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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg



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• (1830)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to the seventh meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

In accordance with the order adopted on Tuesday, February 8, 2022, the committee is meeting to continue its study on equity in services provided to veterans with respect to francophones and anglophones, men and women, and the LGBTQ+ community.

[*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 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 the webinar format. Webinars are for public committee meetings and are available only to members, their staff and witnesses. Members enter immediately as active participants and all functionalities for active participants will remain the same. Staff will be non-active participants and can therefore view the meeting only in gallery view.

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, and when you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute. As a reminder, all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

[*Translation*]

With regard to the list of speakers, the clerk of the committee and I will do our best to maintain the established speaking order for all members, whether they attend the meeting in person or remotely.

I would now like to welcome the witnesses, who are online with us.

First, we have Brigitte Laverdure and Sergeant Nina Charlene Usherwood, who will be testifying as individuals. We also have Michelle Douglas, executive director of the LGBT Purge Fund, and

Sandra Perron, founder and chief executive officer of the Pepper Pod.

You will each have five minutes to make your opening remarks.

[*English*]

We will start with Brigitte Laverdure and then go to Sergeant Nina Charlene Usherwood, who will be followed by Michelle Douglas and then Sandra Perron

[*Translation*]

Ms. Laverdure, you have the floor for five minutes to make your presentation.

Ms. Brigitte Laverdure (As an Individual): Good evening, Mr. Chair.

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen members of the House.

Allow me to introduce myself: I am Brigitte Laverdure, a peer support worker for Canadian Forces veterans who are part of the LGBTQ community.

The purpose of my testimony is to denounce the injustice experienced by francophone veterans in Quebec during the processing of their file submitted to Veterans Affairs Canada.

In the exercise of my recognized role with my peers, I have very often been called upon by them to help them understand why the waiting period was interminable while their application was being processed. I remind you that these long processing times have a significant impact on the morale of the people affected. This ranges from discouragement to abandonment of the process. Worse still, some people go so far as to commit suicide.

For several years, I have been consulting various veterans' groups across Canada through social media, and I can read many comments from English-speaking veterans who have obtained quick responses to their requests. Sometimes, the deadlines are even shorter than those that the department undertakes to respect. I have forwarded several of these comments to Mr. Luc Desilets.

Why is the francophone community being subjected to discrimination? Here, we are not talking about weeks, but rather years. Yet, on the Veterans Affairs website, the notice of decision reads, verbatim, "We are committed to providing a decision to you as soon as possible. In most cases, a decision will be made within 16 weeks of the department receiving all the information required from you in support of your application."

In addition, during a 2020 Radio Canada report in which I participated, the director of veterans' support services acknowledged that the department had experienced an increase in the number of applications from the French-speaking veteran community. As a result, he promised to hire francophone staff to provide responses to francophone veterans within the department's commitment of 16 weeks, as a general rule.

Distinguished listeners, it is clear that, two years later, in 2022, many files still have an unacceptable processing time, whether for receiving a notice of decision or for paying compensation. I would like to remind you that this situation existed well before the pandemic.

Mr. Chairman, members of Parliament, I thank you for your attention and interest in this cause.

• (1835)

The Chair: Thank you very much for your statement, Ms. Laverdure.

We'll go straight to Sergeant Nina Charlene Usherwood.

You have the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

Sergeant Nina Charlene Usherwood (As an Individual): Thank you, Chair.

I am Sergeant Nina Usherwood. I am speaking to you from the unceded territory of the K'ómoks and Pentlatch first nation.

I come from a military family. My dad, mom and sister have all served. I joined in 1979, and I am still serving 42 years later.

Growing up, my parents knew I was dressing in my sister's clothes. My parents were worried about how I'd be treated if I joined the forces. My dad gave me the military policy before I joined, so I knew I would be immediately discharged if I was discovered.

Hiding who I was from the military so that I could serve Canada has cost me my health. While I am aware the military policy on transgender members was changed in 1999 and that I would no longer be discharged, I saw transgender service members suffer vitriol and extreme hostility. I stayed hidden. It was not until 2009, after 30 years of service, that I felt safe to tell the military who I really was.

My health has continued to deteriorate, and I will now be medically released from the forces in August. I applied to Veterans Affairs. I have not been assigned a caseworker. When I log into My VAC Account, it pulls up my old file with my old name and gender. My medical records do not use that name or gender. It took a number of phone calls, secure messages and two uploads of my legal documents to get my name and gender corrected at VAC to match my legal name and gender. Each time, I had to explain to a new person at Veterans Affairs why my name and gender were incorrect.

In the military, the form DND 1209 for self-identification is used to take a census of serving members. On it, you indicate if you're indigenous, a visible minority or disabled. You cannot indicate that you are a member of the LGBTQS+. The military has no idea how

many members are LGBTQ2S+. Likewise, Veterans Affairs has no idea how many veterans are LGBTQ2S+.

Thank you for listening. I look forward to any questions the members have.

• (1840)

The Chair: Thank you so much, Sergeant Usherwood. Thank you also for your service to Canada.

[*Translation*]

I now give the floor to Ms. Michelle Douglas for five minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Michelle Douglas (Executive Director, LGBT Purge Fund): Chair, members of the committee, I'm honoured to be invited to appear before you today.

[*Translation*]

Talking to you tonight is a great privilege for me.

[*English*]

I am a veteran. I served in the Canadian Armed Forces from 1986 to 1989. I was hoping to serve in the military for my whole career, but unfortunately I was one of the thousands of people who were caught up in the LGBT purge. I was fired in 1989 for being "not advantageously employable due to homosexuality".

When I was fired, I took steps to change that policy. I sued the government over the policy in 1992, and it was my legal challenge that formally ended Canada's discriminatory codified policy of discrimination against LGBT people in that year. I've been an activist ever since.

I went on to have a successful career in the Department of Justice and retired in 2019. Since then, I've been the executive director of the LGBT Purge Fund. We're an organization that was set up as part of the class action lawsuit settlement that brought together more than 700 survivors of the LGBT purge. We've been in operation since 2019.

We're the lead organization that's mandated by a court order to build the LGBTQ2+ national monument, among other things. While we do many other things, one thing we don't do is provide direct support services to LGBTQ2 veterans, but we encounter them all the time. We act as an informal referral hub and network for these veterans, who just aren't sure where to go to get support. Some of our board members even volunteer their time to gently support these folks and help them access services and supports through Veterans Affairs Canada. It's a beautiful buddy system network, and more of this is welcome.

We're also very pleased to now have an Office of Women and LGBTQ2+ Veterans at VAC to work with. In this regard, we'd like to offer some suggestions to the committee for consideration.

We're hoping that Veterans Affairs continues and funds this office for the far future. It's very essential that this office be well resourced.

We urge the continuation of work to improve the level of consistency of service. Other panellists have also addressed this issue.

We also want to make sure that there's specialized awareness training for case managers because, as we can see, the trauma experienced particularly by LGBTQ2+ veterans is quite serious and unique, and people must be well trained to support and encourage our members.

Finally, we're hoping that Veterans Affairs Canada will develop communities of practice for both veterans and practitioners—mental health practitioners—so that the practice of supporting LGBTQ2 veterans has an even greater level of awareness and professionalization.

In preparing for tonight, I want to thank the Rainbow Veterans of Canada, VETS Canada and It's Not Just 20K for help in preparing these remarks.

Again, I'd like to thank you for this invitation. It's my honour to appear.

• (1845)

The Chair: Thank you so much, Madam Douglas.

Also, thank you for your participation in this study.

[*Translation*]

I now yield the floor to the founder and chief executive officer of the Pepper Pod.

Ms. Perron, you have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Sandra Perron (Founder and Chief Executive Officer, The Pepper Pod): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also thank all the members of the committee.

[*English*]

Thank you, also, my dear esteemed veteran colleagues.

On March 15, 2017, at 9:15 in the morning my editor called me to say that I was going to be a published author. The memoir that I had just spent the year writing, about my time in the military as an infantry officer, was going to be published in three weeks.

An hour later I was in the hospital, with what I thought was a heart attack. The doctors advised me that it was not heart attack but a panic attack. I denied it and fought against it. I said there was no way that I could be having anxiety or a panic attack, and yet they sent me home with antidepressants.

I drove to Charlotte, North Carolina, where my parents were spending the winter and proceeded to spend five days on their couch curled up in a little ball, thinking that my world was about to end. After five days, my father had the insight to call VAC. They said, "bring her home, and we'll take it from here" and they did.

In the next six months to a year, they put me back together. They got me all of the amazing resources to help me get back on my feet. Today, I am the founder and CEO of The Pepper Pod, a retreat centre for women veterans in Chelsea, Quebec. Two hundred women have been through our programs—soon-to-be veterans, veterans, and spouses of military personnel.

VAC made me the woman I am today to be able to deliver these programs. That being said, they're not perfect. I've heard from these 200 women, and what they are telling me is that we can do better.

I've heard that many of their disability claims are being denied or rejected because they cannot prove that some of their ailments—back aches or injuries to their knees or feet—were a direct result of their military service. That's partially because they didn't have an accident. I'm here to tell you that when you wear equipment that was designed for men with the weight bearing on the shoulders instead of the hips, that will injure your back over a long time. It's the same with the boots that didn't fit and the other pieces of equipment, such as frag vests that weren't designed for women's breasts. I'm here to tell you let's do better with regard to these claims.

I also have other recommendations, but for now I'll leave it there.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Perron.

I think you know that you have translation. You can choose French or English during the committee.

Right now we're going to start with a round of questions. MPs are going to ask you questions, and I'm pretty sure we're going to learn a little bit more about your experience and how you feel. It will be really interesting for our committee to listen to you.

The first six minutes will go to our first vice-chair of the committee.

The floor is yours, Mr. Caputo.

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

The Chair: Excuse me. I'd like to remind you, members of the committee, to please indicate who the question is addressed to since there are four witnesses.

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

Before I begin, I want to thank each and every one of you, first of all, for making the time to be here. It really means a lot. Second, thank you for your service to the military and as pioneers, each in your own way. These are sometimes difficult discussions to have, depending on what your experiences are. I recognize that. I want to thank you for being here, for being pioneers and for the bravery each one of you has really shown in tackling what sometimes may seem really big problems. Thank you.

Where do I start? There is a lot to unpack here, to be very candid with you. I'm just going to dive right in.

Sergeant Usherwood, you have been serving for just about as long as I've been alive. I thank you for that. I was born in 1978.

You mentioned an upcoming medical discharge, which saddens me. I'm sorry to hear of this. What I'm asking, Sergeant, is whether you can comment, based on your experience, on what impediments you face, knowing that you are going to be a veteran who is discharged come August.

• (1850)

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Thank you for the question.

Not having been discharged yet, of course, I don't really know for sure. I have talked to other people who have been discharged.

In the last few years, I could see that I was going to be released. I knew that my medical condition was leading me that way, in that I would no longer meet universality of service. As a result, I was reflecting on my previous career, and I'm finding now that, kind of like another panellist, I didn't think it was affecting me mentally but I can see that it is. I've already started doing some.... Part of it was that as a member of the military, especially someone from way back, was literally the words "suck it up". I swallowed all of that.

I'm just at the point now of seeking medical help for my mental health, and where that's going to take me I don't know. It's my physical health that has suffered from hiding who I was. It's my physical health. The many things I had to do to protect myself caused me a physical injury, and that is the claim that I have. I have not put a mental claim in yet, but in talking to my health care workers, that will be proceeding in the next week or so.

What obstacles am I going to face? I don't know. I don't know anyone else who's had a career quite like mine. When I joined, Toronto police were still raiding gay bars. To protect myself, I had to swallow everything.

I'm sorry, I don't really know how to answer your question. Thank you for the question though.

Mr. Frank Caputo: Thank you. I apologize if it was vague. Just hearing you speak is really moving, so thank you very much for that.

I'd like to speak to Michelle Douglas next, if I could, Mr. Chair.

You mentioned specialized awareness training. Are you aware at this time of how effective that specialized awareness training is when it comes to people who are dealing day to day with veterans, and what could be improved?

Ms. Michelle Douglas: Thank you very much, Mr. Caputo.

I think a basic level of awareness about what LGBTQ people have experienced in the military is vital to being welcomed into a community where you're now called a veteran, but who have reservations about whether they will continue to be judged and marginalized and discriminated against.

If a case manager has training from which they understand what something like the LGBT purge was all about, what they may have experienced, or other kinds of discrimination and, frankly, oppression that was literally on the books of the Canadian government, that goes a long way to acknowledging the history of what someone's been through. A case manager who has been trauma informed as that person has approached, and understanding their story from an informed position, is really helpful.

I believe it to be part of the process that's under way already. However, I also hear many stories. People contact their case manager, and if the case manager happens to be new and doesn't know about the LGBT purge, they may not believe that it could happen in Canada. People have this notion that a history like the LGBT purge couldn't even happen in a place like Canada. There are basic levels of training needed so that it's not the victim, and it's not the person who's traumatized—

• (1855)

The Chair: Thank you. Could you please conclude.

Ms. Michelle Douglas: —who would have to explain the story to a case manager. It's essential that we train them well.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Douglas, and Mr. Caputo. That's all the time we have.

Now we're going to go to Ms. Rechie Valdez, for six minutes, please.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.): Good afternoon, Chair and colleagues.

I want to thank the witnesses for joining us here today. It's amazing, because you're taking your personal experiences and the experiences you hear from so many others and you're advocating for those people. I appreciate your being here to do that.

First off, Ms. Perron, thank you for sharing your personal experience with VAC. I want to congratulate you for being a published author.

You described recommendations regarding claims. Can you elaborate on where in the claims process there are issues?

Ms. Sandra Perron: I don't have all of the specific details of their claims. What the women are telling me is that, first of all, a lot of women have backaches and sore knees, and they're telling me that a lot of their claims have been denied because they could not prove that there were significant injuries during their career, or that their career was a direct cause of their injuries. Their initial claims have been denied.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you for clarifying. That was specifically what I wanted to know.

You created The Pepper Pod, where you have built a strong community of women veterans. I understand that Veterans Affairs recently provided just under \$1 million to The Pepper Pod through the veteran and family well-being fund. Can you share with us how The Pepper Pod is using the funding and how it will help the women veterans you serve?

Ms. Sandra Perron: Yes, absolutely.

One of the core programs we have is called "Lifeshop". It's a weekend retreat. Eight to 10 women come to the centre. For the most part, they don't know each other. They're scared. They're anxious. They're nervous about the weekend. They don't know what they're getting themselves into. By Sunday, they are sisters in arms. They are best friends. They hold onto each other before leaving. Then they follow up with other sessions, together with their new tribe.

In the other programs we have on the agenda is a "No Agenda Weekend". Any graduate of our programs can come and just spend a weekend with other graduates at The Pepper Pod to build their network. They do a little mind-mapping of any transitions they're going through or new projects or adventures. They get a bit of executive coaching.

We have "Wonder Woman Wednesdays" once a month, when we have amazing women come to talk to them. We've had Jody Thomas. Minister Anand was supposed to come, but she unfortunately has bigger fish to fry this month. We're having Christine Whitecross, one of the top generals in the forces, come to coach women. Louise Arbour has committed to come as well.

We're all about networking and providing them a bit of coaching, mentoring and a new tribe of women who, for the most part, have gone through the same thing they went through.

• (1900)

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Being an advocate for women, this is music to my ears, so thank you so much for going into the detail and providing us that context.

I'm limited in time, Sergeant Usherwood, but you described your experiences in your interactions with VAC, and what I'm interested in hearing about is how we can make improvements on our service. You were mentioning how your name and your gender kind of went back and forth. Can I just confirm that this issue is now fixed?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Thank you for the question.

Yes, it is now fixed, but it took a while to get it right. The problem, of course, is that every letter they send out to your doctor to get them to fill in something needs to match the name that's on your medical file. That's the issue.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Since you've gone through this a few times, can you clarify what other recommendations, very specifically, we can improve in the terms of our service?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: The biggest thing is to assign caseworkers. This having to call in and never knowing whom you'll get.... I went through the same thing with my dad. Because he had dementia, I had to be his advocate, and it was exactly the same thing: Each time, we have to get a new person.

Not having a caseworker means that you have to go back over and over and tell them the same thing. That's part of the trauma. I've spent last 13 years or whatever doing exactly that: explaining who I am.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you so much for sharing.

Hopefully I can squeeze this in.

Ms. Douglas, last year the VAC department added a team dedicated to female applicants and veterans, and you mentioned proper training to support the specific needs of females. Can you elaborate more on your recommendations for the department?

Ms. Michelle Douglas: Yes. I think there should be a basic awareness of how LGBTQ2 people should be respected and addressed.

I would make many of the points that Nina made about how just fundamental matters of respect and training are required so that people don't feel as though they're being retraumatized by a department that is, by and large, doing very good things to help them. The first impression really needs to be very positive, and so we should be working on those kinds of opportunities for those kinds of communications so they know what they're getting into.

The Chair: Madam Douglas, I'm sorry to interrupt you once again, but we have only six minutes.

[*Translation*]

I now give the floor for six minutes to the second vice-chair of the committee, Mr. Luc Desilets.

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

I thank our guests for their presence, service and availability.

I want to preface my questions with a preamble, because I have to say that I am somewhat in shock today.

Three weeks ago, the committee received figures that I had been asking for, for months and months. These figures were quite interesting: there was virtually no difference between French and English speakers in terms of the processing of their applications. Being a good sport, I sent my thanks. After all, when it's positive, you should say so.

According to these figures, then, there was about a week's difference.

Now, there's a little problem. This morning we have seen a report from the Library of Parliament that has completely different figures, figures such as we have never seen before. I am not the one putting forward these figures, the researchers at the Library of Parliament are.

According to this report, in the July-September 2021 quarter, the median gap was 55.6 weeks. In practical terms, this means that the average processing time for applications was 20.4 weeks for English speakers, while it was 76 weeks for French speakers. I did not invent these figures. That's a response time of 19 months for francophones—yes, 19 months.

I will quickly explain what the median is, as we are talking about the median waiting period here. This means that 50% of the applications made by francophones were processed in less than 19 months and for the other half of the applications, processing took more than 19 months.

I am amazed. If I weren't in such a prestigious venue, I would feel like uttering a string of swear words. It's unacceptable. It makes me angry. We rely on the results and the numbers that are presented here. A committee like ours is not inconsequential. It's sort of the ultimate authority when it comes to asking questions about veterans. This is quite simply unacceptable. I found out about it this morning and had to go and take a nap in the afternoon, I needed to decompress so badly.

I have a request to make of my very dear Liberal and neo-Liberal colleagues. Can you please look at these figures? Despite our very different political allegiances, I cannot believe that you will not make the required efforts with us.

I'm happy, in a way, to step in at the very moment when we're dealing with the gaps, but, at the same time, I find it dramatic. Once again, francophones are being given short shrift.

There is something I don't understand about our system. On February 23, 2022, \$146 million was allocated to remedy the problem. Last year it was \$192 million. The year before, in 2020, it was \$90 million. At some point, we wondered whether there was a structural problem. No matter how much money we throw at it and how much we try to hire staff, it does not solve the problem. But the problem must be solved. These are people who have to go through this, people who have served the nation, who have served Quebec and Canada. This makes me mad as a hornet; in other words, it makes me angry.

I'm decompressing.

My first question is for Ms. Laverdure, in light of these contradictions.

Ms. Laverdure, we have indeed had the opportunity to speak many times. You are a peer support worker, and I really commend that. We need you more than ever, given these interminable wait times. You told me last spring, if I am not mistaken, that you had tested the system by submitting applications written in English and others in French. Can you tell us about that, please?

• (1905)

Ms. Brigitte Laverdure: Yes, of course.

Last spring, I helped a veteran who lived close to the Outaouais-Ontario border. I asked him if he had any objections to us making his claim in English so I could test the system. He replied that he had no problem with it. He received a positive response in less than seven weeks. He received a reply in less than seven weeks, whereas we wait for years. This is the case for me, personally, and also for my spouse.

I am the boots on the ground. I'm not sitting in an office. I'm in the field 12 months a year, 24 hours a day, and have been for the last 12 years. Along the way, we've lost people. People give up and lose hope.

That's what I had to add to that.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Laverdure.

Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

I now turn the floor over to Ms. Rachel Blaney for six minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate this.

I want to thank all the people who testified today, and I especially those of you who've served for your tremendous service to us and your personal sacrifice. That is something very specific to those of you who have served. You have served, and you have personally sacrificed to bring forward these realities so that we can do a better job. Thank you for that and your advocacy, your dedication and your work.

If I may, I'll start with you, Sergeant Usherwood. It's a little bit weird to call you that, Nina, but that's how it works.

I want to thank you first of all for sharing your story. That was incredibly personal, and it's important that those words are on the record.

One thing that really had an impact on me in listening to that story is this idea of hiding and then consistently having to explain yourself. That's something that I hope everybody takes away from this. When we have groups in our communities who have to hide who they are, and then once we open those doors, they have to continuously explain, something is falling apart that should not be falling apart and we need to rectify that.

I also want to thank you so much for giving us all a copy of this form. That really tells us something important, which is that when you are in Defence, in the CAF, we are not identifying this particular group, so now we know that we don't have the data and the information from the LGBTQ2+. That means that when we see people transfer to Veterans Affairs, that record-keeping continues not to be meaningful.

I'm wondering if you could help us with some sort of recommendation about what VAC can do to ensure that services are delivered correctly to the stakeholder group, to the LGBTQ2+ community, if VAC doesn't even know who they are.

• (1910)

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Thank you for the question.

My suggestion, just thinking off the top of my head, because I haven't thought about this before, is that maybe when someone contacts them is to send an automatic.... Every time you phone them, you get the response, "Would you like to take part in a little survey?" Well, the survey isn't relevant to anything, to me or any of the problems I have. So maybe what they should be doing when you contact them is that they should be emailing you, or something, a survey that actually includes that kind of information and ask if you want to do it.

There are always going to be some members of the community who do not want to be exposed, who are still in a sense in hiding. I know people like that. I see it increasingly less, but there are still people out there who are not yet ready to be public about who they really are.

That would be my suggestion. Maybe they need to have a survey that says "Who are you?" as opposed to "Did we give good service?" Groceries stores do that: "Did we give good service?" I'm not sure that's really what we need.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

Change the forms and make sure that surveys ask questions: I hear that loud and clear.

You spoke also about witnessing and enduring hostility while you served and seeing members from the community go through that as well. I'm wondering if you could give us some examples. I just want to make sure that it's on the record what happens when we repress and hide.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: From my personal experience, part of it is that I had to isolate myself. I could not take part in any social events in the forces, because one thing the forces like to do—at least in the past—is that most social events involve drinking, so I could not lose that kind of control in such a way that it was acceptable to lose that kind of control.

As I said, even when I knew it was possible, I had friends who went through that, and it became public who they were. There is just no way that I could endure that as well as everything else. Almost all of them were forced out of the forces within a matter of months, or at most a year. To serve in that kind of poisonous, hostile environment is just unimaginable.

It's not one thing. It's just the fact that it never stops. As a panel member who was here once mentioned to me, it's the endless pin-pricks, the endless, endless.... It's not any one big thing. It's just that it's endless, and that's the trauma I'm dealing with right now.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that. I have only a few seconds left, so my last question for you is, how would having a case-worker help with the transition?

• (1915)

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Well, to start with, it would have cut months off my application, because I had to keep going through this over and over again. I live beside a large base, but the nearest veterans centre to go to is in Victoria, which is a three-hour drive away.

It's not having anybody you could go to, to meet face to face, that makes it very hard, and also, every time I phone in, it's a different

individual. As I said, I found the same thing when it was extremely difficult was to get my dad's case moved forward. That's why my mother just gave up and I had to take it on.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, MP Blaney.

Now I'd like to invite MP Cathay Wagantall to go ahead for five minutes, please.

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

I want to thank all of you for being here and for the opportunity to interact with you today. It means a great deal to me as well.

I want to start first with retired Lieutenant-Colonel Sandra Perron.

You started out with a comment about being published, which is wonderful, and then you went right into the circumstances of facing a panic attack.

I'm very curious. Quickly, was that in relation to the fact that your book was going to be published? Also, is this something that's available today for us? Would it be worthwhile for us to have a look at that?

Ms. Sandra Perron: Yes, absolutely. Thank you for the question.

Yes, the book was published. It's called *Out Standing in the Field*, and in French it's *Seule au front*. They are making it into a movie starting in the fall, so it's—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: That's wonderful.

Ms. Sandra Perron: Yes, the panic was directly related to my publishing this memoir of my time in the forces and facing those demons—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Right.

Ms. Sandra Perron: —after 25 years, putting them on paper and knowing that my secrets no longer would be secret.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Yes, exactly.

I have another couple of questions for you too. You mentioned that you got all the resources you needed, yet you talk about many women you interact with who are frustrated because they cannot prove that their injuries are due to service. I hear that all the time, and not just from women, actually, but from men as well.

I went out to Dundurn when the snipers were training. They geared me up, and I said, "Oh my word, I can hardly stand up under this." At that point they told me, "Well, Ma'am"—they always say "Ma'am" so nicely—"you don't even have any ammo in your pockets."

I've been on this committee for some time and we hear all the time about how we have changed things and that we are giving the benefit of the doubt. Obviously, if you parachute, of course you're going to have pain in your knees, and of course all of these circumstances you mentioned.... Do you feel that this is what VAC is doing now? Is it better? Or are they still making it incredibly difficult because you cannot directly prove injury due to service?

Ms. Sandra Perron: I can tell you that it is evolving. My last few groups were saying how pleased they were with some of the service they've had, despite the fact that the delays were so long and really difficult to handle.

Apart from that, yes, the services are getting better from the point of view of the participants.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Great.

I'm sorry; I have so many questions.

Also, I'm aware of and have heard that a significant number of women are couch surfing or homeless. We don't realize how many women are impacted.

Would you have a sense of that? Another question along with that is, do you see a value in service dogs?

Ms. Sandra Perron: To answer the first part of the question, I don't have the number of women who are couch surfing. As a matter of fact, at The Pepper Pod, we offer two things. First of all, we offer respite for women who need a shelter temporarily. Also, during Christmas or New Year's, or periods of tough times, we offer single women to come and spend the holidays with other women.

We have a few of them doing that, but I don't have a number.

• (1920)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay.

Ms. Sandra Perron: With regard to service dogs, absolutely. Yes to that, hands down.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay.

I have one more question. I only have a minute, but I'm curious: Why is it called The Pepper Pod?

Ms. Sandra Perron: A pepper pod is a military manoeuvre. While you're advancing towards the enemy, you cover your buddy, so we call it "pepper podding" or "pepper potting". It's designed to help your buddy or to cover your buddy to make sure they are safe while you're advancing towards the enemy. I thought that was quite appropriate for our centre, that as we go through changes in our lives we support one another.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I have 30 seconds left, so I'll just ask this question.

We've had many women come through this committee to talk about things, and obviously these are people with frustrations and bad experiences. Many of them, the majority, have said, "I would never encourage, and, as a matter of fact, I would discourage my daughters from enlisting."

That's very discouraging and sad.

Ms. Sandra Perron: It is very discouraging, and I understand why they would say that. With the women I see going through The

Pepper Pod, I would say that close to 70% of them have been abused, from harassment to rape, and so I can see why they would say that.

Personally, I would drive my daughter to the recruiting centre so she could join, but I would arm her with a mentor, some guidelines and some advice. But yes, I would....

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I appreciate that very much. We definitely need to do far better in that area. Thank you so much.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wagantall.

Thank you, Ms. Perron. I now know what the term pepper pod means.

I will now turn the floor over to Mr. Churence Rogers for five minutes.

[English]

Mr. Churence Rogers (Bonavista—Burin—Trinity, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I too would like to welcome our guests this evening. Thank you for your service and your advocacy on behalf of your fellow members and veterans.

The first question I'd like to put to Ms. Laverdure.

Aside from recent investments, strategies created, and hiring being done to address inequalities and imbalances in the application times, what else can be done to improve confidence in the department and the system at large to ensure that you and other stakeholders know that your needs and concerns are being heard or considered, appreciated and addressed?

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Laverdure: To make things easier inside the department, it would first have to meet its commitments. I've looked at the various committees over the last few months and years, and there are always promises being made about hiring staff. A few weeks ago, there was talk of 350 employees in the department. For five years I have been hearing that 350, 400 or 450 francophone or bilingual people will be hired in the department to work on the backlog. These are promises that were made, but we are not seeing any results. When veterans call the call centre to check on the status of their application, the only answer they get is that they are working on their file, that they have reached the point where they are processing the files submitted on such and such a date or in such and such a year, and that their turn will come.

To answer your question, I would say that the government must respect its promises and commitments.

[English]

Mr. Churence Rogers: Thank you.

I wonder if Sergeant Usherwood would like to comment on that.

• (1925)

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I have been involved directly in only two cases: mine and my father's. I haven't really talked to other people to compare wait times.

I'm sorry. I don't have any comparison. However, if there were more staff, maybe they could assign a caseworker to people.

Mr. Churence Rogers: Ms. Perron, your retreat centre for women veterans in Old Chelsea is an inspiring and fantastic idea. I'm sure it makes a huge difference to the many female veterans' lives and for their families.

Can you explain if there are any other retreats or centres like that across Canada, or if this idea would work in other regions of the country?

Ms. Sandra Perron: I don't believe that another centre like ours exists in Canada. There are some for men. There are probably some for men and women, but there is nothing like that just for women. Ours is unique. There is a need for this across the country. Right now, we have retreats at our centre, but I also travel across Canada to deliver the same services from Comox to Gaagetown, Halifax, Wainwright and North Bay.

Mr. Churence Rogers: Despite the fact there aren't centres, you travel across the country to get that done and get that message out there.

Ms. Sandra Perron: I do.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

[Translation]

The next two speaking turns will be two and a half minutes each.

I invite Mr. Luc Desilets to speak for two and a half minutes.

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

My question is for Ms. Laverdure.

It seems that some veterans, when they contact the Department of Veterans Affairs, are flatly given the recommendation to submit their application in English. We talked about this earlier. In your case, you did a test. That said, is it true that officials, or some officials, make this recommendation so that files can move forward more quickly?

Ms. Brigitte Laverdure: Yes, Mr. Desilets. On a few occasions in recent years, several veterans have been told by departmental employees to submit their applications in English so that they can be processed more quickly. In Charlottetown, some even say that English-language applications are given priority over French-language ones because there are more anglophone employees at the department. So we have the facts.

Mr. Luc Desilets: You have provided support to veterans on many occasions. Could you give me an idea of how many veterans you have been able to support in their application process over the last few years?

Ms. Brigitte Laverdure: In the last 12 years, I have helped more than 1,000 veterans with their applications. Most of these veterans were from Quebec and were targeted by the LGBT purge. I worked with Ms. Douglas a few years ago. I think I have helped

more than 1,200 veterans from all over Quebec and elsewhere in Canada.

Mr. Luc Desilets: To say that officials have told you or others that applications submitted in English are processed more quickly, you are basing that on a significant number of cases, aren't you?

Ms. Brigitte Laverdure: That's right. My spouse and I are veterans, so we also file claims. We've waited sometimes for two or three years. I even still have a claim that [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. At one point, I got angry and asked if I should submit my claim in English to be served faster, like anglophones. It's the truth.

• (1930)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Laverdure.

Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

I'll now give the floor to Ms. Blaney for two and a half minutes.

[English]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you again, Mr. Chair. I will be asking my questions of Ms. Douglas.

First of all, I feel like I'm having a bit of a fan girl moment. I'm not going to lie.

I want to thank you so much for what you've done. I cannot imagine the bravery it took to step up and do the work you did, and what it did to impact a whole community of people.

I thank you for that.

You talked a lot about the lack of training of the purge and the impact this has on people from the community who were calling and then having to tell the story again and again. Across the board, this is something I hear from veterans: telling their story, whatever story that is, again and again to case managers, and not having a person you can call.

I understand that there are challenges, but that really worries me.

Can you talk about what type of training would be required and when it would be required? Would there be a need for updates? I also think about the long term. You have the initial training, but does more need to happen?

That would help us.

Ms. Michelle Douglas: Thank you very much for your kind comments. Certainly I know you've been on this journey for a long time in support of us.

Training is so vital. It's really essential to understand what basic human rights are around LGBTQ2+ equality, and to explain a bit of history to ensure that respect is conveyed whenever you're dealing with an LGBTQ2+ veteran.

The trauma runs so deep. People are already taking a great deal of courage to step in and ask for support and assistance. I've heard in a number of cases when that first initial phone call did not go well. There was doubt, or even mocking in a couple of cases. They never called Veterans Affairs again. They felt so humiliated and ashamed, and it was retraumatizing.

Our experience tells us that this is a particularly vulnerable group of folks who are looking for help. Many have experienced precarious home lives or are experiencing homelessness. There has to be a range of awareness training throughout the life of a caseworker so that there's currency in that training. I do know it's under way, and that's a good thing, but it's certainly not right across the department.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Michelle Douglas: We need to have that training in both English and French so there's good awareness for all veterans who apply.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Douglas.

We'll now go to MP Anna Roberts, for five minutes, please.

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

I just want to say that it's an honour and a privilege to be in the presence of such strong women and advocates for women. It gives me such warm feelings that I can't even describe it.

I have a couple of questions, and the first one is for Sergeant Usherwood.

I had the opportunity to watch your YouTube video, and I must say it brought tears to my eyes. You made a statement in it that really touched my heart. I want to read it back to you:

The way a society or a country or an organization is now, is affected by how they acted, what they did in the past.... If you don't understand the past, you can't see why they are the way they are.

That statement to me was very impactful. What suggestions can you make, going through your experiences, that would help us learn how we could better provide services more efficiently and more effectively? You mentioned consistent caseworkers. Is it a lack of caseworkers? Is it a lack of training?

What suggestions can you make to this committee that we can take back in order to provide better service for everyone?

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Well, thank you for the question.

I would say it's about not being assigned a caseworker and needing to explain yourself each time. If I weren't so angry at the lack of acknowledgement of my service, I probably would have given up. I did give up initially, when I first applied. It's just easier not to put yourself through that.

Not having one person you can talk to makes everything so much more difficult. If they assign caseworkers, maybe some of the caseworkers won't be involved with very much, and as time goes by, once they actually get their application in, it can be given to another caseworker or shared in some different way. Maybe they need to look at how other adjudication works or that kind of system. My

wife is actually involved with the B.C. government and does health adjudication for medical devices.

Maybe they need to look at some of the other ways that this kind of service is being delivered. Health care—which is ultimately what Veterans Affairs is. That would be my suggestion. Maybe they need to look at other places.

Thank you for the question.

• (1935)

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Would you suggest that maybe when a caseworker has to leave or retire or whatever, the next caseworker has a transitional period with the individuals she has been servicing? Would that be a good idea? I'm just throwing out ideas.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Yes. That would be a great idea. There could be someone who says to them, "You're going to be getting this case. This is the brief on it." Then, when they do reach out, if there's no direct contact with a transfer, at least they could have the brief that tells them what's going on. Every time I phone, they go, "Okay, I'm going to read through the notes and see what's there." That gets frustrating.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: I can see that. Thank you very much.

My next question is for Sandra Perron.

You mentioned service dogs. I will tell you that I'm a huge, huge fan of service dogs. I know the effect they have. I volunteer for an accessibility committee. One of the individuals on our committee has a service dog, and she has taught me a lot. I'm also a fan of rescuing dogs.

How many service dogs that you know of have helped the LGBTQ community?

Ms. Sandra Perron: Specifically for the LGBTQ2+ community, there are probably just two. Overall, there are seven or eight service dogs for women coming through. They have been a great help.

One of the comments I have heard is that it takes a long time for them to get their dog. I myself have applied for a dog and have waited forever. I finally just bought a doodle and just cuddled the heck out of him to hopefully convince him to be my service dog. It takes a long time.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Thank you so much.

Thank you, Mr. Chair

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Perron.

Mr. Miao, you have the floor for five minutes.

[English]

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

I'd like to thank all the guests here today for this important study. It's an honour to be together and to hear from you guys about what we can do better.

I'd like to address the following question to Ms. Perron. What sort of programs could be added to Le Pepper Pod's program to increase its outreach?

Ms. Sandra Perron: First of all, I'm going to correct you. We're not guys. We are women.

Mr. Wilson Miao: I apologize.

Ms. Sandra Perron: That's okay.

The programs that could be added with, perhaps, additional funding and, definitely, more resources would include follow-ups from the lifeshops. What we're doing right now is an initial lifeshop and a small follow-up. I would like to do retreats number two, three and four, which focus on different things for our veterans. Those are some of the programs. Perhaps we could add a summer camp for some of the children of veterans who have PTSD.

One of the things that I'm hearing from women quite a bit is that when they are abused by their husband in civilian life, they're told to leave their husband. However, women who are spouses of military members who have PTSD are being told that their spouse served his country, they're there to support him, stay the course, stick with them. That's very hard on the women.

Those are some of the programs. Does that answer your question?

• (1940)

Mr. Wilson Miao: Yes. Thank you very much for your answer.

Do you see any barriers to seeking out these services that could be removed or improved?

[Translation]

Ms. Sandra Perron: I would say that, in 2022, it's time to use the right terms to define ourselves. In French, we are *vétérane*, *anciennes combattantes*. The time has come to prioritize inclusion, and it's time for inclusion to trump the masculine.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you.

[English]

You mentioned in your opening remarks that you have other recommendations. Would you share those with us as well?

Ms. Sandra Perron: I mentioned one with regard to using the correct names for us as veterans. I often hear that we are “female veterans”, but men are just “veterans”, so let's correct that. We are all veterans. If we're going to identify them by gender, we can do both.

The other recommendations are to reduce the delays for disability claims and to provide access to some of our veterans who are in distress. I can tell you that I have had a couple of workshops where women have said they can't find any resources when they are in the

middle of a panic attack, in general distress or suicidal. Those are services that could be improved.

Mr. Wilson Miao: To follow up with the questions, would removing gender from medical documents and adding a preferred name cut down on responses and wait times, and lower the anxiety in this process?

Ms. Sandra Perron: I don't know if this question is addressed to me. Perhaps Sergeant Usherwood would be better positioned, or maybe Madam Douglas or Madame Laverdure, to respond to it.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: Gender is part of why I have a claim that has gone to Veterans Affairs. Removing it... Maybe it doesn't need to be on what we in the forces call the “boilerplate”—the thing at the top—but my gender is very important to me and erasing it is.... My gender, who I am, is why I have a claim.

I'm not sure that's the best answer. You should definitely be able to put preferred names. That's for sure. Maybe a place to indicate pronouns would also help.

Thank you.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you very much, Sergeant Usherwood. That really helps us.

The Chair: Let's go to MP Fraser Tolmie for five minutes, please.

Go ahead.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate that.

Thank you, witnesses, for your presentations and for your service. This has been very enlightening, and I do appreciate it.

When I was serving in the military, one of the things that we went through was what I believe was called “SHARP” training. It was to raise awareness.

Sergeant Usherwood, you're smiling, so this question is going to you.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Also, thank you for bringing up “boilerplate”. I've used that several times, and not a lot of people outside of the military understand that term and its meaning. I have to say thank you very much for that.

Part of the process was to raise awareness. I think that was obviously to recognize a lot of the mistakes that we in the military had made in the past. My question, Sergeant Usherwood, would be, do you feel that would be important training for the caseworkers and file workers, for them to know a little more when they're dealing with a file? I'm not sure if that's part of their job description and whether they're aware of what we've gone through.

What are your thoughts on that?

• (1945)

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: In reference to SHARP training, I've been in for 40 years and it seems that every 10 years we call it something different, because we just haven't changed what is the culture of the military. It's still pretty macho, so we end up going through the same thing over and over. I am somewhat optimistic that this time we finally have the process and we're finally seeing a change.

In my own experience with SHARP training, it was used as a check in the box. Once you had the check, you had your training and you were good to go. If that's all it is, it's meaningless. In the forces right now, they're actually doing something called "Respect in the CAF". Something like that can't just be an hour-long talk by someone talks to you. It actually needs to be communication. Something like that would be more useful, I feel. Thank you for the question, though.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: I really appreciate your honesty on that question. As I said, I think that if that new training is successful, then maybe it could be implemented in the hiring practice and part of the training for Veterans Affairs caseworkers.

Ms. Laverdure, I appreciate that this will be probably translated. When I look at what was mentioned earlier on by Ms. Perron, which was that a service member is a service member and a vet is a vet, it doesn't matter what your language preference is. Do you feel that having more caseworkers is going to solve the problems that our francophone service members are dealing with? Or is there something else that you think needs to be added rather than just coming up with, as has been mentioned before, a tick in the box?

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Laverdure: Thank you for the question.

Over the past few years, I have spoken with many case managers from across the province, in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, in Montreal, in Quebec City, in Gatineau, and they aren't the problem. The problem is the workload that the department imposes on them. Some have to manage 25, 30 or 40 cases at the same time. For them, talking about the veteran isn't the problem.

At the same time as the case managers start processing veterans' files, there could be liaison officers who would follow up on the claims. These officers would be called upon to contact the veteran to inform them of the status of the file. That would be the least the department could do, and veterans would feel less left to their own devices. Case managers certainly can't see everything; they don't make decisions about claims.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Laverdure and Mr. Tolmie.

Mr. Casey, you now have the floor for five minutes.

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

I'll pick up where Mr. Tolmie left off with Ms. Laverdure. I don't have any questions, but I would like to make a comment, if I may.

Ms. Laverdure, I'm the member of Parliament for Charlottetown, and I'm a member of the Liberal Party. The facts presented by Mr. Desilets are not at all acceptable. I admire your work, and as

the Liberal member of Parliament for Charlottetown, I'm committed to addressing this issue and bringing pressure to bear. This is not at all acceptable.

Thank you for your testimony.

• (1950)

[English]

I want to concentrate most of my questions to you, Ms. Douglas. Part of the reason for that is my personal interest. I was a litigator in a previous life.

You started with the fact that you launched a case against the government in or about 1992, a case that resulted in a change in government practice in 1992, and now you find yourself in a spot that was created as a result of class action litigation related to veterans.

I'm interested to hear a bit more about the story. Can you talk a bit about the 1992 litigation, please?

Ms. Michelle Douglas: Well, I really was devastated to be fired by the Canadian Armed Forces. I was a top performer when I was there, but it didn't matter.

In the 1980s, the policy said, if you're LGBT, you can stay, but no promotions, no pay raise, no training and no postings. It was a pretty devastating policy to operate under.

I was fired anyway, and that's when I launched my lawsuit. It had the effect of giving me a bit of justice back in 1992, but we all know that justice for one person is not really justice at all. We know that thousands of others who experienced this purge didn't get justice when the policy ended because of my lawsuit. It took until much later, 2018, until members of the class action could get some justice in that class action lawsuit.

Mr. Sean Casey: So you were a lone litigant, who was terminated in 1989, and by 1992 the policy of the government had changed because of you as an individual suing the government?

Ms. Michelle Douglas: That's exactly right. It was one of the very first section 15 cases under the charter. On the eve of a three-week trial at Federal Court, the federal government settled out of court with me, and at that moment ended the codified policy of discrimination in the Canadian Armed Forces. I should say that ending discrimination by policy and ending discrimination in a more subtle way are two entirely different things.

Mr. Sean Casey: That's an absolutely inspiring story.

The LGBTQ purge lawsuit was commenced in 2016 and settled in 2018. Is that right?

Ms. Michelle Douglas: That's right. There were about 720 members of that class.

Mr. Sean Casey: Would you agree with me that in terms of the progress of class action litigation that's lightning fast?

Ms. Michelle Douglas: I think it is, based on my awareness of these things. It also set for a settlement the greatest settlement in the world, to my knowledge, for LGBT reconciliation outcomes from a class action lawsuit.

However, I would say that no matter what was paid to LGBT purge survivors, making them whole is still taking a lot of work. These folks, and let me add myself to this, are really shattered by what happened to us. The humiliation we experienced at the hands of the military left some pretty deep scars.

Mr. Sean Casey: Ms. Douglas, thank you so much for your commitment to justice over so many years, both personally and on behalf of so many others who have been discriminated against. It really is inspiring. I have much respect for you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Casey.

We'll now have two quick interventions of two and a half minutes each.

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor.

• (1955)

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

My time is limited, but I will ask you a question. In my first intervention, I saw the dismay on the faces of the participants about the numbers that were provided. I just heard Mr. Casey say the same thing, that he also seems to want the true figures.

I don't know the procedure, but I'd like us to ask the minister to clarify the figures he provided to the committee. Perhaps a mistake was made. In any case, there is an astronomical discrepancy, which is unacceptable. It would be nice if he could clarify the figures, perhaps give us the data according to the years. The figures he has given us may be accurate, but when I look at the averages and the median, I have my doubts. As I said, I didn't provide those figures.

I think you are aware of the problem. Since you were the chair of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, you would be very skilful in writing a letter, if the committee agrees, asking the minister and all his resources to clarify this for us.

We are swimming in the dark. Three weeks ago, everything was clear to me, I was happy, and now I feel like breaking down doors. Do we need more money? Maybe we don't need any more if these numbers are correct. Three weeks ago, I asked that these hires be made permanent, that we hire these people full-time. We were told that it may not be necessary.

If we had clear numbers, we could base our future actions on reliable data and better support our committee's conclusion when we write our report.

That concludes my remarks. I don't know if it's possible for us to send this letter.

What do you think, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: I did stop the clock to respect your time, Mr. Desilets. Your intervention stems from the document produced by the library analysts.

After consulting with the clerk, I can confirm that I have the right to write to the minister on behalf of the committee. If we don't get an answer, the committee could adopt a motion, if necessary, to make our request in that regard.

Mr. Caputo, you have the floor.

[English]

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

Mr. Desilets used most of his time as an intervention. I believe I have six minutes coming up. I'm prepared to give him three of my minutes, in the event he wishes to ask an actual question.

The Chair: Thank you for your collaboration.

[Translation]

Mr. Desilets, and to the committee members as well, it's agreed that the clerk and I will look into the matter and write to the minister as soon as possible, perhaps enclosing a copy of the document prepared by the library analysts, for clarification.

Mr. Luc Desilets: As I understand it, we don't need the committee's approval.

Is that correct?

The Chair: We don't need it. It's done.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Great.

The Chair: You have a minute left.

Mr. Luc Desilets: You just gave me three.

The Chair: You know that we adopted procedures at the very beginning of the committee that we must follow. So you have one minute left, Mr. Desilets.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I would like to take this opportunity to thank our four witnesses once again. I've obviously focused on the francophones, but these are moving and poignant testimonies, really poignant. I know that there are also inequities in the processing of applications from anglophones. The witnesses told us about them. I would have liked to question them, but unfortunately, I did not have time.

Thank you, I salute you, I love you.

I'll just ask one last question.

Ms. Laverdure, given the thousand or so cases you've handled over the past 12 years, apart from the delay issue, do you still feel that there's been an improvement in claims processing?

I'm looking for something positive.

• (2000)

The Chair: Ms. Laverdure, I would ask you to respond in 15 seconds. Mr. Desilets will have an opportunity to come back to this later.

Ms. Brigitte Laverdure: We're seeing an improvement in Quebec in terms of how the department processes claims, but that may not be the case everywhere in Canada.

The deadline is shorter for any claim related to psychological health, because these people are often in distress. In Montreal, a person has been appointed to handle only those types of claims, such as anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder. So the responses are sent a little more quickly.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Laverdure.

Ms. Blaney, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you again, Chair.

I would like to come back to Madame Laverdure. I really appreciate and hear your frustration as you talk about the reality you are facing every single day, how hard you are fighting to get these veterans recognized and how long the delay is.

I have two questions for you. First, do you see a difference for the francophone community by gender—between women and men—in the timelines? I'm curious whether you are seeing anything unique that differentiates those two particular groups.

Second, how long have you been advocating to VAC about the delays you are seeing for the francophone community?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Laverdure: There is indeed a difference between the treatment of female veterans and male veterans. There has been an improvement over the past few months with respect to the sexual misconduct class action lawsuit. The Department of Veterans Affairs has set up a special group for women who have been victims of sexual assault and sexual misconduct. With regard to the physical health applications, the wait times are still very long.

As for your second question, I've noticed over the past five years that the department has had a great deal of difficulty in responding to claims.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

Finally, what is the most profound impact of these delays on the folks who are trying to get those services?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Laverdure: As I mentioned in my opening remarks, many veterans drop out of the process and sometimes end up on the street. Some go through a divorce and lose custody of their children. Others do the irreparable: they take their own lives.

I personally experienced this situation last winter when I was asked to support a veteran from the Montreal area. I had started the process, but given the holidays and the COVID-19 pandemic, we were told that the process would be long.

Shortly thereafter, the veteran's spouse called me to tell me that he had found her dead in the bathroom; she died by suicide.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Laverdure.

There will now be four interventions of five minutes each: Mr. Caputo, Mr. Samson, Mrs. Wagantall and Mrs. Valdez. After that, Mr. Desilets and Ms. Blaney will each have two and a half minutes to ask questions in order to keep to the schedule.

I'd also like to talk to you very briefly about the next meeting.

Mr. Caputo, you have the floor for five minutes.

• (2005)

[*English*]

Mr. Frank Caputo: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Again, what we're hearing has been very captivating. One of you is a published author. I think that all of you should consider writing books, because you all have very interesting stories to tell. That's not something I say lightly. I mean that. I'd love to read this, because what we get here is just a snapshot. It's not fully what we could hear. I encourage you and affirm you in the work that you're all doing in keeping going. Thank you for that.

I've heard a couple of comments here that struck me, particularly as they relates to the purge. One of the comments was that people couldn't believe that this happened in Canada, as if there were some caseworkers who were surprised by that or weren't aware of it, depending on their age or their experience and things like that.

One of the things that came to mind, particularly for my riding, where 215 children were discovered at the residential school in Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, are the enduring impacts of that. I'm wondering if there is any sort of parallel to be drawn. Yes, this happened 30 years ago, but there are still lingering impacts of the purge.

I open this up to any of the witnesses. Does anybody wish to comment on whether they've seen that, or is this something that's really in the past?

Ms. Michelle Douglas: Perhaps I could take a start at answering that question. Obviously, I'm very cautious about drawing direct comparisons. The devastating impact of residential schools stands as such a horror in Canada that I'll be very careful to not draw comparisons.

We know that the LGBT purge had a devastating effect on some estimated 9,000 Canadians, people who were trying to serve their country in the Canadian Armed Forces, public service and the RCMP. These folks were giving their all, and in some cases their lives, to serve Canadians and Canada, and yet they were treated horribly by the state. I think we're doing everything we can to try to tell these stories.

There's a great documentary done by Sarah Fodey called *The Fruit Machine*. It's available for free online and you can have a look at it. It really shows quite viscerally the impact and the trauma of the purge.

We're going to tell that story through the national monument and through an exhibit at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, and in some ways take off a little bit of the veneer that everything was okay. It wasn't okay, and we have to tell those hard stories.

I think all Canadians are coming to terms with some of the history that we have been through.

Mr. Frank Caputo: Thank you for that.

I appreciate what you said at the beginning. Certainly what I was trying to get at was that sometimes our past really does inform the difficulties that we continue to endure because of the past.

I'm not sure if any of the other witnesses wish to comment at all.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I would be interested in mentioning that I have a chronic health condition as a result of my service, and specifically about the way that I had to protect myself so I could continue to serve in the forces. Thirty years of trauma gives you a chronic health condition. I don't know how to put it more bluntly than that.

Thank you.

Mr. Frank Caputo: Sergeant, that just speaks volumes, because those around you are impacted by that. That's why I think your story is so meaningful, and that's the type of thing I think we really need to hear.

When you talk about 30 years of trauma, you have loved ones, friends, family. You talked about your wife earlier. That's the type of thing I was getting at in asking the question. These impacts are obviously substantial and they're going to be ongoing. To me, it highlights the need for education. We talked about that earlier, that sometimes that education is missing, so I thank you for that, because that really brought clarity. I do look forward—

The Chair: Your time is up.

Mr. Frank Caputo: Oh, thank you.

I was just going to say thank you and I look forward to visiting the museum and the exhibition when it's open.

• (2010)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Caputo.

Now I'd like to invite MP Darrell Samson to use his five minutes.

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

First, I want to thank you for what you shared today. I also want to thank you for your service, which is extremely important, and for sharing your personal stories. It's very difficult, but very important, and for that I thank you sincerely.

When I hear the phrase “suck it up”, which I've heard so often in the military from military men and women, that was the way it was at that time, and for a long time. I know that a lot of people lost opportunities to have data about some of their challenges while they served, because they sucked it up. They didn't talk about it, and that is a big issue today, because we're trying to get them the benefits they deserve, and the alignment is complicated because of that.

I don't know if any of you were in the House of Commons back in 2017, I think it was, when our government apologized to the public service LGBTQ2+. It was very moving, and I could only imagine how the individuals who were there felt, or Canadians who were watching, because it was important. It was a long time coming. It should have come forward, of course.

I'd like to focus very quickly and try to touch on a couple of quick issues.

The first one is the office of women and LGBTQ2+ secretariat. I'm opening it up very quickly because I probably have four minutes now, and I know that Monsieur Caputo is not going to give me some of his time.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Darrell Samson: He's already given it to his colleague from the Bloc.

That said, have you had any dealings with them? Do you know anything about them? Can you share something about that? Basically, they're there to share some of the influences from the research so they can make changes to policies or suggest changes.

[Translation]

It can also make people aware of the situation.

[English]

In looking at the barriers, just quickly, we'll go right to Brigitte Laverdure.

[Translation]

I'd ask you to keep your answers brief because we only have 30 seconds each.

Ms. Brigitte Laverdure: As I mentioned earlier, I think there needs to be more of a team blitz to deal with claims that are assigned to case managers. There could be service officers or liaison officers who would be responsible for monitoring and mentoring veterans.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you very much, Ms. Laverdure.

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood, do you have any comments on this?

[English]

Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood: I have had no interaction with them. In fact, I didn't even know they existed until a few months ago, because of lack of information. Veterans Affairs, frankly, doesn't advertise very well.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Okay. Thank you for that information. It's important for us to know that so we can use other ways of reaching individuals.

Next is Michelle Douglas.

Ms. Michelle Douglas: I have had quite a bit of involvement with them. Early on, they reached out to us, and we said, "Nothing about without us." They said: "Great. Come to lots of meetings, help us learn and help us improve."

My sense of the organization and the office is that they're highly motivated to improve and they're doing quite a good job. We can go to them with specific cases if we need to, and I'm grateful they exist.

• (2015)

Mr. Darrell Samson: We'll tap into that as much as we can.

Sandra Perron is next.

Ms. Sandra Perron: I will echo Ms. Douglas's comments. I've had some interaction with them.

One of the recommendations I made to them was for them to go upstream with some of the things that women are suffering today with the military and to see how we can prevent them to avoid casualties in the future. If we have so many women with needs in VAC, with problems, then let's make sure that gets looped back to the military so that we can prevent these problems.

[Translation]

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you very much.

What you said earlier about the equipment that is designed for men and the weight that women have to carry is very important to remember. We need to collect accurate data on that. We want to improve that so that we can better respond to people's needs.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Samson.

[English]

We now have five minutes with MP Cathay Wagantall.

Go ahead.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you, Chair.

Very quickly, I would like to speak to Ms. Laverdure about the impacts she's still seeing within the francophone community of veterans.

I have trouble determining where we really are in this regard. How many veterans are francophone? How many case managers are francophone? How much improvement is actually taking place? We're hearing confusion again today with regard to those numbers and percentages.

Do you have a concern as you realize—and can you share with us—the importance of the difference between a case manager who is bilingual versus one who is francophone?

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Laverdure: Thank you for the question.

I don't have the exact figures because I don't work in the Department of Veterans Affairs offices. I'm on the ground with veterans.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has led us to do things differently, I can tell you that, when veterans need help, I usually accompany them to the district offices. I travel throughout the province. It's always difficult to talk to a case manager. There should always be a case manager on call to record the information, because as we talked about earlier, veterans have to repeat themselves over and over again.

As for the exact figures, I know that each case manager is given 25 to 35 cases.

[English]

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I made a little note of a comment you made. We've been trying on this committee to come up with recommendations for improving that whole process so that it will be time efficient. One of the issues concerns the point you made about case managers not being the ones who make the decision. It seems to me that we have quite a complicated bureaucratic mess here and, a lot of the time, case managers end up in the middle. As you said, they're overworked. They don't get to make the decisions. Sometimes they get to relay the decision when it's not something that was truly wanted in the first place; it was recommended it the first place.

One of the recommendations that was made was that case managers should become far more a part of the professional process and take that process right from the beginning to the actual decision-making. Do you see that that would make things better? They're at the front of the conversation and build the relationship with that veteran.

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Laverdure: I'd like to highlight two facts.

The case manager is responsible for managing the veteran's file, and claims are routed to a decision-making unit in Charlottetown.

The district offices don't decide whether the veteran is entitled to compensation. Case managers are people who support veterans when they leave the armed forces for all aspects of the professional, medical or psychosocial component. A case manager will support the veteran for a minimum of two years.

• (2020)

[English]

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: It's for a minimum of two years. Is that correct?

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Laverdure: Yes, the minimum support period is two years.

[English]

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I ask because I have many veterans who have struggled with the fact that they get moved from one to another. Their case manager quits and they don't even know that they're gone. There's this type of thing, so I appreciate that.

Do I have any time left, Chair?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I'd just like to put a plug in for the fact that we heard a little bit today about the importance of service dogs. As the witness said, there's a difference between an obedience dog or a family dog and a service dog. We have a responsibility. This committee put forward a study on national standards, and I think we need to improve that accessibility for our veterans.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now, let's go to MP Rechie Valdez for five minutes, please. Go ahead.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: I just have a question for Madame Laverdure for clarification. Are you aware of the specific VAC franco-phone unit, and have you referred any cases there directly?

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Laverdure: In fact, a few years ago, I directed veterans in Victoria, British Columbia, to this service.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you.

[English]

Mrs. Douglas, in my previous corporate career I had supported call centres that handled customer cases to ensure that employees had proper change management training. This is really essential because, unless you train them in a very specific way, it's going to be really hard for them to handle calls that come in.

Since employees at VAC may or may not have your experiences that we've talked about, as you mentioned, and training is vital. Can you touch on specific educational training that we can include in our recommendations? For example, do you feel that simply by adding LGBTQ purge training, it could help them be more educated?

Ms. Michelle Douglas: I think that would help enormously if they had that kind of baseline training. There are other, broader human rights kinds of training or respectful engagement training that would also be helpful. There are those kinds of base levels that we'd like to see.

The LGBTQ Purge Fund prepared, with the help of experts, a 250-page report called "Emerging from the Purge"—*Au lendemain de la Purge*. This report, which is available free online, comes up with recommendations that managers could easily look at and say, "Yes, we can implement those." They're not such giant system recommendations that they couldn't be implemented at the local level. It would help with the welcoming both as an employer, which is really important to making sure people are respected in their own workplace, and then as a service to clients.

I think both aspects are important, and training would help that a lot.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: That was getting right into my next question, which was around soft-skills training. It's one thing for you to have the knowledge of how to use whatever system you're using, and then understanding the background of veterans, but now there are soft skills, which really concern empathy and how to respect others. What other soft-skills training would you recommend?

Ms. Michelle Douglas: There are some terrific safe space or positive space ambassadorial training courses available through the Canada School of Public Service, including online.

I know there are other training opportunities within Veterans Affairs that are being delivered slowly, but if we could speed up those kinds of training courses.... We'd love to see basic human interaction training courses, so that those skills reach across everything anybody would do in their job. There are also some great courses that can be purchased, I think, by the department that are available through organizations like Pride at Work. Those are the kinds of things we'd love to see happen all the more within Veterans Affairs.

• (2025)

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Can I request you to share those with us, Mrs. Douglas? That would be great.

Ms. Michelle Douglas: Of course, we could do that—

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: I think it's really important for us to have reference to those direct resources that you specifically recommend for us.

Those are all my questions. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now let's go back to Mr. Desilets.

[Translation]

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

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

Ms. Laverdure, you mentioned liaison officers. I don't have much time, but I'd like you to take a minute to explain to me how you see this.

Ms. Brigitte Laverdure: Thank you for the question.

We know that case managers don't have the time to take calls from veterans who use case management services. I would therefore suggest that liaison officers in the district offices be linked to veterans' files in order to follow up with them. That would be ideal.

These officers would also be able to monitor the files and answer veterans' questions. They would be less left to their own devices and would be able to find out the status of their file after several months of waiting.

As I said earlier, case managers don't authorize claims. They authorize plans.

Mr. Luc Desilets: From what I understand, that would be very reassuring for veterans.

Would there be a time saving or an advantage for liaison officers?

Ms. Brigitte Laverdure: I think there would be an advantage for case managers. Instead of spending many hours on the phone to call veterans back, they could spend more time processing cases to respond to requests for psychological or psychiatric care, to authorize visits to the doctor or therapist or to Ste. Anne's Hospital. They could also respond to Blue Cross requests and claims. It's the case managers who authorize all of that.

So that would be helpful for case managers.

Mr. Luc Desilets: That's very interesting.

Our goal is to make recommendations in the report we'll have to write at the end of the study.

You alluded to something I had never heard of that might be interesting. What do you mean by blitz teams?

Ms. Brigitte Laverdure: The blitz teams would work in the district offices. We lost a large district office in Quebec, the one in Sherbrooke, which served a lot of veterans from the Eastern Townships, from the entire Eastern Townships. All these people are being redirected to Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu and Montreal.

I would suggest that each district should have blitz teams of case managers and liaison officers who would travel to the regions.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Laverdure.

Ms. Blaney, you have two and a half minutes.

[English]

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

Again, thank you to all of our witnesses. It's good to be in the presence of so many strong and powerful women.

Ms. Perron, I want to congratulate you on having a movie made out of your book. I think that's absolutely fantastic and very exciting. It's exciting to see those voices finally represented in meaningful ways. Thank you for your dedication.

We know that women's disability claims are often extremely delayed. We know they're delayed because their bodies are seen as the traditional male body, without an acknowledgement of the wonderful spectrum of bodies that we exist. I'm just wondering if you could talk a little bit about what you've heard from the women you work with about the gear they wear and the impacts that has on their bodies.

The other part—and then I'll stop—is that you talked a lot about microaggressions. We heard today from other witnesses words like “shattered” and “endless pinpricks”. I think those two things need to be connected. It's what happens physically, emotionally and mentally that has that impact.

Could you just answer that huge question in about a minute?

• (2030)

Ms. Sandra Perron: So many of the VAC and military programs have been designed for men and adapted to women. This has a huge impact on women's bodies with regard to equipment. The rucksacks were not designed for women.

This is changing. There's new armour, bodysuits and body armour, that's coming out, but the women today who are retiring have been wearing equipment that was designed for men for 30 to 35 years, and that's had an impact. We need to recognize that.

We also need to recognize that some of the trauma they have suffered from sexual misconduct has physical consequences, such as debilitating diseases and—the name escapes me. A lot of physical ailments are due to some of the trauma they have suffered.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Ms. Blaney and Ms. Perron.

That's all the time we have tonight. On behalf of the members of the committee, I would like to say thank you to all of you.

[Translation]

I can tell you that, personally, I've learned a lot this evening, and I'm even more aware of your situation. You've given us some excellent testimony.

I would like to thank Brigitte Laverdure and Sgt Nina Charlene Usherwood, who testified as individuals, as well as Michelle Douglas, executive director of the LGBT Purge Fund, and Sandra Perron, founder and CEO of the Pepper Pod. Again, I thank you for your interventions and your contribution to this study that we're doing at the committee.

I'll now take a quick minute to address the committee members before adjourning the meeting.

First, as part of this study, you've received a document from VETS Canada.

[English]

I would like to know if I can get the consent of the committee to invite Ms. Lowther to appear at our next scheduled meeting for this study. I know that Ms. Wagantall has already answered on that.

So there's no problem with that?

Mr. Sean Casey: No problem.

The Chair: Okay. We will invite VETS Canada.

[*Translation*]

I would also simply like to inform you, committee members, that a number of people have declined our invitation to appear: Sherry Bordage, from CannaConnect, as an individual; Pierre-Claude Vézina, as an individual; Sylvain Bolduc, as an individual; Lori Buchart, from It's Not Just 20K; and Virginia Vaillancourt, national president of the Veterans Affairs Employees Union, and Mike Martin, communications officer for the same union.

Committee members, I'd now like to know if I have your consent to adjourn this meeting.

I see that everyone agrees.

The meeting is adjourned.

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