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# Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg





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• (1925)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)):** Good evening.

I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number two of the Standing Committee on Veteran Affairs.

Pursuant to the order adopted on Tuesday, December 14, 2021, the committee is meeting for a briefing with the Minister of Veterans Affairs, the Hon. Lawrence MacAulay. The Minister will be accompanied by Deputy Minister of Veterans Affairs Paul Ledwell for the first hour. The deputy minister and departmental officials will stay on for the second hour.

[*English*]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of November 25, 2021. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely by using the Zoom application.

The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. Just so that you are aware, the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the committee.

Today's meeting is also taking place in a webinar format. Webinars are for public committee meetings and are available only to members, their staff and witnesses. Members enter immediately as active participants. All functionalities for active participants remain the same. Staff will be non-active participants and can therefore view the meeting only in gallery view.

I would like to take this opportunity to remind all participants at this meeting that screenshots or taking photos of your screen is not permitted.

[*Translation*]

Given the current pandemic situation and in light of recommendations from health authorities, along with the October 19, 2021, directive from the Board of Internal Economy to keep safe and stay in good health, all those attending the meeting in person should maintain a physical distance of 2 metres from others and wear a non-medical mask when circulating in the room. In addition, it is strongly recommended that masks be worn at all times, including when participants are seated in their spot. They must practice good hand hygiene and use the hand sanitizer at the entrance to the room.

As Chair, I will enforce these measures throughout the meeting.

I'd like to thank members and our guests in advance for their co-operation.

• (1930)

[*English*]

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of either the floor, English or French. If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately and I will ensure interpretation is properly restored before resuming the proceedings.

The “raise hand” feature at the bottom of your screen can be used at any time if you wish to speak or to alert the chair. For members participating in person, proceed as you usually would when the whole committee is meeting in person in a committee room. Keep in mind the Board of Internal Economy's guidelines for mask use and health protocols.

[*Translation*]

The Clerk is in the room, and he will alert me if anyone wants to speak and I can't see them on-screen.

[*English*]

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. For those in the room, your microphone will be controlled as normal by the proceedings and verification officer. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute. I will remind you that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

[*Translation*]

With respect to the speaking list, the Clerk and I will do our best to maintain the established speaking order for all members, whether they are attending in person or virtually.

I would now like to welcome the witnesses. We are honoured to have with us the Hon. Lawrence MacAulay, Minister of Veterans Affairs, and Paul Ledwell, Deputy Minister of Veterans Affairs.

Given that we had a vote, we will begin this two-hour meeting at 7:25 p.m. and the meeting will therefore adjourn at 9:25 p.m.

I'd like to tell the speakers that I will monitor their time. When they have one minute left, I will alert them, and when their time is up, I will let them know so that they can end their speech as quickly as possible.

With that, Minister MacAulay, you have the floor for the next five minutes.

[English]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay (Minister of Veterans Affairs):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Members of the committee, it's a pleasure to be back here at your committee to talk about what our government is doing for veterans and their families.

Since I became minister back in 2019, this committee has done important work in helping us reduce wait times, finding ways to support veterans' organizations and making sure my department is running as smoothly as it can.

I want to congratulate you on your election, Mr. Chair. I know you care deeply about the folks who serve our country in uniform.

It's also important to note, Mr. Chair, that today is the first day of Black History Month. From the western front to operations here at home and around the world, for more than a century, Black Canadians have always been there, and we thank them today.

Before I begin, I would like to take a moment to comment on some of the unfortunate things we have seen in the past few days in Ottawa.

Everyone has the right to protest in this country, but the disrespect shown to the National War Memorial, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the National Aboriginal Veterans Monument was completely disgusting. The National War Memorial represents all those who have served, fought and died for our country. A Canadian soldier was murdered on the very spot, and there were people climbing and celebrating on the tomb of another. To see that from the protestors was shocking, disgusting and a slap in the face to every Canadian veteran. I hope we never ever see anything like that again in this country.

Now, before I take questions, I would like to provide a few remarks.

I know, Mr. Chair, that some veterans are frustrated with the amount of time it takes to get a decision on disability benefit applications. I want them and all of you on the committee to know that reducing processing times is our number one priority. Over the past several years we've hired hundreds of staff, made improvements to the application process and simplified decision-making for some medical conditions. We're making more decisions, and the backlog has been getting smaller.

This includes making progress on francophone applications. We've opened an office in Montreal, with 30 people working exclusively on French applications, and we have an additional five bilingual teams.

We've made good progress—

• (1935)

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Minister. We have a problem with your microphone. Can you lower it a little bit, please?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Okay, will do.

We're making great progress, but there's certainly more to do.

As you may know, the department has already received approval to extend some 168 backlog staff, which should help us continue to make good progress on the backlog. We've committed to making the investment we need to make, and we will continue to focus on this vitally important issue.

I also want to point out, Mr. Chair, that budget 2021 included some items that affected the veterans community as it relates to benefits, including a program that will immediately cover mental health care costs for veterans with PTSD or depressive or anxiety disorders while their disability benefit application is being processed. The changes to these regulations are currently out for consultation in the Canada Gazette, and we expect this to be fully implemented by April 1.

Mr. Chair, I know another area of concern relates to case management. Our case managers make sure that veterans with more complex needs receive the support they need. It's absolutely vital work, and we're lucky to have the folks who work on this at Veterans Affairs. I know they're dealing with backlogs and workloads that are too heavy. Over the last few years, the department has considerably increased the number of case managers in order to meet the increased needs of our veterans. As of last November, there were 476 of them in the department. We promised during the campaign that we would hire more, and we will.

To close, Mr. Chair, since forming government six years ago, we have invested more than \$11 billion in new programs and services for veterans. We've hired the much-needed staff to ensure veterans are getting the services they need. We're going to continue to do everything we can to make things better for the folks who serve with our flag on their shoulder. There's certainly still a lot more to do.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

• (1940)

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

Now we are going to the first round of questions.

I start with the first vice-chair, Mr. Frank Caputo. The floor is yours for six minutes, Mr. Caputo.

**Mr. Frank Caputo (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First off, may I remove my mask? Second, MP Valdez has her hand up.

**The Chair:** Okay. Great.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.):** Thank you.

I would like to give notice for this motion that I put forward. It's just notice of motion. Here's the text:

That, given the shameful and disrespectful behaviour shown by protesters at the National War Memorial, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and the National Aboriginal Veterans Monument, the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs undertake an urgent study to review these actions and that witnesses include the Ottawa Police Services, the Royal Canadian Legion, the Assembly of First Nations Veterans Council, and government officials from Veterans Affairs Canada, the Canadian Armed Forces, and Public Services and Procurement Canada.

Thank you.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Valdez, I should tell you that we have received your motion, but as you know, the rules dictate that a notice of motion must be provided 48 hours in advance.

So we cannot debate this motion, but as prescribed in the Standing Orders, we will submit the motions to the subcommittee, which will do what is required. Then we will consider the motion at committee.

We will now pick up where we left off.

As I was saying, Mr. Caputo has six minutes for his questions to the Minister.

[English]

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you for joining us. I intend to ask you questions about caseloads and backlogs.

Minister, you would agree with me that it's obviously important that we provide timely service for veterans and their families, correct?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Yes, sir, I do.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** I'm sorry, Minister, but is there a lag between us?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Can you hear me, sir?

Frank, can you hear me?

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Yes, I can hear you. There's just a little bit of a lag, I believe.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Okay.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Minister, part of providing the best care possible is to provide this care within an appropriate amount of time, correct?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Of course that is correct, Mr. Caputo, and that's exactly what we intend to do. That's exactly what I have been working on since I became Minister of Veterans Affairs.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Part of the reason—

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** As you know—

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** I'm sorry, Mr. Minister.

● (1945)

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** As you know, we've made a number of investments in this area to speed up the application process, and we will continue to make sure that we put additional benefits in place to make sure that this is done in a timely manner. We have decreased the backlog, but as you know, there's much more to do, and we intend to do it.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Minister, if you could make your response proportional to the duration of my question, I would appreciate that, please, with respect.

Minister, you've acknowledged that when caseloads get too high, it can lead to burnout for workers, correct?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Well, of course I would have to let the department indicate what burnout has taken place. I understand that on caseworkers there has not been much of a change. In fact, I believe in the last year there has been less sick time than there was the year previous. That's basically where we are, but—

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Okay—

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** —you are right: We have to work on more caseworkers, and we've indicated quite clearly that we would.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Okay. I wasn't actually going there, Minister. I was just asking you about that basic proposition about burnout, because when burnout happens, it puts more pressure on other people, which can lead them to burn out. Yes or no, do you agree with that? Yes?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I certainly agree that burnout causes a difficulty for any organization in any part of government or any business. You have to make sure that they have a proper workplace. We are doing that at Veterans Affairs Canada—absolutely we're doing that. We are making sure that caseworkers, if they need help or assistance, they get it. Now, I know the ratio is not right, but we're working full time on that, and I think you're aware of that.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Minister, you mentioned that the caseload was getting smaller. What has been the reduction in caseload average wait times in the past six months?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Well, what I can tell you is that over the period of time, the caseload was at 22,000 and it was reduced by about 40%. That's exactly where we are.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Okay—

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Well, not exactly—I don't want to mislead you, you know. It's not exact.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** I take your point.

Is it your intent that those case numbers continue to fall?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Absolutely, sir.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Okay.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** We have to continue to work on the caseloads...on the personnel, in order to make sure that the caseloads and the ratio are into an appropriate manner [*Inaudible—Editor*]

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** There were people that were hired recently in order to deal with the overabundance of applications, correct?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** You are right.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Okay.

Those people, a number of them, were hired on terms, as in, they were set to be hired for a specific period of term that would expire, correct?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Well, full-time for a period of time, sir, I believe is the right terminology—

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Yes.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** —to make sure that they were well trained and able to do the job. You just don't walk into Veterans Affairs and become a caseworker. There's work to be done in order to make sure they're ready to serve veterans, and Veterans Affairs Canada makes sure that is done.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Certainly, and you would acknowledge that many of these caseworkers haven't been extended past next month. Is that correct?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Of course, what I have indicated quite clearly is that we are committed to investing additional resources in this area. That's what we continue to do. We indicated that in our platform, and I fully expect that's what will take place. As I indicated from the start, we will make sure that we continue to work on the backlog to make sure it's appropriately reduced.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Minister, I would ask that you keep your answer proportionate to my question, please.

With respect to the caseworkers, there is no agreement and no commitment at this time to keep a number of caseworkers past March 2022. Is that correct?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** As I have indicated to you, we have indicated that additional resources will be acquired to make sure we work on the backlog, and make sure we continue to reduce it. I've said that, and I will continue to say that. We will continue to reduce it, as we have.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** With respect, Minister, that's not what I'm asking. Will you extend the caseworkers past March 2022, yes or no?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Mr. Caputo, I'm not the Minister of Finance. You know the history from this point on. You know the way government works. What I have to do is indicate, if you want me to answer the question, that the fact is that we've made the commitment and we will follow-through with our commitment.

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

Thank you, Mr. Caputo.

We will now have Mrs. Rechie Valdez, for six minutes.

Go ahead, please.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** Good evening, Minister MacAulay and Mr. Ledwell. I appreciate the opportunity to ask both of you questions.

Minister, my first two questions are in reference to your mandate letter, which indicates that you will “Ensure the benefit system and services are responsive to and meet the needs of under-represented Veterans, including women, LGBTQ2, racialized and Indigenous Veterans.”

Can you comment on what progress has been made thus far, and what work may lie ahead?

• (1950)

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I very much appreciate your question.

As you know, one of the first things that happened when I became Minister of Veterans Affairs was a conference on women and LGBTQ veterans. This was two or three different meetings that we had in this area. It was well attended from right across the country. It is a vitally important question and it gives the office a chance to focus on the issues that women and LGBTQ veterans face on gender equality, diversity and inclusion for all veterans. It's so vitally important.

We have heard from many women veterans forums and we want to hear from any female veterans. We're wide open to this. I think there's a different way that you have to serve different issues for different veterans. In fact, that's why we had this meeting for the Office of Women and LGBTQ2 Veterans. It was to make sure the department understood basically what different issues women and LGBTQ people were facing and to make sure that they were able to deal with that.

More needs to be done in this area. I was pleased to see that my mandate letter included ensuring that the benefit system and services are responsive to meeting the needs of the under-represented veterans including women, LGBTQ, racialized and indigenous veterans and to making sure that people who are not properly represented have a better chance to have their issues addressed with Veterans Affairs. That is what we have done and that is what we will continue to do.

I have indicated that these conferences will be held on a yearly basis. The last one or two had to be held virtually, but they were well responded to. I think it's fair to say that the department received a lot of very valuable information in order to deal with these clients.

That's basically where we are on this issue.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** Thank you, Minister.

In December of 2020, the Assembly of First Nations announced the creation of a first nations council. Do you have any outreach strategy updates to veterans or indigenous veterans and their families living in northern communities?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Again, I appreciate that question.

As you're fully aware, there's much more being done in the northern areas for veterans and with first nations and other groups. We have the Métis organization, for example. We put \$30 million into a program just to make sure they were fully able to address the problems within the Métis organizations and to make sure they could properly put together programs to make sure that the veterans and what they did would be fully appreciated. It was to make sure we have ceremonies to show what an important role they played.

As I indicated from the start, so many different groups of people have been involved in freedom and democracy in this country. It's so vitally important that every group is recognized and that we pay tribute to them because of what they have done, so that you and I can sit here and discuss the issues.

That's what we're trying to do at Veterans Affairs Canada and that's what we will continue to do. I appreciate your question.

• (1955)

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** Thank you, Minister.

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

Thank you, MP Valdez.

[*Translation*]

It is now the second vice-chair Mr. Desilets' turn to ask questions to the Minister and deputy minister.

Mr. Desilets, you have six minutes.

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

Mr. Minister, it's a pleasure to see and hear from you again.

As I told you the last time we met, I am going to keep pressing you on the same issue, and it appears that some of my colleagues agree that it's necessary.

We've had the opportunity to talk about the disability benefit claims backlog on several occasions, and in particular, the fact that the francophones do not necessarily receive the same service as anglophones. I heard you say in your speech earlier that this was improving. You also told me things were improving on May 10. At the time, I was waiting for the figures, and I still don't have them. On November 22, I had the chance to speak with Mr. Harris, a very nice person much like yourself, and I asked him for the figures

again. We also spoke on December 2. As it turns out, I still have yet to receive anything.

Would it be possible to get some tangible numbers?

I would be so proud to be able to congratulate you and tell you that I really like you and you are doing a great job because the backlog of claims has gone from 21,572 to 9,200.

Why is this information being kept secret? If you've been successful, that's great. I will congratulate you and we can move on to something else.

I will let you respond, Mr. Minister.

[*English*]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much, Luc. I appreciated very much our conversation and the direction you gave me. Of course, I can give you some stats. In 2021-22 the average turnaround time for female applications was 36.5 weeks and 33 weeks for male applications. For comparison, in 2021 the average turnaround time was 43.2 weeks for female applications and 36.3 weeks for male ones. Now of course we discussed the francophone issue, and I addressed it when I spoke, but in 2021-22 the average turnaround time was 32.2 weeks for anglophone applications and 41.1 weeks for francophone applications. For comparison in—

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Mr. Minister, forgive me for cutting in.

I hear you and I heard what you said about it, and what Mr. Harris said.

Could these figures be sent to the committee? You are repeating them out loud to me, but I'm a visual person. I need to see the progression.

Can you commit to getting those numbers to the committee?

[*English*]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Luc, yes I will, but it's important to note that in both figures I gave you—both in the male and female, and anglophone and francophone applications—it is getting better. It is not where it should be, but we will continue to work.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** That's wonderful. We want the same thing, Mr. Minister. We want things to improve, when it comes to the backlog of claims, francophones and women. If you're a woman and francophone, you could find yourself in a tough spot.

I only want the numbers for those groups, please, so I can be sure everything is fine. My colleagues would benefit from that as well.

• (2000)

[*English*]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Luc, the answer is yes. I would like the deputy to give you a minute here on this very issue.

[Translation]

**Mr. Paul Ledwell (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Thank you for your question, Mr. Desilets.

We're more than willing to share the exact details and numbers with you. We've had a lot of encouragement to address this challenge with respect to women and francophones, and we're in the process of doing that. We want to see results within a few months, but in the meantime, we are ready to provide the numbers so we can—

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** You can see that makes me very happy. That's what we want. We're all working towards the same goal: helping veterans.

I have one last question for you, Mr. Minister. The basis for our analysis hasn't changed: it's about the fabled four months.

Do you think four months is a reasonable turnaround time for our veterans?

[English]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Luc, what we're going to do is to make sure that we speed up all of the process. What we have to do is make sure that our veterans are responded to and receive the benefits they're entitled to in an appropriate time.

We are working towards that, but we're not there yet. We will continue to work towards that. You have been a major asset in helping me get there. I appreciate it. Thank you.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Minister and Mr. Desilets.

For the next six minutes, we have Rachel Blaney.

You have the floor, Ms. Blaney.

[English]

**Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP):** Thank you so much, Chair.

I just want to express my appreciation to the chair for the little signs that give us the timeline. I really appreciate that, so I just want to acknowledge that.

Minister, it's always good to have you. I always enjoy this time, probably a little more than I should, but I do want to ask you about the marriage after 60 clause. You know we've had this conversation several times. You know I've put forward a bill, because I think this is something that needs to be dealt with immediately. I'm really curious about the reality that fixing this was in the mandate letters for the minister's position in 2015 and 2017, and then afterwards it disappeared. I'm a little concerned and don't want that to get lost.

You know, the reality is that we worked with a veteran, a veteran who had plans to get married, and when COVID hit, of course, like every other Canadian, he couldn't follow through on that until a later date. The problem is that he was going to get married when he was 59, and because of COVID he couldn't get married until he was 60. That means, of course, that his partner will not be able to access any pension supports after his passing.

I'm also very concerned because DND now has on their website a notice that tells members, by the way, remember that if you get married after 60 you cannot get a pension for your loved one, and here's the form to fill out so that you can get a smaller pension during this time—which means a lot of veterans are in poverty—so that your loved one can have some money when you pass on.

This is an archaic system. It's shocking that it's still in place. I just wonder if you could explain to me and to the veterans of this country who marry after 60 why their spouse does not deserve the supports that other members receive.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Rachel, it's good to see you, and thank you for all your pushing and making sure that issues are brought to the forefront. You certainly do that.

As you're fully aware, we're always committed to those who serve and to their spouses having the support they need. I know you know that. We have been working, and we still are, with Statistics Canada and the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research to gather information about those survivors. We are working on it. We will use the results of this research to inform how best to support these survivors. As you know, and I know, the well-being of veterans and their families is so vitally important.

They've been doing a lot of work and they've been doing a lot of interviewing. Veterans Affairs has interviewed a large number of people, quite a number of people, mostly female—

• (2005)

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Minister, I am so sorry to interrupt you. I try to be as respectful as possible, but I understand that this study, that work, is done. I know there was \$150 million promised in budget 2019, the veterans survivor fund. Is this actually going to go out to members?

This is a band-aid solution for the interim. I'm hoping to see the action happen in terms of changing the pension.

Could you just answer that? I'm going to have to cut you off again, because I do have another question that I really need to get to, but please take the 30 seconds or so.

Thank you.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Rachel, I appreciate that you never stop, for sure, and that's good. I can only tell you where we are and what we're doing, and I think you know that.

We are committed to doing all the research on this and making sure we have the appropriate information. That is where we are on this.

Thank you so much. You won't have to interrupt me again.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you so much, Minister.



I want to talk about Roy Puthiampadavil. He is a veteran. Today is actually the 10th anniversary of his fight with VAC about his OSI report.

Mr. Chair, through you, I want to let the minister know that the OSI report was incorrect and that VAC agreed it was incorrect, but were not willing to take the next step and say to the doctor that it is incorrect and needs to be fixed or deleted from his file so that he can move forward.

This person who served our country has suffered traumatically over the last 10 years because he didn't feel recognized by the people who were supposed to protect him after he fought so hard for our country. We also know that for a year he lost his income because VAC was trying to push him into a vocational rehab program that he simply was not ready for. He had to go through a whole year without that income.

The other thing I'm hearing from veterans like Roy is that they feel it's an insurance agency instead of a support service for them. His file clearly illustrates there are systemic issues that need to be addressed when veterans are accessing support.

Through you, Mr. Chair, Minister, will you commit to meeting with me and Roy to discuss this? This is a perfect example of the trauma that some of our veterans are feeling with the service systems in place right now.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Rachel, you know that I will help you in any way I possibly can, but I think for an individual case like this it would be better for the deputy to deal with it.

I'll turn it over to you, Deputy.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Is that an assurance—I have only a few seconds left—that the deputy will, in fact, meet with me and Roy, at the very least? I would prefer that you were there, Minister, to address this issue. For 10 years this veteran has been fighting again and again to have his voice heard. I want to make sure it is on the record that you will be meeting with him and me very soon.

**The Chair:** Minister, you have 15 seconds, please.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** The deputy is going to respond.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Honourable Member, I'd be very happy to meet with you. If the veteran is willing to share the information from his file, I'd be very happy to sit down and go through that information as well. We understand the privacy of the matter, and we want to make sure the veteran is willing to share that.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Deputy.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Mr. Chair, could I just say that if I can and need to be there, I too will be, Rachel. I think you know that.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much.

The next round will be five minutes.

We have Mrs. Anna Roberts for five minutes, please.

Open your mike and go ahead.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts (King—Vaughan, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question for the minister is this: What resources does this government provide to assist veterans and their families in their transition to civilian life? Why are they not connected with Veterans Affairs immediately after leaving the service?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much.

I appreciate your question, and it's a very important question. I can assure you that on military bases across the country, there are Veterans Affairs staff dealing with people.

What we are trying to do is make sure that people.... I believe that when they enter the Canadian Armed Forces, they should be told that there's a day coming when they will leave the Canadian Armed Forces and to be ready for that. I think it would help an awful lot in terms of the difficulties we have in some areas with homelessness and other difficulties...with jobs.

In fact, settling in to a regular lifestyle and not being in the Canadian Armed Forces, as you are fully aware.... We both know that if you're in the Canadian Armed Forces, you have a doctor, for example, and when you come out, you likely do not have a doctor. In this country, sometimes it's very difficult. But that's only one of the things. They need to find a job. That's why there are so many things. We have these job fairs.

I think, first of all, your question is so important. Canadian Armed Forces personnel need to know that, number one, some day they will be leaving and they will become veterans and to make sure they make use of, let's say, the education fund—

• (2010)

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** Respectfully, I don't have a lot of time. I have a couple of questions that I want to get in and that leads me to my next question.

Health care services provided by each province vary. A standard national program would ensure that our veterans received the assistance they require, such as access to mental health programs regardless of which province they choose to live in. How will this government ensure a streamlined transition?

My research has led me to believe, from speaking to veterans like Mr. Paul Breeze and Tom Hobbs, who has addressed this committee on numerous occasions leading back to 2008, that the services provided are not sufficient to support our veterans.

How can we as a nation ask our veterans to go to war, yet when they leave the service, we expect the provinces to take care of them, when we know that each province, and especially...? My research has led me to believe that one of the worst provinces.... I'm embarrassed to say that, because I'm from Ontario. It is lagging behind all services for the vets. Could you help me understand that?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Again, that's an important question, and of course, you're fully aware that health care is under the provinces.

We want to make sure that when Canadian Armed Forces members leave the armed forces and become civilian citizens, they are aware of every asset they have there.

For example, in Veterans Affairs Canada, we just announced \$140 million in mental health benefits in order to make sure that we're able to help people with PTSD and many other things. This money is available when you apply to Veterans Affairs Canada as of April 1. We expect it will be approved and in play on April 1. If you have any of these problems, you qualify for benefits, even if your application has not been reviewed, in order to make sure that you're able to have the mental health support you need.

That's one thing the Government of Canada is doing, and I think it's a very important move in the mental health area to help our veterans.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** That takes me to my next question. I'm glad you brought that up.

Research has shown that service dogs are essential to mental health and the well-being of our veterans and their families. Does this government recognize the value that service dogs provide to our veterans? When will this government implement a standard national program that will allow our veterans access to service dogs?

There is a reason for why that touches me very dearly. I spoke to a police officer who was a veteran, and he had to fight to get his service dog, so that he could go to work. He is now limited to desk service due to his injuries from the war, but it took him years and years for a law to be implemented, because every province has different laws.

Do you agree that if we have asked our service members to go to war for us, give us our rights and freedom, that this government owes them a program no matter where they decide to live, whether it's in Newfoundland or out in Victoria? Should we not as Canadians be responsible for them?

**The Chair:** Minister, a quick answer please because the time is almost up.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Of course, we have an interest in service dogs, the health of veterans, and the mental health situations. In 2019, for example, we funded Wounded Warriors Canada, a program to expand the PTSD and service dog programs. We have a number of pilot projects in order to make sure how this will work.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Minister, and Mrs. Roberts.

I'm going to pass the floor to Mr. Churence Rogers, for five minutes.

• (2015)

**Mr. Churence Rogers (Bonavista—Burin—Trinity, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's good to see you, Minister.

I'm new to the veterans affairs committee, and I'm really pleased to have been appointed to this great committee to work on behalf of the veterans who served our country, and to represent some of the veterans who live in my riding of Bonavista—Burin—Trinity.

Minister, in last year's budget we invested an additional \$15 million in a veteran and family well-being fund. This is a crucial program that our government introduced in 2018 to help fund grassroots veterans organizations across Canada. We recently made some announcements on funding with this money from the last budget.

Could you tell us about some of these organizations that are getting help through this latest round of funding, and what work they're doing with or in support of veterans across the country?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much, Churence. It's good to see you too.

I would have to say the veteran and family well-being fund is something that I'm very proud of. It's a great program. It's something our government introduced, and it's having an impact on the lives of veterans and their families. It's helping a lot of great organizations that wish to help veterans.

I'm certainly very pleased, Churence, that we were able to put an additional \$15 million into this program in last year's budget, and the rollout has been well accepted in many organizations. We know some veterans feel more comfortable when they can turn to their peers in grassroots organizations. That's why it's so important that we work with these organizations and they do great work.

Just as an example, Helmets to Hardhats will receive \$700,000 to assist women and LGBTQ2 veterans in skilled trade careers. That, as you know, Churence, can tie into our education program that has been put in place. There's \$80,000 a year just to upgrade your education so you are more valuable to industry.

Ottawa Innercity Ministries will receive \$175,000 to address the rise in social isolation. With all the difficulties, Churence, that people have gone through during this pandemic, that gives this inner-city ministry a chance to work very hard with that.

Homes for Heroes Foundation in Calgary will receive \$250,000 to support the Calgary veterans village. I was at that village, and it was so wonderful for people who had just left the armed services and were having some difficulty. For example, one family was just coming out of the tiny homes and they were going to move into their own home. He had a full-time job; she had a job, and they're right back into society. That's what we want to be able to do. It's valuable to the veteran and it's valuable for our economy.

We have many others like VETS Canada, Wounded Warriors, Veterans Transition Network, Sunnybrook—which you have heard of, and it's a great place—and many more.

There are so many great things that this program has done to give veterans a chance to really become what they want to be in civilian life. It's valuable for both sides.

Thank you for the question. I appreciate it.

**Mr. Churence Rogers:** Thank you for that. I appreciate your passion and your compassion for our veterans and the way you've delved into this portfolio and worked so hard to make life a lot better for the veterans we represent.

Mr. Chair, I know time is short so I'll just finish at this point. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Minister.

**The Chair:** Okay. There's no intervention by the minister, so we can go on.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I would just like to add something on the importance of that program. I think it's not the largest amount of money in the program, but the family and veterans program has done so much to give the veterans.... They feel so good about themselves. All you have to do is see that in reality to realize what this has done for veterans.

As I said to Churence, it's valuable for the veterans and it's valuable for our economy.

• (2020)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

Mr. Desilets, you now have the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Minister, in your final sentence you said that veterans seem to be feeling good out there. I find that a little hard to believe.

I'm going to ask you some questions and I would ask that you respond quickly.

You have invested \$40 million in mental health. Will that money go to the provinces with no conditions? Yes or no?

Please refrain from taking two minutes to answer my question, Mr. Minister.

[*English*]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much, Luc.

What I've indicated quite clearly now, Luc, is the fact that we are committed to making sure that in the mental health area, we... There's \$140 million there. If you apply to Veterans Affairs Canada and you have PTSD or many other mental health or addiction problems, you can start receiving benefits immediately. Now, it takes a while, as we know, for the applications to be processed, but in the mental health area, they do not have to wait.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you. It's worth following. What you said is very interesting. I will surely keep an eye on this, because I'm concerned about it. I've worked as a school principal, but I also have a master's degree in psychoeducation. So I'm very concerned about mental health and suicide. Thank you, Mr. Minister.

I'm going to ask you a question again, because you didn't really answer it.

Will the funding go to the provinces with or without conditions?

[*English*]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much.

What we do is give it directly to the veterans. When you apply to Veterans Affairs Canada—let's say if you have an addiction or PTSD—immediately you start receiving it. You don't have to get the receipt and hold it.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I understand. The federal government will take care of it through the Veterans Affairs Department. I have no problem with that.

Earlier, one of my colleagues pointed out something that I find very significant, the relationship between Veterans Affairs and National Defence. We will surely have the opportunity to discuss it at another time.

I receive calls regularly about medical files not being forwarded, transfers, people waiting when they need to see a doctor, and so on.

We'll get the chance to talk about it again, but I would like—

**The Chair:** Your time is up, Mr. Desilets.

Mr. Minister, you can take five seconds to respond.

[*English*]

A really quick one.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Over the years, the files have been a problem. I think it's under much better control today, but it is a problem. Even the veterans themselves, sometimes if they get hurt a bit, won't report that. It's costs down the line.

[*Translation*]

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

I would like to welcome Ms. Ashton, who is replacing Ms. Blaney at committee.

Welcome, Ms. Ashton. You have the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Every year we take a day to remember our veterans—Remembrance Day. We might remember them on the anniversary of a conflict or a battle, but we don't do enough to recognize our veterans' sacrifices.

After what we saw this weekend with the disturbing and deeply disrespectful actions at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and at the National War Memorial, it is appropriate that today we talk about how we can recognize the valour and sacrifice of our veterans now.

Other countries have recognized this and have reviewed the citations given to veterans who ought to be appropriately recognized for their valour, but here in Canada we have not done that appropriately. As a result, Canada has not awarded a single Victoria Cross since it took it over in 1993, and in fact, no Canadian has been awarded a VC since 1945. This must change.

There is an unprecedented grassroots movement bringing together the veteran community, including well-respected organizations such as the Royal Canadian Legion, members of the military community, municipalities and grassroots Canadians. Together they are calling for Private Jess Larochelle's citation to be reviewed and to award him the Victoria Cross that he deserves.

In September 2021 you, Mr. Minister, indicated that you recognize Jess Larochelle's sacrifice and support initiatives from the military community “to make sure that every veteran receives the service and remuneration they deserve.”

With that, will you bring forward to your government colleagues and the Minister of Defence the message of tens of thousands of Canadians, and what I would hope would be the unanimous support of this committee, to recognize the valour of Jess Larochelle by awarding him the Victoria Cross, and in doing so recognizing the valour and sacrifice of our veterans and those who have served our country throughout our history?

• (2025)

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much, Niki.

I can assure you, Private Larochelle's story is exceptional, and I'm certainly fully aware of it. He demonstrated unbelievable bravery in combat. I know you're fully aware of that too.

Of course I fully support anything that the military does to make sure that folks who serve bravely receive the recognition they deserve. As you know, if the military decides to take the steps they take, you and I, I'm sure, will fully support them in any way we can—and I will make sure I support them in any way I can. As you know, however, I'm not part of the chain of command, and it's important that as a cabinet minister I don't interfere in the responsibility of the military.

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

Thank you, Ms. Ashton.

Now for five minutes, we have Mr. Fraser Tolmie.

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

Mr. Minister, thank you for participating tonight. I don't have much time, so my questions for you will be quick.

In an answer from your office to an inquiry that was submitted by my colleague Mr. Frank Caputo, the number of applications, according to this answer, is increasing. As a result, the backlog of applicants is increasing.

Would you agree with the numbers that have been provided by your office?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I will get the deputy minister to touch on this.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Thank you, Minister.

Yes, there were some details provided in the question by Frank Caputo. In actual fact, the number of files that we were handling has gone down. We've reduced the number of files waiting to be addressed down by 10,000, and the actual backlog, as the minister indicated earlier in his comments, has been decreased by 40%.

As of last week, the numbers in the backlog are now down below 14,000. It is declining. We have more work to do.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** The answer that you just provided doesn't jive with the answer to the inquiry I have here.

When I look at the numbers here, it says on April 1, the number of pending applications was 26,600 and the backlog was 11,500. When you go to July 1, 2021, the number pending increased by 3,000 to 29,900 and the backlog went up to 12,900. On October 1, 2021, the number pending was 33,200 and the backlog was 14,400. On January 1, the projections are that it's going to be 36,500 pending, with a backlog of 15,800.

Is the answer that you provided to Mr. Caputo incorrect?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** No, it's not. The fact is that they were answering the question, but if you check the statistics, you will find that for the last number of years, the backlog has continually reduced. I've indicated quite clearly that it will continue to be reduced.

I will let the deputy explain how these figures came out.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** The numbers that you are quoting are accurate. They are numbers that project ahead, given the resources that we have at the present time, but, again, as the minister has indicated—

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** You're projecting that the numbers are going to go up. The backlog and applications are going to go up. Is that what you are saying?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Based on the current resources, that is the indication. However, as the minister has indicated, there is a commitment to seeking further resources so that that backlog can continue to go down.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** I'm a bit confused, because in the minister's opening statement, he talked about a number of investments. He later referred to "additional benefits" for the applicants. In his answer to Mr. Caputo, he talked about additional resources, and that's not been absolutely clear. We need to know what those additional benefits are, what those investments are going to be and what those additional resources are going to be.

Could you clarify that for me?

• (2030)

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I will tell you, my friend, the fact is that in the figures you have to date, the backlog has decreased. For the question that you asked about the funds that are available this day, you have those figures. I've indicated quite clearly that we will be seeking and putting more investment into making sure that the backlog decreases.

That is the answer to that question.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** My question is whether you are, in this upcoming budget, going to be allocating finances to this and continuing to keep the employees that we have in service.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I cannot indicate what will be in the budget because it's not appropriate. However, I've indicated quite clearly that I will be seeking additional funding to make sure that we continue on the same track that we're on to reduce the backlog.

That is what I've said and that is what we will do.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister, and thank you, MP Tolmie.

The last questioner of this panel is Mr. Darrell Samson, for five minutes. Please, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

Minister, it's so nice to see you, even if you're in P.E.I. and we're here. I appreciate your intervention and the fact that you could join us today.

I also welcome Paul, who is our new deputy. We've had good conversation. Thank you both for being here today.

Minister, I want to talk about the veterans emergency fund. That's a fund that we brought forward in 2018 to help veterans who were in tough situations—probably short-term, hopefully, but if there was no help, then it could be long term.

From what I've been hearing and reading, that fund has had a very big impact on many veterans right across this country. They can get up to \$2,500. Can you describe some of the impact you have heard and seen for these veterans?

What was happening was that there was an emergency, but no discretionary funds. This is a program to come forward right away and support these veterans.

Could you talk a little about the veterans emergency fund?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much, Darrell.

The veterans emergency fund is \$1 million a year and vitally important to the veterans—anybody who is down and out, down on their luck and that type of thing. It has helped so many people. A veteran can receive \$2,500.

So many times you find people who are up against it totally. It could be a family in a home, it could be a mortgage, it could be whatever. These things were put in place just to make sure...to try to help repay them. You can never repay veterans for what they did, but it's to make sure we make life as good as we can for them. That's exactly what the emergency fund is about. After we use the emergency fund, the other programs can kick in in order to make it much better.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Minister, thank you for that answer.

Also, we brought in a new education and training fund. This is for helping veterans who, after they finish in the active armed forces, can go back to school. If they've done six years in the military, they can get up to \$40,000. If they've done 12 years, they can get up to \$80,000.

I understand the uptake of that program is not as high as we would like, but can you see some type of correlation with the new employment strategy program? Is there a way we could design that program that would complement this education and training benefit that is helping many veterans right across the country?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much, Darrell.

You're fully aware that, of course, the national veterans employment strategy program, which we're working to put in place, can certainly work with that. With the education program and everything else, it makes the veteran more employable. In fact, veterans can leave the military and then perhaps end up going to university. If you've been there for 12 years, \$80,000 means a lot in helping you to become more qualified for wherever you want to go.

As you're fully aware, we're discussing the national veterans employment strategy with the veterans and veterans groups and having their input on what will be put together. When we get it in place, the end result will be combining all the programs: the national veterans employment strategy, the education fund and all the other programs that are in place. These programs are put in place to make sure the veteran has a better quality of life, and that's what your responsibility and my responsibility is.

I appreciate every person sitting at the veterans affairs table tonight, because everybody here wants to make it better for veterans. I do, and everybody else there does. I thank you so much, and we will continue to work together.

• (2035)

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

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Minister, on behalf of committee members, I want to thank you for being here this evening with the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. I'd also like to thank you for making yourself available so quickly, as the committee has just resumed its meetings.

I would now like to address committee members.

Based on the notice of meeting sent out, the meeting should be adjourned at 8:30 p.m. As you know, however, votes were taken. I would therefore like to propose something to you and very briefly hear your thoughts on it.

We are receiving other guests who were called to appear, namely the assistant deputy minister and the acting assistant deputy minister. We will take a break to test the audio with our guests. Given that several of you already have other engagements after 8:30 p.m., I propose that we test the audio and take a break, but that we do only one round of questions with the second group of witnesses. That would mean a single round of six minutes per member from each party.

Is that all right with you, or do you wish to take a full hour?

Rather than giving the floor to everyone, I will ask one of the vice-chairs, Mr. Desilets or Mr. Caputo, to tell me what he thinks of the suggestion.

[*English*]

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Yes, my colleague is just trying to get my attention. Might I just speak with her very briefly, Mr. Chair, please?

Mr. Chair, I have no plans. I'm not sure if my colleagues have any plans. I'm in the hands of the remainder of the committee.

**The Chair:** It's up to the committee. We can stay one more hour with our witnesses. Are we ready? We can go on.

We're going to take a break. We're going to invite those witnesses to come in. After that, we're going to come back. We're going to take a break for about one or two minutes.

[*Translation*]

I will now suspend the meeting.

• (2035)

(Pause)

• (2040)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Before we start, I'd like to ask members once again: Are we going to do a full hour or only the first round of six minutes for each party?

I understand that Mr. Caputo said that he has no problem staying for the full hour. Is that the consensus?

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Mr. Chair, I believe MP Block has a limited amount of time. I don't want to keep her past any commitments here.

**The Chair:** Okay.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Chair, I'm happy with one round of six minutes each for each party and then we can get on to other things.

Thanks.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much.

[*Translation*]

All right. Thank you.

Mr. Caputo, you have the floor.

[*English*]

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** We are okay with that as well.

[*Translation*]

We also agree to one six-minute round of questions per member from each party.

• (2045)

[*English*]

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** I apologize, Mr. Chair.

May I have the floor for the questioning of the deputy minister, please?

**The Chair:** Yes.

Okay, perfect. I'm going to start.

Just a second, I have to go back.

[*Translation*]

I must get back to committee business.

I'd also like to inform the technicians and everyone that we are going back online. Let's be ready.

[*English*]

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the new witnesses.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize your name. When you are ready to speak, you can click on the microphone icon to activate your mike. As a reminder, all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[*Translation*]

The interpretation services for this videoconference are virtually the same as those offered at regular committee meetings. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of either Floor, English or French.

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mic should be on mute.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses: Paul Ledwell, deputy minister; Steven Harris, assistant deputy minister, service delivery branch; and Sara Lantz, acting assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and corporate services branch.

First, I would like to inform you that I will be using cards to let you know your speaking time is almost up.

I know that you will not be able to use your five minutes' speaking time for your opening remarks, so we will go straight to the first round of six minutes of questions.

So, I invite Frank Caputo to begin.

Go ahead, Mr. Caputo.

[English]

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for joining us.

Could I ask approximately how many caseworkers are needed to bring the backlog to the expected level by the end of 2022?

[Translation]

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Thank you.

[English]

Member Caputo, that is a very good question.

I just want to be clear that the backlog is associated with disability adjudications, which are not undertaken by caseworkers, but by adjudicators in that system. We have caseworkers who work with our almost 16,000 veterans who are under case management, and we have workers who do adjudication.

I'll ask my colleague, Assistant Deputy Minister Harris, to speak to the specifics around the backlog and the numbers that are needed to get it down to the desired location.

**Mr. Steven Harris (Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs):** With respect to case management, Mr. Caputo—and I address this through the chair, of course—the case management elements are such that no veteran waits for a case manager because there is not a backlog. If a veteran needs a case manager, they are assigned a case manager, so that is a case manager-related issue.

With respect to files and disability adjudication, if there is an application for a disability benefit, as you've noted, there are files in a backlog. The minister indicated during the first hour the progress that we've made with respect to this over the course of the last period of time. We do expect to be down to about 11,500 files in a backlog situation. That is beyond our 16-week service standard. That's down from about 23,000 files, where we started about two years ago, with the additional investments and resources that are there.

We do expect that by around April 2022 the backlog would be in a state of about 11,500.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** How many adjudicators are needed by the end of the year to bring us within that 16-week standard?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** There would be no number of adjudicators within this end of year we could bring on and train in place to have it down to that perspective. It takes some time to recruit, hire and then ultimately train to have people in place to do the adjudication itself. We continue to work among the resources we currently have to be able to reduce the files that are beyond our service standard.

• (2050)

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Is it possible, then, to even give an estimate as to how long this backlog will last, given that we don't know how long it will take to hire adjudicators?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** The challenge with respect to this particular issue is that we don't control intake, so the number of veterans who come forward seeking benefits varies, and it has varied significantly over the course of the pandemic period, in particular. We've seen increases, as is noted in much of the material that has been shared with you. We've seen significant increases in the amount of intake we've seen since 2015, in particular. While the intake has varied over the last little while, our production has been able to go up with the additional resources we do have.

Forecasting it out, the resources we have indicate that we will be in a position of trying to meet the incoming intake, but it will depend on the intake with respect to how we would forecast it out.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** With respect to forecasting, the forecast now—if nothing changes, even with the additional hires—is that the backlog will increase by the end of the year. Is that correct?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** It wouldn't increase by the end of the year. Sorry, did you mean the end of the calendar year?

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Yes.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Yes, sir. If it's the end of the fiscal year, we do expect it still to go down before the end of the fiscal year.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** So, it is absolutely necessary to hire more adjudicators in order to deal with the backlog. Is that correct?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I think additional resources, sir, are always helpful. Of course, we're doing other things to try to speed up the process for veterans who apply. In behind the scenes we are streamlining the processes that are required to support that, making it easier for our disability adjudicators and all of the team that works on this to make decisions much more quickly. Those are additional steps we take in addition to what resources we may have available.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** I understand that \$638 million lapsed on the public accounts in the last fiscal year. Is that accurate?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Yes, sir. I believe that is the accurate figure.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** That money could have been used to hire more adjudicators and more caseworkers. Is that right?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Well, sir, if you would like, I'd ask Sara Lantz, my colleague who is the chief financial officer, to respond to that question.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Thank you.

**Ms. Sara Lantz (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Chief Financial Officer and Corporate Services Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Thank you for the question.

Mr. Chair, actually, of the lapse of approximately \$635 million, 95% of that funding was directly voted for clients' financial benefits and services, so the department has no authority whatsoever to spend those funds on operating the department. Because they're quasi-statutory in nature, it's really just a timing difference. Those funds were not used in the last fiscal year, but they were available for use in future years.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** To any of the witnesses, what, in the eyes of the department, is an acceptable caseload level or the appropriate average caseload for a caseworker?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** If I could, Mr. Chair, I'll respond to that.

I know that we pay a lot of attention to the quality of care that's provided through our case managers. It's obviously measured in terms of numbers, but it's also measured in terms of the time they're able to spend. We hear from our own case managers that they feel that a level around 30 is probably acceptable; in fact, it's the industry standard. That's what they indicate to us.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Ledwell.

Thank you, Mr. Caputo.

Now it's the turn of Mr. Wilson Miao for six minutes.

Please, go ahead.

**Mr. Wilson Miao (Richmond Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm actually very new to this. It's my first term as an elected member, also in this committee.

I'm aware there were nine Veterans Affairs Canada service offices reopened after being closed more than 10 years ago. Taking into account the fact that demand had dropped due to the pandemic, how many veterans and family members sought service through these services since they reopened? Even if they are unable to go to these offices in person due to the pandemic, can veterans obtain services through these offices at the same time?

Thank you.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Mr. Chair, thank you very much, member, for the question.

You're correct. We do have 38 Veterans Affairs offices and 31 transition centres located on Canadian air force bases across the country, so 69 unique locations from which our 188,000 clients are served.

Obviously, throughout this last period of time, none of those offices have been open during the pandemic, but the presence in those areas and the service toward veterans and their families in those locations has been essential to ensure that level of service is there vir-

tually, that it is responsive and people are reaching out to veterans that we know may have needs and they are able to get a response very quickly.

We have, in all of those locations, very active frontline staff who are there to respond and to answer the needs of veterans. They are doing that from home locations and remote working, but they are doing that in the communities in which those veterans are living as well, so that presence is very important.

• (2055)

**Mr. Wilson Miao:** Thank you very much.

I'd like to share my time with my colleague, Mr. Casey, for his questions, if you don't mind.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Casey.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

Thank you, Mr. Miao.

Did I understand you correctly, Mr. Ledwell, when you indicated that every single veteran that requires a case manager is assigned a case manager?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** That is correct.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Did I understand you correctly that the number of case managers has absolutely nothing to do with the backlog...?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** That is correct.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Just for the benefit of the committee, the case managers within Veterans Affairs are represented by a different union than the disability adjudicators. Is that right?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** For the most part, that's correct. Yes.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** The projections that were provided to Mr. Caputo assume that the level of resourcing would be exactly the same as it is now through the period of the project, so that's through the calendar year. Is that right?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** That's right.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** In fact, if you are given the approvals to add resources, that is your intention.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** If we are given more resources, that will certainly address those numbers and will allow us to bring that backlog down.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Can you give us some sense for the likelihood that you will in fact be allocated additional resources?



**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** It's difficult for us to say that, Member, very clearly. We certainly are making the case. I think the track record of investment around these resources, the understanding of the importance of it, as has been articulated by all members of this committee, and the past commitments to resourcing this particular need give us some hope, but we don't have the confirmation of resources yet, and that will only come through the budgeting process.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Thank you.

Is it still the case that of the entire budget within the Department of Veterans Affairs about 10% is used for salaries and overhead and 90% flows directly through to the veterans?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** The figure is actually less than that. Approximately 7% of the entire allocation is for administration and operations, and roughly 93% is there to support veterans directly.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Ms. Lantz answered the question perfectly, but to make it crystal clear, when we see funding lapsed that is earmarked to go directly to veterans, you do not have the discretion to take that funding, those monies, and allocate them to salaries.

**Ms. Sara Lantz:** No. They are absolutely safeguarded to ensure the funding is there for when the veteran comes forward and is eligible for that funding.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Thank you.

There was raised during the last election the prospect of streamlining Veterans Affairs benefits with the Department of National Defence. Is that an initiative currently being worked through within the department?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** There's active work with National Defence on coordinating the assurance that there are supports for those who are transitioning out of active service and becoming veterans, but there's nothing specific right now to look at the further alignment of those supports and resources in any formal way.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Thank you.

Can you give us an update on the renovation and revitalization of the Daniel J. MacDonald Building?

**The Chair:** You have 10 seconds, please.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** It is happening very soon. It is going to be a state-of-the-art facility. It will have a very low carbon footprint and will be fully accessible to a level unseen before.

• (2100)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Ledwell.

[*Translation*]

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

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Harris, I am very pleased to see you again.

Mr. Deputy Minister, we spoke this past December 2. At that time, a gap existed between anglophones and francophones in terms of their wait time to get a response about their case. Francophones were waiting an average of 41.1 weeks and anglophones, fortunately for them, were waiting an average of 32.2 weeks.

Is that still the case?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** I can tell you that those numbers have improved, but it remains a great challenge to improve the process for all veterans, anglophone and francophone, men and women alike.

Our ultimate goal is to have a process that is—

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I understand.

I would have preferred that Mr. Harris answer my question, but I'm happy that you did, Mr. Ledwell.

There is still a nine-week gap?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** No, there is not.

In previous months, the gap was about six weeks. In October, November and December, the gap was about three weeks.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** All right.

I'm glad to hear that. I hope the committee gets the numbers on that; that is what we want and we asked the Minister for them earlier. We'd like to get some tangible numbers; there's a lot of dithering going on and we are getting numbers from all sides.

In your opinion, is the gap between francophones and anglophones acceptable and to be expected?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Actually, it is unacceptable. We are currently working to improve the situation.

Mr. Harris, would you like to comment on that?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Thank you, Mr. Ledwell.

Of course, we're making significant efforts. As the deputy minister said, over the past few months, we have significantly narrowed the gap between francophone and anglophones applications. I see that our people are now trained and equipped to make decisions on francophone applications. That will allow us to continue working and close the gap.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** That's what we all want. We're looking out for the well-being of veterans.

When do you think you will close the gap between anglophones and francophones?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** That's a very good question.

All we have in our files right now are francophone applications that have been pending for a long time. When we make a decision, it has an impact on the wait time. It's hard to say exactly when we will close the gap between francophone and anglophone applications, but I believe we will get there soon.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** What do you mean by "soon"?

Can francophones expect to one day have the same wait time as anglophones?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** To be honest, I think we might get there in the next few months.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I'm glad to hear that; I'm hoping for it. We will be able to see the results.

Mr. Chair, I have finished asking my questions. You can therefore transfer my speaking time to my colleague.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much for your questions, Mr. Desilets.

[English]

For the last round of questions, I invite Ms. Rachel Blaney, for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you so much, Chair.

It's very nice to see all of you and, of course, to meet Mr. Ledwell. I always enjoy our conversations.

My first question is actually more of a request. I'm wondering if you could commit to providing to the committee the proportion of VAC workers who are former veterans, or veterans themselves I should say, or former Correctional Service Canada workers. That would be really helpful.

Is there any way we could get that information?

• (2105)

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and Ms. Blaney.

Certainly, we can provide you with those details regarding veterans. That's something that we ask. Obviously, it's self-identified. I will have to check about those who are former Correctional Service employees, and whether we can share that information, but I will look into that.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I'm very curious about one thing, and I did put a question to the department on this, and received a response not too long ago. I guess what is concerning to me is this. We know we have a Veterans Bill of Rights in this country, and when you read that Bill of Rights, it's very clear that it applies to every veteran who is a client of VAC.

I was a little surprised when we put our request and found out that although there is an extensive amount of training for VAC employees, they are not being trained in any way about the Bill of Rights, what it means, and what their responsibilities are pertaining to that particular document.

It seems to me that it would make sense that, especially in the positions of case managers, they should understand what that is and how to deliver those services in a particular manner.

I guess I have two questions. First, what is the purpose of the bill of rights, if it's just there as a document that cannot be actually used in a meaningful way? Second, if veterans who are being provided services feel that their bill of rights have not been acknowledged or represented, is there any process within VAC for them to move forward with an official complaint?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madame Blaney, there's a tremendous amount of training that goes in. My colleague, Mr. Harris, referred to the training that we undertake for new staff who are especially interfacing with veterans. That's something we take very seriously. In addition to public service training, such as in values and ethics, there is a lot of training that is very specific to the importance of the way our staff comport themselves in their interaction with veterans.

Included in that will be all of the fundamental aspects, including the bill of rights, that are important for our staff members to understand. I would be surprised if there's not reference to that in the general training that transpires.

In terms of a mechanism by which a veteran can raise a question, yes, we have several of those. I'll ask Mr. Harris and Ms. Lantz to—

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I'm so sorry to interrupt and I apologize for this through the chair.

I just want to clarify that I asked a question and it was very clear in the response that I got. I just got it yesterday. I'm happy to send that back to you. It came from the department itself. It said that at no point is this training put into place.

I completely embrace the idea that, as part of a particular type of training, that would be part of it. It may not be called training on the bill of rights for veterans. I need to push back on that, through you, Mr. Chair, because when we got that response there was a very clear message that it is not an official part of the training.

Again, it's a document. It's something that is a commitment to veterans. I'm just wondering how is it not taught to folks that are doing that work? That's not me criticizing in any way the amazing people who serve our veterans every day—I really appreciate it—but if that's not part of the training, that's not their problem. It's really an upper management problem.

I just want to go back to the other part of it. Is there not a process for veterans who feel that their rights have been trampled on? They have this document that assures them there will be a certain criteria of how the services are provided to them. Is there no process for them to move forward that includes this?

I'm hearing about it a lot. We've talked in this committee about it and about sanctuary trauma. Veterans are coming, asking for help and then they're turning away. I talked about Roy earlier today. There's years of trauma. There were ten years of him saying that this is wrong and please fix it. Because of his particular trauma, he was not able to move forward. It was to the point where if somebody from Veterans Affairs sent him a message, he couldn't even look at it because he's traumatized by what has happened.

I'm just wondering if you could come back to this. Again, I just want to clarify that we asked the question and we were told that it is not part of the training.

• (2110)

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** We'll certainly look into that aspect of it, Madame Blaney.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Mr. Chair, if you'll allow me, we'll verify what information was provided back to you.

In terms of sources whereby a veteran can come back and raise issues and questions about the way that they're being interfaced with, we have several mechanisms to do that built into our system. Again, I'll ask Mr. Harris to indicate that from the service delivery perspective, where we interact with most of our clients.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Ledwell.

That was the final set of questions.

Is it the pleasure of committee members to adjourn the meeting, as agreed?

Let me thank our witnesses. We have with us Paul Ledwell, deputy minister; Steven Harris, assistant deputy minister, service delivery branch; and Sara Lantz, acting assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and corporate services branch.

I'd also like to thank committee members, the staff who guided us, and the interpreters.

The meeting is adjourned.

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