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Chair

Mr. Neil Ellis

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Neil Ellis (Bay of Quinte, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee will now study the subject matter of the supplementary estimates (C) for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2018, and the interim estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2019.

I'd like to welcome the Honourable Seamus O'Regan, Minister of Veterans Affairs, and General (Retired) Walter Natynczyk, deputy minister of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Welcome, Minister, and thank you for coming today. We'll start with your 10 minutes.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Chairman Ellis and fellow members of Parliament, good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs today. I am always glad to meet with you because I know that we share the same goal, supporting the veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces and their families.

[Translation]

Our shared mandate is to ensure that Canada lives up to its duty to provide the care, support, respect, and economic opportunities that veterans deserve for their services to the country.

Before continuing, I would also like to thank the committee for its dedication to ensuring that we keep that promise.

[English]

When I first appeared before the committee this fall, I was a newly appointed minister, and a lot has changed since then, including December's announcement of the pension for life. It will become another integral part of the package we provide for the well-being of our veterans. The pension for life provides three new benefits.

The pain and suffering compensation recognizes and compensates veterans for the pain and suffering they experience as a result of service-related disability. Additional pain and suffering compensation will be provided for those with severe and permanent service-related impairments causing a barrier to re-establishment in life after service. Veterans will be able to choose to receive those as tax-free monthly payments for life or as a single, non-taxable lump sum, whichever is right for them and their family.

The second component of the pension for life is the income replacement benefit that will provide up to 90% of the veteran's

salary at the time of their release from the Canadian Armed Forces. This is for veterans who face barriers to re-establishment caused by health problems resulting primarily from service.

[Translation]

These components will be combined with the wellness benefit included in the New Veterans Charter in order to provide better support to ill and injured veterans as they begin their life after military service.

[English]

These components will build on our government's investments in budget 2016 where we increased the amount of the disability award; and as of December, veterans received \$650 million. You can see that increase reflected throughout Veterans Affairs vote 5 in the 2017-2018 main estimates and throughout this year's supplementary estimates for the department.

We also increased the earnings loss benefit, which veterans receive while in rehabilitation, to 90% of their pre-release salary. We re-opened the nine offices closed by the previous government and opened a new office in Surrey, as well as expanding outreach to veterans in northern Canada, and we hired more staff.

Going live in two weeks are our budget 2017 initiatives, including the education and training benefit; career transition services; veteran emergency fund; caregiver recognition benefit; the expansion of our successful military family resource centre pilot; the veteran and family well-being fund; the centre of excellence on PTSD and mental health; and the elimination of a time limit on the rehabilitation services and vocational assistance program. I look forward to reporting back throughout the year on the progress in each of these.

The key to these benefits and programs is how we deliver them. Since December, I've had the opportunity to meet with hundreds of veterans, their families, and serving CAF members at town hall meetings. I can tell you how we deliver services and, in many cases, how services are not being delivered comes up loudly, and it comes up often, and for good reason.

When I was here last, I spoke about this committee's reports, "Reaching Out: Improving Service Delivery to Canadian Veterans" and "Mental Health of Canadian Veterans: A Family Purpose". Many of your recommendations corresponded with what Veterans Affairs own service delivery review identified as key areas of need.

•(1105)

[Translation]

I also said that the department has an action plan to address those recommendations. Among the 91 specific measures to improve veterans' experience, the department has already responded to nearly half of them and I am committed to continuing to implement them by the end of 2020-21.

[English]

To accomplish this, we've made a number of fundamental changes to the way that Veterans Affairs works. The most significant one is completely turning around the approach to delivering services. Previously, it was up to the veteran to apply for benefits and services. Our service delivery review report called this the "pull" model. The problem with it was that veterans often did not have enough information to be able to ask the questions that would enable them to apply for benefits. Again, this is something that has come up over and over again with the veterans that I meet.

Therefore, we've flipped that to a push model. Now, Veterans Affairs staff take the initiative to give veterans all the information they need about the services they're eligible for. Let me take a moment to tell you a little more about that.

This month, the department is wrapping up a six-month pilot called guided support. The program assigned a veteran service agent to be the main point of contact at the department for a veteran. The agent gets to know the veteran, their family situation, and their needs and then determines what programs, benefits, and services they're eligible for. The agent helps the veteran navigate through the department's application and delivery system, and coordinates services.

The reactions of participants in the pilot study have been very encouraging. Veterans and families liked the fact that they only had to communicate with one person at the department. They appreciated the support they received in learning about services and benefits and in filling out the right forms to apply for them.

[Translation]

Veterans service agents were also enthusiastic. They like being able to visit veterans at home, getting to know them better, and developing a plan that is tailored to their individual needs. We are about to implement this level of support for all veterans who do not need a case manager, but need more than just a phone call.

[English]

However, it's important to realize that the fundamental changes the department has made to the benefits and services, and to the way it delivers them, are having an impact right now on the lives of veterans and their families today.

It's not only through the pilot project that veterans are getting more and better information about the services and benefits they're entitled to; the whole department is adopting the push model. It has made significant progress in improving communications to veterans, families, advocates, and stakeholders, whether in person, by phone, over the Internet, or even by mail.

As a result of these efforts, the number of applications for disability benefits has increased 32% over the past two years. We will ensure that every veteran who comes forward receives what they're entitled to, whether that's 10 veterans or 10,000.

I am here today in regard to supplementary estimates (C). As you can see, Veterans Affairs Canada is seeking \$45 million in increased operating expenditures and \$132 million in grants and contributions.

Our programs are driven by demand, which is why the bulk of these supplementary estimates will pay for benefits and programs that go directly to veterans, their families, and caregivers. They also include increases to disability awards and allowances, a doubling of the critical injury benefit, money for educational assistance for children of deceased members or veterans, payments for house-keeping and grounds maintenance for veterans, and funding for treatment benefits and operational stress injury clinics.

Chairman Ellis and members of the standing committee, we share a common goal to ensure that Canada's veterans get the support and services they need. Veterans Affairs Canada is working hard to enhance the well-being of veterans and their families.

[Translation]

With further improvements planned for the coming fiscal year and the reinstatement of a pension for life option in 2019, we are making real strides. With the support of this committee, we can continue making progress.

Thank you very much.

•(1110)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll begin our questioning with a six-minute round.

I ask the committee to be patient today with the the time. We have another group, so I will be tight on time with everybody.

We'll start with Mr. McColeman for six minutes.

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brantford—Brant, CPC): Thank you for being here, Minister.

In a report—I have a copy of it here and I'd be glad to share it with you—in *The Globe and Mail* published last week on Tuesday, March 13, two issues were brought forward.

The one I want to refer to was brought forward by Mr. Forbes, the head of the veterans associations in Canada. The article states:

According to Mr. Forbes, the new pensions for life will pay a maximum of \$3,650 a month to the most severely disabled vets, while the Pension Act pays as much as \$7,444 a month to qualified disabled vets who retired before 2006.

Mr. O'Regan has said there is little disparity between the two programs, but Mr. Forbes says the numbers prove that the minister is misinformed.

The commitment to restore the pensions for life has been the subject of veterans' expectations for the past three years, Mr. Forbes said.

But the pensions announced by the Liberal government 'didn't come close to closing the gap,' he said. 'We take the view that the commitment has basically been unfulfilled.'

What is your reaction to Mr. Forbes' comments?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I would say he's wrong.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Thank you. I'll move on to the next question.

This one is from the same article, actually, and it's that veterans are complaining that the new education and training benefit does not match what was promised in the days leading up to the 2015 election. Veterans groups are saying that pensions for life were also part of that Liberal platform and are paying much less. This is a quote from Sean Bruyeca, a veterans' advocate, who says, "Politicians need to stop expecting veterans will swoon at empty political promises". It goes on to say that your leader, the Prime Minister, said, "We'll cover the cost of four years of post-secondary education for every veteran who wants one."

The article goes on to talk about the fact that this is actually not happening, that this is not available to all veterans. Can you speak to that?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Sure. The education benefit is available to those who fall under the new Veterans Charter. That would be those veterans who have made a claim from 2006 onward. I am incredibly proud of the education benefit because it is exceedingly generous. It is \$40,000 for six years of service, and at 12 years of service, it's \$80,000. It's a grant. It allows veterans complete and utter flexibility on what they want to study. It can be anything and at an institution of their choosing. It covers not just tuition. It also covers room and board, books, and everything associated with their education. In fact, upon graduation, it also includes a small graduation bonus of \$1,000. It gives them another lease on life, and it also provides them the flexibility to choose to do it anytime within 10 years after they leave. If they change their mind, they can do something else.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Is it available to all veterans, and you said no, just the ones after the new Veterans Charter came into effect. It's not available to all veterans as per the promise that was made.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: It's for those under the new Veterans Charter.

Mr. Phil McColeman: The promise that was made in the election campaign in 2015 is that it would be available to all veterans, but it's not.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Well, there is an educational benefit that is available under—

Mr. Phil McColeman: No, full education, sir.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: It's quite a good benefit under—

Mr. Phil McColeman: Could I go back to the quote? It's about four years of fully paid education and it's not available to all veterans. Thank you for answering that.

Let's move on to my third comment and question. The third one comes from a recent study done by the National Association of Federal Retirees. They developed a veterans outreach initiative in 2017 to determine what has and what has not been working for veterans. Under the title "Respect", their 2018 report says:

There were two areas where veterans noted a feeling of lack of respect when dealing with VAC: feeling they have to fight for benefits, and some interactions with VAC staff. Many felt that processes were intentionally difficult to discourage applications or to deny benefits. While interactions with VAC staff were generally positive when they occurred, there were several instances where veterans identified that staff had treated them poorly.

If you're doing all you can, why are veterans still feeling disrespected?

• (1115)

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: That is a tough question. We are attempting to change the culture. From the time I was appointed minister—I think it was one or two days afterwards—the deputy and I went right to Charlottetown to speak to the bulk of the employees who would work at VAC and who would be in Charlottetown. We said that we did want to change the culture there. As I had described in my opening remarks, it was a "pull" culture that really left it to the veterans to find what programs and services were available to them. We did want to create what we call a "push" culture. In other words, we're going to tell you everything that you should be entitled to, and we'll do that in a pleasant and effective way.

I think I told this committee before that I am impatient by nature, and let me tell you that in the town halls we have been doing across the country since the beginning of January—and we just got back from Edmonton where we did five meetings in total and two full town halls—there is nothing that will hold your feet to the fire, with all due respect to this committee, than having a veteran stand at a mike and tell you, "I'm not getting the services I need."

The Chair: Mr. Samson for six minutes.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Thank you, Minister and Deputy. It's nice to see you here today. It gives us an opportunity to get the facts straight, if you will, from the minister and the deputy.

I'd like to begin with maybe giving you a second to finish answering the question that was posed about the education support under the old charter, if you wanted to expand on that.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Sure.

Walt, I'm going to get you to maybe expand on it. This is available under vocational rehabilitation and it's up to \$75,000, so it is a fair amount.

General (Retired) Walter Natynczyk (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): Right. Just to be clear, the new education and training benefit is open to members of the Canadian Armed Forces who release either voluntarily, medically, or for retirement. For those who have released from April 1, 2006, if they have six years of service, they are eligible for up to \$40,000, as the minister indicated, for tuition, books, and living expenses. At 12 years of service, they would be eligible for up to \$80,000, again for tuition, books, and living expenses. This is on top of the benefits for those members of the Canadian Armed Forces who have been released medically, or who have a disability with Veterans Affairs. They would have up to \$78,000—I think is the current amount—for their vocational rehab, education, training, and re-establishment in society.

The minister and I were in Edmonton speaking to one veteran who was an ordinary seaman and who was going through his Ph.D. in psychology based on the existing vocational rehab education benefit. This education and training benefit is on top of this vocational rehab program right now. Again, if any veteran, no matter where they are, has a claim under the new Veterans Charter... We have many veterans who are both clients under the old Pension Act, as well as under the new Veterans Charter. It's a question of when they came forward with their disability. If they require additional assistance to re-establish themselves in society, they would come under this voc rehab program.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you.

Minister, maybe you could expand on the supplementary estimates that show an additional \$177 million in funding for Veterans Affairs. Can you speak on why we're seeing that increase and what the funding is for?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Do you want to speak to it immediately while I find the rest of it?

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Sir, as part of the \$177 million, the \$45 million goes into the operations fund because we use part of that fund for treatment benefits. This is based upon the needs of veterans. More veterans have come forward for treatment and medications, but we have also seen a significant increase in the number of clientele using the operational stress injury clinics across the country. We're monitoring that and ensuring that we reinforce that support in working with the health authorities across the country.

Then the second amount, about \$132 million, goes to the grants and contributions. That indicates the increased number of veterans coming forward for the disability awards. This is based upon our forecast that goes to the whole premise of our funding, which is a quasi-statutory obligation. We monitor the usage or the requirement by veterans and are able to come back to government and ask for additional top-ups as we see the trend throughout the year.

• (1120)

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you.

Minister, I would also like to share with you that many veterans I've spoken to in my riding and in the province of Nova Scotia are very happy with the budget line that indicates the expense credit for service dogs. This has been requested for many years, especially by veterans with PTSD. I know that my colleague in my riding, Medic Cousineau, who walked from Nova Scotia to Ottawa and wrote a

book about service dogs, has been a strong advocate. I'll tell you that he's extremely happy, as many others are.

If I have a second to finish, you spoke about the various town halls you've held since being appointed. What feedback are you getting about all of these extra benefits, because these are major benefits? You indicated in your introduction the key benefits that are taking place as we start 2018. What's the feedback? Are they aware of these benefits, and how are they feeling?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I'll be absolutely honest with you. I think the biggest issue is that nobody likes a lot of change at once. On the upside, we are putting forth a lot more money, more programming, and more services than they've seen in a long time. It's a lot. It can be overwhelming for some of them. We find that the town halls are the most effective way of telling the narrative. One thing that I concluded in Gagetown was that it's tough, because you're not telling a simple story and it's not a one-size-fits-all approach anymore. We know that, which is why all parties in Parliament came to the conclusion, along with the legion and other groups, that the Pension Act had to change, and the new Veterans Charter came into place. We know now that we have a much better understanding of the challenges, both mental and physical, especially mental nowadays, that veterans face, the need for vocational rehab, the need for stronger programs and services. Now we also have the ability to tailor those to the individual needs of every veteran, which means that in response to a complex question you have a complex solution, which makes for a complex story. Politically it's not as easy to tell that tale, but it's necessary; and when you tell it that way, they get it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Johns.

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

As we know, the new pension for life option, which is part of the planned spending in the 2018-2019 budget, could cost as much as \$3.6 billion. This is a significant sum of money, but I think it's quite a bit less than what was promised to veterans by the party that is now in power, your party.

The 2015 Liberal Party platform said, "We will re-establish lifelong pensions as an option for our injured veterans". So your party's document refers to the old lifelong pension that existed before the implementation of the new Veterans Charter. That is why the word "re-establish" was used, and not "instate" or "create". The word was to "re-establish" it as it was before. It was clear and unequivocal language.

In a town hall meeting in Edmonton on February 1, the Prime Minister admitted that your government was still fighting veterans who are seeking the reinstatement of the lifelong pension, in court, "Because they're asking for more than we are able to give right now".

My question is specifically about direct payments made to veterans—no other services or programs, just the direct monthly payments to veterans. If the old lifelong pension regime was actually reinstated, as the Liberal Party promised it would do, as you and your leader promised to do in the election, Minister, then how much more would it have cost compared to the watered-down lifetime pension program that you're delivering now?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I disagree with the member. What we said we would do is bring back a monthly payment option. In fact, I wish we didn't say "option" all the time, but we do, because technically that's true. There are a number of veterans for whom, later in life, the lump sum payment makes more sense financially.

We are nudging people, and this will nudge people, towards a monthly amount. We believe it needs to be monthly because there was something that didn't ring true to a lot of Canadians, and obviously to a lot of veterans, about the lump sum amount being the only option available. And that was this: it's a lot of money for a 25- or-30-year-old veteran coming out of Afghanistan suddenly to take on. If that's the only amount you get and you're not—

•(1125)

Mr. Gord Johns: You're saying that it's the same amount that was promised before 2006.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Actually, it builds on the point that I was making earlier.

Mr. Gord Johns: Just straight-up payments, is it more or is it less?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: This gets exactly to the point that I was making earlier. More increasingly, this gets down—

Mr. Gord Johns: I'm just asking a simple question. Is the answer yes or no?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I'm giving you a very complicated answer—

Mr. Gord Johns: Yes, you are.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: —which is that for every individual veteran, it will depend on their circumstances.

Mr. Gord Johns: Sorry, Minister, I have a friend here, Mark Campbell. He served alongside Paul Franklin, has the same injuries from the same war, with the old system, and totally different benefits. There's a 40% difference when it comes to payments.

Minister, maybe you can explain this. It's just a simple question. Why are they getting less than somebody who fought in the same battle?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: It depends on the individual involved, sir. I can only say it so many times. There are some who will fall under the Pension Act of 1919 and there are some who will fall under the new Veterans Charter.

Mr. Gord Johns: This isn't what they were promised and what they expected, Minister.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: With the pension for life, we are giving a monthly pension to those who are unable to work, who are unable to re-establish themselves in society. In almost every case, they will do as well as, if not better than, they would do under the Pension Act of 1919.

Mr. Gord Johns: I just wish the government would be more forthcoming.

The Chair: Could we just have a conversation as opposed to arguing over each other, please?

Mr. Gord Johns: Okay, great.

In a letter to this committee, your department stated that there are "approximately 29,000 pending disability benefit applications (First Applications, Reassessment and Departmental Reviews). Of the 29,000 pending in the queue, approximately 9000 applications (First applications, Reassessments and Departmental Reviews) are over the service standard."

Your government has now committed \$42.8 million over two years to address the backlog in processing the increased number of claims. Was this dollar amount, \$42.8 million over the two years, the amount that was officially requested by experts in the department to resolve the backlog?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: It is very difficult for us to gauge, to be honest with you, how much it will cost us to absorb that backlog. You only have the capacity to absorb so much money. We only have so many people trained and ready to go at any one time. I'll allow the deputy to speak further on this, but certainly we were very pleased with that amount. It is not going to happen quickly enough to my liking or, frankly, to the liking of any of those 9,000 people who are waiting an abnormal amount of time for the benefits and services that they're entitled to.

Mr. Gord Johns: I know you're saying that it's not enough money to do that, but will this eliminate the backlog? Do you believe this amount of money will eliminate the backlog?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: The head of the union says it's definitely in the right direction and that it gives us a huge good start.

Mr. Gord Johns: It was my understanding that they needed double to get it to zero, so that's—

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I have not seen a figure that would ever put us at zero, to be honest with you.

Mr. Gord Johns: So what is the figure to get us to zero? There must be a number that you should be able to—

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I am not aware of any number. I just know that \$42.8 million gives us a good start.

Mr. Gord Johns: Okay.

I think I'm running out of time and so my last question is this. We know we had 4,000 staff working in VAC in 2012. There were significant cuts by the Conservative government and 1,000 jobs were lost. You've rehired. When we do the math, we're still looking at being about 600 people short. You're introducing new programs, and we can't keep up with the programs that we're dealing with now before implementing new programs.

How many staff do you forecast we need to be able to deal with the backlog and implement the new programs?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Right now we are focused on retraining those staff who are available and who have the experience to best handle the new programs.

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

Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Ms. Lambropoulos.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.): Thank you for being with us, once again, to answer our questions about the budget.

As we all know, when a veteran is in his or her transition period after service, it's often one of the most difficult times for them. They feel extremely vulnerable, and a potential crisis can occur.

Can you speak to us a little bit more about the veteran emergency fund, and just tell us how it's going to be different from what was offered in the past?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: First, it allows us flexibility that we didn't have before. What's interesting is that when I first came on as minister, even though you're talking about a big department that dispenses billions of dollars in programs and services and has thousands of people in its employ, you actually have very little flexibility to be able to take some money and help somebody out immediately. That's some consolation to taxpayers, knowing that every dollar is watched, but it means that you don't have the flexibility to act very quickly.

Before this emergency fund, and in fact in the present day, we rely upon bequeathments, the people who have left money in their estates, for instance, and have set up dedicated funds to help homeless veterans, for instance. Even then, it might be very particular, i.e., it might be for a particular city, a particular province, or only under particular circumstances, so it doesn't allow for a lot of flexibility. This will, so that when we know that someone is in need, we can just immediately, for instance, get them off the street and give them the shelter they need while we assess what programs and services may be available.

Do you want me to take it a little further?

• (1130)

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Just to reinforce what the minister indicated, the funding that we have today is all kind of tied to the eligibility of the veteran. When we know the veteran had an injury as a result of service, then we can dispense funds. As the minister indicated, up to now we've been able to use some of the charitable funds that have been given to the department. We have 23 different funds. One fund can only be used for those veterans at St. Anne's Hospital, one can only be used at Sunnybrook, and one can only be used on Vancouver Island.

We've also partnered with the Canadian Armed Forces and got great support from the Canadian Armed Forces from their morale and welfare services fund.

As of April 1, for the first time we will have public funds that we can dispense to support a veteran in crisis even before we've

established their eligibility. If a veteran comes to us, no matter when they come to us, we can dispense funds and put a roof over their head, put groceries on their table, and provide them support as we figure out who they are, what their eligibility is, and move them on, mindful that we're working constantly across the country with organizations such as the Royal Canadian Legion, VETS Canada, Soldiers for Soldiers, and so on, because it really is a partnership with all of these not-for-profits and the communities, and there's a lot of great support from the communities as well.

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

At this point I've heard a lot about the pension for life option and I've seen, in a way, what's being included, but can you just speak to it a little bit more and give us more details as to what we can expect to be implemented as of April 2018?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I think what you're ultimately getting is financial stability for people so that they won't just receive the monthly amount but will also have that tie to the government—and almost to the people of Canada—that says, “Thank you very much for what you did”.

There was a feeling with the lump sum that not only were some people taking on a lot more money than they could handle and expecting that it would last for the course of their lives, but also that they were being written off the ledger, to the effect that “You're done. We don't need to deal with you anymore.” That's what we heard time and again from veterans, and that's what they were looking for. Now they have the option.

If the lump sum works for them, fine. In fact we provide money for independent financial counselling. They get \$500 if they want to go to somebody independent to help them make that decision, whether or not at that point in their lives they should go with the lump sum or with a monthly option. We really are encouraging the monthly option, because if you look at almost any scenario, they will get more if they take the monthly amount.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Mr. Chair, through you, I believe my colleague said that the Liberals' pension for life would come into existence on July 1, 2018. I'd like it on the record, because we are on the record here today, that it is actually 2019.

Is that correct, Minister?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Yes, April 1, 2019.

The Chair: Thank you for that correction.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: As a former educator and teacher, I recognize the importance and value of education. I think what we're offering at this point is much better than before. I know that a lot of money has gone into it since 2015, but can you tell us what's going to change for the education benefits in this next budget?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: It offers a lot of flexibility. Again, it's giving the benefit of the doubt to the applicant by saying, “You go and do what you think is best for you at this point in your life.” The ability to go back to university, to carry on to do a Ph.D., not only adds to your well-being as a person, but it can also help you with your employability.

I found the fellow we spoke to in Vancouver very interesting, because he had been through a heck of a lot and confided in us. Obviously, he's anonymous, but he had PTSD and other issues and he wanted to study it. He wanted to take it further, so he wanted to do a Ph.D. I think after that he intends to figure out how to help serve his fellow veterans who are also suffering similar conditions. That's a pretty great story.

• (1135)

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Going back to one of the earlier questions, when we went back to the veterans' associations and asked how to move forward on this re-established lifelong pension as an option for wounded and injured veterans, many of the associations came to us and said, "Please don't go back to the Pension Act"—for exactly the reasons the minister indicated. It was a cookie-cutter approach. Only those who are most severely injured, with the highest level of injury, received sufficient funding so that they were financially whole. The vast majority of veterans have a very low level of disability, but if they have a significant issue, say a back issue or mental health issue, there wasn't enough there to keep them financially whole.

That's where even my predecessors mentioned to me to not go back to that, but to create a hybrid, to take the best of the Pension Act and the best of the new Veterans Charter, bring them together, and allow veterans to move forward. That's what we have been trying to formulate in this pension for life.

As the minister said, the additional pain and suffering component is a regular monthly connection between the Government of Canada to that veteran that says, "Thank you for what you've done. Thank you for your service. We recognize the sacrifice that you have endured for our nation."

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Eyolfson.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia—Headingley, Lib.): Thank you, Minister and Deputy, for coming.

I'd like to clarify something from an earlier question by my colleague Mr. Johns.

He referenced something from our party's platform, that what we have offered is not what we said we would do in the platform. I have the platform pledge in front of me right now. It says, "We will re-establish lifelong pensions as an option for our injured veterans".

Does that say we will re-establish the same lifelong pension plan that existed before? Would any court of law say that's the same statement?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Are you asking me?

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Yes. What I'm saying is that I'm being told, "We will re-establish lifelong pensions as an option" means that we would—

The Chair: Can we have order here?

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: It was just said that this meant that we would bring back the pension as it was before. Is it reasonable to say we have somehow broken our promise by not simply bringing back the

old one? Or, would you say, based on what we've done, that we've kept that promise to re-establish lifelong pensions?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: The pension for life is a monthly distributed pension for life.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you.

Would you say that we have kept our promise on that?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: It would appear to me that it certainly is the case, yes.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you, Minister.

We have heard concerns from many veterans about the time it takes to access medical records. Being a physician, I know what it's like getting medical records when I have patients from other provinces who aren't even involved with VAC. Even getting records from a patient's doctor's office to the emergency room sometimes takes some time.

What steps are we taking to close the gap between the Department of National Defence and VAC when it comes to information sharing?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Thanks, Doug.

It was the direct order from the Prime Minister on the day he told me he'd be swearing me in the next day: to close the seam. Interestingly, it was something that my brother, who's a lieutenant commander in the navy and was acting commandant of the naval fleet school in CFB Esquimalt, had said to me months earlier. He said we had to do something, without either one of us knowing that I'd be here, because suddenly he was involved in a lot of human resource issues and it became evident that people were coming out and they were lost. Emmanuella was referring earlier to the transition being very difficult, and you've heard this from veterans. When you're in a very structured environment for a long period of time—20 to 25 years, let's say—and you know exactly how your day is going to go and where your benefits come from and everything, and suddenly you're thrust out into the world, and you don't know, and you have to reapply for everything, and you have to go see a new doctor, it just doesn't make any sense.

We call it convergence, as you all know, and that's what we're working on.

I would say right now that the Minister of National Defence and I meet about once every week or two on things that we can do to start putting that process into place. I was almost singularly looking at pension for life up until Christmas. Now it's the communicating of the pension for life, and bringing it before the House. But it's also convergence right now and backlog. Those are my biggest priorities.

With convergence, what we would like to have happen is that service men and women would never know they're moving from one department to another. They would simply be aware of the services and programs they're entitled to and that perhaps they're moving over to other services and programs.

This does involve some issues with privacy. These were set up with the best of intentions. People shouldn't be able to throw around your medical records, which makes all sorts of sense. So you have a whole series of legislation and regulations to ensure that people's privacy, when it comes to their medical records, is held carefully. However, in this instance it doesn't work, because we want to make sure it is seamless. So we are working with Treasury Board as well to make sure those systems are put in place.

We all sign onto Google's terms and conditions—maybe that's not the best example these days—and say, “You have permission to use my information.” In a much more controlled and secure manner within government, perhaps we can find something similar, where perhaps early on in your military career you can agree that you are willing to share your military records post-service with Veterans Affairs Canada.

● (1140)

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: I should also say that our clientele come to us not only while they're in uniform and on transition, but that the vast majority actually come to us after they've released from the Canadian Armed Forces. In fact about 25% of our clientele come to us while they're still serving, another 25% come in that two years after they release, and then 50% come to us from about year two to year 50 or 60. Sometimes those records are no longer in the Canadian Armed Forces; they're actually in Library and Archives. So actually getting all those files together, and then joining them up with a more recent diagnosis, is quite a challenge even over and above the comments about privacy that the minister mentioned.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: We've heard about of the role of caregivers in the day-to-day roles of veterans. Can you speak to any upcoming benefits that might address this role?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: That benefit starts April 1. It will be paid to the caregiver, it is tax-free, and it is \$1,000.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Wagantall, you have six minutes.

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

Thank you for being here today.

My questions will revolve around your conversation on closing the seam.

I had five different conversations with veterans, and I'm beginning to find where they are in Saskatchewan because they are trying to connect with me. One particular individual, who is not in Saskatchewan right now, is posted into JPSU waiting for medical release. He was told he can't be released, won't be released, until everything is in place and that his contract would not be up until 2020.

His wing surgeon sent confirmation to Ottawa that he was approved for service-related medical release. The report included testimony from the base doctor, the base psychiatrist, his case manager, and his civilian doctor. The response back from VAC, which his doctor could not believe, was that more proof was required. We're trying to close this seam and who knows better whether that person who's being medically released from service is released due to service injuries—DND or VAC?

I had this conversation on February 15 with Ms. Elizabeth Douglas, because the ombudsman had indicated that they recommended that at the initial release from service, DND clarify whether or not the release was due to service or not. Her response to my request to have her perspective was that VAC believed this is a VAC function. I went on to ask if it would not streamline the process—which is what we're trying desperately to do here for these guys and gals—if it were at least deemed when they left the armed forces that their injury was or was not due to service. She continued to say that she felt it was their responsibility.

I'm going to quote one more statement. I asked who would know better when it comes to serving in the armed forces whether that injury causing release was due to their service? Would it be VAC or DND? Right now, in her report, she has said the integration of VAC staff with the IPSCs has given VAC the opportunity to better understand military culture. I find it very disturbing that we have to find ways for VAC to better understand military culture to deal with an issue that could be taken care of long ahead of their leaving, and then taking months for it to do so. What's slowing them down in getting their VAC services is not ignorance of what they qualify for, but the amount of time it takes for their release to be identified as being a result a service-related injury.

Is that not something, Minister, that you could do immediately and say, from now on when they're being released VAC will know, as the releasing service member comes over, that this is a service-related injury? Yes or no?

● (1145)

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I can't say yes or no, Ms. Wagantall, other than to say that every case being every case.... I'm as frustrated hearing that story as anybody would be, save, obviously, for the people who are actually involved. We can't do this fast enough. The direction we are attempting to go in is to identify the immediate things we can address right now. In some of it we're going to get into legislation and regulation and bigger beasts. I'm not going to let that intimidate us. We're going to try to find the smaller things that we can do. I'm hearing this story again and again at town halls, and I'm happy to say—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: What would be the—

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: —just by way of reference because it's important—that Admiral John Newton, who's been tasked by the Chief of the Defence Staff to follow us in these town halls, does attend and we hear about these cases.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I'd ask, what is the rationale for needing to wait to VAC to make that determination? I know there are other injuries that come along over time, and I totally get those. However, we're talking about when they are released as part of being prepared completely to transition. Yet, that one decision of whether it's service-related cannot be given to them before they're released.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: First of all, thanks very much for the question because it is absolutely fundamental.

As I mentioned before, about three-quarters of the clientele who come to VAC come after their release, so they have left the Canadian Armed Forces either on retirement or voluntarily and then come to us at some point in the future. One of the key aspects is, are we standardized across the board in terms of attribution of service and non-service? I think it's absolutely terrific that the Canadian Armed Forces are holding on to these men and women until everything is done. While they're in uniform, they have the best medical care the country can provide. They have their income for as long as they stay in uniform, which is absolutely terrific. I can't comment upon an individual case; it would be inappropriate. Keep in mind that the minister's responsibility under the new Veterans Charter is for service-related injuries. At the same time, the crown pays for a significant portion of the service income security insurance plan program, SISIP. The key purpose it's there is non-service related and, based upon the program arrangement we have, it's also the first payer for both service and non-service. Even if for the individual—and I'm not talking about a specific case—their injuries are not attributed to service, then they have the full SISIP program, upon which the new Veterans Charter will pay.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I know all of this. It's a simple question, though. We're trying to improve the transition process for these people. It's a simple determination to change that, so that when they leave and they're being removed due to medical reasons, are those medical reasons due to service, yes or no?

I'll just leave it at that.

I have another quick question. In the budget, the example for lifelong pensions is a particular service member who served for 25 years, the full 25 years, and then suffered a severe injury and was released. In the example of that scenario, can you tell me realistically how many of our individuals who are released with 100% disability have that happen after 25 years of service?

The Chair: Can I ask you to make it short, please? We're out of time.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: The bulk of the cases we see are actually hearing loss and tinnitus. If I was going to point to anything that would be the driving force behind the flexibility we wanted pension-for-life to have, it would be PTSD, because those are cases where something can happen and it can take hold five or 10 years down the road. We wanted to make sure that the system was flexible enough to be able to suit that individual. That was—

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bratina, you have six minutes, please.

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

I was in a steel mill the other day and talking to a steelworker about my job. He asked what I did, and I said, "I'm on the veterans committee and I'm quite proud of the work we do." He said, "Well, I'm a veteran." I said, "Do you have a My VAC Account?" He said, "What's that?" Honestly, I've had that same or similar conversation, so on the push-pull, does the push include reaching out? Can you tell me about that part of it? We still have people who don't know that there are things available to them and easily accessible.

• (1150)

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I don't want you to think we're leaving the push only to My VAC. We're not, although I'm not going to make any sweeping generalizations about what age group uses apps on an iPad. We've seen all ages that have gone to and have been attracted to the My VAC Account. We've seen a huge uptick in the number of people who are opening My VAC Accounts.

Mr. Bob Bratina: You are?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Yes, which is really good. It's been quite a lot of uptake.

A voice: It has been in excess of 60,000.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Yes, it has been in excess of 60,000, the bulk of which has been in the last couple of years.

It's much easier. Everything is set up: what medical records are relevant that you have. It's all included. It also leads you directly to where we want you to go on direct deposit and all sorts of things.

We keep trying to improve My VAC to keep up with that demand and keep up with capacity. Also, to your point, whether it's guided support or case management, it's an attempt to find out your circumstances and then tell you about what you are eligible for, as opposed to just totally sitting back and wondering if they're going to find out about what they're eligible for. That's the sea change that had to take place, and it can't happen quickly enough.

Mr. Bob Bratina: In your opening remarks, you talked about the supplementary estimates, the \$45 million and the \$132 million. On the grants and contributions, can you just flesh out a bit for me what the \$132 million is dedicated towards?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: The forecast for the disability pension grant decreased due to fewer eligible war service veterans than originally forecast. This is an example. VAC reallocates this money to programs that require additional funding before seeking new funding from the fiscal framework. The transfer payment table lists all the grants that require an increase in authority regardless of whether new funding was required, and this is the reason that the total of these grants and contributions exceeds the amount of new funding being requested.

Mr. Bob Bratina: I see. Okay.

The veteran emergency fund is another situation where knowledge of the fund might be the problem. Generally speaking, how is that working? What is the intake of requests for those kinds of emergency funds?

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Again, Chair, ladies and gentlemen, the veteran emergency fund will start on April 1. At every one of our 37 locations across the country, there will be people delegated to be able to spend those funds for any veteran in crisis. In addition to that, we're setting up a hotline to be able to work with our partners, which are the Royal Canadian Legion, VETS Canada, Soldiers for Soldiers, and Veterans Helping Veterans, in order to be able to get funding as a bridge to ensure that those veterans who show up on a weekend, in an evening, in the middle of the night, or on a Friday afternoon can at least have shelter, can have some support while we try to figure out who they are.

Again, some veterans don't want to be found yet. The minister and I were out in Victoria at Cockrell House, supported by the Royal Canadian Legion. Because of the temperate climate of Vancouver Island, many veterans move across the country and go out west, and they camp out. To see these veterans come in, some who have been out of the military for many years, and to see, in this case, the Royal Canadian Legion working with VAC to bring these folks in and put a roof over their heads while they figure out who they are, then get them into addiction treatment, mental health treatment, or vocational rehab, and to see the graduates of the program brief the minister was absolutely phenomenal.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: But they had to come to that conclusion themselves: they were out and then they decided, when they were ready, to come in.

It's complicated, and that's not to make excuses. We need to have the resources available and ready from when they need help, but it's not always easy.

Also, there are triggers. For a lot of veterans who are mentally ill at the time and need help, there are certain triggers for them. Finding them an environment where there are identifiable military people, where people are wearing uniforms, for instance, can make a situation go from bad to worse. In fact, I've witnessed that myself. We were in a meeting and an individual was triggered by somebody who was wearing a uniform.

Mr. Bob Bratina: We heard testimony that these guys are well trained to not be found if that's their choice.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Yes.

The Chair: Mr. Kitchen, you have five minutes.

• (1155)

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

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

We're discussing interim estimates today. Like it is for a business, these are yearly projections that are based on costs and on our expectations for the next year. That said, the government has just announced that it is going to commit our soldiers to Mali. I recognize that most of the budgetary aspect of this...and I assume prudent analysis was done on this mission. I also recognize that the budgetary funding should have been—I'm assuming it will be—discussed with the National Defence estimates.

However, these soldiers—airmen, airwomen—will be our future veterans. Therefore, there should have been some planning, costing, and proactive analysis done for the increased expenses that will occur. These increases could be in health care costs, transition costs, and disability costs, and God forbid someone comes home with a death.... There are family costs and analysis all factored into this part. We are dealing with the issues of PTSD that we have learned about, and I suspect there will be concerns about anti-malarial medication issues.

We know that the UN basically pays for the personnel while they're there, but it does not pay for the transition for our veterans. These things will happen immediately. They could transpire from the moment it happens, and we could have numbers coming back the very next day. Those numbers should be factored in.

Minister, I also know—we all know—that you are an assistant deputy minister. You have also indicated to us today that you talk to the defence minister weekly, so you should have been at the table. I assume you were. As you've told us many times, you have committed to our veterans, so you would have brought up these issues at that table. The Liberals brought us into Afghanistan, and now they're taking us into Mali. I'm hoping that we learn something from that aspect of it. Where in these figures are they factored into what the numbers are, and how much are those costs? Can you tell us that information in these yearly costs, please?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I would say first that obviously our obligations to Mali, as announced yesterday, are not nearly what we did for Afghanistan.

Having said that, we have to be prepared. I would just remind members that our obligations to our veterans are statutory obligations, so we will come back at some point—

Mr. Robert Kitchen: What are the numbers, Minister? What are the factors that are different in these grants per person per year? You're asking for pensions and benefits of \$1.2 billion. How much of that are you anticipating to be paid out for our veterans who are being committed to Mali?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Mr. Kitchen, I would just say we will be ready for those who—

Mr. Robert Kitchen: How much are those numbers? Do you know those numbers? Did you ask for those numbers? If not, why not?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I don't have those numbers handy, but we—

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Can you get us that information?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: —will be ready for those who come back.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Can you get us that information, please?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: We will be ready for those who come back.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Can you get us that information?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I don't see any reason why we can't.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Okay.

Let's move on to another aspect within this budget. I'm wondering if you can give us numbers. You're not giving me any numbers on anything else, but perhaps you can give us numbers on the education and training benefit.

You're basically saying that \$4.9 million is being projected for that. You've said to us today at committee that this is a grant. A grant means money up front. Assuming your numbers are correct and it's a grant of \$80,000 per service member for 12 years, if you do the simple math, that amounts to 61 people who are going to get this benefit. Are those numbers correct?

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Sir, the costing that we go through is with the Department of Finance. This also goes to your previous question. We rely on the actuaries. The actuaries in the office of the chief actuary do the costings for us based upon the best information they have at the time and the projections across the board. In addition, as the Minister indicated, whenever this comes into legislation and is approved, it becomes a statutory obligation. Basically it depends upon the uptake from veterans, whether they be drawing on the education benefit or indeed for injuries.

That's why in being able to come back on a cyclical basis through the supplementary estimates, using the quasi-statutory approach that we have with Treasury Board, we're able to revisit and get adjustments as required throughout the financial year.

• (1200)

Mr. Robert Kitchen: How many people do you expect will utilize—

The Chair: Sorry, but we're out of time for now.

Mr. Johns, three minutes.

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

Minister, in the campaign—and this has to do with the meeting today—there was a promise that the government was going to go to 25:1, caseworker to clients. That was a promise that was made. It was sold to veterans, to employees. It was mentioned several times last year in the budget, but it's not mentioned once this year.

I'm wondering if you have decided to abandon that pledge. Right now it's my understanding that we're around 38:1 or 39:1. We're very grateful that you're reopened offices, but in some cases we're hearing it's 60:1 or 65:1.

I mean, when you have this amount, and I'm back to this \$42.8 million.... Again, it's our understanding that you needed double that to get to this place where we need to get to. I don't understand why we're not hiring back the staff that we need from 2012.

Can you maybe explain if you have abandoned that promise?

I don't know, Mr. Eyolfson, if it's something that could be tested in a court of law. It's a simple question around a promise. Can you answer that, because that's important?

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: My understanding is that we are still working hard to achieve 25:1. We owe that to veterans. We owe that to our employees.

The Minister and I were in Edmonton, and I had an opportunity to talk to our staff out there. We have some case managers who are in the upper thirties, and some who are in the lower twenties.

What is terrific is that we're able to get quality social workers, psychologists, and so on, who have case management experience. I met with a whole bunch of them, put them through a boot camp, and then slowly increased their caseload in order to take cases from those who have been around for a while. When we asked for additional folks a few years ago, we had an expectation of below about 10,000 folks who would be case managed. For a whole host of reasons, we're north of 12,000 case-managed veterans.

We're out there on an active basis trying to hire the right folks, put them through a boot camp, get into the offices, and then cross-level workloads, and this is ongoing. This is tough work. Case management in this kind of business—many of you have worked in communities—is tough work. Getting the right kind of people with the right kind of skills is absolutely essential, and then retaining them.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I would add too with regard to my comment earlier and my opening comments about a push mentality, word has gotten out, so we see a much increased demand on our services. We're hoping that the \$42 million will help us in some way to keep up.

I'm happy for the demand, in a way, because people are calling because they need these services, and it's our obligation to provide them. We have a challenge—you've identified a significant challenge—and that is to keep up to make sure we can provide the services.

Mr. Gord Johns: Minister, would the government be able to come back and tell us what is needed to get us to 25:1? What is needed to get the backlog to zero, not just for the next two years but permanently, so this never happens again?

Would the Minister be able to come back with those numbers so we know what we need to do? It's the right thing to do that proper analysis and come back, so we can talk about how we're going to get there.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Mr. Johns, I have a strong suspicion that those numbers are more elusive than we think. All I can tell you is that we were bound and determined to bring it to zero.

The Chair: Thank you. That ends today's time for testimony. I would like to thank both of you for appearing today.

General Natynczyk, again, we have a long history and I would like to thank you. I hired a veteran in my office who worked and trained under you. I find that veterans like to speak of veterans. Veterans who come into my office and see a vet sometimes end up walking the same road, and they enjoy that. Thank you for that training.

I suggest that all of us, as MPs, look at vets for our constituency offices and get them back to work.

We'll recess for about five minutes and then we'll come back. Thank you again.

•(1205) _____ (Pause) _____

•(1210)

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

To slip to our second part, the Department of Veterans Affairs witnesses, we have Mr. Butler, assistant deputy minister, strategic policy and commemoration; Mr. Doiron, assistant deputy minister, service delivery; and Ms. Stuart, assistant deputy minister and chief financial officer, corporate services.

You don't have any testimony, so we'll start with questioning.

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

Mr. Phil McColeman: Should we not have testimony?

The Chair: Sometimes we don't.

If you want to make an opening statement...

Mr. Michel Doiron (Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery, Department of Veterans Affairs): We have no opening statement, so we'll turn right into questions.

The Chair: "Just happy to be here" is your opening statement today, right?

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Phil McColeman: Okay, great. Well let's get at it.

Thanks for being here.

My first lead-in is referring to testimony from a meeting we had with your director of field operations, Mr. Cormier. Is he under your supervision, sir?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Yes.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Okay, so you're his boss. Thank you.

I asked him if VAC keeps statistics of contacts with veterans contacts, in particular, how they contact VAC. He said yes, that statistics are kept, whether they come through online or from My VAC Account or through an office door at one of the offices. Later in the testimony, I asked for those statistics—as detailed as possible—to be presented to this committee by way of the channel they were received and by way of location. His answer to that was that, yes, he would do that.

Do you know why there is a delay in our getting that information? These should be statistics that are kept on an ongoing basis.

Mr. Michel Doiron: I absolutely do not, but I'll follow up on it. We do have the statistics. We have them by mode, whether from phone calls or contacts via My VAC Account. The only thing that we don't have very specifically are the walk-ins to the offices. We don't track that one exactly the same way, but we have case management, adjudications, our phones, and My VAC Account—and even emails to My VAC Account. I actually have some numbers here, but if you've requested that, I'll make sure we get that back to you.

Mr. Phil McColeman: I find it interesting that you say you don't keep statistics for people coming into regional offices. You do not?

Mr. Michel Doiron: No. We have started tracking the actual traffic, but that's one area that was lacking.

Mr. Phil McColeman: When did you start?

Mr. Michel Doiron: A few months ago.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Okay, so prior to that, you're saying here today, VAC never tracked the number of people coming into a VAC office?

Mr. Michel Doiron: No, because they usually come in to meet their case management, so we were tracking that. However, we were not tracking people just coming in to grab a pamphlet or things like that.

Mr. Phil McColeman: I just want to explore this a little deeper with you. If you don't mind, I'm going to drill down here. When someone comes into a VAC office, typically you would think the person would be a veteran.

Mr. Michel Doiron: Typically, yes.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Most of the time?

Mr. Michel Doiron: It could be a veteran or a family member. I mean if you have—

Mr. Phil McColeman: Yes, so someone acting on the veteran's behalf.

Mr. Michel Doiron: Yes. Let's be clear. It's not only veterans, because family members do come in to request information.

Mr. Phil McColeman: You're saying it's frequent that someone comes in and just says, "All I want is a brochure"?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Yes.

Mr. Phil McColeman: All they want is a brochure?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Well, they want a brochure. They want to understand a certain program. They're not applying for a program. They'll walk into an office and say, "Do you have a certain program?" Or sometimes they come to us and say, "I know somebody who needs help. Can you help them?" I actually dealt with one in Valcartier not too long ago, where somebody just said, "I have a battle buddy who's not well. Can you guys do something about it?" I mean that happens.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Right. You don't track that?

Mr. Michel Doiron: We were not.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Okay. That's interesting, because my recollection, having been on this committee in 2008 to 2010, was that those statistics were being kept.

•(1215)

Mr. Michel Doiron: Well, they may have been. I've only been here four years. You outdate me on that, sir, so I apologize.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Could you offer a reason—or maybe Mr. Butler could offer a reason—why you would stop taking those statistics?

Mr. Michel Doiron: I can't. Mr. Butler could, but I can't offer you a reason. I know when I started asking for the granularity of that, we did not have it, and I've asked for it.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Mr. Butler?

Mr. Bernard Butler (Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy and Commemoration, Department of Veterans Affairs): To be honest with you, however, the operation does fall under Michel, and any changes to data gathering that might have occurred over time, I would not be privy to it, not at that level of detail, my apologies.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Okay, but you will provide what you have?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Yes, absolutely. I'm surprised you haven't received it yet.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Sure. You know, it is a good thing that parliamentarians can get the services of the Library of Parliament, so we'll do some research on when that decision was made, why it was made, etc.

We've just heard the minister today say that there's a significant cultural change that he recognized needed to happen at VAC. We have had you here as witnesses over and over again, through the years. What is the difference between the promises you've made for the cultural change and what he's trying to make?

Mr. Michel Doiron: “Care, compassion, respect” is where we're going, and where we are in many places, notwithstanding some of the examples I heard earlier. I have to say, I was quite upset at that. I'll figure out who the veteran is and I'll figure out what happened there. That's my area.

I have been here four plus years, and there has been a fundamental change when it comes to how our staff deal with veterans. Now, it is not perfect. They are individuals working on the front line, and things happen, but there has been substantive change when it comes to care, compassion, respect, and actually getting to yes. How can we actually get the help that the veteran needs when the veteran needs that help?

There has been a lot of stuff done. Now, there are still pockets of areas, and they're not all in one branch or area. Some people have been doing the same job the same way for 25 or 30 years, and to try to get them to look at it from a different perspective is not always easy, but we've come a long way in the past four years, and many veterans actually tell me that. When I arrived at Veterans Affairs four years ago, I probably had a serious issue or two to contend with on a daily basis. Now I actually get thank-you notes from veterans, and I have to say that four years ago they were very rare.

We've done a lot of work on that, but there's still a lot of work to be done. The service excellence that was approved by Treasury Board—we used to call it service delivery review, but we've changed it to service excellence—is actually inculcating that care, compassion, and respect in our staff. I always challenge my colleague, Mr. Butler, that it's not just the service that has to be excellent and

veteran-centric; it has to start from the policy and move into service so that we can deliver this. We're working very hard on doing that.

As an example, last year, we pushed out the disability award. You didn't have to apply for the increase in your disability award. We actually sent everybody an email through their My VAC Account, or by normal mail, to tell them the money would be in their bank account, and on the third day of the month—because the first and second happened to be a weekend—the money was deposited automatically.

Unfortunately, we had a lot of phone calls from people asking what the money was for, which killed my stats on the phones for a month, but the reality is the money was there. That's taking a different approach. Previously we would have required that they come to us and apply, we'd adjudicate it, and we'd get the money to them in a month. When we did the DA change, it was in their bank accounts.

We are working on it, but we still have a long way to go, because there are still some people who have to come along.

The Chair: Your time is over.

Mr. Bratina.

Mr. Bob Bratina: On the money side, Ms. Stuart, maybe you could help me out with this. How do you actually come to decisions on the amounts of money required? I heard an interesting comment from a lady you probably all know. She said regarding the caregiver's allowance, that there are 700,000 veterans, so there are 700,000 caregivers. If you do the math, we'll never have enough money.

How do you actually break down the estimates and put them into a document?

• (1220)

Rear-Admiral (Retired) Elizabeth Stuart (Assistant Deputy Minister, Chief Financial Officer and Corporate Services, Department of Veterans Affairs): Let me try to answer you succinctly in that regard.

At Veterans Affairs Canada, we have a very professional long-standing relationship with the office of the chief actuary. Every year, we re-evaluate our client base out six decades. I would add that I've been here for two years. No two veterans' cases are alike, so when we are considering program changes or new programs, we work very closely. We also work with Statistics Canada, to understand the statistics for various age demographics in the country. That would pertain more to the families of the veterans. The annual review is done by an independent third party every July, and that helps inform some of the changes in programs that occur. As the deputy mentioned, we have the quasi stats, so whether one person or 10,000 come forward, we ensure that there is always money to pay for those who are eligible and entitled to benefits and services.

Mr. Bob Bratina: It sounds as if we should be reasonably confident that those numbers are based on solid evidence.

RAdm Elizabeth Stuart: Yes.

I would add, if I may, on the question on Mali. In my previous life, my staff and I would do the validation of the incremental costs for operations. From a temporal point of view, that would be an incremental cost. One would expect to see incremental changes in our client base in Veterans Affairs, whether they still be serving or post-serving when they present themselves to us with their issues.

That ties in very well with what I just mentioned about the annual valuation of the client base. What we're dealing with today are the supplementary estimates (C) and the interim estimates, which are very focused on this time and place. With the Mali mission, which was just announced last year, as we see the outcomes of that mission, we are going to be adjusting our client base with that information.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Mr. Doiron, we've had a number of conversations and we keep hearing the kind of message you just delivered, which is that things are changing, and changing for the good. But then we always open the newspaper and there's....

How do you and your staff relate to this kind of information? Whether right or wrong, it's out there. That's what the discussion is about, and people tearing up their cards, and stuff like that.

Mr. Michel Doiron: To be honest, I take it a little bit hard, because my job is to get it done right the first time. Unfortunately, we don't always get it right the first time.

I think what happens is that we miss the millions of transactions that actually go right. We actually do millions of transactions a year, whether for the veterans independence program, the DA, or case management. We do on occasion, but we rarely hear about those.

We always hear about those that go wrong, and some of them actually go wrong. It's a very unfortunate reality, one I don't like. To me, there's a person attached to every single one of these. That's why I take it seriously.

We have open lines of communication with most of your offices. Most of you send them to the minister's office—they actually land on my desk. I read every single one of them. I have a team that works on them. I probably get 20 to 30 a day. I'm going to raise it because somebody else is going to hit me with it shortly. Right now most of them are about the backlog. I won't hide that. But every once in a while, there's one in there that is more than that. We deal with them. We take them very seriously.

I had a call from somebody two Thursdays ago. This veteran, dying of cancer, had never come forward to us for anything. By Friday evening we had VIP.... We had full-time care for him, an OT assessment. Everything was done for him. And God rest the veteran's soul, he died on Saturday. You may say that's a lot of work maybe for.... You wonder why. Well, now the widow is entitled to some of our programming. That's how seriously we do take it. When this goes astray, we feel...and we try to rectify it.

•(1225)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Johns, six minutes.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you.

Thank you for being here.

I want to go back to the \$42.8 million. Is there a number the department asked Treasury Board for? Again, it's my understanding that the department asked for double what they got. Can you confirm that?

Mr. Michel Doiron: I wouldn't say it's double. We did ask for more money, but it depends on—

Mr. Gord Johns: Can you tell me the number?

Mr. Michel Doiron: No, I'm not privy to give you the number. Sorry.

Mr. Gord Johns: Perhaps we could request that, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Michel Doiron: I can't provide that number. That's for a discussion with Treasury Board.

We did ask for more. We got the number we got, and we are extremely pleased we got money from the government to do this. We are going to do everything in our power to make as much progress as possible with this money.

Mr. Gord Johns: I really believe that. I do have concerns.

When we had the minister here and we were trying to get an idea of where they came up with this number, the question I asked the minister was, what analysis did they put on the service delivery to come up with this number? There's no analysis.

That amazes me. This is a lot of money. We have a huge backlog, and to not have a number....

I talked earlier about getting to 25:1. In the last budget, it was mentioned all throughout the budget. Now, it's not mentioned once. Is the department abandoning that promise? It seems to me that it is. People just want to know.

Mr. Michel Doiron: I'll keep it very short. No, sir, we're not.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you.

There's a new veteran and family well-being fund that starts on April 1. It's a small amount of money—\$3 million—to develop new and innovative ways to support veterans and their families by conducting research and implementing initiatives and projects. We know that the States—and Mr. Chair, you talked about it as well—emphasizes the hiring of vets as caseworkers. In the States, I think 30% of front-line caseworkers are veterans.

Under the veterans hiring initiative and Veterans Hiring Act—and most departments aren't really utilizing the act to the extent that we'd like to see—does the department have a target for rehiring vets like the States has done? The U.S. is at 30%. I know that Pacific Coast University, a school in British Columbia that is an institute for workplace health, hiring people, and training them for return to work, has put forward a proposal, but there's a gap. There's not a lot of money there for this, and I think it's really important. Does the department understand the significance of it? We know that vets often need a person they can trust, someone they've served with. Maybe you can speak to that.

RAdm Elizabeth Stuart: The hiring of veterans is absolutely at the fore in the program at Veterans Affairs Canada. One side of the program focuses on the hiring of veterans in private industry. There's an area within my own branch called the veterans in the public service unit, and it was created together with the Public Service Commission and Public Services and Procurement Canada. There has been a pledge by several ministers and deputies to increase the number of veterans in the public service. It is undertaking a pilot at this moment. It's gaining traction. In fact, we had a job fair at the Invictus Games last year that was very successful. The next phase will be to reach out to regions across the country and make more efforts in that regard.

Mr. Gord Johns: Ms. Stuart—and I really appreciate it—is the government looking at setting targets, though? I think that when we set targets, we have an opportunity to try to meet those targets. I know that Pacific Coast University applied for a pilot project proposal to work with VAC to try to move this forward. It was denied and directed to this fund, which is really a start-up fund, if you can call it that. Three million dollars isn't a lot of money to do many things with.

Is the government looking at setting clear targets so that it can get there? What would the number be that the department would like to see?

RAdm Elizabeth Stuart: I can't speak to that number. I can tell you that the linkages with the universities are something that we are engaged with. I wouldn't wish to speculate, but I can say that we do have percentage targets within the federal public service.

Mr. Gord Johns: Oh, you do. Can you get those numbers to us so that we have numbers of what we're looking at so that we can monitor that?

RAdm Elizabeth Stuart: Yes. If I may add, it's centred primarily on the statutory hiring requirement of medically released vets, and also on the regulatory aspect and all other vets. We take the Veterans Hiring Act very seriously in that regard.

Mr. Gord Johns: Great. We have a lot of veterans who are becoming homeless because of the housing crisis—and certainly on Vancouver Island. I have a veteran in the Comox Valley, William Webb. He has a family, and he's looking at hitting the street. There's a veteran emergency fund that you talked about. Can you elaborate on that fund? We're challenged in finding out more about it.

• (1230)

Mr. Michel Doiron: Thank you for the information.

The veteran emergency fund allows us... In the 2017 budget—and I think I've told this committee before—this was the one that

really got me excited. When you talk about billions of dollars, and all at once you talk about \$1 million a year, why would that catch my attention? It's because that will actually allow us to do stuff directly on the ground.

As the deputy minister mentioned earlier, when a veteran comes to the office... We have new programs starting April 1, but prior to that, all of our programming was based on a service relationship, so we had to adjudicate. We had to figure out if the injury was service-related before we could help the individual. It's not to say that we wouldn't work with the Legion and everybody else. However, with this fund, it doesn't matter. Now if somebody knocks on the door and says, "I'm homeless; I don't know where to go", we can actually use this money. Working with our partners, we can put them in the Holman Grand in Charlottetown, which is where we often put people up, or in other hotels when we need to, or get them a meal, or help them immediately.

Mr. Gord Johns: We look forward to hearing more about it.

The Chair: Mr. Eyolfson, you have six minutes.

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

Thank you all for coming.

I don't know who can best answer this, but as you know, the Veterans Affairs offices have been opened across the country. Has that improved the ability to provide services to veterans? Has there been value added to this?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Absolutely it has improved services. People can now go to a local office and get the services locally instead of having to travel. I was quite happy to open them, and we added one, and they're doing great.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you.

What would be the total expected payout? This may have been answered. I'm getting numbers mixed up when they're coming around. I apologize if this has been answered.

For the pension for life, annually, for 2019-2020, do we have an estimate of how much Veterans Affairs would have to pay for that, what that amount will be?

Mr. Michel Doiron: We do. Our chief financial officer will get the number.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: While we're waiting for that answer, I'll ask you about the previous career impact allowance. That was a taxable benefit. The new additional pain-and-suffering compensation is going to be tax-free. Is there an estimate as to what that price difference will be, as in how much potential revenue it would cost the government to do that?

RAdm Elizabeth Stuart: I'm sorry, but I'm still focused on your first question on the pension for life.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: If you have that, it would be good.

RAdm Elizabeth Stuart: I can't discuss cash yet, but the public amount in the investment for budget 2018 is approximately \$3.6 billion.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you.

With regard to the other question, the old event was taxable. This new event is not taxable. Does anyone know what kind of figure that would be, the amount of tax that would have been paid under the old system that's just not being paid now?

RAdm Elizabeth Stuart: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We do work with CRA and the Department of Finance on all the costings that go into the pension-for-life calculations. We do have those amounts identified.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Do we know what those are right now?

RAdm Elizabeth Stuart: I'm not at liberty. We're still deliberating with the Treasury Board Secretariat. I can't speak to those at this time.

Mr. Bernard Butler: Mr. Chair, if I can add to that to clarify, for pension for life program, there are three basic components now. The first is the pain-and-suffering award. That is non-taxable. It's a tax-free benefit. The second component is the additional pain-and-suffering award for the most seriously disabled veterans. That is non-taxable. The third element is the new income replacement benefit, which is an economic benefit. It will be taxable.

I think in order to have your question answered, we would have to look at that, and we would have to break down those elements to better understand or better clarify what you're seeking.

•(1235)

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you very much.

With regard to the military family resource centres, are they available to vets who are not medically released or is that strictly a program for vets who are medically released?

Mr. Bernard Butler: The military family resource centres, the new program that will roll out, will be available to medically releasing members and their families. That's who it is targeted at.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: There are veterans who are not medically released but who later might develop either physical or mental health problems that manifest themselves well after non-medical release and are attributed to service. Would this be available to these veterans and their families as well?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Yes. They're medically releasing, but at this point if they have a condition with us, they will.

The MFRCs are not for profit. We're providing them money. They've been very clear to us that they don't plan on turning anybody away. We were quite clear that they're for medically releasing members. When I met with this group, they were a little different everywhere. If you've never visited them, you should if you have one in your riding. They're a little different everywhere you go. They've been very clear to us that they're there to help veterans and their families. They will support veterans and their families. I'll give them a little pitch here because I know we've talked about medically releasing veterans, but they say that if someone shows up at the door, they'll help.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Ms. Lambropoulos, you have six minutes.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: I've been hearing for a long time—and you even just mentioned it—that it's mostly the case that veterans will not be turned away if they ask for support. Let's say they need something in a specific area and the finances for that have reached maximum capacity. Would they be turned away at that point, or would other ways be found to support these veterans?

Mr. Michel Doiron: The MFRC would find a way, or they would contact us to see if we could help them. They do that on occasion, and we help if we can. They've been quite clear that they're there to help veterans' families. Let's not forget that most bases or areas where these are situated also have non-public funds that the military will help with. We fund the MFRC some money, but the military is funding also. They're quite innovative in getting some money. They're there to help.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Okay. Thank you.

Can you also talk about other service delivery improvements that are going to be implemented at this point, going forward in the new budget? I know we've already improved quite a bit in the last couple of years. I'd like to see what the differences are, specifically for budget 2018.

Mr. Michel Doiron: Well, there are seven mandate letter items that are coming on board on April 1, 2018. The career transition services and the education benefit are ones we've talked a lot about here, where they're going to be online.

Let's just talk about CTS, where a veteran will be able to work with an adviser and get help getting employment somewhere. We're working on that. That's going to be very innovative in the way we're doing it, and it's going to link with education.

Beyond that, you've all heard about the seven things we're bringing in, but we're also doing a lot of work on the operational side. We're trying to remove as many barriers as possible on the adjudication side. It's still a complex program, but we're trying to facilitate that. We're trying to eliminate some of that.

We're working with our friends at CAF, our partners, on transition, on medical health records. How can we ensure we get the health records in a timely fashion? That's all stuff to improve the services to our veterans. Some stuff can be done quickly. Some stuff will not be done quickly. There are privacy issues with health records. We're now working through that, but there's a real openness with our colleagues at CAF now to actually do this electronically.

I mean, I could go on, but I know time is limited so I'll be quiet.

•(1240)

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you very much for your answer.

Lastly, what have we done to improve the service for veterans who find themselves in remote or rural areas? Has there been any improvement recently?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Yes. We are now going to the three territories on a rotational basis. That has been, actually, quite successful. We weren't sure what the demand would be. The numbers don't sound like much, maybe 14 in Iqaluit who now have case management, but the reality is that there are 14 getting help now.

We're now exploring a second tier to this, doing northern Quebec and northern Labrador. As you look at the territories, they're also up there. How can we serve those communities?

We have to remember that we have Rangers who actually work up north and are entitled to some of our programming. It's a bit touchy, what they're entitled to and not entitled to, but they are entitled. On a monthly basis, I have a team that goes up to Whitehorse, Yellowknife, or Iqaluit—they alternate. It's actually been going quite well. We have a lot of people. We work with the Legion's service in Canada, and they publicize it. When we arrive the appointments are made, but we still take walk-ins. Actually, the numbers are higher than we anticipated. They're not off the charts, but they're higher than we anticipated.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Do I have time?

The Chair: Yes, you have about two minutes.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: You had mentioned before that CAF has been more open to working with VAC in order to improve service and the transfer of files or information. Can you explain to us a little bit how and why that change has come about?

Mr. Michel Doiron: You would have to ask the CAF, but I think it's just an understanding of where the delays are occurring. They want to make sure their members and their people are getting it. I also think we're doing a lot of work in transition. I know you've had General Misener here, and I have been spending a lot of time with General Misener to better understand the transition, because VAC transition often starts when you have your permanent category.

However, there's a whole process before that. That's the part we're learning a lot more about, and we're going to be collaborating in that realm. That's where things like the health records are coming up. Regarding diagnosis from doctors on the VAC side and CAF side, often they say "sore foot", but they don't give a diagnosis. When it comes to our place, we can't give you a disability award based on a sore foot. We need to know what that is. We're working with the surgeon general to make sure that the doctors write a diagnosis. With a diagnosis, I can now give you a disability award. Without a diagnosis, it's a sore foot. We have to remember it's a disability award. It has to be permanent. We're working much closer together now to line that up.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Wagantall, you have six minutes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Mr. Doiron, we had a conversation the last time around about the advertising funds of \$2 million. I know you're a busy guy. It's split between commemoration and mental health. Then we went on to have a conversation about how much was for mental health, and how much was for commemoration. You were going to get that number to us. It was in response to my concerns about the mefloquine issue, the diagnosis of that, and alerting our veterans that it may be a causal scenario for them.

In looking back in our records, I don't believe we've received that.

RAdm Elizabeth Stuart: I am aware that the department did provide a response, and I will read this. It is in response to a question. I agreed to provide the committee with the amount of new advertising funds devoted to mental health:

VAC currently plans to spend \$100,000 in 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 on advertising mental health services... VAC also plans to profile mental health during general services advertising campaigns over the next three years.

We have a healthy outreach renewal initiative surrounding communications and we use a number of media means.

• (1245)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Could you send that to our new clerk just so we have it on record?

RAdm Elizabeth Stuart: Yes, thank you.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: That would be great. Thank you.

In talking to this individual that I mentioned previously, I'm not comfortable giving out his name at this point in time. I hope we all understand that.

One of the things he also mentioned about the base he is on is that this last Christmas, there were six suicide attempts, and five of them succeeded. The struggle is with the backlog of people going for medical care, and they basically just get told to take extra sick days. One of them literally got handed from person to person and taken to where they needed to be, and that's the one who did not take their own life.

Again, I appreciate that we need to do more on the whole awareness of mental health and do better with that.

I also asked another question previously of Ms. Elizabeth Douglas in regard to a committee report in 2015 on continuum of transition services. It was made clear that it can be very difficult to reach reservists after their services come to an end. In 2016, in response to a question our colleague Ms. Romanado posed, this answer was stated by a co-witness, Ms. Pellerin:

The group we're not so successful within terms of reach as the non-medically-releasing reservist group. As part of the seamless transition task force work that's getting under way, this is one group we'll be focusing on in terms of how we can better reach and serve them to make sure they're successful in their transition.

That was at the beginning of June 2016. I assume this study is done. Approximately 5,000 reservists leave each year, and I had asked how many were being contacted per year through this transition. She was going to get back to me with that, and I haven't heard that as well.

Is that information available?

Mr. Michel Doiron: It should be, because I have the number of reservists who are leaving on a yearly basis, and I have how many are leaving for.... It is approximately 5,000. That is pretty consistent. It varies, but it's close. I do have the number of medically releasing in that, and we would absolutely contact those.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Those are the ones they are contacting for a transition review. You would have that number.

Mr. Michel Doiron: Yes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay.

Mr. Michel Doiron: We do have those numbers, but I do want to clarify that reservists, by their nature, are more difficult....

Without getting into classes, because I know the military is looking at it, let's say you're a class A. You're coming on Thursdays nights and maybe a Saturday here or there. You actually can decide, at any point, to leave. We're not always informed of that. We're working very hard with the CAF reserve leadership to find a way to make sure we're told about it. When a person comes in on a Thursday night, gives in their kit, and decides to go to work in Fort Mac or somewhere else in the country, we're not always advised of that.

So there's a difference there—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Right, but this study started in 2016. I'm just wondering if there are results from it that we could have.

Mr. Michel Doiron: Perhaps you could provide me with more information on that study to make sure I provide the right stuff. I think it's a transition study—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Yes.

Mr. Michel Doiron: —but perhaps you could provide some more information.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Yes. Thank you.

I have another quick question here, although I don't know how quick it will be. We ask it often, and I'm hearing about it again. It's the whole issue around medical records. Of course, my perspective is in agreement with the ombudsman's, that we should be providing the information to VAC when they are medically released; the reason for that medical release is or isn't service-related. From the information I have from the analyst, if you are going to be leaving and as a member you request your medical records, you can get them before leaving the service, but afterwards, if you've left, the request goes out, but your records go to VAC, not to you.

Is that correct? Do they also go to the individual? I have also been told that they only can request 10 pages at a time. Is that accurate? I've asked that and I haven't heard back.

Mr. Michel Doiron: You would have to ask the Canadian Armed Forces. It's their records.

Once you leave the Canadian Armed Forces, after one year we go to Library and Archives to get your record. It does not come automatically to VAC. As to what you can release, and the process, you would have to ask the Canadian Armed Forces.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay.

Thanks.

The Chair: Mr. Samson, you have six minutes.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you.

Thank you for being here today and sharing this information as we continue to try to drill deeper and get a better understanding so that we can advocate for and support our veterans. One thing I would like to say is that the advertising I've seen on Facebook and other places through VAC has been very, very positive. I'm getting a lot of positive feedback. I'm using it to share with my veterans. That's something I did want to share, because this is important.

In testimony we're getting a lot of feedback about veterans having to repeatedly prove their illness when they make new applications. Have we made improvements? How much so, and how quickly?

● (1250)

Mr. Michel Doiron: We have made some improvements. I don't think the department.... Look, I'm the service guy, so I'll point the finger at myself. I don't think we've done enough yet. We're bound by legislation. We have to ask the questions we ask. However, with the oncoming pensions for life, we're entirely relooking at how we're going to do this, and to do this in a more modern way.

Notwithstanding that, we're actually looking at the process in terms of trying to eliminate the need for pension medical examinations. You will always have to explain how your injury was caused. You will always need a diagnosis. That's the legislation. We're trying to eliminate all those other steps that are attached to it. It's a slow process, but it's going.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I appreciate that. I mean, that information should be tracked. It should exist, but some veterans are saying that you should just have to put a check mark in the box, tell them to check your file—i.e., file WK6—and it should be there. I know you said that you're going to work on that improvement, but I'd like to see a plan in the next six months for how we're going to see improvement in that area and what our objectives are to make that happen.

It's the transition that's really causing veterans a lot of headaches. A little bit like Mrs. Wagantall mentioned, and I'm of the same opinion, why can't DND just make the assessment of service-related injury? Do you object to that? Do you have a problem with that, and to what extent?

Mr. Michel Doiron: I am on the record here, so I'm not going out on a limb. I disagree with the ombudsman at CAF, because I think 25% of our veteran clients come out of the Canadian Armed Forces, and 75% come afterwards. You want to have a consistent way of dealing with them. You don't want one person doing the adjudication one way and another group doing it another way, and then you have two or three different classes of veterans.

That said, I do think the doctors at CAF—and that's why we're working with them very hard—should be diagnosing the injury. If they do a CF 98, the check mark you're talking about, we're into a different realm, but often they don't fill it out. The CF 98 is the form used when you have been injured.

I have a nephew in the Canadian Armed Forces, and I asked him about it. He is a pilot, and he told me he wouldn't fill it out unless he could not report to duty, so there is still that mentality.

But if they do their diagnosis, you have the CF 98, our job is way easier at the other end.

Mr. Darrell Samson: To continue on that flow, or that theme that is so important, some people are saying that we should join the CAF and VAC when it comes to the transition. That way you can't blame Charlie Brown or you can't question the other department. It's obvious that everybody seems to say it would help.

Do you see that as a possible improvement?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Sir, I will not comment on that. That is a political decision and a machinery of government decision, and I think it's a question to be asked of politicians, to have that debate. It's not for a public servant to comment.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Absolutely. I just thought I should put the question on the table.

Moving to the next question about cultural change, you made some good points about care, compassion, and respect, and moving forward in that area. You did say that there are still pockets or areas where there is lack of improvement. Can you help me understand what they are and define that a little more deeply?

Mr. Michel Doiron: Absolutely. In adjudications it's much better, but we still have some areas that were trained under an older regime and still really think the test is higher for them. We're working on that, their position that it is public money and that they want to be careful.

•(1255)

Mr. Darrell Samson: Should MPs, with their staff, be sending you names of individuals who seem to be causing a lot of stress? I'm hearing in certain cases that nothing has changed in the last two years as far as service is concerned.

I know that anybody can make comments. I'm not pointing fingers, but is there any way we can...? You just said that some who have been there for a long time have an older culture and whatnot. Can we do something to try to help you understand or see who they are, and how we can improve it? I ask because it is an issue. Some staff have been there for a long time, but the veteran is in need today, not tomorrow.

Mr. Michel Doiron: Mr. Chair, you have my email. We communicate often, and you're always at liberty to send me that information, or other MPs can.

The reality though is let's always be careful. Sometimes "no" is the right answer; it is not a popular answer, but it is the right answer. It's not that we don't want to give something to somebody, but sometimes the act does not permit us to do that; the person is just not entitled. And if the act doesn't allow me to pay something, it's illegal for me to pay it. Whatever I believe is irrelevant; it's illegal.

I would assume in your case a case manager in the greater Halifax area or Sydney is causing you angst; you can always send me a note.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Kitchen, you have three minutes.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's good to see you all again.

I'm going to be very quick because I have very limited time.

The minister talked about a push model, which he is pushing, and you're implementing this push model. What are the consequences when an agent provides the wrong information? Who is responsible for that? I ask because that wrong information and the provision of wrong forms now leave that veteran out to dry. What happens? Is there a firing, is there disciplinary action?

Mr. Michel Doiron: A lot of stuff could happen. If it's an honest mistake, it's a learning experience. If it's a recurring—

Mr. Robert Kitchen: If it's a learning experience for a veteran who has given their life to their country and, all of a sudden, you say that we're just learning, my response is that there have to be some consequences.

Mr. Michel Doiron: There are and we actually deal with performance on a daily basis. It depends on the severity and the issue. At the end of the day, VAC is responsible, so we take those actions.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: My colleague, Mr. Samson, touched on one of my other questions dealing with the pain and suffering aspect of the pension for life. In that, we talk about the benefit amount continuing to be tax free, and that the method of rating the degree of disability will be unchanged.

I agree with my colleague. If someone's lost their legs, there are certain issues. They should not need to turn around every year and say, my legs grew back. There are certain conditions that can happen that they can recover from—I get that—but there should be a box that they should be able to tick and say, "This is it, so I don't have to prove that year after year".

Mr. Bernard Butler: Mr. Chair, I'll respond to that question.

I think that there may be some confusion over that. It's really interesting because there was quite a controversy here over this in the last year or two, when a veteran came forward and said, "They're asking me every year, did I lose my legs?" First, that wasn't actually Veterans Affairs Canada. It was in another context, but we do have a veterans independence program and treatment benefit program where we do try to.... At one point, we reached out every year to do an assessment, really for the benefit of the veteran, to ask, has your condition worsened? Is there more treatment? Is there anything more we need to do?

Then there was push-back to the effect that we were constantly reaching out to question it, and a decision was taken to stop doing that. The fact of the matter is that, by doing that, some veterans were not getting the care they really needed because their conditions were changing.

The long and the short of it is that I really don't think we're doing that today in that context. Certainly, in the pension's pain and suffering award context, there would not be a scenario where we would be asking them to verify that they've lost their legs, for sure.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you.

Can you just clarify whether it is true that the education and training benefit will provide \$133.9 million over six years, or \$22 million a year for six years?

• (1300)

RAdm Elizabeth Stuart: Yes. I've got the \$133.9 million education benefit.

Mr. Gord Johns: Great. I want to clarify that the Liberal commitment was for \$80 million a year to create a veterans education benefit fund.

Last, Mr. Eyolfson asked you a question about the difference between the old pension and the new pension, and you said that Treasury Board has those figures. Can you send those figures back to the committee, so we have a chance to look at the difference. His question is on the record, so if we could get those answers, that would be fantastic.

RAdm Elizabeth Stuart: That I will do.

The Chair: That ends our testimony. I'd like to thank you all for appearing today and for all that you do to help our men and women and veterans who have served.

You have a motion to recess, Mr. Samson.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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