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## **Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Thursday, November 30, 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.)):** Good morning, everybody. I'd like to call the meeting to order.

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(5), the committee commences consideration of the supplementary estimates (B), 2017-18, votes 1b and 5b under the Department of Veterans Affairs, referred to the committee on Tuesday, October 26, 2017.

I'd like to welcome the honourable Minister of Veterans Affairs and Walter Natynczyk, deputy minister of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

We'll start with a 10-minute round of testimony and then we'll get into questions.

Welcome, Minister. Thanks for coming today.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan (Minister of Veterans Affairs):** Thank you, sir.

**The Chair:** Deputy Minister Natynczyk, welcome.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Is that the cue for opening remarks?

**The Chair:** Yes, go.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Mr. Chairman, fellow members of Parliament, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs for the first time. I appreciate the good work that members do on behalf of Canadian veterans and their families. I want to thank you for the hard work that went into your most recent reports, "Reaching out: Improving Service Delivery to Canadian Veterans" and "Mental Health of Canadian Veterans: a Family Purpose". The former already precipitated a great deal of change since it was tabled a year ago and the latter is very near to my heart as a long-term advocate for mental health awareness.

We have been taking action on your recommendations to ensure the programs that we deliver are efficient, valued, and meet the needs of our veterans. As I'm sure you're aware, our own internal report, "Delivering Service Excellence", released earlier this year, complemented many of the recommendations that you made. We are committed to improving our current system. We have a plan in place to address the recommendations. We are hard at work implementing them. We are overhauling how we deliver services. While it will take five years to successfully complete the transition, 90% of the recommendations will be completed within three years. A few of the

things that will take longer rely on other government departments or policy changes that are outside our authority.

[Translation]

Those changes are key improvements to the many systems, services, support measures, benefits and programs that veterans need to successfully transition to civilian life. I am proud to take office during this pivotal time in order to help implement them.

[English]

I talk many times about my own connection to the Canadian Armed Forces: the fact that I grew up at CFB Goose Bay, and that my brother Danny is a lieutenant commander in the Royal Canadian Navy. Actually, growing up at CFB Goose Bay—I don't know if I've ever told you, Mr. Chair—I was taught at a very early age that Trenton was nirvana. All the CAF forces at CFB Goose Bay couldn't wait to get back to Trenton. I said, "Someday I have to visit it."

In discussions with my brother, he made me aware of some of the challenges even before I came into this role. It was quite fitting and an honour and a privilege to be named Minister of Veterans Affairs and the Associate Minister of National Defence, and to work alongside members of the Canadian Armed Forces, the RCMP, veterans, and their families. This has given me the opportunity to take on these essential tasks of improving service delivery, closing the seam between the Canadian Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Canada, and ensuring financial security for the most seriously ill and injured veterans.

We are here today to talk about what my department is doing, how the supplementary estimates reflect our approach to veterans' well-being, our accomplishments, and the work that remains to be done. Specifically, Veterans Affairs will receive an additional \$26.1 million in these supplementary estimates, a 0.6% increase to \$4.7 billion.

Before I speak to where we increased our estimates for new programs, it's important to point out that 90% of that budget figure represents payments directly to veterans and their families. For many veterans, this means the pain and suffering disability award in recognition of her or his injury. More than that, though, it goes to the earnings loss benefit of 90% of their pre-release salary, paid out during vocational rehabilitation. It also goes to the vocational rehabilitation that works with the veteran through the injury, which might be a barrier to finding her or his new normal.

If that veteran cannot re-establish after rehabilitation, it provides through the extended earnings loss benefit of 90% of pre-release salary paid out until the age of 65. It also goes to the career impact allowance if the veteran has a severe and permanent impairment, and to the career impact allowance supplement if that impairment results in a diminished earning capacity.

When a veteran turns 65, it goes to the retirement income security benefit or the supplementary retirement benefit.

[*Translation*]

Ultimately, all veterans who come to one of our many area offices can now be assured that most of our funding is used to recognize their pain and suffering and to set up and maintain wellness programs that provide a safety net during their recovery.

[*English*]

Let me say this again because it's an important point. Ultimately, for any veteran who comes to the door of one of our many area offices today, they can rest assured that the majority of our funding is going towards recognizing their pain and suffering, and establishing and maintaining the well-being programs that provide a safety net while they are mending.

But we still have work to do. We are enhancing the financial security and wellness elements of the new Veterans Charter to help veterans and their families transition to civilian life and make choices about what they want to do next, whether it be work, education, or other activities.

These supplementary estimates (B) primarily include funding for several budget 2017 initiatives. This funding and our overall guiding focus is about improving the lives of Canadian veterans, whether it be through enhanced education and employment services, the new caregiver recognition benefit that will provide \$1,000 a month tax-free to the informal caregiver, or other critical programs we introduced in budget 2017, which will be implemented on April 1, 2018.

Of course, some of the funding went to the Invictus Games Toronto 2017, where veterans and active military members alike embraced the power of sport as they pushed through barriers and proudly represented our country. While it was an incredible event for the millions of spectators, I know there are many veterans who need more support from us, and that's why we're here today.

We are on the right track to improving our support for veterans. For example, of the 67,000 individuals who received the disability award increase reflected in these estimates, which put approximately \$700 million in the pockets of our veterans, around 37,000 received

their amended payment immediately, as a result of our move towards a fully automated system.

Having already done so much in reinforcing the benefits that make up our wellness model and bolstering the successes of the new Veterans Charter, we will announce more details on our monthly pension option for veterans shortly. We know this is an eagerly awaited announcement. We are committed to giving veterans and their families the best options to ensure their financial security and getting them the best possible support in their post-military lives.

We are all here to serve Canada's veterans. At the end of the day, those who need our assistance now or in the future need to know that we are here to assist them, and that we will continue to expand and adapt to the needs of our growing and diverse veterans community, especially with the help of this committee.

Thank you for your time.

● (0855)

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

We'll start the six-minute rounds with Mr. McColeman.

**Mr. Phil McColeman (Brantford—Brant, CPC):** Thank you for being here today, Minister. We appreciate it.

I want to go right to the issue you mentioned near the end of your comments, and that's the lifelong pension. As you know, there were promises made to veterans. Time is running out.

I have been meeting with veterans as recently as this week in Vancouver and Edmonton. Some are suggesting to me that politics might be anticipated here and playing into the by-election in South Surrey with the Prime Minister.

When is the announcement if there is going to be an announcement? You said it's coming shortly. We've been told time and time again in answer to our questions in the House of Commons that it's going to be before the end of the year. December is fast approaching—tomorrow. When will this announcement be, before the end of the year?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** By the end of the year.

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** By the end of the year.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** By the end of the year.

I don't think I'm disclosing too much to say we literally just came from another meeting on exactly this issue. This is a commitment we've made to veterans. This is a commitment we've made to Canadians.

I'm not going to make excuses by saying I'm a new minister but obviously, I came in as a fresh set of eyes and the learning curve was extremely steep. There were things I wanted to do as well on this.

I will take advantage of this opportunity in public to commend our officials who have been working, as you would expect, weekends and late into the night, because we want to have that option ready.

You are absolutely right, sir, that December is fast approaching. I've just recommitted here again in front of this committee that it will be by the end of this year.

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** Okay. I wanted to revisit the politics around this because the view of many of us around the table is that this should be one of the most non-partisan, non-political issues that parliamentarians deal with in terms of veterans' lives.

Are you saying, sir, that this will not be announced in the South Surrey by-election, as a lever by the Prime Minister to win that election?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** I can honestly tell you that it has not even crossed my mind.

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** Okay. Are you saying the Prime Minister will not announce this in the by-election in South Surrey?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** No.

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** Okay. Thank you.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** No, it honestly has not even crossed my mind. You are absolutely right that this is not a partisan issue. I wouldn't even think of using it as a partisan issue.

This is singularly an issue of blood, sweat, and tears to make sure that we meet our commitments. This is singularly about my team in my office, Walt, who is the deputy minister here, and his officials, literally working night and day to meet that commitment.

● (0900)

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** Okay.

We see no appropriations in the supplementary estimates for lifetime pensions. There are many questions the veterans brought to me in these past few days about what this might look like. Can you share any details? Will this be tax-free money? Will it be stackable with the other pensions? Will the people who receive the new lifelong pension be subject to clawbacks? Can you give us any of these specifics that they're asking about when this comes up for discussion?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** No, I can't. Not to be impolite, but I'll be direct: it has to appear before cabinet first. I have to get cabinet's approval on that.

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** Okay.

Chair, I'm going to yield the rest of my time to my colleague Cathay.

**The Chair:** Cathay, you have two and a half minutes, .

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

Thank you very much for being here today.

I'll just reiterate that it's really important to all of us around this table that we meet the needs of our veterans.

It has been a real privilege for me to be able to serve in this role. I have no military background whatsoever, so I come at this as your typical Canadian. Having travelled this summer and having had

many conversations with our veterans, there's no question that there are a lot of issues. A lot of them relate more to frustration in understanding what's coming their way and receiving it in a timely and kind manner.

Minister, on the whole issue around the pension, I'm sure you hear it over and over again, that a promise was made to Equitas that it would not be taken back to court, and that has happened. There's a lot of concern there as well on what that promise was versus what might actually be announced.

I know there's a lot of concern about that pension being not just an option, but the number one go-to, with other things being the option. Can you re-emphasize to me what you mean when you say the "option" of a lifetime pension?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** First of all, Cathay, let me reinforce the importance of the voice of, as you put it, the average Canadian. With great humility, I talked about growing up on a base and having a brother in the armed forces. Those are important points of view. It is not the same as having served. I wouldn't pretend otherwise. I know what I know, and I know what I don't know, and I'm more than willing to look to people such as the person sitting next to me, to those who have served, and listen especially, as I have done in my travels in my short time as minister. However, it's also very important that Canadians weigh in on this, because this is a priority for Canadians themselves.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Yes, very much.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** They want to know that their veterans are being treated fairly.

The new Veterans Charter, which all parties in the House arrived at realizing that the old system did not work was meant to be a living document. We were meant to amend it. We were meant to look at it. We were meant to listen to veterans. We were meant to meet their needs.

The word "option" is being delivered, but I understand the financial security that comes from knowing what amount you're getting every month, and that certainly appeals to many veterans. Some will prefer a lump sum payment, and that sometimes depends on the time in their life. Later in life, a lump sum might make more sense to them, but for many, receiving a monthly amount is very important to their financial security.

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

Mr. Fraser.

[Translation]

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

Mr. Minister, thank you for joining us today.

[English]

Congratulations also on your appointment. I know how important veterans issues are to you personally and how committed you are to making the necessary changes, and I'm so glad that you're here today.

I want to state as well how much of an honour it is for me to work on this committee. I think we have made some really important recommendations already in our work. One of those was a study, as you highlighted, on mental health and suicide prevention. I wonder if you could talk a little more about some of the mental health supports that are in place now, and could perhaps be enhanced by your department, to address some of the challenges we saw in our mental health and suicide prevention study.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** I can't remember how many weeks it was into my tenure that we dived right into suicide prevention. Within academic and international circles, this is seen as a pivotal study, with such pivotal purpose. Not to be glib, I've been fighting for mental health issues since before I knew I was suffering from some of them. It's a deeply personal issue to me.

I am extremely proud of the efforts that have been made by the people of this department to attempt to effectively address the mental health needs of our veterans. On the day I was sworn in, the general here commandeered me and threw me into the back of a car and immediately started briefing me on the work of the department. One of the first things he said to me was that the culture is changing and we had to reinforce that change and that we give our veterans the benefit of the doubt. That is a very fundamental principle: when they call, we give them the benefit of the doubt. Veterans did not always feel that. It does take courage. When they've worked up the courage to acknowledge that they were suffering and sought help, they did not always feel that there was a sympathetic ear on the other end of the line. I think that's fair to say.

I think there's been a demonstrable change. We've heard that from many veterans. It is not perfect. Mental illness is sometimes a very elusive target for the person who's suffering from it in attempting to describe their illness, and to the people who are attempting to address it. Again, the principle of benefit of the doubt comes into play time and again.

I think we acknowledge and seek to help 94% of the people who call and say they're suffering from PTSD. If they can prove they were in a special duty area, that it was in service, then we put them in the program.

Is that fair to say, Walt?

● (0905)

**General (Retired) Walter Natynczyk (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Absolutely, Minister. Of all the claims coming in to Veterans Affairs with mental health issues, we are approving 94% of them. In that 6%, those we are declining, in some cases it's folks who have not served in the Canadian Armed Forces, or folks who don't have a diagnosis, so we need to provide the appropriate regular.... But generally, if someone has served in the Canadian Armed Forces and they have a diagnosed mental health injury, we're going to provide support for them. As the minister

indicated, one of the toughest parts is getting them in the front door. We have to ensure that the moment they come forward, we provide a helping hand. Again, the federal government does not provide treatment as that's in the jurisdiction of the provinces, but we partner with the provinces coast to coast and with 4,000 mental health professionals and enable them to provide support to our veterans coast to coast.

**Mr. Colin Fraser:** Thank you very much.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Speed here is of the utmost importance. It's important to give the benefit of the doubt, because in the great majority of cases, you're going to effectively get them treatment at exactly the right time. The window is very short. When somebody seeks help and they don't get it and they're left waiting for the system to catch up to them when they've made that leap mentally that they need help, it can cause considerable damage, so you've got to work quickly.

**Mr. Colin Fraser:** Our committee has heard a lot of testimony about the difficulties a soldier would face when transitioning from DND to Veterans Affairs. Do you see that element as closing the seam that you mentioned in the transition phase and having more integrated services being important to the well-being of those transitioning, and perhaps assisting in their mental health and well-being as well?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** As a member of Parliament, sitting down with my brother, who was commandant of the naval fleet school in Esquimalt, he would have much preferred just being in charge of the navigation department where he goes out in Zodiacs with students and they look for killer whales and such. He enjoys his job immensely and teaches navigation, but as commandant, suddenly he inherited a lot of human resources work. It came to him pretty clearly, as he said to me, and was repeated not coincidentally by the deputy here when I became minister, that we do an extraordinarily good job in this country at training men and women to become soldiers, but we are not doing as good a job at training our soldiers to become veterans. That's really what we're talking about when we talk about closing the gap.

I'll tell you as well that when I was brought to the Prime Minister's Office and the Prime Minister sat me down to tell me that he was appointing me Minister of Veterans Affairs, that was the first thing he mentioned to me, that we have to close that gap.

● (0910)

**Mr. Colin Fraser:** Thank you, Minister.

**The Chair:** Ms. Mathysen.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP):** Thank you for being here, Minister. I appreciate this opportunity. I have a number of questions.

I want to get back to the question of my colleagues in regard to the lifelong pension. Very clearly, when veterans were assessing the Liberal platform, they heard lifelong pensions, and they made assumptions. My questions have to do with those assumptions.

Is this simply, as we're concerned it will be, a spreading out of the lump sum over a veteran's life, thereby making it less than the traditional lifelong pension? This announcement that we've been waiting for, will it be before the House rises so that MPs can evaluate the plan?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** I really do not want to get into the details of it, simply because I've not brought it to cabinet yet, but I will say this. I would hope that this government has built up a certain degree of credibility in the past two years in the eyes of our veterans, because quite simply, 40% of our new spending as a government has gone towards veterans. Budget 2016 committed \$5.7 billion to restore critical access to services to open up new offices and to provide veterans with compensation, choice, and financial security. That was the point of budget 2016. In 2017, we had another \$624 million for mental health to support families and to help with education. Of course, there's our caregiver benefit.

On a small but very symbolic note, too, I would add, the Invictus Games cost \$15 million, but that was a very important \$15 million for anybody who looked into the eyes of the veterans who not only were there but were spectators—

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Thank you, Minister. I have a number of questions.

I want to ask about a young veteran. I won't use his name, because I don't want to jeopardize him in any way. He is being medically released against his will. You're also Associate Minister of National Defence. This young man was profoundly injured in Afghanistan, and he became the poster boy for DND because of his persistence. He was used for recruiting and to enhance the reputation of the department, and now he's being pushed out against his will. As a result, this will negatively impact some of his benefits and his educational opportunities.

Will you look at this individual's file? He's caught in a terrible catch-22 situation because of rules that don't necessarily make sense. It's not just him; it's all those others who may also be caught.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** I would simply say, how could I not? With his kind permission, and if he was willing to pass along that information, we will look at absolutely any case.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Okay, thank you. I will pursue that.

I have a question about the so-called gold diggers clause. Of course, I think we all regard it as extremely paternalistic, because these are partners who cared for veterans, and whether it was for 15 years or 50 years, there was still a great deal of care, compassion, and love in the relationship. I'm wondering when we will see an end to this particular clause in the act.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** I'll just add that this is something that's been brought up with me in consultations and from hearing from couples directly. It's exactly as you pointed out. These are people who provided that sort of support.

Walt.

**Gen Walter Natynczyk:** I'll just say that it is a mandated promise. It's a marriage after 60 issue that is in the mandate, and our instructions are to work closely with the Canadian Armed Forces and National Defence, because this is a Canadian Forces superannuation clawback issue. We're working closely with our colleagues at National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces to advance this mandated promise.

● (0915)

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

Finally, on the caregiver recognition benefit, it's \$1,000 per month tax-free, as you indicated, but all of us know what it costs to live in this country. The impact in terms of lost income for an individual can be quite significant and, in the case of that caregiver partner, there's an impact on future pension benefits. They may very well be in a situation in their senior years where their pensions just don't cut it. I'm wondering if you considered that long-term impact. Did you consider that \$1,000 per month in this kind of economic climate may not be at all adequate?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** No, I'll say this. I don't believe its intent was to be all encompassing. One thing that I've discovered in this role is the importance of recognition of what families go through with a veteran in the family and the sacrifices they make. I would agree with you that in its totality, does \$1,000 meet all the costs? In many cases it probably would not. Does it go some way? It does.

I think the greatest value in that \$1,000 is an acknowledgement, particularly because it goes directly to the caregiver, that we recognize as a country what your family is going through. We recognize the value of what you do every day in the help and care of a veteran. I've realized that recognition is a huge part of this.

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

Ms. Lambropoulos, go ahead.

**Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.):** Thank you so much for being here today to answer our questions. I have a few questions.

First of all, I know that part of our budget has gone towards education and employment opportunities for veterans. I was wondering if you could give us some examples of what services will be enhanced in this regard. What will this money be used for specifically?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** We've been working with the provinces and individual institutions on this.

Walt, do you want to flesh it out?

**Gen Walter Natynczyk:** Just to say that with budget 2017, as the minister indicated before, the focus is on the well-being of the veteran.

What is really unique about the education and training benefit is that for the first time since World War II, we have a benefit that is available to all veterans leaving the Canadian Armed Forces who have served at least six years and 12 years—these two gates—to re-establish them and assist them in re-establishing into Canadian society. In the U.S. they would call this the GI bill.

It's the first time since World War II that we have this kind of flexibility to provide education and training for veterans, many of whom kind of joined the military because they didn't like school. Later in their life they don't have the skills, especially if they had been in, say, the infantry, the armoured artillery, and some of the other trades, that are easily transferable into civil society. What's terrific about the education and training benefit is if someone reaches six years of service—because we want them to fulfill their obligation to the country—they could have access to \$40,000 for education, books, tuition, and living expenses. If someone has served 12 years of service, they could get up to \$80,000 for four years of education, college, university, trade school, again, for tuition, books, and living expenses. If they wanted to do something of a hobby nature, you know, entrepreneurship or those kinds of things, they could get up to \$5,000. This is extraordinary, to be able to have a package like this that we can link on to the other part in the budget, which is career transition. It takes these individuals with new skills and then lands them into a purpose, a meaningful purpose, that may also give them financial security in the long run.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** I was just going to briefly add—I mean this is something that really struck me coming into the role—that this is not a token amount. This is a substantial amount of money that will take up a substantial amount of the educational costs for those who want to pursue it.

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

Since you brought it up, I was wondering how the career transition services have changed since 2015.

● (0920)

**Gen Walter Natynczyk:** In the past, the uptake on the career transition service was minimal because it was so restrictive in nature. I think in the past year we had a handful, maybe less than 30 veterans, actually use the service. Again, the narrative of this past budget is one of well-being, to give veterans this opportunity of meaningful purpose.

In these supplementary estimates we have the seed money, if you will, to start working with contractors, with providers who would then work individually with veterans coast to coast in order to ensure that they have the skill sets, to put their own resumés packages together, and then work with regard to job placement. So, it's really about starting at the beginning with education and training, going all the way through to landing them in an appropriate role.

Often for veterans—this is really key—the first job may not be the right job. There is a cultural thing that occurs with them in terms of getting back into civil society. What's key about this career transition is it's not a one-off. If it doesn't work the first time, find what the second or third solution is so that the veteran actually can land something that he or she can identify with and gives them all that they need for that next phase of their life.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Let me quickly add that an important element there is flexibility, because that will respond to their immediate needs and most fulfill their needs. As well, the importance of purposeful work for mental health cannot be stressed enough. That's a major dimension here.

**Gen Walter Natynczyk:** Could I also mention that this benefit is for spouses as well.

**Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos:** There is one last thing, which I don't think has been done yet. I was wondering about the intention. Something that I recommended recently was to have a better transition from DND to Veterans Affairs, and to see if information could be transferred more easily. Would you guys be willing to work with DND to enable a better transfer of information?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** The minister and I are both committed to it. My first meeting with him after I was sworn in was at Esquimalt. I went out there almost right away. We're committed to it on direct command from the Prime Minister. This is something that we've been assigned to do. It is a prominent part of my mandate letter. It is something that he's verbally instructed me to do, and the Minister of National Defence and I are committed to it.

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

**The Chair:** Mr. Samson.

**Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.):** Minister, I'm extremely happy about your appointment. It was exciting to see an individual with your capacity take this role, and, as you said earlier, bring new eyes to the challenges, so congratulations. I was extremely impressed with your French as well, so continue the good work.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** He's been hard on me in the past, so I appreciate that.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** I know. I have to tell you that probably the highlight of my two years as an MP is being appointed to this committee. I say that because I represent—and of course you would know—Nova Scotia, which has the highest number per capita in the country of military and veterans. My riding has the highest number in Nova Scotia with 23% now. Some of my neighbouring MPs would question that number, but I feel very confident about that number. It's extremely important for me to be on this committee and to continue to advocate. I've been advocating for two years and I continue to. I will also continue to learn as it's so important for us as MPs to be able to articulate some of the challenges that some of our veterans have faced, continue to face, and will continue to face. I just did a round of presentations to every Legion in my constituency, town hall meetings. I did five in the last two months and they've been outstanding. Veterans appreciate what we've done. They are underlining the things we must continue to do. I shared the questions with your department, and we're finding answers to those together.



I want to underline that there is a lady named Trish, who works in the military resource centre. She has followed me every night to every one of my meetings so she could add her information. Her dedication is impressive. She didn't have to. She volunteered and she allowed our discussions to be that much more. I wanted to touch on that and thank her as well for that work.

That being said, can you share a little bit more about the changes that we've brought forward for military resource centres for veterans?

• (0925)

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** I have visited three and I have a lot more to go to. The people who work in our military family resource centres are the front lines. Their commitment—I mean, Trish's commitment to you, going around so that she can make sure that you're informing veterans as well as you ca—is completely in keeping with the commitment to the people I've met. I really want to emphasize that this is in no way partisan; it's just to make sure that the right information is out there. You'll learn more at town halls and you'll see more of the commitment not only of our employees but more importantly of veterans.

Perhaps you want to get into the exact figures as to how much we've increased military family resource centres.

**Gen Walter Natynczyk:** If I could just add, as the minister has indicated, our MFRCs, are on that front line supporting the families who often are the informal caregivers to our veterans, especially those veterans who are medically released. We had a very successful pilot of seven locations on seven bases where we had veterans given access when they are medically released to those military family resources centres.

In going back to the importance of budget 2017 in terms of well-being and supporting the families, the announcement in that budget and some of the funds in these supplementary estimates are with regard to opening up all of the 32 bases in terms of the military family resource centres. That is in order to provide support to those veterans who are medically released in their areas. Where they need additional support—counselling, support to families—they do extraordinary work in supporting whether it be parents or other family members, in counselling on how to deal with a veteran, especially a veteran with a mental health injury, in providing support in trying to find a doctor in the local area, and often in helping the spouse find employment in the area.

In terms of surrounding that veteran who is dealing with so many tough issues as they transition to civilian life, those military family resource centres are absolutely vital in providing folks with the skills and knowledge to safely and securely re-establish in society.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** For most of them, it's in their neighbourhood. They're neighbours.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** I got that feeling when speaking with veterans that they very much appreciated the improvement of immediate services to them.

I have two quick questions. I'll put them together so we make sure we get the time respected.

**The Chair:** You have about 50 seconds.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** One is on the promotion of communication. Many veterans are not aware of exactly the changes that took place. We need to do a better job in communicating that. It's crucial.

The second one is on the Invictus Games. Why do we put money into that? How does it feel? Share some information on how important it is to us and to veterans.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Communications is a massive priority, and one that I feel personally as minister, primarily to make sure that the veterans know what services are available to them. There's been a lot that's come down the pike in a very short order.

On the Invictus Games, for a lot of these veterans, it was a call to duty again. They got to put on a uniform again for their country. It was huge. It was very emotional not only for the veterans who participated, but also for the veterans who watched. I can't emphasize it enough, and I hope we have a presence at future Invictus Games.

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

**The Chair:** Ms. Wagantall.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Thank you. I get to use my time now.

I have a number of things I want to mention, because from what I've heard from veterans, it's important for you to know. You may know it already, however.

In regard to the lifelong pensions, I'm aware that the candidate in Surrey has served significantly in the realm of Equitas doing fundraising and whatnot, and this issue is very important to him. Our veterans have made an ask here for lifelong pensions, tax-free, subject to legislation to change any rates, and no clawback on their military pensions. I just want to put that on the table today to make it very clear that this is what I certainly hope is going to happen in response to the promise that this government made.

You talked about transitioning into the military and being moved into a hierarchy. When someone comes out of the military, that falls to the wayside to some degree. I don't see that happening in transition. With the earnings loss benefit and the increase to 90%, there was also a change in demotions, shall we say, to the lower people. They are not receiving the same level of increase that higher-ranked people are.

When it comes to the education opportunities, I applaud that after six years and after 12 years, there's this opportunity, regardless of whether you're injured. However, if you are in the military, your boots are on the ground, and you're somewhere between 18 and 20 to 25, chances are you're the one who's going to be injured. A lot of that tends to happen early on in service. Those individuals will not have that opportunity, and they're injured. If you're injured between one to five years of service, you only get the two-year SISIP. The requirements there are not reasonable to someone who has been harmed. That is something that is very concerning to me.

Minister, you said in the House that if you need help, all you need to do is raise your hand. I don't know if you're following me on Facebook, but that really stuck in the craw of people who said, "I've raised my hand."

You also spoke just now of the benefit of the doubt. We did a major study on mental health care. Mefloquine is an issue in this country for our soldiers. I'm thankful that they've finally relegated it to a drug of last resort, coming into line more with the rest of the world, our allies, on this, but that in itself is not enough. That's like having a car with a recall because of something that is causing death, and you just say, "Well we've fixed it for the future. We're not going to deal with what's happened in the past."

These veterans gave a lot of testimony at this committee. On the mental health report, none of it was really included because it was considered anecdotal. If you're listening to our veterans.... I cannot comprehend how that could be an argument for not hearing what they had to say, unless we want to just have a whole bunch of people take mefloquine and do a study, which obviously is not the way to go.

We've had so many suicide intervention strategies. The reality is that suicides are happening all over. We need to know the numbers, and we need to know the whys. This is going to happen, even if the government doesn't do it itself. If you want some help with that, I have lots of information in my office. It's time, I think, that we came face to face with the realities of what has happened and recognize that to a far greater level. That in itself would make a difference to these individuals who end up suffering, like Lionel Desmond, who took the lives of his family along with his own, which is not unusual. The mentality is, "I don't want them to suffer because of me."

Those are issues that are very important.

The Invictus Games were phenomenal. The symposium was amazing. I attended the whole thing. I had an opportunity there to speak with the Minister of Veterans' Affairs from Australia, Mr. Tehan. He talked a little bit about your conversation and wanting to get together more in research. I hope that happens with mefloquine.

That's my rant. There are many ways that I think, when we look at how we're taking care of our veterans when they come and they're

injured, that hierarchy cannot be part of the equation. If they need education, then they need education. It shouldn't be only at six years or only at 12 years. If they're injured—and it's not a huge number—we should be doing everything we can for them, and the rest, I believe, will fall into place.

● (0930)

**The Chair:** Do you want to take the rest of her time?

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** How much time do we have?

**The Chair:** One minute.

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

During one of my early meetings after coming into this role as critic, I received this from the veterans ombudsman. I called it the "spaghetti page". The title of it is "Canadian Forces/Veterans Affairs Canada Program Relationships with Budget 2016 & 2017".

Have you seen this, Minister?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** I have.

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** What did you think of it?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** From up close or afar...?

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** I can send you a copy.

● (0935)

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** No, I hear your point.

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** This is the navigation that our military people face while they're transitioning out of the military, but also what they face if they even fall into this little box down here. Where do we go next? This is what I call the "spaghetti page". It demonstrates a dysfunctional relationship between the veteran and Veterans Affairs, which I hear over and over again. It's the "no" culture: say "no" so many times and they'll go away. Try to navigate this if you're someone who has any kind of PTSD or mental illness issues, and it's saying, "Well, you qualify for something over here and this is kind of where you go next." We have to correct this culture. I hear it over and over again.

Do you have any comments regarding that?

**The Chair:** We're out of time.

Mr. Eyolfson.

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

Thank you, Minister, and thank you, General Natynczyk, for coming.

This has been a very important committee for me. I requested to be on this committee from day one. Air force base 17 Wing is in my riding, and there are some very worthwhile veterans groups, ANAVETS and Charleswood Legion 100. I was very honoured to be selected last month for the commemorative trip for the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Passchendaele. That was a very moving experience. This has been, as I said, a very important file for me from day one.

One thing that impacted the people of my province is Shilo air force base, two hours west of me and nearby the veterans service centre in Brandon, Manitoba. It was one of the nine that were previously closed, and I was getting a lot of feedback about how difficult that was making things for a lot of people now having to drive through two hours of bald-headed prairie to get their services in Winnipeg. I was honoured to be at the opening of the one in Brandon.

Can you give us an update on the status of the renewed services now that we've reopened these? Is it all nine of them that we've reopened?

**Gen Walter Natynczyk:** It's nine plus one, so 10—Surrey.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** And it services up north.

**Mr. Doug Eyolfson:** Okay, thank you.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** I'm going to have you speak to the specifics of that, but before I do, I want to get back to Phil, to your point about the “spaghetti page”, because I think it's really important.

I'll be honest. I'm not sure if that's an entirely fair depiction of what every single veteran has to go through, because there are a number of options that are portrayed there. I will tell you I believe impatience is a virtue. I am impatient about streamlining as much of this as we possibly can.

I know, frankly, from the deputy's commitment, which he has reiterated to me again, that it is vitally important that we maintain a veterans' point of view on how we deliver services. It is vitally important that everything new that we roll out... I call them “sherpas”. There are a number of different words that we can use for them, but the onus is on us to navigate those waters. The onus is not on the veteran to navigate them; the onus is on us to achieve results in as short an order and amount of time as we possibly can so that they never have to see that page or feel it, more importantly.

That's my commitment to this committee and that's my commitment to veterans.

I'll let you speak to Doug's—

**Gen Walter Natynczyk:** Opening up the 10 offices—the previously closed nine, plus the one in Surrey—and, as the minister mentioned, also now having a mobile office that works through the territories, has been huge in bringing personal services back to those regions where we know there are a large number of veterans. In the case of Canadian Forces Base Shilo and the Brandon area, that whole area west of Winnipeg and east of Regina, we know we have a lot of veterans...and to reduce the difficulty of trying to get face-to-face services.

I was at the office we opened in Prince George, and it was amazing. The door opened up at this office at 0830 and there were three door-crashers—one veteran who had just become homeless, and we were able to help that veteran; one veteran who wanted a reassessment; and a third veteran, a 94-year-old World War II Royal Canadian Air Force veteran who didn't want anything. He lived on his own on a 200-acre property with no electricity and no water. However, he knew at some point he may not be able to drive, and he just wanted to know that someone would be around to take care of him.

The fact is that this face-to-face meeting was so important. Even though we have the electronic connection through the My VAC Account, I want to emphasize two veterans used this platform to say they wanted to register for a My VAC Account where a lot of the programs out there are all there. A lot of the links to get re-established are there. That's what some veterans want. Some veterans want to see someone face to face. We've been able to open that Brandon office as well as all the other offices from Corner Brook and Sydney all the way out to Surrey and Kelowna. The veterans often want to see the Veterans Affairs folks who can walk them through the process to demystify the challenges at the same time as we try to make our system a lot less bureaucratic.

• (0940)

**Mr. Doug Eyolfson:** Thank you.

Minister, you didn't really have a chance to respond to any of the statements made by Ms. Wagantall. Do you care to respond to any of those in the time we have left?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Let me get back to my notes because there was quite a bit there.

**Gen Walter Natynczyk:** Could I address one?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Yes.

**Gen Walter Natynczyk:** I'd like to emphasize one point on the education. There are a number of points here, but on the education, in the last budget we created this education and training benefit at these two gateways of six years of service and 12 years of service. That applies to all veterans. What just came out in the budget goes into effect on April 1, 2018, but today, an injured veteran who has difficulty in re-establishing has access to an education, a vocational rehab program that exists today and has existed for a while for up to \$75,000 no matter what the age. The fact is they are medically releasing, and they have access to that vocational rehabilitation resource of \$75,000 already. This additional program is for folks who meet these two gateways. We are taking care of those who may release very early on, and release later in their careers as well.

**The Chair:** Mr. Brassard, you have five minutes.

**Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC):** Minister, it's good to see you this morning, and I'm glad you are on the road to recovery.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Thank you.

**Mr. John Brassard:** I want to address the elephant in the room again. Minister, you have a lot of power, as did Mr. O'Toole when he was the minister of veterans affairs. Mr. O'Toole held the Equitas lawsuit in abeyance. I watched it again this morning because I wanted to be reminded of what the Prime Minister said in Belleville. When he spoke about veterans fighting their government, he said that no veteran “will be forced to fight their own government for the support and compensation that they have earned.” He also said, “We will reinstate lifelong pensions”.

Minister, given the power that you have, the same power that minister O'Toole had, if you believe that the lifelong pension option that you're going to be proposing to cabinet—and I understand and appreciate that it hasn't gone to cabinet at this point—satisfies the argument that has been so vigorously defended by the government—and I'll remind you again that it was your government that reinstated the lawsuit after the abeyance agreement ended—will you or can you commit today to speak to the Prime Minister before he leaves for China to again hold that Equitas lawsuit in abeyance or stop the lawsuit altogether? If you're that confident that this pension option reflects what those veterans have been fighting for, will you do that?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** I don't think I can commit to that happening before the Prime Minister goes to China. I am very confident that we are going in the right direction, my team and officials, in fulfilling our mandate promise of a pension-for-life option for our veterans. I am confident that we are on the right track. I am confident that what we present to the country in very short order will meet those tests.

Ultimately I think of those tests as being on two levels: that of the veterans who will be affected, either currently or in the future, have to feel that it meets the test; and that of Canadians as a whole, who have to feel that it meets the test. I am very confident that it will do so. That's what I'm striving for, and we don't have much time to do it.

• (0945)

**Mr. John Brassard:** I hope, then, Minister, that if this pension option as it will be proposed by the government doesn't meet the arguments of the Equitas lawsuit, you understand and can appreciate that there will rightly be significant disappointment in this government among the veterans community in this country, because many of them voted for what the Prime Minister promised in Belleville. You understand that.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** I do. The weight of the expectations for this initiative is heavy.

**Mr. John Brassard:** I want to get back to something you said earlier, because it caused me some confusion. You said that 40% of new spending has gone to veterans, when in fact \$1.06 billion has increased in the Veterans Affairs budget since the government was elected in 2015. There's been some significant spending on the part of the government. We're seeing \$20-billion deficits, which is far more than the Prime Minister had promised, again.

How do you quantify that number, that 40% of new government spending—because you did say “new government spending”, and I confirmed it with staff at the back—has gone towards veterans? How do you deal with that number? How do you reconcile it?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** When you look at the specifics of what we offered in budget 2016, \$5.7 billion, and look at exactly what we have given to our veterans.... I think substantially of the disability award. Increasing the maximum to \$360,000 has put more money in the pockets of 65,000 ill and injured veterans.

**Mr. John Brassard:** I can appreciate that.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** This is the biggest increase. The earnings loss benefit—

**Mr. John Brassard:** Excuse me—

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** —went from 75% to 90%.

**Mr. John Brassard:** —but you said 40% of new government spending has gone towards veterans, when in fact the numbers don't quantify that. I understand that each individual program has increased, but I don't see that 40% of new government spending has gone towards veterans.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** We can agree to disagree right now, but I will say this, and I stand by it very proudly: we have seen an increase in funding towards veterans. The money they receive in their pocket is greater than we have seen in decades.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, Minister, we're out of time.

Ms. Mathyssen, you have three minutes.

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

I'd like to pursue this, because there needs to be some clarity.

You said 40% of government spending. Do you mean all government spending, or a 40% increase in the VAC accounts? Exactly what does 40% mean?

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** It's 40% of new government spending. I'd be happy to report back to this committee on the exact number, but I will reiterate, because it's something that frankly I don't believe has been communicated nearly enough, that we have seen more money go into the pockets of veterans in these past two years than has been seen in decades. I'll be frank. The new Veterans Charter, which all parties agreed to, was meant to be a living and breathing document. It was meant to be a living tree, as goes the metaphor that's constantly used.

**Ms. Irene Mathyssen:** Okay.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** It withered since its inception, and we have listened to veterans over the course of the campaign—and before, when this party was in a third-place position. We listened very carefully to the needs, to the gaping holes that existed within the system—

**Ms. Irene Mathyssen:** Thank you very much. I have another question that I really need answered.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** —and we responded in a way that was more substantive than veterans have seen in decades.

**Ms. Irene Mathyssen:** There's very short time.

I'm advised that 40% of new government spending is \$8 billion—

**An hon. member:** Point of order.

**Ms. Irene Mathyssen:** I'll be very interested to see—

**The Chair:** Irene, there's point of order.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Sorry, Irene, but I have a point of order.

I would like the minister to produce those numbers to this committee.

**The Chair:** Ms. Mathyssen has asked for the numbers to be sent already.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Ms. Mathyssen, you have a minute and a half.

**Ms. Irene Mathyssen:** I will be very interested to see how you account for that 40%, because \$8 billion seems to be rather a lot.

I want to ask questions about the reorganization at Charlottetown. We've heard bits and pieces about something going on there, and there's only one news report that I've seen.

Could you describe what's happening? What is it costing? What is the intent regarding these changes at Charlottetown?

• (0950)

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** What specific changes?

**Ms. Irene Mathyssen:** It's a reorganization at Charlottetown, something significant. There was a news report that there are significant changes happening at Charlottetown. I wonder if you could elaborate.

**Gen Walter Natynczyk:** I think what we're talking about is that in order to support our colleagues in PSPC with regard to Phoenix, we have been trying to put some of our administrative and previous pay compensation folks into a position to assist in dealing with some of the significant Phoenix pay issues. We tried to do it by creating a group of pay clerks who would assist, but unfortunately they didn't have full access to the Phoenix pay system. In September, we seconded 24 of our administrative clerks, and some of them were previous compensation advisers. We have been able to second them into Public Services and Procurement Canada so they can have full access to Phoenix and actually resolve many of the issues with regard to Phoenix.

That's the only change that I'm aware of in the last few months.

**The Chair:** That ends our time today for both of you.

**Mr. John Brassard:** I have a point of order.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** Could I take a moment, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair:** There is a point of order.

**Hon. Seamus O'Regan:** I in no way want to lead this committee astray. I was incorrect in the number 40%, and I feel badly about that, because I don't in any way want to diminish this government's commitment. It, in fact, is 20%.

It's very important, and I will re-emphasize I feel badly that I got that number incorrect. I do not want it to diminish the incredible amount of money that has been committed to veterans in the past

two years by this government on behalf of our veterans and the needs of our veterans.

**Mr. John Brassard:** I have another point of order.

You can't just throw numbers out of the air. The minister spoke about the largest increase in spending in decades, and also said that those numbers had withered over decades.

I am wondering, Mr. Chair, if the minister can supply to this committee, so that it can assess those numbers—

**Mr. Colin Fraser:** Mr. Chair, that's not a point of order.

With respect, that has nothing to do with the rules of the committee and the engagement of the rules.

**Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.):** It's not a point of order.

**The Chair:** We're getting into debate.

**Mr. John Brassard:** So then it would be an order paper question.

No problem, I'll look after that. Thank you.

**The Chair:** On behalf of the committee, I'd like to thank the minister and deputy minister for taking time out of their day to testify, and for the knowledge they brought today.

We'll recess for a couple of minutes, and then we'll come back with our next round.

• (0950)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

• (1000)

**The Chair:** Good morning. I'd like to call the meeting back to order.

During this last part of the meeting, we're going to have to shorten the rounds of questioning. There's no testimony coming from the witnesses, but I will introduce them. I think everybody knows them all well. For the new people on the committee, we have Bernard Butler, the assistant deputy minister for strategic policy and commemoration; Michel Doiron, the assistant deputy minister of services delivery; and Elizabeth Stuart, the assistant deputy minister of the chief financial officer and corporate services branch.

We'll begin with rounds of questioning. We'll start with six-minute rounds.

We are dealing with the supplementary estimates (B). Also, we will need time for a vote on these at the end of the meeting.

Mr. McColeman.

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

Thank you for being here today. I'm going to get right into it.

Mr. Doiron, when you last appeared before this committee, you told us that improving processes to reduce the wait times veterans faced was an ongoing effort. It's been going on, at least since you arrived at Veterans Affairs. At the time, you committed to providing us with briefing notes that contain recommendations regarding how to improve those processes. That was almost a month ago. When will you be providing us with those briefing notes?

**Mr. Michel Doiron (Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery, Department of Veterans Affairs):** The briefing notes have all been gathered. Since they were not bilingual, we cannot provide unilingual products to the committee. They are being translated. Once translation is finished, you will be receiving the briefing notes. They're all ready. We just have to get them translated.

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** The reason you haven't got them back to us in a month is because of translation?

**Mr. Michel Doiron:** It's not only translation, but we also had to make sure that we had the proper briefing notes. We had to get the briefing notes from all sources and make sure there was no personal information contained within the information that we sent up.

That has all been accumulated and it's now moved over to translation. It's on its way.

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** Okay.

The minister just provided testimony today, which indicates that we can expect an announcement on the lifetime pension issue before the end of the year. This is the centre of the Equitas case, as you know. On many occasions, since I've been in this role, which is a short period of time, I've had contact with many of the principal people involved with the Equitas case.

As you know, the government decided to re-engage in the court case, after the abeyance agreement ran out. The appeal court still hasn't rendered a decision on where that would be. The Equitas people were in Ottawa prior to Remembrance Day articulating pretty clearly what the lifetime pension conditions are or the parts of the program that they thought it should be.

The reason I bring that up is that, when we look at the supplementary estimates (B), there are no appropriations for lifetime pensions.

When we anticipate an announcement that the minister has promised by the end of the year, how do we square that with no appropriations for lifetime pensions?

In your roles, can you explain how that squares?

•(1005)

**Mr. Michel Doiron:** I can start, but then I'll turn it over to my colleague.

We have to remember that supplementary estimates (B)—and our chief financial officer will explain it—are in-year budgets. With the announcement, the pension for life, or whatever the government decides that it will look like, would not be within this budget cycle, obviously. You have to go through not only cabinet approval, but also a budget cycle and everything else. There's a whole process.

That is why it is not contained within supplementary estimates (B). However, I will turn it over to our chief financial officer, who may want to add a lot more to that.

**Rear-Admiral (Retired) Elizabeth Stuart (Assistant Deputy Minister, Chief Financial Officer and Corporate Services, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Thank you, Michel.

I would just like to add that supplementary estimates, as I'm sure all are aware, is part of the normal parliamentary approval process to

ensure that previously planned government initiatives receive the necessary funding to move them forward.

For Veterans Affairs Canada, this means presenting to Parliament on the spending requirements that were not sufficiently developed in time for inclusion in the main estimates or new initiatives that were approved after main estimates. This includes items that were announced as part of budget 2017, as well as funding approvals through submission to Treasury Board for the 2017 Invictus Games, Remembrance Day, and mental health advertising initiatives.

**Mr. Phil McColeman:** Thank you for that well-prepared answer.

The Prime Minister, during the last campaign, promised the lifetime pensions as a way to woo the voter base, frankly, and it has been two years since that happened. Every answer we've had in the House of Commons has been that this is coming and it's coming by year-end.

When you mention the processes involved with whatever is announced—because the minister obviously was not prepared to provide details—if it's ever announced, what in your mind would be the logical time frame within which veterans could expect a lifetime pension program to actually be put in place? Frankly, I heard from veterans earlier this week in Vancouver and Edmonton that many veterans are relying on whatever is announced to be forthcoming and not greatly delayed. What period of time is being allowed for the process to unfold where a veteran might be able to see some benefits from a lifetime pension?

**The Chair:** You have about 20 seconds.

**Mr. Bernard Butler (Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy and Commemoration, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Mr. Chair, perhaps I can speak to that.

At the end of the day, just to reiterate what the minister said, he has been working on this as an issue. He has yet to take it to cabinet. Once it goes to cabinet, it will be cabinet that basically determines how the government will respond to it. It then, as you know, goes through a legislative process. The House of Commons will have to look at it.

Within that, depending on what it is, that will determine how long it might take to implement it, and that would then be part of the legislative program. Parliamentarians would weigh in on that and it would have an implementation date, all linked to the nature of it, the complexity of it, and so on. That, right at the moment, would be an unknown. Clarity will come once the cabinet deals with it and it's put before the House in whatever form it might take.

•(1010)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Bratina.

**Mr. Bob Bratina:** Mr. Doiron, I have asked you this question before and the answer was good, but I think it's a question that can be asked again, because it's about measuring the efficacy of the measures the government is taking and the responses you're getting from veterans, and so on. How are things going in terms of the changes that are occurring on behalf of veterans?

**Mr. Michel Doiron:** Thank you for the question. I hope I do as well with this answer as I did with the last one.

As the honourable member mentioned earlier, we have challenges. I'm not going to hide it and I didn't the last time. When it comes to production and our numbers, we have challenges with the numbers going up. However, the programming and the surveys we have done in relation to the programming have demonstrated that we're trending in the right direction.

Our survey of 1,500 randomly chosen veterans of different categories—traditional veterans, CAF veterans, and RCMP veterans—has demonstrated that our staff is respectful. We are trying to meet their needs. We're helping them advance and get what they need.

Can we do better? We can always do better. We know there are areas such as in mental health in certain parts of the country where it is a challenge, so we're working on all those areas. However, this has provided us with some insight we did not have before. It's okay to ask ourselves what it looks like. I know that people here talk to veterans, and I talk to a lot of veterans, but to actually go out and randomly just ask people what they think and come back, it gives us this insight and helps us concentrate on where to look.

In addition, when we did the service delivery review, which we're now calling “service excellence” because the review is finished and we're trying to implement some of the stuff, it demonstrated that we're still too bureaucratic. We have to improve our documentation.

Communication was raised with the minister earlier. How do we improve that communication with veterans so that they understand? How do we go to a push system and not a pull system, meaning that Veterans Affairs does the heavy lifting and not the veteran, and do the chart and all those things? How do we simplify that so veterans know what they're entitled to and they can actually get it? Those are all things we are working on.

We still have a lot of work to do on simplification. However, at least when we did the survey, which was anonymous so they could say what they wanted and there would be no repercussions, the veterans who were surveyed were pleased with the services. They were pleased that it was providing them with a level of financial security to help them deal with the day-to-day things.

There are still some irritants, some areas we have to work on, some work to be done on rehab. Some of them are still not quite happy with the rehab, and there is some work to do on the case management side, but all in all, we're trending in a different way. I'm not sitting back and saying everything is nice and rosy, because I still get, on a daily basis, complaints from veterans, so how can we improve that?

**Mr. Bob Bratina:** Is it fair to say that our push to improve the communications has resulted in higher...?

**Mr. Michel Doiron:** Absolutely. It's a multitude. I guess sometimes you're the victim of your own success.

Improved communications, the reality where we're giving more benefit of the doubt to the veterans, and a host of new programming have made it so that we've gone from approximately 36,000 applications a couple of years ago to finishing around 53,000 last year. We're probably going to have close to 60,000 applications this year, which means people are coming forward looking for help, and we're giving them help. We've increased our production by 22%, and I'm not even talking about the other gateways, such as rehab. This is really on the disability and financial side.

The reality is even though you're improving production by 22%, when your incoming increases by close to 30%—or 27%, 28%—you're sliding backwards, and that's where this backlog is coming from. An increase in communications, such as through My VAC Account, has helped us a lot. An increase in benefits that are easier to understand than some previous more complex ones has made it so that people are coming forward for help.

•(1015)

**Mr. Bob Bratina:** Is there any information or data on the reintegration of veterans to the civilian workforce?

We want to provide training for veterans, to get them back to work. We've talked about this in testimony past, that there's sometimes almost a stigma about taking a former military person into the civilian workforce, for whatever reason. Can we speak to that at all?

**Mr. Michel Doiron:** We don't have clear studies on it. Let's be clear. This is what the career transition service—the new program that's coming in that the deputy talked about earlier—is going to be working on. It will not only give us the data, but also work with employers to make sure there is no such stigma.

The military people are good employees. Yes, some of them may have mental health issues. Some of them may not be ready to work, but a lot of them are good employees, ready to work, very devoted, and very dedicated to their employer, whether it's the Government of Canada or a new employer.

With the new CTS program, the hours of counselling and the job placement are actually to make sure that is there. There's also a follow-up component to make sure there's no misunderstanding. What we are noticing—I don't have stats on this, so it's more anecdotal—is that it's a difference in communication. It's the translation of the terminology. A military person speaks in a certain way—those who've served in the military know exactly what I mean—and is used to certain ways. In the private sector and the public sector, it's a different lingo and a different way of doing business. There's an adaptation that is needed, and we have to make sure we help the member and the veteran adapt to that new environment.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Mathysen.

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

Thank you for being here. I have a couple of questions. The first has to do with the caregiver benefit. In supplementary estimates (B), there was an additional \$1,032,000 and change requested for the new caregiver recognition benefit that was announced in budget 2017. Since the monthly grants of \$1,000 won't start until April 2018, what do the operating costs of this new benefit cover in 2017-18, and how many benefit applications do you anticipate receiving in 2018-19?

**RAdm Elizabeth Stuart:** Thank you, Vice-Chair. I will commence by addressing your first point, the caregiver benefit. As with most of the new initiatives announced in budget 2017, these supplementary estimates really cover what I would describe as preparation and implementation costs that the department needs to undertake in order for the benefit to be in a position to come into force on April 1.

For example, there's \$450,000 that we've costed for information technology development costs. There's another \$40,000 in salary for service delivery, work that has to take place, and various operating costs, including a threat and risk assessment, office accommodations, and information technology fit-up costs. When these are announced, there are system developments, system design, and user testing, and we ensure that on the coming-into-force date, the implementation of the new benefit will be smooth, accurate, and timely.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Okay, thank you.

There was an additional \$2 million plus requested for government advertising programs to cover advertising unique to veterans affairs. Is it a transfer from the department to a central fund for any government advertising, or is it specific to veterans affairs?

**RAdm Elizabeth Stuart:** The \$2.1 million for advertising is within Veterans Affairs Canada. I should add that the advertising amount is done annually as a horizontal government initiative, but specific to Veterans Affairs, the \$2.1 million is for a special purpose allotment for outreach, for promotion to veterans and their families, in the areas of commemoration and mental health.

• (1020)

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Okay, thank you.

Finally, an additional \$600,000 for the critical injury benefit is listed in table 90, under grants and contributions, but it's not included under vote 5b of the supplementary estimates, which also covers grants and contributions. Is this an error? If the amount is not included under vote 5b, was it included under vote 1b, even though it is a grant?

**RAdm Elizabeth Stuart:** May I have a few minutes to get back to you on that one, please?

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Yes, that would be fine. I know it's a bit complicated.

Finally, I want to get back to my question regarding Charlotte-town. I understand that some of the reorganization was around Phoenix—and good luck with that—but I had heard that there was some construction going on, some physical changes to the plant. What are they, and what is their purpose, cost, and benefit?

**RAdm Elizabeth Stuart:** Part of my responsibilities on the corporate side of life includes human resources support. I must say that our department has really reached out. Obviously, we have challenges with the new pay system for our own employees, but further to that, we are working very closely and collaboratively with Public Services and Procurement Canada. We have on-boarded 24 of our own compensation advisers and admin personnel, with a national target across the federal government upwards of 300 personnel for the foreseeable future.

We are using our learning centre at Veterans Affairs—it's an interdepartmental learning centre—to train the employees in the Phoenix system. We are on-boarding, together with PSPC, to support the pay centre in Miramichi. We have additional folks in Charlotte-town, P.E.I., and also in Kirkland Lake, where I have quite a few support staff.

We have a phased approach, and we've developed a pod approach—that's what it's called—whereby we are assessing files according to a prioritized schedule, somewhat akin to case management, that is established by PSPC.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Okay, thank you.

**The Chair:** You have another 20 seconds.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** I offer my condolences around Phoenix.

The indication from the department was that there will be better data and that you'll be able to get data in regard to hiring within the public service by January. Are you on target there? Are you feeling confident that you will be able to collect this data about hiring?

**The Chair:** Be as quick as possible on that, please.

**RAdm Elizabeth Stuart:** Pardon me? Are you referring to the hiring of veterans in the public service?

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Yes.

**RAdm Elizabeth Stuart:** Okay. We work together with the Public Service Commission. You may recall the Veterans Hiring Act, which has statutory provisions for medically released veterans. The Public Service Commission has the data as to statutory hires. With respect to the rest of the federal government, we do not have the capability established in the Phoenix system as yet, but we are working together with HR systems and the Phoenix system.

I can tell you that many departments have questionnaires when individuals arrive. I myself am a veteran of 32 years. I just retired last year—



**The Chair:** I'm sorry, we're out of time. We're going to have to keep going here.

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

**The Chair:** Mr. Eyolfson, go ahead.

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

Thank you, everyone, for coming.

Just to reference what I had talked about before with this commemoration for Passchendaele that I attended, we do have a commitment to veterans to commemorate their service over the years, from past and even from present service and present events. Could you elaborate on what Veterans Affairs has done over the last couple of years in commemoration, and what it intends to do in the coming years?

• (1025)

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** I would say that we've had an absolutely amazing year. For 2017, as you know, there were three major international events, which were kicked off with Vimy and were followed by the 75th anniversary of Dieppe and most recently, by the 100th anniversary of Passchendaele. This was, as I say, just amazing for all those folks who participated. We were so delighted to have the parliamentary secretary attend in Passchendaele to see first-hand what it was like to really experience dealing with Canadians overseas, dealing with our veterans overseas, dealing with all of our colleagues, and so on. This has taken up, really, an awful lot of our time from the commemoration sector perspective, as well as Veterans' Week, which we've just come off of, and which, I think, was universally accepted to be a very positive experience. Not only were there all those overseas events, but they were all matched by events in Canada. We were so pleased to have Mr. Brassard with us as well, at Vimy, to see the effects.

Now the team is turning its attention to 2018. We're looking at some major events for 2018. The 65th anniversary of the Korean War will be one of them, and also the last 100 days of the First World War. We're working with our colleagues and allies overseas, mapping our planning to what other countries are going to be doing overseas at that time. This is where we are focused right at the moment, pushing out a plan for 2018 and also starting the discussion internally around where we go after that. I'm basically looking to my team to say we need to develop a plan for commemoration over the next five years. I think we'll see some very exciting opportunities over that time.

**Mr. Doug Eyolfson:** Okay, thank you.

Changing gears a bit, we've talked a lot about homelessness, in general, but also homeless veterans. As you know, there's a recently announced national housing strategy over the next 10 years. Is there any item in the supplementary estimates that touches on housing assistance for veterans, or is there any dialogue or input from your department that's helped in regard to the national housing strategy to address housing needs for veterans?

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** Perhaps while my colleague is just looking up the appointed question on the supplementary estimates, what I might like to do, Mr. Chair, is just give you a bit of a sense of what we're doing from a departmental point of view on the homelessness strategy.

You've identified the housing strategy that's recently been announced. Veterans Affairs works with CMHC to ensure that veterans were identified as a vulnerable group in that mix. We'll work with CMHC in terms of the funding that's been allocated by government over the next 10 years to address that. Veterans Affairs is also working very closely with ESDC on a homelessness partnering strategy where, again, veterans are recognized as a vulnerable group, a priority group. We will work ESDC and our other partners on that. In terms of our basic approach to homelessness, we have essentially a four-point plan. We have a lot of ongoing activity and it basically falls under four points.

One is to leave and leverage. We see Veterans Affairs as having a leading role to play in coordinating a lot of the work that's being done across Canada at all levels of government and also with non-profit organizations. We see ourselves as working with them to help, as I say, coordinate and leverage existing resources out there.

We're very concerned about finding veterans who are homeless and, again, working with colleagues and organizations out there doing that. Once they're found, it's about assisting those veterans, through all of the programming at our district levels, to get them off the street and provide all of the range of supports from rehabilitation and onward.

The fourth prong of our strategy is about prevention. It's to work with our colleagues, all of these groups, and with veterans in the transition process in particular to position them so that their needs are identified before they leave the military. Through our rehabilitation programs, our career transition programs, our education programs, the new veteran emergency fund that's been identified for budget 2017, and so on, we try to ensure that we help prevent homelessness in the veteran population.

• (1030)

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

We now have Mr. Samson for six minutes.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Thank you, all three, for being here today. I very much appreciate it. Monsieur Doiron, it's the second time we get at it, so we'll try to continue to grow in finding answers together.

My first question is extremely important. In speaking with veterans, they are not aware of many of the new programs we've put in place, but let's go deeper. Why are they not aware? The feedback they are giving me is that the caseworkers are not aware of the new programs coming out. My question would be, what have we done in the last two years as far as PD, professional development, for these caseworkers is concerned so that they are able to give the utmost support to our veterans?

**Mr. Michel Doiron:** Thank you for the question, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Samson, it's always a pleasure.

We have invested a lot of time and money in, I don't know if the term is "upgrading", but investing and improving the knowledge of our case managers, and I would go further, all of our employees.

The reality is with the influx of money we've received in the last couple of years, we've hired over 460 new employees. These are new positions, new employees, plus an attrition rate of probably between 10% and 15%, so we're probably close to 600 new people joining the department, but there are 460 new positions. We decided to really bring them into this care, compassion, respect environment, so we developed a national training program for our new people where we teach them—I don't know if that's the right term; I don't want to sound degrading in any way—we educate them on our new programs and bring them into this care, compassion, respect environment of giving the benefit of the doubt to the veteran.

They are professionals. They are case managers. They are social workers, nurses. They have the education, but what's important is whether they understand the military culture and our programs. We've been investing a lot, so much so that our more experienced case managers have come back to us and said, "Wait a minute. This is all nice and dandy that you are doing that with the new guys, but what about us? We need this recycling." So we've embarked since April 2017 on recycling. It's not the same length of training, but it's recycling the people.

When veterans say the case managers don't know about the new programs, I'm always a little concerned because they should.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** I'm going to stop you there, because we could talk about a lot. I'm sure there's good PD, professional development, happening, but that's something we can look at in the future. Thank you. At least the point is made that we need to continue to drill in that area.

[Translation]

Mr. Doiron, my second question follows up on the one I asked you about a month ago. I told you that there were no pain doctors in Nova Scotia and that some veterans in my riding were faced with an extremely difficult situation in terms of cannabis, to which they were entitled. You said that it wasn't necessarily about pain specialists, but that it could also be psychologists or other mental health experts.

We then took action and sent the requests to the Department of Veterans Affairs, but we did not receive a positive answer. They even questioned the right to use the services of those experts. So I still have the same problem I did one month ago.

Could you help me understand the situation better?

**Mr. Michel Doiron:** Absolutely.

Once again, let me first stress that Veterans Affairs Canada does not provide medical care. I understand the situation in Nova Scotia, but the fact remains that it is the responsibility of the provinces to administer medical care and to give veterans what we call scripts, not marijuana prescriptions. In fact, we are not talking about prescriptions for marijuana, since it is not a recognized drug that can be prescribed in the same way as other drugs. For doctors to be able to prescribe it, they must be assigned a certain number.

[English]

I think it's called a DIN, but I stand to be corrected by the doctors; I know there are some in the room.

[Translation]

You are talking about some veterans in your riding. However, I cannot talk about specific cases, because the information is confidential.

•(1035)

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Yes.

**Mr. Michel Doiron:** Each application is assessed. On our end, we provide the veterans with a list of doctors we know. It is then up to them to find a doctor prepared to provide them scripts for 10 grams. It must be said that any doctor can write a prescription for three grams. Veterans have to go to specialists only when they need more than three grams.

Clearly, when veterans have mental health problems related to their service, a certified psychiatrist can write the prescription. If you were told that it was not the case, send me the note and I'll take a look.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Okay. Thank you very much.

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

[English]

**The Chair:** You have 30 seconds.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Oh, you're always cutting me at 30 seconds.

**The Chair:** I'm going to hold you tight to 30 seconds.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Concerning the education program—the six and 12—which is crucial, some veterans are telling me that they are not necessarily able, depending on their situation, to access it. Can dependants—spouses or kids—have access to those programs, in replacement of the veteran?

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** The answer is no. It's a benefit paid to the veteran.

**The Chair:** For the last six minutes—we're going to have to end after this round—Ms. Wagantall will split the time with Mr. Brassard.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** I thought you were going to stick with me.

**The Chair:** We could try that. You have two seconds left. We can give them to Ms. Wagantall.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** You indicated that the advertising funds, over \$2 million, were split between commemoration and mental health. How much of that is going toward mental health programs?

**RAdm Elizabeth Stuart:** I do not have the specifics on that.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Can you get that for me?

**RAdm Elizabeth Stuart:** Yes, I can.

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

Also, within that mental health venue, I'm wondering whether there is any communication planned to reach out to those who are required to take mefloquine, specifically because the surgeon general has now moved it to being a drug of last resort and Health Canada has changed the labelling, with significantly more serious repercussions attributed to it. Is there any kind of outreach to our veterans who are required to take it? I would like to know that as well.

Also, as you're training your case managers, what training are they receiving in regard to mefloquine? I'm sure there are questions coming forward.

**Mr. Michel Doiron:** I'm not aware of any specific communications concerning mefloquine. I will confirm this, but I'm not aware of any. I think we go at a much higher level.

I want to stress something I've stressed here before. When it comes to mefloquine or any other situation, we at Veterans Affairs Canada don't prescribe. At the end of the day, the cause of the injury... As long as you have the diagnosis and it's linked to your service, whether it's mefloquine or...I know we've talked a lot about sexual trauma and things such as that—

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Could I interrupt?

Unless Veterans Affairs recognizes it as a condition related to service, there's nowhere to go with that. The question is, is that being done within Veterans Affairs?

**Mr. Michel Doiron:** It's not the use of mefloquine that we recognize, it's the mental health situation. Whether it was mefloquine that caused the mental health problem, if you come to us with a diagnosis, whether you've used mefloquine or used any other drugs or anything else but you have a diagnosis, it will be based on your mental health diagnosis.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** If a doctor indicates that an individual has a brain stem injury due to the use of mefloquine, they can then receive funding for treatment.

**Mr. Michel Doiron:** Absolutely, as long as it's linked to service. It's not because of mefloquine. It's because the brain stem injury is linked to service.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** I understand that, but at the same time, obviously there's a causal effect here.

**Mr. Michel Doiron:** I'm not debating at all the causal effect. I just want to be clear. For us, the question is, what is your diagnosis and is it linked to service? It might sound like a small point and I'm not trying to be picky at all on this. I know the issue surrounding mefloquine, and I think my chief medical officer has been before you to talk about it. The reality for us is that if you have a mental health issue, whatever it may be, we want to treat you; we want to help you get better. It's not what caused it.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** I understand. Really, we're splitting hairs somewhat here, because the reality is that it's not actually a mental health issue; it's a brain stem injury, a physical injury.

**Mr. Michel Doiron:** Okay, so it's brain stem.

**The Chair:** You're at three minutes.

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

Will I get that information from you, then, in regard to what percentage of that funding is for mental health?

**Mr. Michel Doiron:** Yes.

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

**The Chair:** Mr. Brassard.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have some rapid-fire questions.

With respect to the veterans transition program, I travelled across the country over the summer, and as of late August or early September, military family resource centres said that they weren't prepared to implement the veterans transition program as of the April 1 start date.

Quickly, what's the status of that? Has the funding been allocated to the MFRCs? Are they prepared, at this point, to put the veterans transition program into effect?

• (1040)

**Mr. Michel Doiron:** I'm not aware that they're not ready to implement the CTS. However, for the CTS, we went out for a contract and the period is closed. We've assessed the contracts and we should be ready to do an announcement of who will be providing CTS for us on April 1.

**Mr. John Brassard:** To be fair, Michel, the challenge that the MFRCs were talking about was the fact that there had been no funding allocated, there had been no communication with VAC, and there had been no staffing implementation, which they're going to require in this case. I think you need to circle back with your MFRCs to understand whether they're prepared for this April 1 timeline and this April 1 launch. That's number one.

Second, Invictus—

**RAdm Elizabeth Stuart:** Can I address the funding issue?

**Mr. John Brassard:** I don't have time for that. I think you need to circle back with them. Okay?

**Mr. Michel Doiron:** Yes, got it.

**Mr. John Brassard:** The second thing is about Invictus. Millions of dollars are being put into the supplementary estimates for Invictus. Is this to cover a shortfall in the original funding? Why is this money being put in there?

**Mr. Michel Doiron:** The additional funds that were requested and received for Invictus weren't for shortfalls, actually. Based on the numbers I have seen lately, Invictus was actually quite successful. This was to add, I'll call it programming, to the whole event of that week. There was a matching amount, so all of that \$7.5 million had to be matched by other parties for the Invictus Games.

**RAdm Elizabeth Stuart:** It flowed through Veterans Affairs. I would add that at the Invictus Games we held a first-of-a-kind job fair for veterans and we on-boarded upwards of 200 veterans. It was very successful.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Okay.

The last question is on attribution to service with respect to injury. The concern for the DND ombudsman is that we're still not attributing service within the DND to VAC. There's a disconnection there. What's the status of attribution to service in terms of VAC's identification for medical disability?

**The Chair:** You'll have to make that answer very short, please.

**Mr. Michel Doiron:** We're talking to the surgeon general. They don't attribute the injury to service. They give a diagnosis and then we do the assessment. We've talked about the ombudsman, but to really do justice to this, I would need a lot more time.

**Mr. John Brassard:** We need a lot more time.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We would like to call the vote on the supplementary estimates (B) now.

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Vote 1b—Operating expenditures.....\$18,459,904

Vote 5b—Grants and contributions.....\$7,500,000

(Votes 1b and 5b agreed to on division)

**The Chair:** Shall I report supplementary estimates (B) 2017-18 to the House?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**An hon. member:** On division.

**The Chair:** I would like to thank all three witnesses for their answers. If you could get the requested information to the clerk, it would be appreciated.

I have a motion to adjourn by Mr. Eyolfson.

(Motion agreed to)

**The Chair:** The meeting is adjourned.

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