



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

## **Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs**

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ACVA • NUMBER 062 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, October 3, 2017**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Neil Ellis**



## Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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• (0850)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Neil Ellis (Bay of Quinte, Lib.)):** Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and a motion adopted on February 6, 2017, the committee resumes its comparative study of services to veterans in other jurisdictions.

I would like to welcome John Boerstler. He's the executive director of NextOp and is video conferencing in from Houston, Texas.

John, you have 10 minutes, and then we will hopefully go into some great questions.

Thank you, John, for joining us this morning.

**Mr. John W. Boerstler (Executive Director, NextOp):** Thank you for having me, sir.

In Houston here, obviously we've had a bit of trouble with a hurricane, if you haven't heard, and it's brought up this idea of resilience and what a resilient city would look like. Although we bounced back very quickly in terms of hurricane recovery, and everyone is back to work and everyone is housed, we found that the veteran community was one of the major things that led the resilience of our city in the return to normalcy after the hurricane. That fit in line with everything we designed when we built the Combined Arms system.

I come from the United States Marine Corps. I worked in the United States Congress as a military liaison, and then worked at the municipal level to build the Houston-Harris County returning veterans initiative, which was led by our then mayor and county judge in a collaborative effort. Being an entity of municipal government, we ceilinged out very quickly and realized that creating one program can't address all of the complex needs and issues of the entire veteran community, the second-largest of which in the United States is in our area, smaller only than the community in Los Angeles.

So we set out to create another program, through the United Way, which is a very institutional NGO here in the United States. The United Way set up a 211 hotline for veterans, so they could be directed to resources. We quickly found out that only elderly veterans and veterans who use the phone instead of the Internet were actually accessing these resources. We were missing the entire transitioning military and post-911 Iraq and Afghanistan populations and their families.

Then we set up another program, after ceilinging out yet a second time, called the Lone Star Veterans Association. That was meant to recreate that network of camaraderie that we enjoy in the military and be kind of a net to catch all of the returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and their families, and to ensure that they make that successful transition from military to civilian life.

Yet again, because it was another program, we ceilinged out very quickly. It took us eight years to make those mistakes and to figure out that we can't just create another program to find a solution to the complex needs and problems in the veteran community. We needed to create a system of programs that connected all of the government agencies, the NGOs, and the private organizations that have a stake in military transition and veterans affairs.

That's when we created the Combined Arms system. Some of the data points we used when we created this system were backed by the University of Southern California and their survey on the state of the American veteran. There's another one out of Cincinnati that Deloitte backed, which basically showed findings and recommendations. It showed that veterans are unprepared, obviously. We all know that. How do we address that problem? Should we conduct an awareness campaign that targets veterans and their families to make sure they're connected to resources?

One organization really can't address all the issues. For so long, people believed that the United States Department of Veterans Affairs was the solution in terms of veteran transition. In fact, they provide only three services: health care delivery, benefits administration, and cemetery administration. They technically cannot be—because we have such a limited government—everything to everyone. We needed to establish a community support network that really addressed veterans issues in a holistic way, and held these agencies more accountable to ensure that these veterans didn't fall through the cracks and that we weren't getting bogus organizations joining our network.

The organizations themselves were disjointed. Organization A and organization B didn't know what one another did, and they certainly didn't know how to properly refer to one another. That's why we created our integrated technology system to develop that collaborative accelerator, to ensure that we lower the overhead and reduce programmatic redundancies when veterans enter the system, either electronically or physically.

Finally, one of the last findings and recommendations that we derived from all of our research is that data is not consistent, nor is it shared. If we're able to standardize this data capture and share it across the networks and the community, we can use that to identify redundancies, lower the overhead, and also go for more consistent funding in a collaborative way.

Our mission in Combined Arms as a backbone organization here in the Houston area is to unite the community to accelerate the impact of veterans in Houston. We're not serving veterans. We're not helping veterans. We don't have the traditional mission statements that have operation and heroes and all kinds of weird terminology in there. We're actually here to accelerate their impact, accelerate their transition, so that they can make a more significant economic and social impact on the communities they return to, particularly here in southeast Texas.

Our three major strategic objectives are to create a system and to really establish and nurture the system of organizations that provide holistic services and support. We're built on efficiency, as I said, so we want to reduce those programmatic redundancies and costs, and make sure we're serving veterans quickly and effectively. Collaboration is at the core of everything we do, so we want to increase the collaboration of organizations and also increase the quality of services. We do that in really four different ways. We have a transition centre. We have a physical single point of entry for our large community. We're the third-largest city in the United States; Chicago will argue that it's third, but if we actually count our undocumented population, then we're definitely the third, and the 2020 census will absolutely show that.

Our transition centre is centrally located. It's available via the rail line and the bus line. It has free parking, a café, and a gym. It really serves as not only a co-working space for our organizations to collaborate more effectively but also really that one single point of entry, that one-stop shop, so to speak, for transitioning service members and post-9/11 veterans and their families to access so they can be served not just by one service but, holistically, by, on average, six different services when they enter the system physically or electronically.

When I say electronically, the second way we do this is with our technology platform. It's built on Salesforce.com, which is a really innovative Fortune 500 client relationship management tool. We essentially customized that with the developer to ensure that each of the organizations has an account, and that whenever they received a referral from a veteran entering the system electronically or physically, or through one of the 40 organizations that are partners, this referral would be tracked and this organization would be held accountable. When I say held accountable, it's not that somebody's calling them to let them know that they're behind. We actually have a scoreboard that's posted here in our transition centre in the café, which holds everybody very publicly accountable, so it kind of creates this collaborative competition in which you can see each of the 40 organizations that are in this system. You can see how far behind some are and how quickly some are responding and how quickly they close the cases, and which result in positive outcomes for the veterans, be that in employment, mental health services, veterans assistance, community service, volunteering, or camaraderie, etc.

We have an integrated marketing campaign, and it's something that I think a lot of communities miss. If we collectively pool our financial resources, we can actually actively market to the active military populations on base and sell Houston as a destination, so we say, "Check out of your unit in San Diego, California, or Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, or Norfolk, Virginia, and check into your new unit here in Houston, and we'll help you find a job, help get you housing, help your family, and help you find financial assistance and benefit services from the VA. We'll really help address everything as holistically as we can." We're doing it almost as an economic development initiative.

Really, our value—and I'll finish with this and allow everyone to have some questions, because I know I don't have too much time, and as I said, I'm a marine, so I want to be as brief as possible—is accelerating impact through value. The veterans come in and they have an assessment. With our no-wrong-door approach, the veterans can really enter our programs through any of our 40 partner organizations or through another method that leads them to us, such as the marketing campaign or word of mouth or their transition-assistance counsellor. The value to the veterans that the Combined Arms system—which is kind of a third-party, backbone organization that connects all of these different agencies, government, non-profit, and private—offers is really speed, efficiency, accountability, and holistic support. The value we provide to our 40 member organizations is shared data, collaboration, feedback, mission focus, and free space.

When we are selling to Houston our value to the community, we show our economic impact. I actually show the average starting salary of veterans and show their economic impact, because they're buying groceries there, taking their kids to school, paying their property taxes, buying houses, and getting engaged and involved in the community and showing how much we're volunteering, because we all want to continue our service after we take off the uniform. We want to show how much we're impacting low-income and at-risk neighbourhoods in the city. With regard to social growth, we can show that veterans not only participate in civic organizations more but we tend to vote more, and we're more civically healthy, so to speak, if we have that ability to transition successfully from the front end of our service and move into civilian life.

• (0855)

And really, it's just getting civilians more involved. We all talk about bridging the military-civilian divide. We're really trying to bring in the community.

Today, for example, one of the big Hurricane Harvey relief efforts is brought in by Ford, the truck maker—well, it's a truck maker down here in Houston but of course a car maker everywhere else. The Houston Texans, which is our American football team, of course, are coming in and doing a lot of fanfare for all the organizations that volunteered and stepped up for the Harvey relief. So it's really getting the community involved and engaging media, engaging our politicians, and really activating those institutional NGOs like Easter Seals and United Way, and of course, getting government agencies like the VA, state or provincial government, and our municipal government activated and aware of who we serve.

I wanted to be brief because we have other presenters, but if you need to see any of our data in terms of the veterans per category of service, the number of clients, the response time in hours, or any other data showing the number of connections made this year to date and some demographic data on the veterans we serve, I'd be happy to share my screen and show that to you.

Thank you having me.

**The Chair:** Great. Thank you, and thank you for your passion.

Mr. McColeman.

**Mr. Phil McColeman (Brantford—Brant, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, John, for your testimony.

Are there any other programs similar to this one in any other major municipal centres or other parts of the United States?

• (0900)

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Yes, sir. We collaborate directly with Los Angeles, and the University of Southern California runs the LA collaborative. They're currently shopping for an integrated technology system, so maybe they'll be using ours soon, but their collaborative is very well developed in terms of how they get their organizations on the same sheet of music.

AmericaServes, which is an initiative led by the Institute for Veterans and Military Families out of Syracuse University, which isn't too far from a lot of cities in Canada, has a very well-developed program that is very well funded by JP Morgan Chase and the Walmart Foundation. It uses a proprietary technology platform called Unite Us, which essentially does the same thing, but it's a little bit more cost prohibitive to some communities that don't want to make the significant investment.

Other platforms also include America's Warrior Partnership, which is based in Augusta, Georgia, and is significantly funded by the Wounded Warrior Project, which is the very large, \$330-million charity based in Jacksonville, Florida.

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** It's no small task, I would imagine, getting something like this up and running. Where did the capital dollars come from to get you up and running?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** We had to seek seed funding from large institutional foundations at the national scale in order to kind of prove the pilot and show proof of our concepts. We're seeking other local dollars from local foundations here in the greater Houston area now that we have the data to show the positive outcomes.

We also have earned-revenue models for corporate sponsorship and earned-revenue models for some of the organizations that house here. For example, Team Rubicon and Lone Star Legal Aid are up on our second floor now, specifically here for Harvey relief, and they're paying rent. We have a lot of avenues from which we can continue to generate revenue to accelerate this process and really scale it to meet the great needs.

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** Our Veterans Ombudsman has recommended a similar but different thing, and I want your thoughts about it. He has recommended a concierge service, which is a central point where veterans could go, that one-stop-shop idea that you brought up.

Have you considered that, or are you aware of any state or municipality that's considered that as a way to get something going without really...? If you're lacking the capital to cover the cost of the physical plant, the building, and the staff, that's a way to focus on veterans by helping them individually and uniquely with their own problems.

What are your thoughts about that?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** I think that's a great way to leverage the local municipal elected and appointed relationships. Usually cities and counties have a lot of open space, a lot of buildings that are just sitting idle. We actually did that for the Lone Star Veterans Association, one of the programs that I mentioned, as one of the lessons learned from the past.

They had free space given to them by the City of Houston, and the City of Houston is heavily involved and invested in this. The mayor's office does have a seat on the board of directors at Combined Arms and has been a part of the formation of our collaborative since the beginning. We are getting some tax incentives, and we do have—and I neglected to mention this on your previous question—some state-level funding provided by the Health and Human Services Commission of Texas, which is funnelled through the City of Houston and executed as a major partnership grant for 14 different organizations.

I definitely believe that if we can activate those relationships at the local level to identify buildings where these single points of entry can be used in partnership with the federal government and in partnership with private organizations, then they can definitely be leveraging points for transitioning service members and their families.

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** You mentioned 40 different partners in the program, and they were organizations. The two I remember are the United Way and.... I forget the other one. It doesn't matter. I'm just thinking about the logistics of pulling together 40 organizations. Many have competing agendas. If I look at the NGOs and such, they're often competing with one another for funding that's available. How did you pull that off?

• (0905)

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** We started with a small group, a brain trust so to speak, of six organizations that really identified the need to collaborate more effectively. At that time, during the Obama administration, we were facing large-scale reductions in force. We thought we would see almost double the number of service members coming into our communities, so we needed to prepare ourselves. And it's good to prepare ourselves, no matter what, for the future transitioning population.

We started with six organizations that were like-minded. They were willing to give up a little bit of autonomy and a little bit of their time in order to make the community more effective and a lot more collaborative. When we did that, everyone else.... It was the *Field of Dreams* concept—the Kevin Costner movie—“If you build it, they will come.” Sure enough, once we built it, we all moved in together instead of being located all over town, which had made it very difficult for service members to access those services provided. We co-located, and when we did that, everybody wanted to be a part of it. We grew from six to 40 within a year.

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** That's excellent. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Fraser.

**Mr. Colin Fraser (West Nova, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, sir, for joining us this morning. I really want to commend your city for its incredible resilience following Hurricane Harvey. We did follow it here in Canada. Our thoughts are with you as you continue to rebuild. I really appreciate your mentioning the veterans who obviously were, first and foremost, there to help their city.

I want to follow up on the previous questioning about the NGOs themselves. Can you tell me how it was determined which ones would be asked to come in? How did you get to the number 40? Is there any plan to continue reaching out to other organizations that could help veterans?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Absolutely. That's a great question, and this will also help to answer the previous question.

We actually engaged KPMG, which of course is a top-five consulting firm globally. They wanted to be a part of what we were doing here. They're a local veterans affinity group, so all the veterans who work at KPMG in their consulting vertical wanted to be a part of this.

We asked them to build us a tool that they use typically for evaluating companies they want to buy but to adjust that to the NGO and government sector, the public sector so to speak, and then to evaluate organizations based on their governance, based on their financials, and based on their programmatic outputs, making sure they didn't have any outstanding litigation or any red flags in terms of media stories that have ever come out about them.

That generates a report that is electronically directed to the board. Once they pass that first test, then the board of directors has to do a two-thirds majority vote in order to ensure that these organizations

are properly vetted and allowed into the system. From there, they're trained and on-boarded, and their staff is brought into the fold.

**Mr. Colin Fraser:** That's very good.

You talked about holding them accountable, and you said that there was basically a scoreboard to determine how far along they were with each individual veteran, I suppose. Could you talk a little bit more about how you actually hold them accountable? If one organization or one part of the process is not performing adequately, what actually happens?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** There is basically a corrective action provided by the backbone staff. We have five full-time staff members who work for Combined Arms. It really functions as a chamber of commerce, so to speak, for these organizations. If they don't accept the corrective action, then the board can take immediate action to remove them from the system. We haven't had to do that yet. We haven't had to remove any organizations or ask them to leave.

All of the corrective action that the executive director has led with his staff has been to essentially consult on how to either turn off the flow or slow it down. If they're getting too many clients and they can't serve them all adequately and effectively enough, then we'll make sure to adjust those settings in the integrated technology system.

There are a lot of different tactical things that we can do before we have to, unfortunately, ask somebody to leave. As I said, that hasn't happened so far, in two years.

**Mr. Colin Fraser:** You talked a little bit about capturing data. I agree with you that it's extremely important to have all of the relevant information to make good decisions. What actual data are you capturing as each veteran goes through?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** We're capturing what category of service they're requesting. Typically, one in three veterans comes through the system looking for career transition, which I think is obviously the most important part. If we can prevent unemployment, we can prevent substance abuse, family challenges, homelessness, criminal behaviour, and suicide, most importantly. It really all starts with career transition.

When they come in for career transition, they take the assessment, and once they do that they find out, “Oh, I need to apply for my VA benefits” or “I might need some help finding housing” or “I want to get connected to social events and volunteerism.” That's what we track, how many veterans are actually connected to those categories of service, and then what the response time is by the organizations they're referred to, and the number of hours.

Our average return time is 39 hours, and those organizations that fall into the 96-hour category are the organizations that are then coached.

We do the number of connections made, the number of referrals made, and then also the demographic information, so area of service, gender, rank, skills and experience, and those kinds of things.

• (0910)

**Mr. Colin Fraser:** Do the veterans themselves actually have access to the data on their personal profile in order to track their progress?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Absolutely. When a veteran is referred to a different organization you can actually see that.

If my organization, which provides employment services, makes a referral to one of your organizations that provides veteran benefit services, we can actually see that referral move along and progress through the status updates in the system, so that we know they're being.... Then it shows if whether a positive outcome was achieved, and we can actually see that happen, whereas before we were just firing off emails into the nebula of the Internet, not really knowing what happened to that veteran client.

**Mr. Colin Fraser:** Thank you very much. I appreciate your joining us today, sir.

**The Chair:** Ms. Mathysen.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you very much for joining us. I appreciate this quite significant amount of information.

I have some questions in regard to when you set up the organization. How did those 40 various individual organizations respond to this new approach? Were they receptive and were they on board?

How did the Department of Veterans Affairs react to this new delivery initiative?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** All three branches of VA, most importantly, the health administration, which we want all of our veterans to enrol in so they have access to good health care; the benefits administration to help execute that; and, God forbid, the cemetery administration, which most of us hope we don't need for quite a while....

But most importantly, the VA is here once a week and they enrol veterans directly into the health care administration and the benefits administration. They were one of our earliest partners. Also, the veterans centre, which delivers mental health care, comes in and they actually hold appointments in one of our closed rooms. So that's been a fantastic partnership.

To answer your first question, I think that having the VA on board and some of these larger NGOs and more institutional non-profits in the community that have been here for a long time really gave us the credibility to then invite and vet other organizations to then interact in the system.

I believe these organizations want to be held more accountable. Some of them haven't reacted extremely well. There are some that are to the right of the response time in hours, and to the right of the positive outcomes achievements, and they're being coached on that. But most of those organizations that are to the right of that 96-hour response time are volunteer-led, like Pets for Vets, for example, which is an organization that provides service dogs, or Team Red White & Blue, which basically gets veterans together and does

physical fitness activities. Those are all volunteer-led, so that's why they're a bit slower. It's not their primary focus.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Thank you.

In terms of our study we talk about veterans, but that important component, the veteran's family, is always very much within our discussion. Do you support veterans' families? Are there supports for spouses who are perhaps struggling with finding work or looking after the needs of the veteran?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Absolutely, and we firmly believe, as you do, that you have to support the family unit, especially in that sometimes difficult transition from military to civilian life when they're coming from different places all over the country, or even the world, to a large community like Houston that doesn't have a military base. We don't have a support system, so to speak.

Probably one-third of our organizations have a category of service that serves either spouses or children, or other family members. They're supporting those veterans in their transition.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Thank you.

You mentioned service dogs. There is some discussion here about the value of service dogs. Could you comment on what you're discovering with regard to the importance these animals could possibly have?

• (0915)

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** I don't know if there is much empirical evidence that shows the effectiveness of some of these animals, especially with equine therapy. I haven't seen that, but I haven't done a ton of research on it. As I said, I'm more on the employment side of the equation; I'm not a mental health expert by any means.

I do think that it's a part of the positive transition experience for a lot of veterans who are suffering from combat and operational stress. Who hasn't ever seen a puppy make someone feel better? It is a positive thing in the transition.

More importantly, we need to be addressing other major issues when veterans are transitioning, such as unemployment, substance abuse, family challenges, and so on. If we can't prevent those things, then we'll never be able to prevent more chronic mental health issues.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Thank you.

You mentioned the need for work and the difficulty when someone faces unemployment. Could you talk about the challenges for veterans in getting civilian trade certifications? They come out of the service with a set of skills. Is there a problem translating those skills? How do you support that transition to work?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Unfortunately, we do have a skills gap. In many different cases, the military doesn't provide credentials according to civilian standards. The only real cases that exist are for lawyers and medical doctors, which we all know are jobs that probably account for less than 2% of the total active force. For engineering, construction, military occupational specialties, avionics technicians, and things like that, we're working diligently with the Department of Defense to identify those crosswalks.

Until that time, however, it's really incumbent upon the communities that receive veterans to direct them to the community and technical colleges that are able to help them upskill and test out, if they do have those skills and experience. If someone coming from the marine corps is a welder, then they can test out. They can show their competency on a job site or at a technical school so that they can accelerate that transition, as opposed to going through repetitive training, which obviously costs taxpayers more money and leaves service members frustrated because they've already been through that.

We do our best to direct them to those opportunities, and then make sure that they translate the skills and experience that they gained in the military to the civilian world. This means cleaning up all the jargon, all the military acronyms, and really coaching them on how to prepare themselves for a civilian interview.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** I'll come back, thanks.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Bratina.

**Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.):** Thank you.

Mr. Boerstler, thanks so much for this. I'm very excited to hear your testimony today.

I was the mayor of a city in Canada—Hamilton—and one of the things that I brought into my mayoralty was a senior adviser on military heritage and protocol, who was the former commanding officer of a local regiment. I wanted to reacquaint Hamiltonians with their military heritage.

Early in your remarks, you mentioned the relationship with municipal programs. Could you expand a little bit on that? What was the point, and how did that come about?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Absolutely, sir.

Thank you for doing that. That is one of the best ways that our community identified early on in 2008. It was shortly after the scandals at Walter Reed, which were very apparent in the media, that former mayor White and county judge Ed Emmett got together and created the returning veterans initiative. That really answered a lot of questions, such as what we are doing for our veterans and how many veterans are in our community. Then we found out that we're the second largest. We needed to do something to be a lot more proactive in that transition from military to civilian life if we were going to invest in these civic assets.

I think that using local municipal elected officials probably creates the biggest mouthpiece possible when you're forming a backbone collaborative organization, because those individuals are able to bring so many stakeholders together and to give your organization a sense of credibility immediately, for both private and public funders.

For example, Mayor Sylvester Turner, who has been all over the media about the Hurricane Harvey relief, was here at our grand opening for the transition centre. He did a great job of articulating the need for investing in our veterans at the front end of their transition to Houston.

Originally, after transitioning from Congress, I worked on the mayor's staff for a number of years to establish the returning veterans initiative. Even though we ceilinged out very quickly in terms of what we could deliver in terms of programs and services, that beacon, that awareness that the mayor's office brought, that credibility, was very impactful.

• (0920)

**Mr. Bob Bratina:** That's exactly right. I didn't make this up. All politics is local. It's wrong for people to assume that there is an office in the nation's capital that will look after a situation in some far-off part of the country. There has to be a local presence.

Then, as you say, you hit a ceiling. There is only so much you can do, so then you get into the system of programs that you talked about.

What would you say about that system as it stands right now? Are there any big gaps still to be worked on, or is it all moving in the right direction?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** That's an interesting question. Initially, a lot of what the media and the VA and Congress reported was that veterans are broken and need mental health services when they return. All of our data shows that this is not the case. We need to prevent mental health issues—with employment, connection to social activities, family services, and volunteering in our communities, giving us a mission and a purpose when we have that loss of identity when we take off the uniform. That's the most critical piece of the transition—making sure that we have a mission and a reason to get up in the morning, to serve our community and interact with our brothers and sisters whom we served with.

Mental health is extremely far down in terms of the categories of service and the needs we are seeing on a real-time basis. I think the gap is that we don't have enough organizations to serve in the career transition and to really deal with the great need of one out of three veterans coming through each month, or 200 or 300 veterans. We don't have enough organizations to adequately accelerate their transition into employment. That's what we have been seeking. We've actually reached out to several national partnerships, like Hire Heroes USA, the Call of Duty Endowment, and several others, to really bring them into the system so that they can be a referral point for our system as well.

**Mr. Bob Bratina:** What point may there be with regard to the reluctance of employers to hire ex-military? Are there any myths out there about how those military veterans might behave in a private corporate setting?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Absolutely. We have to work every day to destigmatize post-traumatic stress and what the media and, unfortunately, our own Department of Veterans Affairs have misreported for the last several years. Veterans are not dangerous employees. They won't bring this to the workplace. In fact, 98% of us are ready to go to work the day we step off the base into the community that we return to. It's really more about accelerating that process so that we can get to work.



When I educate employers every day, I talk about the misnomer that is “post-traumatic stress”, about demystifying it and talking about the data. They say that 22 American veterans commit suicide every day. Let's drill down on that data. We don't have to go into the specifics when we talk to the employers, because they usually get it right away, but 20 out of those 22 veterans are white males over the age of 60. This is exactly consistent with the civilian population in the United States, which shows, obviously, that there is no correlation to military service. It just shows that white males over the age of 60 tend to commit suicide, unfortunately, at a higher rate than do other populations.

It's really about breaking down those numbers and demystifying it as well as we can, and showing that they are civic assets, not detriments to the community.

**Mr. Bob Bratina:** Sir, you've made a great contribution to our committee. I thank you for this.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Samson, go ahead.

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

Thank you, John, for your presentation. It's extremely interesting and, of course, it allows us to reflect on what we are doing here in Canada.

I'd like to focus a little on the awareness program you talked about, your new program, the Combined Arms system. Can you tell me a bit more about how that strategy is moving forward?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Yes, sir.

We actually partnered with our regional chamber of commerce and our economic development corporation to use the same branding they deploy to companies and to workers all over the United States and the world to engage them and attract them to come to Houston. At the end of the day, when they transition out of military service, veterans are what our Department of Labor refers to as displaced workers. We are coming from places like San Diego, Japan, Germany, or Norfolk, Virginia, and we are coming to places like Houston, which don't have a military installation or a flagpole to return to, so to speak.

We are really trying to make sure we are selling our community—the economic and housing opportunities, the great schools, and all the fun stuff to do. The average age is 31. Who doesn't want to return to Houston—apart from all the flooding, mind you, when a hurricane comes through, but that's something that I think we handled very well, considering the situation.

It's really about partnering. Don't reinvent the wheel. I am big on that, and they say it a lot in the Marine Corps. If you engage those activities that are... Our regional chambers of commerce and economic development corporations are the best in the business at getting people to come to Houston, companies and workers. We can just put a military twist on it and use that same branding.

• (0925)

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** That's interesting.

You talk also about data collection and tracking. I know you said you were mostly not in the medical end of it, but in Canada at least, there is difficulty tracking the medical piece and where veterans are on that spectrum.

Can you share some information and shed light in that area?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Absolutely.

There's a lot of data that we can't access when we refer to the Veterans Health Administration that is operated by the VA—all the VA health systems. What we can see, though, is what is reported on the back end of that to Congress, showing how effective our local hospital is or our outpatient clinics are and how typically healthy our veterans are.

One indicator, one measure of success that we can show, is how many veterans are actually referred to the Veterans Health Administration year over year with the advent of the Combined Arms system. Now we're showing an uptick of younger veterans accessing these health services at the VA. Whereas before it was typically elder veterans who had income and housing barriers, now it's a whole different population of veterans, because they're coming through our system for careers but they're also getting sent to the VA to enrol in the health care administration.

That's good for business, so to speak.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Without criticizing others, where would you place Houston in benefits and services to veterans compared with other cities in the States, and why?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Well, we're always the best. Isn't that right?

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Why? Just focus on two or three things that make you believe that you're digging deeper and supporting them, and indicate how you're doing it.

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** We've made many mistakes in the last 10 years. The only reason we're here now and that we have created this system is that we continue to make mistakes and continue to improve the process. It's not perfect, because we have such a limited government. We have so many NGOs filling the gaps, so to speak, in transition and veterans affairs.

We have a long way to go to become a resilient city in this endeavour, but we're on the right track to getting there. I would place us in the top three, for sure. I don't know how we would evaluate that, but hopefully we'll have a tool soon that can really... We hold our organizations accountable and we vet them with KPMG. Perhaps we can develop a tool that identifies resilience in a city in terms of military transition and veterans affairs.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Thanks.

You talked about licensing and credentials following the transition. What can be done, in your opinion, to accelerate that process? Can we be doing something while they're in the military and trying to connect with the workforce to allow them to come out and be better prepared to join the workforce; or do we still have to try to blend in the community college trades to assist them as we move forward?

Is there something we can do prior to release so that the transition will be easier?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Absolutely, sir.

I've done many comparative studies of various countries, particularly the U.K., Denmark, Ukraine, and Israel. In the U.K.—and I'm sure you guys have a version of this, depending on the military occupational specialty—if someone is a heavy equipment operator in the British army, they can't operate that equipment on base until they're licensed by the civilian credentialing body.

That makes too much sense for our military to ever invoke, unfortunately, but it's what we need to get to. We can't allow these individuals to walk out of service without something saying that they can operate this equipment, or stand next to a doctor and perform surgery. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] ...we close the skills gap. I think that's a really good best practice.

The United States Air Force also has the Community College of the Air Force, and they encourage their service members to get credentials while they're in service as well. Unfortunately, as marines, we don't have that type of thing. The fact that it differs between services is unfortunate as well.

I would definitely point to the U.K. as a really good example of how credentialing works pre- and post-service.

• (0930)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Wagantall.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC):** Good morning, John. I appreciate what we're learning from you this morning. I can see a lot of ways that could really make improvements in our system.

We have Veterans Affairs, which is responsible for many areas. On the other side we have a lot of veterans groups that have self-organized, and we've seen those gaps that you're talking about, but we haven't quite made a good system of enabling those two to work together.

You talk about the 40 organizations that you have. Is there opportunity for others to engage as well? How do you determine which 40? It's based on your needs, obviously. Here, many of them have solid ideas and do very effective work, but they're cash-strapped. They could do so much more if they had that opportunity.

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** The competition for limited resources is always going to be a barrier for many smaller non-governmental organizations that are serving an at-risk population. But typically, as I mentioned earlier, the KPMG tool that we asked them to develop, which vetted the organizations on the front end, the real-time data that we produced showing their effectiveness at achieving those

outcomes, and the speed at which they achieved those outcomes really holds the balance, so to speak. I mentioned this earlier, but I think it's important to continue reaching out when we see the gaps, when we see the needs and the categories of service that are being referred to most, and the inability for us to serve those veterans effectively. We need to seek out those organizations. We sought out Hire Heroes USA and the Call of Duty Endowment, for example, to help address the gap in career services and career transitions since that's the number one requested category of service.

We have a long way to go, as I mentioned earlier. We're not going to stop at 40, but we also don't want 200, because we want to make sure that the best-in-class organizations are serving veterans and are held to the higher standard. If they can't do that, then we don't want them to be a part of the system.

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

Do you have any data on the number of veterans who are actually involved on the service side of your organization?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Do you mean the number of veterans who work in the NGOs and government agencies or the number of veterans coming through the system?

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** I mean the number integrated into working in the system to provide the services.

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** That's a good question. Here locally we have some nationwide organizations that have a regional presence, which have anywhere from four to eight people. The VA, of course, is a massive organization. It has an entire hospital here. It has a lot of veterans who work for it and a lot of civilians. On my team specifically, as an employment agency, we have 10, and nine of us are veterans, for example. It is common for veterans to work in this space because we've had that "poverty experience" of making that sometimes difficult transition from military to civilian life. We stepped on a lot of land mines in our transition, and so we're able to help our brothers and sisters avoid those land mines in their own transition.

I would say that probably more than two-thirds of the staff who serve in our collaborative are veterans, and then of course we can't do this without our civilian counterparts in some of the more institutional non-profits and government agencies.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** I would assume, then, that as veterans are receiving services, they are part of the feedback system to determine how effective things are.

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** The veterans who receive services—and we have now 1,200 clients year to date, and we're probably going to hit closer to 2,500 before year end, because this is a busy time of year—are able to go in and rate their experience. This is something I didn't mention before, so thank you for asking, ma'am. They're able to go in and rate their experience positively or negatively once that case is closed. They're able to rate them on a 1-to-5 scale like the ones on Yelp or Google or Facebook. They all have the same star scale. That shows our qualitative feedback on the 1-to-5 star scale, and then they're able to leave qualitative information in terms of “I didn't get what I wanted” or “these people were amazing”. The agencies are able to improve their services, and the delivery of the services, in real time based on that feedback. That rating system will bring the organization either up or down, and then make sure it turns on or off the number of clients who flow to them. It's fairly intuitive.

• (0935)

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

A lot of the services you are providing are in addition to what VAC provides. How would you compare the cost of those services being provided through the government versus through this type of an approach?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** It's no different here. The VA doesn't provide employment services. That's the one major difference. The VA does provide some housing services, but a lot of that's grant-based to NGOs. The VA likes to indirectly fund a lot of community-based organizations to deliver the services. Employment services is a huge gap, and they're obviously our number one most requested need, and the VA doesn't provide those. I think we can deliver those services a lot more cost-effectively because we are a lot more agile, as small non-profit organizations, and we can make decisions a lot faster through having the second-largest bureaucracy in the world. That's an advantage, I think. That's coming from someone who runs an NGO, of course, but I have also worked for both the federal government and the municipal government and that's just my observation and my opinion. For example, it costs about \$1,500 to place a veteran, on average, in most of these employment-serving non-profit organizations. I don't know what it would cost the government agencies, but I imagine it's much higher.

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

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Lambropoulos.

**Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.):** Hello, John. Thank you for being here with us today. I am extremely impressed with what we've heard so far this morning. I think it's very concrete and it's great that you guys have found a really good way to collaborate and that all of the programs and all levels of government are in on making the experience for veterans a lot better.

How do you reach out to veterans, or how do they know what programs exist in order to reach out to you guys when they realize there is a problem?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** That's a great question. In fact, the marketing campaign is one way. That's only going to touch maybe a quarter of the veteran population that's transitioning into Houston. The best way though is word of mouth, what we call in the Marine Corps the lance corporal underground or in the U.S. Army they call

it the E-4 Mafia. That's really buddies telling buddies about how they got their VA benefits or how they found the great job they have. That is really the most effective form of marketing we can rely on.

Of course, we employ geofencing and social media tactics apart from our coordinated marketing campaign that we launched with the chamber of commerce. That's extremely effective, but one of the other most effective ways veterans find out about the suite of services is through that no-wrong-door approach. Technically they can walk into our transition centre and receive services from all the organizations that are co-located here, but if they come in electronically, either via word of mouth or via social media or the marketing campaign, they then have access to all 40 different organizations based on the needs assessment that they take on the front end. Each of those organizations, while it is talking to the veteran.... if I'm talking to a veteran about employment services and I realize they need help with VA benefits, I can then go into the system and refer them to organizations that provide the services to achieve VA benefits.

It's that no-wrong-door approach that really allows that and really holds those organizations more accountable and makes sure that no veterans fall through the cracks.

**Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos:** Thank you. You say there is a no-wrong-door approach and that so many different organizations offer different services to their veterans and that there is great collaboration between them. Is there a database that everyone's information gets entered into? How is that communication held? How do you guys keep that communication going?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** The integrated technology system I referred to is based on Salesforce.com, which is a Fortune 500 client relationship management tool, a cloud-based system in which every organization has an account, so whenever they receive a referral as an organization via employment services or volunteer services, they then input that into their own system, but then they have to go back in and make sure that activity is updated in the Combined Arms system so that the other organizations know and we can track all of that data. Everything is housed in what they call Salesforce communities, which is a proprietary way of really connecting all of the organizations. It only costs us about \$40,000 all in, which I think is a significant return on investment in terms of being able to create a dynamic system. Salesforce itself is free for non-profit organizations and all you need to do is pay for the development and for dropping the app on top of the CRM itself.

• (0940)

**Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos:** Thank you.

I have one last question. I read in your article that you had recommended a standardized uniform national system that translates military vocational skills into civilian credentials. I was wondering where your government is on that. Has there been any improvement as to turning the skills people have in the military into something they can use later on in civilian life?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** There's a nice way of answering that. I think at the highest levels of the bureaucracy at the defence department that hasn't been achieved yet, unfortunately, so we took it upon ourselves to bring industry, the credentialing body, and the U. S. Army Engineer School for the construction side specifically together and we engaged the dean of the engineering and construction school at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and he was able to sign off on the fact that we basically took industry and a credentialing body and crosswalked. Say you were a 12R electrician in the army, then that means you are a level 2 NCCR-certified electrician in the civilian world, and you can go to work as soon as you step off active duty. That has been a huge success, but it's been done, I would say, at the operational level instead of at the strategic level. The Department of Defense had no bearing on how that was achieved, and now they're kind of running to catch up to use that as a case study so that they can apply it to other military occupational specialties and corresponding civilian credentialing bodies.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Calkins.

**Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC):** John, I want to thank you for your service to your country and to the greater good of allied forces. I really appreciate it. Whether you know it or not, you've kept Canadians and people all around the world safe. I want to thank you, sir.

I want to ask you a question about equality of services. In Canada, one thing that comes up quite frequently is the frustration that veterans feel. Some of them are from smaller communities and are more isolated. You, sir, are from a very large metropolitan centre. Your organization is doing great work for a large number of veterans where you have a critical mass and where it makes sense to do so.

How would a veteran who is, say, returning to Knox City, Gorey, or O'Donnell, Texas, find the level of services that they get there, and what would your organization be able to do in the context of providing equity of services for somebody who doesn't live within the region?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** That's a fantastic question. It's a huge dilemma for our public organizations that serve veterans.

Fortunately, within the system there are some extremely... Particularly the Military Veteran Peer Network is a state-wide initiative that specifically goes to rural communities to which veterans return, and it connects them to institutional services, be those state agencies or other non-profits that may be headquartered there, which can provide them the services they need.

Also, the VA outpatient system—they call it the CBOCs, the community-based outpatient clinic system—is specifically punched out to areas from which it's too far to drive to the VA hospital for just routine medical appointments and mental health appointments. It makes sure that they are connected into those organizations and that

they also have access to such opportunities as the 211 hotline, which covers the entire state here in Texas—Louisiana, our neighbours here, have a similar program—and that they are then triaged and sent to organizations that have the appropriate geographic coverage in that rural area.

It's not perfect. We're working on funding streams so as to be able to send more outreach workers to engage veterans in those rural communities, because the gap in the access to services, as you mentioned, sir, is a significant problem. This is the area in which we're seeing many of the more chronic mental health issues arise, because employment is down and entrepreneurship is down. We need to be more proactive on the front end and get out in front of those veterans.

**Mr. Blaine Calkins:** I want to go back to something you brought up earlier, which is the stigma of PTSD. I want to know how relevant it actually is, because I don't think we talk about it here in that context. I found it quite refreshing to hear you say that most veterans don't have this problem. If you believe the general discourse of the conversation from the media and other sources here in Canada, you would think that every soldier is returning home somehow broken and is unable or incapable or will be a liability at some particular point in time in the transition to civilian life.

How much of your efforts go into, how much success have you had, and what are the best practices you've used in dealing with potential employers to remove the stigma of PTSD? Could you elaborate on that a bit more?

● (0945)

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Absolutely. I think it's a question of educating employers on the value of hiring veterans and on the skills that we bring and showing that if combat and operational stress is an issue, it's acute, typically, not chronic, and that we can make it more acute and less chronic the faster we get them into a new mission, role, or opportunity to lay a foundation for their family and make an economic and social impact on their communities.

When we go in and talk about it, we have a specific slide that says "Working with Warriors". It's the "W3" training that we provide. It's an adaptation of what the Wounded Warrior Project has developed, called "Working with Wounded Warriors", or W4. It specifically addresses the misnomers by which post-traumatic stress and combat operational stress are mis-reported in the media. A host of government programs and NGOs have been set up to deal with this issue. When we conducted our initial landscape analysis, when we set up the Combined Arms system, that showed.

There are 15 organizations that serve veterans in mental health and only three that serve veterans in employment transition. Obviously, the data we're seeing in employment transition shows a much higher need, in real-time data and statistics coming to the Combined Arms system, and mental health is on the bottom.

In order to prevent further mental health issues from occurring in their transition and reintegration into civilian life, we need to focus more on the employment and career transition instead of putting more dollars and media attention and efforts into explaining why veterans are broken rather than why we're civic assets and we will be the best employees at your company.

**Mr. Blaine Calkins:** I think that's absolutely brilliant. I hope you have some empirical evidence to show that a little work on the front end getting people transitioned will solve all those problems on the back end.

You talked about the frustration of veterans facing walls and barriers from time to time wherever they go, but you also spoke about the difference between your organization and what you're doing in Texas and another organization it looks as if you will be partnering with. It's doing some great work in California and then there's a completely different platform on the eastern seaboard.

I can only imagine that a veteran moving from one area to the other, who is familiar with the services of one.... Would they find it frustrating switching from your organization if they were to come from, say, Syracuse or someplace like that? I'm assuming your approach is collaborative across the country, but if you're working on different platforms, that might create that barrier. What's being done to resolve that?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** We originally went in very punky about it. We have these terms like API, and all these data and technology terms; we have to make sure the APIs measure up. One dumb marine infantry guy came into the room, and he asked why we didn't open an account with one community hub and an account with the other community hub. We could then bilaterally refer between New York and Houston, Memphis and California, or Seattle and Missouri to make sure that these veterans, who are either transitioning out of the military or moving because they want to be closer to family, or for economic or housing opportunities, are handled successfully from one community hub to the other. So far we've achieved that with AmericaServes out of Syracuse University and with America's Warrior Partnership, which covered about nine communities in the southeast, but in terms of national [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] we're a long way.

**Mr. Blaine Calkins:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Do I still have a little time?

● (0950)

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** We were far from national interconnectivity between the community hubs, but we have set up MOUs and partnerships with AmericaServes and America's Warrior Partnership, which are two of the larger community hub programs that represent about 24 different communities collectively. We've set up accounts from one community hub to the other so we can bilaterally refer and track that progress for veterans who are either transitioning from the military installations in those regions or migrating for business or economic opportunity.

**The Chair:** Ms. Mathysen, you have three minutes.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Thank you.

John, I want to go back to a question I didn't get to ask before. We talked about the skills gap, and you talked about the fact that the air force had credentialing within the service. Marines did not.

Here we have the opportunity to go to a post-secondary institution or to get training. The problem is that there's a time frame—you have to apply within two years of leaving the service—and there's a monetary ceiling.

Is that a situation you encounter, and if so, does it present some problems because some veterans just aren't ready? It takes them some time.

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Absolutely, and our new GI Bill.... In the old GI Bill you had to spend it within 10 years. Now it doesn't have a ceiling in terms of time frame, but the money does have a limit. If I serve 48 months, or four years, in the army, for example, I am only eligible for 36 months of school, which doesn't really add up, but that's one of the.... As all of you know as ministers, it's one thing that was decided on to save quite a bit of money for the taxpayer.

There are gaps, and we are finding that of those eligible to go back to school, be it technical or professional programs, only 50% of eligible users are going back to take those two- or four-year degree programs.

● (0955)

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Thank you.

It's my understanding that you travelled in order to see what other countries were doing. You discovered that Denmark had embedded clinical psychologists and chaplains in units during pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment. I wonder if you could explain to the committee any value you saw in integrating clinical psychologists and chaplains at all phases of military deployment.

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** I saw tremendous value. I'm an infantry guy, and we don't believe in a lot of that stuff, because we believe in our team first, and that's probably an old, outdated mentality. But we saw the results, having them not just at pre-deployment and post-deployment but also during down range in Afghanistan or Iraq. Then, there was also the fact that they aren't rank-holding officers. They don't have to call the chaplains and the psychologists "madam" or "sir". The customs and courtesies traditionally associated with an enlisted officer, those barriers, are removed, so the soldiers are able to talk to them one on one at the client-to-practitioner level or as client to mentor or client to chaplain.

I think that relationship is a lot more effective than what we have in the United States, for example. They're rank-holding officers. So whenever I saw our chaplain—and I never saw him, by the way, because he was just not around where we were in Iraq, for example—I would have to say "sir", or I would feel inclined to say "sir". Even though he said it was no big deal, it's just part of our customs and courtesies and what's drilled into us. It's the same thing for the psychologists.

I think eliminating those barriers and also being part of the unit... Even though they're not rank-holding military officers, they had to pass all the physical qualifications to deploy. So being part of that training process, being part of that deployment and post-deployment, I really think increases the success of a lot of Denmark's veterans when they transition into a military life.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. McColeman.

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** Thank you, Chair.

I'm wondering, John, if you could send us a list of the 40 organizations or NGOs that are part of your group.

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Sure.

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** I'd like to have that as a frame of reference to compare to our system.

I'm going to make a comment that I'd like you to react to. It seems to me that our system is weighted heavily on creating a government bureaucracy to handle all the issues associated with this topic area of transitioning veterans. You're a fresh-start organization in the sense of the words you've used today. They indicate to me that you want efficiencies; you want effective results; and you're setting your targets and goals to demonstrate that to the organizations that provide the service, and to your individuals.

First, feel free to comment on my observation. I'm not sure that this exists in the United States to the same degree it does here, but it just seems that we keep going back to try to do it differently, to get a better result; and your approach is quite innovative in my opinion. That, along with.... I've lost my other train of thought. I'll think about it while you're reacting to that.

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** That's exactly what we were going for in terms of being the antithesis of the existing top-down process that the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs and their services provide. Obviously, the transition assistance program process is fundamentally flawed, and that's why we have such high unemployment rates of veterans, or we did for the past 10 years, and we're finally catching up with that.

As the other gentlemen said, all politics is local. Transition is local, too. Ultimately, it's the responsibility of the communities that receive these veterans and their families to ensure that they successfully transition and reintegrate into civilian life so that we can make a more significant economic and social impact. If we can't do it, no one else is coming. It's truly up to us, because they're left and displaced workers from the DOD, and they don't know. They don't have a network. They don't have a support system, so it's truly incumbent upon us.

We created this, really, in the vision of what a social enterprise could look like, so that we're a lot more agile, a lot faster and more effective in delivering these services, and holding those organizations more accountable, with the ultimate goal of having no veteran fall through the cracks.

• (1000)

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** Thank you for articulating it that way.

I'm doing a lot of comparisons in my mind. I've had a lot of years in the disabled community. These would be individuals who are ready, willing, and able to work, but who have some form of intellectual...or a disability. They're kind of the square peg trying to fit into the round hole.

I'm thinking of all the organizations that are somewhat in silos. You try to pull them together, and it's a very difficult task, because they all have their own personal interests.

I know that our tendencies as a society are somewhat different than those in the United States. I lived in a small college town in the U.S. for my graduate studies, and I noticed immediately the responsibility that the community took for individuals who were having struggles. It wasn't just veterans. Society, in general, took it very seriously—at a community level. It's a much different reaction than what we have in our country in many ways. Not that we don't have them, we just don't react with as much buy-in, as I think a lot of Americans do in bearing that responsibility.

I don't have any more questions other than to thank you again. This has been very enlightening.

I'm going to yield to my colleague for her question.

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

In regard to enabling the veterans to be employed, I can't help but think of the infantry, the boots on the ground, the young guys who go in. Their skill set is not quite as transferable to civilian life. We're looking at engaging them right when they start in the military, to understand that, yes, they want this to be a lifelong career, but it may not be: What else are your interests? What would you like to study as you go?

How do you deal with that when we're talking about the guys who are serving as boots on the ground?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** That's a great question.

The preponderance of the people we serve in our employment services are army and marine corps, many of whom are combat arms and don't have skills and experience transferable into most civilian industries. I think it's an awareness and education gap. We educate them about the opportunities that are available to them in the region they return to. For example, Houston is the energy capital of the world. We also have the largest medical centre in the world.

They don't know what it is to be a field service technician for Chevron or Exxon and the great economic and training opportunities. They can use the "soft skills" they have as infantrymen and combat-arms types to be better team players. They can make their companies more productive, more safe, more respectful. They'll show up early. They'll stay late. They'll learn things faster. Typical companies aren't finding those qualities in the millennial generation these days, and we talk about that a lot. I'm sure that's discussed at the government levels.

Military millennials very much have those soft skills that are missing in a lot of the younger generations. They're the same age. They're tech savvy, so they use Instagram and Snapchat, while I have no idea how those work. They can also show up and not be on the phone all day, and actually be more safe. That impacts the bottom line. The retention impacts the bottom line, and the productivity impacts the bottom line.

If you educate them on the opportunities they can pursue via a technical college or by going straight into an industry and doing on-the-job training, that's where we have found the secret sauce, so to speak.

• (1005)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Bratina.

**Mr. Bob Bratina:** Thanks again for the opportunity, John.

My aunt married an American who served in the American navy in the Second World War on the *Bunker Hill* aircraft carrier. It's a great story, but I'll get on to my point. He received his education as a result of his service and had a very good career, with IBM, I think.

I'm curious to know why at the end of the Second World War so many veterans got their careers coming out of the military and why we're having this problem currently.

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Absolutely. I think that's a great observation and it's totally true that the greatest generation, as we refer to it here in America, is because of that GI Bill, the original GI Bill, which is still better than the post-9/11 GI Bill we have now, which is good, but still not as good. And there's that funny math that Congress has done so that if we serve 48 months, we get only 36 months of school. Under the old GI Bill, you got 48 months of school. So my grandfather was able to go to not only university but also law school and make a much greater impact on his life after being an electrician's mate on a submarine.

I think one in three entrepreneurs after the Second World War were veterans and then there was that whole middle class that was created because of the GI Bill. Giving those returning service members that opportunity to upskill themselves really created what America is today. I think if we're able to continue to prop up our service members and soldiers when they return even though we're a much less significant population than we were back then per capita in the United States general population—and it's the same in Canada, much smaller these days—then we're still able to not only educate these individuals but also ensure that they have access to tools to create a small businesses and to be entrepreneurs as well.

**Mr. Bob Bratina:** To the point of the modern day reluctance regarding PTSD and what is published about it, his aircraft carrier was hit by three kamikazes. Over a thousand sailors died, and there were terrible burns below, all that awful stuff. I'm sure there must have been a lot of PTSD among that cohort and yet we're seeing this difference, as you've just outlined.

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Obviously, I can't speak from direct experience of being in that war and returning home, but if we compare it to the situation in Israel, it's like that shared experience, that shared resilience with 75% of the population in Israel every year going into military service. And they protect their country, right? We

don't have that in Canada. We don't have that in the United States whereas we did back in the Second World War where one out of every two or three people would be going into the uniformed services to protect our interests across the world, whether in the Pacific or the Atlantic theatre.

I think that shared resilience, that shared experience of World War II, is very different from what we have today, because we're a fraction of the population, and the regular civilians don't understand it.

**Mr. Bob Bratina:** Okay, this is not quite about transition, but I am just curious about the third element, the cemetery one, which we're not really talking about. Could you just give us an idea of how the death benefits and military honours work for an American veteran?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Absolutely. I think a lot of people joke that the National Cemetery Administration is the most effective part of the VA, and it's a terrible joke but it is what it is. I think that the benefits extended to us, to our family, when we do pass, to really take that burden off the family, both financially and in terms of organizing and being able to be buried in a veteran-specific cemetery in many major communities across the United States, is one that's afforded.

Although I don't know the specifics on dollar amounts and funeral arrangements and expenses, I can definitely find out more of that information and direct that to the committee along with the list of our organizations and perhaps our slide deck as a follow-on, sir.

**Mr. Bob Bratina:** It was raised that a bit of a problem is that a lot of families aren't aware of the benefits, and I'm wondering why in this day and age there isn't some sort of automatic notice that goes, with the passing of a veteran, to Veterans Affairs or however that would work to signal that the family needs to be communicated with about benefits.

• (1010)

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Here in the United States, there are a lot of private cemeteries, and, at the end of the day, they have to run a business. So if they have a family plot and they happen to be a veteran, they're not going to go and advocate for them to be buried at the VA cemetery, because they want the revenue. I know it comes down to business at the end of the day, and the funeral business is big here. So I think that it's more of dealing with that private versus public and just the awareness as you said. The government's not going to take proactive measures to notify the family of these occurrences, unfortunately.

**Mr. Bob Bratina:** I see. Thanks so much.

**The Chair:** Ms. Mathysen.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to come back to some of the things you said. We have talked about the fact that post-World War II vets seem to do better. You referenced that support system with the GI Bill, their ability to go to school longer, and the supports that were in place. I think that was probably also true for Canadian veterans.

We had support systems for veterans coming back. They could buy a farm, get a loan, or go to school. That seems to have gone by the wayside to a degree. The social safety net that followed World War II is breaking down.

Do you think that breaking down of the social safety net is part of the issue? I'll let you answer that and then I'll go to my next question.

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Extensive [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] government on the federal side, comparatively, I think, to many European and even the Canadian system of governance, but absolutely I think it's more just a general awareness of veterans.

The Vietnam War really soured the American people on what service meant in our country. Only recently did the American public wake up and realize that you don't have to support the war to support the warrior. Unfortunately, it's taken us all too long to realize that as a people.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Thank you.

You talked about various private sector partners in what you do. I wondered about that specifically, because the private sector, as you pointed out with regard to burials, expects a certain return. Does that create any problems? Is that a barrier to veterans? Do they need to have a certain amount of financial resources when dealing with that private sector component? Is anyone shut out because they don't have the money?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Absolutely. I think we have access to more services than typical civilians do, and it's just a matter of navigating an extensive system of services and resources. It becomes complex and frustrating for veterans when they transition out of the military, especially when they're dealing with the support system that they've had for four or 20 years on base, and they return to a community that has nothing of the kind. That is daunting for someone who has been in that situation for a long time.

I think it's really just a matter of education, awareness, and helping them to navigate that system much more successfully by making them take a needs assessment, addressing those needs, and then triaging them on the back end and making sure that the agencies then follow up on that referral.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** In terms of those corporate partners, how do you find them? Do they come to you, or have they been approached by you specifically?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** A lot of times, yes. It's really because of the network we've created.

The organization that I run is called NextOp. We were founded by energy and construction executives who really wanted to pipeline more military talent into those sectors, specifically because they were facing a skills gap in leadership.

When they created the organization, they basically put the word out to all of their colleagues. Everything is local, local, local, as we've been talking about. We literally have corporate partners

knocking on our door when they find out about this great opportunity and sending us the opportunities. Then we match them with the veterans who are qualified for those opportunities.

● (1015)

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** We used to do that in the city where I come from. We had a base there, and some incredible talent from that base went into upper management roles locally. The problem, or I guess the concern, was that it was rather a hierarchy. It didn't seem to always translate down to the lower ranks, and that's a problem. I take it that your organization does make the effort to translate this opportunity down to the lower ranks of service.

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Absolutely. We focus only on middle enlisted personnel. We do not focus on officers or senior enlisted personnel. Because they have networks, degrees, and leadership skills, they typically make a faster and more successful transition into higher-paying jobs. There are many for-profit recruiting firms that are going after that talent proactively, but they're leaving out the 85% to 90% of the total force who are middle enlisted service members, and that's who we focus on.

**The Chair:** Ms. Lambropoulos.

**Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos:** I know you have a lot of experience seeing the different programs that are offered in Europe as well, which we haven't touched on as much in today's discussion. You seem to have the most experience with Denmark, and I was wondering if you can give us three of their best practices that you haven't yet implemented in Texas.

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] Their Veteran Centre is fairly innovative. The reason we picked Denmark first is that they have the highest casualty rate among the ISAF forces in Afghanistan per capita, which shocks a lot of people. Really, they send only combat troops, which is why they have the highest casualty rate.

They also have a population that is very comparable to that of the greater Houston area, where I live. They have about six million people in the country, and we have about six million people in Houston, so it was pretty interesting to make the direct comparison. They have comparable numbers of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans as well.



The Veteran Centre system they have set up through the Ministry of Defence is a good example of how federal-level government can implement community-based transition. They have these centres spread out across Denmark which address employment, mental health, family issues, and benefits issues all in one place—one-stop shopping, so to speak. Also, because they are a very rich country and a very small country, they are able to do that effectively. It's a good case study for state- or local-level organizations to potentially implement.

Obviously, earlier we talked about the chaplains and the psychologists not being rank-holding officers. That was very important.

As well, just the general investment by the Danish Parliament, by creating a veterans policy in 2010 and addressing, really, the major issues that confronted Danish veterans in their integration into civilian life from Afghanistan, was very proactive. It really showed the resolve of not only the elected officials but also the people to really help these individuals when they return home.

**Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos:** Have you had the chance to look at the Canadian system and compare it to the American system? Obviously we have many different areas. We have a lot of rural communities, and it's more difficult to reach out to our veterans. What are your comments on the Canadian system?

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** I would love to do a comparative study on the U.S. versus Canada, even in just a couple of different communities we can pick out. We've talked to a couple of

corporations to fund this, particularly McKesson. They have a large footprint in Canada. I and one of my colleagues, who went with me to Denmark and the U.K. as a Marshall fellow, engaged those individuals at the C-Suite level to invest in the project, but we haven't made a ton of progress. Any recommendations you have for us to potentially do a collaborative project on this would be incredibly interesting, and I would love to be a part of it.

● (1020)

**Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

That ends our round today.

John, on behalf of the committee, I'd just like to thank you for your passion and what you brought to the committee today. It's been exciting, and the ideas coming forward have opened all our eyes here today. If there is anything we can offer on our side, contact our clerk, and we can get that to you. Also, if you could get those couple of things we asked for, or if there is anything you want to add for the committee, get it to our clerk and he'll distribute it to the committee.

Again, thank you, sir, and have a great week.

**Mr. John W. Boerstler:** Have a great one. I appreciate it. [*Technical difficulty*]

**The Chair:** That ends the meeting today.

The meeting is adjourned.

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