us a number for us to call you back, or call 911 if you're in crisis. Those are the three options.

We have followed up with them, and we've asked for a deep dive. What has happened here? Did something actually happen?

I don't know if I will ever be able to get to the bottom of the case that you brought to my attention, to be honest. They get a lot of cases, but we take it extremely seriously. Our chief medical officer, Dr. Courchesne, who has appeared in front of this committee on more than one occasion, is talking with them to ensure that type of event doesn't happen again.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): We will have to stop there. We're a good minute over time.

Mr. Bratina, you have five minutes.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Welcome back, everybody.

On backlogs, I'm confused about how files are dealt with and whether they are closed or not, because I have had individuals come to my constituency office with a certain request. I found out later, bumping into a person, that "Yes, it was all great. I got the benefit." I ask, "Is that it? They say, "No, I have another one."

Can you ever close a file? It must be fairly complex to keep statistics on things like backlogs and so on.

Mr. Michel Doiron: It's not that complex to keep the statistics. We're actually really digging in to what the statistics are.

It is not easy to close a file, because we're talking about a disability award or a disability pension. We're talking disability. We're talking dealing with health professionals. We're talking medical appointments, so on and so forth, depending on the case. They're not all complex, let's be honest.

The reality is that we are working really hard to facilitate that. Since, I don't know whether it was my last appearance or the one before, we've actually really drilled down on the numbers and on where the files are in the process. Last Friday we had approximately 4,000 files waiting for documentation from either a medical professional or the veteran. When you look at the pending, that's all in the pending. But at the end of the day, the reality is that we have a backlog, and at the end of the day, it's taking us too long to adjudicate.

We have implemented a lot of new initiatives, integrated teams. The files aren't bouncing around between units. You had a unit of juniors, nurses, doctors. The file goes here. Then you send it to the next person, where it stays a couple of weeks on the shelf until somebody takes it off. Then that person does it, and says, "Oh, I have to send it to a doctor". That takes a couple of weeks.

We have this process that we've piloted, and we're going to go full hog on it, because now the team is integrated. I go to you and I give you the file, you look at it right away, and we make a decision. A file that would have taken eight months, with eight conditions.... That's the other thing people don't often mention. They come forward. It's not one condition. If you're coming forward with hearing loss, period, that's pretty straightforward. What they're coming forward with is eight different conditions. A file like that could take eight or nine months. They did it in half a day, with one letter to the veteran.

Now, let's not say we've won the battle yet, because we're far from having won it. There's still a lot of work to be done, but we are really starting to put some of the stuff.... We've now drilled down. We now know where the files are. We knew that before, but I wanted clarity. What I've learned in 29 years of operations is that you can fix problems, but if you're not fixing the right one, you're just creating something else somewhere else. We've really been digging in to that.

We have a very complex system. I think everybody around this table knows that. The biggest issue is that we have huge amounts coming forward. Last month, November, was our biggest month in history—48,000 files went out the door. Unfortunately for me and for the veterans, 5,400 files came in.

We've doubled the production of our employees, and it's still not enough. We're looking at all avenues. The deputy and the minister talked about some. We're adding staff. We're adding new processes, eliminating steps. We still have a ways to go. We can do better, and we have to do better.

•(1645)

Mr. Bob Bratina: It's not fair to discuss individual cases. I know it sounds awful, and you say, "Why did you do that?" You need all the details.

One thing that keeps coming up is that a veteran asking for a benefit will say, "I have this physician's report, but they won't accept it." What's that all about?

Mr. Michel Doiron: That's a great question. It's one that annoys me.

What happens is this. If it's a complex case, and depending on what is written on the form, our nurses refer it to our own doctors for, I'll call it, a second opinion, for an assessment. We're actually working on limiting the number of times that happens.

With all respect to doctors, and I know there are a couple around the table, sometimes the notes are not very clear about what the diagnosis is, and then we do have to do it. However, when it is clear, we try to avoid sending that to our doctors, because it's twofold. It's frustrating for the veteran, but also it's causing delays in the processing. If it goes to a doctor and then our doctors have to look at it, and sometimes they have to send additional information to a doctor and get some more forms filled out, you're just adding all this time to the process. We're doing some process re-engineering to make sure that's being—I won't say eliminated as it will never be eliminated—at least decreased.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thank you.

Mr. Johns.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you.

First of all, thank you for your service and for your work.

We know that the government is only meeting half of its 24 self-identified service standards. Some of them predate this government. Some are getting worse under this government.

Based on your current planning and priorities, when do you expect Veterans Affairs Canada to meet all 24 service standards?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Services fall under me, so I will try to answer that, but I don't have a date. I can't give you date.

Even if I had a date, I can't, because we've had a huge increase in.... I'll just touch on adjudications.

Mr. Gord Johns: I think you talked a bit about the increase—

Mr. Michel Doiron: Yes.

Mr. Gord Johns: —and explained some of the reasons why.

What resources do you need to get there? Why are you not meeting these targets? What can Parliament do? What funds do you need, resources, to get there?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Thank you for the question, and I thank you for your efforts.

This is not the first time you've hammered me on how many resources I need. I'm very happy that we received the \$42 million.

Mr. Gord Johns: I'm sure, but it's not enough.

What is enough? We're trying to get that number.

Mr. Michel Doiron: There are numbers, but the issue we actually have is—

Mr. Gord Johns: You said there are numbers.

Can you tell us what the numbers are? What is it that you've requested that you need to meet those standards?

Mr. Michel Doiron: I mean, the \$42 million we have now will go a long way—

Mr. Gord Johns: But that wasn't what you requested. We know you need more.

Can you tell us what you need, what those numbers are?

Mr. Michel Doiron: I can't because it's government privilege and it was given to cabinet. We have asked for money and we received the \$42 million, and I'm very thankful for that.

What we need to remember is that there's a lag between the time the money is approved and the time the production starts going. If you look at that lag, I have hired 42 adjudicators already this year, but they are not yet producing. Why? I got authority in June to do it. The people are hired. We are now in training. They are going to start producing in January.

Mr. Gord Johns: I appreciate that—the time that it takes—but my concern is that clearly we know we don't have enough employees. We're not being told, because it's cabinet privilege I guess, what we actually need. That is disappointing.

I think if we knew what was necessary, we'd be trying to fight for you to get that. It's disgraceful that the government isn't giving you what you need. Veterans shouldn't be waiting.

I know Mr. Kitchen asked a lot of questions around the call centre, and I really appreciate his work on this. You can expect to be connected in two minutes. That's a standard that you've set. Your target for that two-minute connection is set at 80% of the time, but you're only meeting that 66% of the time.

What's it going to take to get people to answer the phone? We have to have someone on the other end or people fall through the cracks.

• (1650)

Mr. Michel Doiron: Thank you. That's actually an excellent example.

Some of these standards are difficult to reach. If I take the phones—and I thank you for bringing it up because I wasn't thinking of that one—when we brought in the seven new programs in April, the government could not give me enough money, and I can't put enough people.... I guess they could give me enough money—I shouldn't say that—but I can't put enough people on the phones to answer every phone in April and May. It would be improper use of dollars to do that.

Unfortunately, that means for the rest of the year, I'm catching up. It was the same thing last year when we upped the DA. That month,

my accessibility on the phones for April was about 10%. Everybody wanted to know how come they had \$40,000 in their bank account and where that money came from.

The rest of the year, we're doing pretty good, but we lost a year in the first month and a half.... Even if you give me the money, I can't get enough people in the seats to answer the phones. Then, what do I do with the people after, because the volume is not there? It's a spike. We have to manage these funds very prudently—it is taxpayers' money—and I feel very strongly about that.

I think where we need to go is not additional money. I think we need to invest—and we are, with PFL—in a new way with our systems and maximizing the use of electronic systems. It's not necessarily the number of people—

Mr. Gord Johns: Why is that not happening right now?

Mr. Michel Doiron: We're working towards April 1 on PFL, and PFL will be a whole different system of application.

Mr. Gord Johns: The idea is to clear the backlog, then, right after that's implemented. How long will it take after that?

Mr. Michel Doiron: I'm hoping.... I don't know.

PFL will not clear the backlog. What PFL will do going forward is that it will be a lot faster to receive your disability payment. It's a different system and the controls are all in the system. The backlog will be in existence, and I'll have to get rid of that backlog as we're working on the new one.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you.

Thank you, all, for being here today and for continuing to help us find these answers that are so important.

I'll continue on the same topic of questions. I'm puzzled as well as to the wait time. I realize we have 32% more ask and I realize 60% are new, so it puts enormous stress. I know we're doing a lot, with the joint committee between the CAF and VAC. When I'm hearing that some of the reasons for the delays are due to the fact that something is missing or we have to go back to CAF and find out, I really don't like that. We talked about how we can ensure that we get this right.

There are two things. Do we have a tracking system? Maybe this question has already been answered, but if I put in an application, can I go on weekly and find out where my application is, what desk it's at, how long I should have to wait? I was superintendent of a French school board, and when there was request for maintenance for anything, you put the request in and weekly you could track it to see who did what, where it's at and who's now supposed to take a decision and if they took it yet.

Do we have a complex system in the process that the veteran can go look for?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Yes, we do. It's not as advanced as it could be. Under PFL it will be much better, but we do. What's frustrating for the veteran is that it may stay in the same place for two months. I get complaints about that. I'm being very honest, I get complaints on it.

Mr. Darrell Samson: As you should.

Mr. Michel Doiron: Absolutely. I'm not saying I shouldn't.

Mr. Darrell Samson: What would be the reason it got stuck for two months?

Mr. Michel Doiron: I'm going to try to explain the process very quickly.

There is a unit that prepares the file. The file comes in and there's a unit that... If you go on your system My VAC Account, on which we have over 80,000 people, the system will say it's in file prep. It may be in file prep for many weeks because your documentation is not complete. The veteran may think it is complete. By the time we go back to the veteran or we go to the military for a file or so on and so forth...but it stays there and it doesn't say the reasoning for why it's there.

Then it will go to adjudications. It may be in adjudications for many weeks for the same reason. That's why I'm saying—

• (1655)

Mr. Darrell Samson: I'm not trying to be difficult, but if I buy a ticket from Air Canada and I start answering the info I need to require and I press the go button, it says, "No, you're not going anywhere, buddy. You didn't answer question three. You didn't get question four."

If we had that process, they couldn't file unless that was happening. If we had a caseworker who's working with each—and again, I don't have all the details—ensuring that all the data and information is there, then we'd be able to do it.

How can we make it better? Because we need to make it better. You'd agree with me, of course.

Mr. Michel Doiron: Of course.

Mr. Darrell Samson: What can we do?

Mr. Michel Doiron: That is actually what we are doing. That's part of the process we're looking at to eliminate the steps. As an example, we work very closely with the military. We are no longer requesting all the medical files. They've given access to certain systems and there are certain files we know we don't need so we're not asking for them. That's eliminating some time. We are actually looking at exactly what you just said. If it's not complete, like your passport, return to the veteran. We're actually looking at that.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I have to get a second question in. Thank you.

It's on commemoration.

Mr. Butler, I know we invested in some improvements in investments in certain areas and improvements in cemeteries and that, but I'm hearing some veterans tell me—and tell me if you've heard this—that they don't see themselves on many cenotaphs. If they were in certain places or most places. For example, if they were

Afghanistan veterans, it doesn't mention Afghanistan on certain cenotaphs.

Have you heard that and what would you say to that?

Mr. Bernard Butler (Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy and Commemoration, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you for the question. It's certainly a pleasure to be here today.

That's clearly an issue that we are concerned about in terms of trying to ensure that we understand fully what the modern-day veteran—that's how we refer to them—wishes to be recognized and how to go about doing that.

I would point out that cenotaphs across the country are not owned by Veterans Affairs Canada, they're owned by local communities and so on.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I agree, yes.

Mr. Bernard Butler: It's a very challenging question, actually, because a lot of modern-day veterans will tell you that they don't even see themselves as being veterans—

Mr. Darrell Samson: That's right.

Mr. Bernard Butler: —let alone looking to be recognized at a typical November 11 event, for instance, like we had a few weeks ago here in Ottawa.

We are cognizant of it for sure, Mr. Samson. We continue to survey our population of veterans. We continue to ask that question, and we continue to try to reflect the modern reality of our population.

Mr. Darrell Samson: In closing—and I was closing, if you could give me just a quick second—I'm hearing a lot about it in my riding. A lot of them are talking about it, so it's an issue.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Madam Ludwig.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Thank you.

I was getting quite caught up with my colleague here.

Thank you all for your presentations today, and certainly for the work that you're doing for veterans.

I'm not only the daughter of a veteran. I'm actually the sister of a veteran. Veterans Affairs certainly is an important service that so many of us recognize as invaluable and critical, really, to the health and well-being of the people who have served and have given so much.

We heard from different witnesses regarding veterans who are homeless. One of them specifically was Matthew Pearce. He's with the Old Brewery Mission. He's the president and CEO. One of the things he had recommended was temporary rent subsidies. Is that something that's being looked at, not only within Veterans Affairs but also as a whole-of-government approach, maybe with the national housing strategy? How would that work for a veteran?

Mr. Bernard Butler: Thank you so much for the question.

We certainly have heard that as a proposition, and we certainly know that there are similar approaches in the U.S., as an example. It is one that we're certainly mindful of. I think it's one of those many good ideas that is out there and is being considered as part of the overall response. I think it's really important to underscore the fact that the homelessness issue in Canada, both for Canadians and for veterans, is one that quite clearly requires a global, collective government and community response, and there's no single answer to the problem.

We have certainly heard that particular idea now and are certainly mindful of it. It's one that we will be exploring further with our many partners in this domain. As the minister said, that's the type of thing where.... With the homelessness round table we had in June, we had the opportunity to engage with so many folks who really work in the day-to-day world of homelessness and who have much to offer in terms of that collective, global solution. We're certainly mindful of it, and it's something that we'll continue to look at.

• (1700)

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Thank you.

My next question is actually related to research. We've heard from a number of witnesses that a lot of the information they're collecting is anecdotal. Is there a plan within the government for the measurement and collection of data? I'm wondering how Veterans Affairs measures success in the programs that exist today.

Mr. Bernard Butler: I thank you for the question because it really is quite an interesting one.

The area of research in the domain of veterans is absolutely fascinating. As you know, there are organizations like the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research, with whom we are strongly partnered, and we have partnerships with a whole range of other peers, including the Canadian Armed Forces, DND, Statistics Canada and so on. There's a lot of data being generated now, for sure. From our perspective, singularly within Veterans Affairs Canada, the reports and so on that we produce as a function of our research, we certainly do publish where appropriate and where possible. We make them available to the public through our websites and so on.

There is a lot going on in that domain, for sure. As I said, it's an area that seems to be burgeoning. Recently, at a Five Eyes conference that our minister attended, it was a singularly recurring theme among our allied countries, in terms of maximizing research in domains such as mental health, suicide, homelessness and so on, and to ensure both that there are opportunities for collaboration and that this information is disseminated internationally.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Thank you.

Of the \$1.1 billion for total operating expenditures, which was just mentioned, what proportion was actually allocated to mental health services?

RAdm (Ret'd) Elizabeth Stuart: I don't have the exact figure for mental health services at my disposal at the moment.

Mr. Michel Doiron: That is because there are a lot of different components to the \$1.1 billion, so we'll have to give you that. OSI has a percentage, and then DA and mental health, so we'd have to figure that out, but we'll get that done.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Thank you.

My next question comes again to the collaboration piece. We've heard from a number of witnesses who have said that, as a veteran, the challenge sometimes is that an organization, a provincial government or a municipality, will say, "Oh, you're a veteran. That's not our responsibility". Is there a plan, as you're working through programs from a practical perspective where you may be more working in collaboration with the provinces than perhaps has happened previously, to make the gap smaller?

Mr. Michel Doiron: The answer is yes. Canada is a big country. We deal a lot with health care in Veterans Affairs, but we're not a primary provider of health care. We subsidize health care. We support provinces on health care.

We do work with all provinces. We probably don't work that much with municipalities, but we work with various groups in the communities that help with veterans' homelessness or.... There is a multitude of them, and our local offices are extremely well attuned to whatever is in their community. If you're in Saskatchewan, you have a certain reality as opposed to Halifax as opposed to Toronto. My area directors and my staff, case managers and veterans service agents, are very well attuned to that.

At a more macro level, we do work with provinces, because every province has a different mechanism for charging back. They have different rules and regulations for health care related to veterans, so we deal with them, either my colleague in policy or from an operational perspective. As an example—

• (1705)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thank you.

Mr. Brassard.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Michel or Bernard, which one of you, either of you, was involved in the Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue transfer?

Mr. Michel Doiron: I was not involved with the transfer, but I'm now on the transfer committee.

Mr. John Brassard: What was your understanding when the transfer agreement was made between the federal government through Veterans Affairs and the provincial government with respect to the level of service to our veterans?

Mr. Michel Doiron: The transfer agreement stipulated that the level of services was to be maintained.

Mr. John Brassard: Right, so on October 2, the day after the Quebec election, Mr. McColeman wrote a letter to Premier François Legault because of complaints of veterans within the Ste. Anne's Hospital.

I actually visited it. As I said to the minister, I visited the hospital back in June. As fate would have it, I spent about an hour there. I talked in particular to Mr. Solkin and others as well about the level of care and how it has diminished over the years with fewer employees.

As fate would have it, as I left the hospital to take an Uber ride back to my hotel, the driver of the Uber was a long-term employee. He had spent 35 years at Ste. Anne's. We started talking about the reason for my visit, and he told me that the level of care has diminished to a point where the safety and security of our veterans are at stake.

What are you doing about that?

Mr. Michel Doiron: We are doing a lot, and I would like to clarify—I'm not sure who the Uber driver was—that the safety and security, from a medical perspective, has been maintained.

What has occurred is that there was a decrease—and I say “was” because the Ste. Anne's Hospital or the CIUSSS, and I don't know what the acronym CIUSSS means, but the group that runs it has made a lot of effort to improve. For sure, after the transfer, there was a decrease in services, and I want to be careful—

Mr. John Brassard: Did they take it back up to the level they were expected to by VAC?

Mr. Michel Doiron: They are very close, to be honest. Are there still issues? There were, but let's be honest, even when we ran it, we had people in the hospital who were not happy with certain things, and for those of us who deal with long-term care facilities, food is often a big issue in every facility. I'm just using that as an example.

Mr. John Brassard: It's not just food. There is dental care for which the service levels have diminished. There is property care where the service levels have diminished. There is physical care where the service has diminished. For doctor visits, the services have diminished, at least they had in June, so if you're telling me that they've improved since June to this point, then that's good news. But the reports we're getting are that the service levels are still significantly lower than what the expectation was when that transfer agreement was made.

Mr. Michel Doiron: I can't comment on the expectation. I have to be careful what I comment on, because there is a court case on it. I want to be as open as I can.

Mr. John Brassard: That should speak volumes, Mr. Doiron, to the issue at Ste. Anne's. Don't you think?

Mr. Michel Doiron: I absolutely know.

Mr. John Brassard: The fact that 95-year-old veterans have to take Veterans Affairs to court should be a wake-up call to Veterans Affairs as to the level of service, or the lack of service that is going on at that facility.

Mr. Michel Doiron: Well, sir, a court case is a court case. I don't want to get to everything that's in the—

Mr. John Brassard: Can I ask you quickly, then, what type of audit system is in place in that transfer agreement between VAC and the Quebec government to ensure that those levels of service—the money that's being funded to maintain those levels of service—are used?

What sort of audited services do you use in order to show that?

Mr. Michel Doiron: They bill us for the services, and we actually have the reports of the times that people are being used on the floor, to collate that with what we are being charged.

Mr. John Brassard: Are you 100% sure that the money that VAC is paying is actually going to the services that veterans—

Mr. Michel Doiron: Yes, I am.

Mr. John Brassard: Okay.

I'm going to split a bit of time with Mr. Kitchen.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you.

We've heard recently from testimony here at committee that about two-thirds of the emergency fund has already been spent, and it's likely to run dry long before the end of this fiscal year. We've learned also that VAC officials will likely lean on outside organizations to assist even more.

What are you going to do when that fund runs out before the end of the year?

RAAdm (Ret'd) Elizabeth Stuart: Thank you for the question.

I would commence by confirming that the veterans emergency fund expenditures for this fiscal are just north of \$700,000 of the \$1 million that's allocated.

I would add, as the deputy mentioned in his testimony earlier, we have 23 trust accounts at a current P7 value of approximately \$1 million that can also be drawn upon.

• (1710)

Mr. Robert Kitchen: You're going to utilize another fund.

RAAdm (Ret'd) Elizabeth Stuart: These are the accounts that have been with Veterans Affairs for many years, which are bequeathed to the fund.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Why are you leaning on these volunteer service organizations to have them do more and pushing people to those organizations?

Mr. Michel Doiron: We have to remember that although this is an emergency fund, there are requirements. Some of the people coming forward for services are not emergencies. I can give you a whole list—but because of time I won't—of examples of people coming forward trying to get \$2,500 for stuff that is not considered an emergency.

In some of those cases, the case manager will refer the individual back to whoever is best suited in the community to help them, because it is not, under the definition of the fund, an emergency.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: You're not giving them money, but you are over \$700,000 at this point in time.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Mr. Kitchen, we're way over time.

Sorry, Mr. Doiron, if you'd like to address that in a later questioning round, please do.

Mr. Eyolfson.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you all for coming.

One of the things that's happened in our mandate is that there were the nine veteran services offices that were closed by our previous government and we've reopened those. So far, we've hired more than 400 front-line staff, and we're still hiring more. As was said in the earlier testimony, they're being hired as quickly as we can train them.

What impact have these changes had to VAC's ability to deliver veterans services?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Thank you for the question.

Additional staff, for sure, have improved the services, whether it is the nine offices or the additional case managers we've hired and put into the offices, or the additional adjudicators. All the additional resources and the additional programming—because it's not just people, we have received a lot of new programming in the last couple of years—have helped veterans in general. That doesn't mean that we don't have veterans struggling. We do. The downside effect is that I have backlogs, which I keep trying to figure out. However, it has helped.

As a case in point, I've been coming to this committee now for five years. It has been the hardest job I've ever had. Every single day, I would have three to four messages, often from people in various locations, receiving complaints from veterans in crisis—I call it crisis. I still get 20 emails a day from various constituency offices. They go through the minister's office, but they all come to me and I read them all. I have a team working on it, but I actually read them because I want to know what's happening out there.

The reality is that 19 of the 20 are because of the timelines. I won't break down that some are legitimate and some are not. You can go through the whole.... However, it is much better.

That said, as the deputy mentioned, there are still 32% who are having a hard time in transition. We have to do better, and that's why we're working closely with the Canadian Armed Forces on better transition. If we can do a good transition, hopefully it's a better landing.

I think the money and the programming have come a long way. We can still do better, but they've come a long way.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: All right. Thank you.

We talk about backlogs. Can we give an idea of the extent of the backlogs, say, in spring 2015?

Mr. Michel Doiron: I've been told by somebody who's been around longer than I have that there have always been backlogs at Veterans Affairs. I know when I arrived there were backlogs. I arrived in December 2013, and there were backlogs then. In those days, in 2014, we finished the year at about 36,000 files in adjudication. The backlog by memory was probably in the 6,000 to 7,000 range. Actually, it was a bit higher than that. We did a big push to bring it down.

As new programming comes in, more demands come in. I think I've told this committee here before that my personal calculation is

that we will hit over 60,000 files in adjudication this year. I may be off by a couple, and please if I'm wrong don't...but I think we're going to be pretty close. Last year we had 52,000 and the backlog now is higher than the 6,000 it was. The backlog is just under 14,000.

• (1715)

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you.

I understand there's been a 32% increase in the number of applications.

Mr. Michel Doiron: That is correct.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Over what time period have you had that 32% increase?

Mr. Michel Doiron: It's over the last two years, so year over year.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Would you say that's also contributing to the backlog?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Absolutely. We have more files coming in, and as the deputy and the minister mentioned, from one perspective it's a good thing. People are coming forward. We have to do better. I can't give excuses on that, but there are more files coming in. There are more programs.

The big game-changer, I think, was when the earnings loss benefit went to 90%. That's where it really moved not only in adjudications but in case management. At that point, on October 1, that December my case management ratio was below 30%. I was at about 28 point something. Within a three-month period, the number of people who started coming forward and applying, who needed case management and everything else, just skyrocketed. When you're running a first application approval at about 85%, which is what we're running—in 2014 we were running at about 70%—people now are saying I have a good chance of getting it in, especially on the mental health side. We're really making an effort. I think, all said and done, that's why we're seeing this big influx coming in.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): I'm going to ask a couple of questions.

Mr. Michel Doiron: Yes, sir.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Number one, when the agreement between the government of the day, and I believe it was the previous government, for the transition to Ste. Anne's of the services they were providing.... I believe 738 individuals who were previously working at Veterans Affairs were transferred to the payroll of Ste. Anne's. Am I correct in saying that?

Mr. Michel Doiron: I would have to confirm the number of people transferred because I was not part of the transfer program.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): I recall that from the time. Technically, you could say that those were jobs that were cut from VAC. Is that correct?

Mr. Michel Doiron: They were transferred to the province.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Yes, so you could say the government of the day cut 738 jobs.

Mr. Michel Doiron: I would say they were transferred to the province, but....

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): So would I. Physically, I know this is not an easy question. I've been very critical publicly. You know that.

Mr. Michel Doiron: Yes.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): You probably heard my comments. I ran a business and I know about growth of a business and what it does to you and how it strains you and how you have to figure out how to deal with it. You have growth and you have to figure out how to deal with it on a timely basis. I talk about redesign, re-engineering, things you have to do. It's not only adding people, but looking at your systems, so I'm happy to hear you say that.

On one of the issues, there are a couple of specific things. When you talk about adding adjudicators, where physically are they being added in the operations?

Mr. Michel Doiron: They're in multiple places, sir. We added some in Charlottetown. I opened up a unit and they're in training currently in Montreal because of some of the comments from the ombudsman on the French language, that it was unacceptable. I'm also the champion of official languages at Veterans Affairs.

We added a unit there. We added resources in Winnipeg...or I shouldn't say "added" resources. These are new resources. We were not doing adjudications at those sites.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Right.

Mr. Michel Doiron: Talking purely adjudications, I added a unit in Kirkland Lake.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Okay, so they are not all in Charlottetown.

Mr. Michel Doiron: No, sir.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): What is the physical need in Charlottetown? We heard the minister and the deputy talk about adding people as fast as they could. I immediately think of the square footage of space that you need to house these people as one of the issues you have to deal with. How are you dealing with it?

• (1720)

RAdm (Ret'd) Elizabeth Stuart: My IMIT division also carries the responsibility of looking after accommodation requirements. Through the planning process for the growth, my team has been involved from the outset in understanding what the space requirements are for office openings and every other requirement across the country. We work very closely with PSPC and Shared Services Canada to do the fit-up and find the space. We've been very well supported.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Are you at capacity in Charlottetown from a physical plant point of view?

RAdm (Ret'd) Elizabeth Stuart: I would say no. I would say we could still find additional capacity.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Has there been a series of additions put onto the building?

RAdm (Ret'd) Elizabeth Stuart: Not in my recent history; I've been with the department for two and a half years. We have maximized the infrastructure we have. We also have dealt with PSPC for the rental of space that doesn't constitute an addition to a building but space we find in other complexes.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Okay. Let's move on to Mr. Johns.

You have three minutes, sir.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you.

We talked about the plan to deal with the backlog. You said you couldn't give me the number that you have requested of the minister. Maybe you can answer this. Have you actually costed a plan to deal with the backlog? Has that analysis been done?

Mr. Michel Doiron: The analysis has been done. The costing is not all finished, because of the point made by the chair. I'm of the view that it's not warm bodies we need. We need to change the fundamental way we're doing business. That means maximizing artificial intelligence, AI, and maximizing the use of our systems. My VAC Account works very well. If you file through My VAC Account, we can do what you have been talking about, sir. It's not only tracking; the file is complete.

That's the area we're now costing. We're working closely with my IT colleagues. We've learned a lot in the past two budgets. When we implemented the DA, nobody had to apply. The system worked. When we did the new seven programs in April 1, 2018, there were some applicants, and there were new programs. But let's say I apply for the education benefit, for example. They will ask me, "Is this you, Monsieur Doiron? Is this your service number?" If I say yes to both, then I don't have to do more. The system works behind the scenes. If they find me and my service number, and my file is clean, I will get an answer pretty fast.

That's what we need to do. We're costing that side of the argument. It's to maximize the smart technology that's out there.

Mr. Gord Johns: We appreciate the modernization and working towards that and using technology and innovation. However, the government is announcing more and more new programs, yet I don't see that it's been costed, probably. The backlog's growing. I appreciate that you're going to take some action on trying to be more efficient, but clearly there's not enough staff.

How much new money requested in the supplementary estimates will be dedicated to hiring caseworkers? Have you identified that?

Mr. Michel Doiron: I don't have the dollar amount, but I do have the number of individuals.

Mr. Gord Johns: Okay.

Mr. Michel Doiron: Under what we call the “surge” proposal, it was 50 case managers.

Mr. Gord Johns: Okay.

I asked you last winter if you had a plan to hire veterans to serve veterans. Last winter you didn't have a number. In the spring you had a number of 10% by 2020 as the goal. Can you give us an update? We've heard from veterans as witnesses here. I've asked almost every witness how they feel about it, and they wholeheartedly support it. Can you give us an update on the measurement of how that's going in order to meet those goals?

RAdm (Ret'd) Elizabeth Stuart: Being a veteran in the public service myself I can definitely relate. Upon the enactment of the Veterans Hiring Act the deputy and the minister issued a challenge to their counterparts to make a pledge. The pledge we made at the time remains. We are currently working very closely with the Canadian Armed Forces both on the uniform side of the House and with the assistant deputy minister of civilian human resources, and also with the Public Service Commission, which is accountable for the oversight of the implementation of the Veterans Hiring Act.

Mr. Gord Johns: Do you know the number of veterans serving veterans within your department?

RAdm (Ret'd) Elizabeth Stuart: I don't have it exactly. I will have to get back to you on that. I believe it is what you stated: 10% by 2020.

• (1725)

Mr. Gord Johns: The goal is 2020. I'd like to get an update.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): We'll have to end it there, Mr. Johns.

Mr. Martel you have three minutes to finish.

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Martel (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, CPC): Good afternoon, Mr. Doiron.

Timelines seem to be the major issue. You said earlier that 19 out of 20 complaints concerned timelines. This has been an issue for a long time. What concrete action can be taken to resolve the issue?

Mr. Michel Doiron: You're right, Mr. Martel. Timelines are currently one of our big issues, but they aren't the biggest issue. That's why we've started to review all our procedures. Veterans Affairs Canada is currently requesting information that isn't necessary. By eliminating these requests, we're eliminating steps.

For example, we've made changes concerning the medical records that we ask the Canadian Armed Forces to provide. We used to ask for the entire medical record, which took an average of 88 days. Since we had only 16 weeks to process an application and we lost 88 days waiting for the medical record, there wasn't much time left for the rest of the process. Now, in many cases, we no longer even ask for the medical record. We have access to their system. Since this involves personal information, it isn't a simple matter and it requires us to comply with all sorts of rules. In addition, when we reviewed our procedures, we realized that we didn't need an 800-page medical

record and that one page of information was sufficient. There are many steps to consider, and these steps have been around for a long time. We don't eat an elephant in one day. We take one bite at a time. By working more resolutely to review these procedures, we'll succeed.

I gave the example of integrated teams. If I work on a file and send the file somewhere else, it may take two or three weeks for the other person to process the file. It's not really the person's client until the person opens the file. This is part of the process, but it causes delays. When all these delays accumulate, we have a considerable timeline. However, in an integrated unit, I can sit down with a colleague, show the colleague what I've done and ask whether the colleague agrees. We can make a decision that day on the file, which wasn't done before.

There's certainly a challenge in terms of work culture. We've been trying to change the culture for a few years. We provide disability benefits, and we used to take an extremely rigorous approach. However, in recent years, we've been much more open-minded, particularly with regard to mental health issues. Perceptions of mental health have changed not only at Veterans Affairs Canada, but also among the general public. We're asking for fewer documents, which helps us to proceed much more quickly.

We've needed to change our work culture. Our employees had been doing things a certain way for 25 or 30 years. Now we're asking them to use a completely different method. We're also teaching this method to our new employees, including through the training provided to our case managers and adjudicators.

Mr. Richard Martel: Have you noticed an improvement?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Richard Martel: Are we able to measure this progress?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Absolutely. We're able to observe and measure our progress. Adjudicators used to process an average of 1.2 cases a day. Today, they process twice as many cases. As a result, we can measure the progress, and employees are accountable for their performance.

Mr. Richard Martel: Thank you.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thank you.

It's my responsibility to thank you all for being here. I know there are times that are maybe very difficult, especially when you mention the growth numbers. It's not an enviable position to be in, as I mentioned, having some experience in that environment, but it's our responsibility to make sure our constituents, our taxpayers and especially our veterans are well served and we get the maximum out of the resources we have. That is what this committee tries to do, time and time again.

Thank you for coming and being witnesses this afternoon.

The meeting is adjourned.

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