



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 022

Thursday, October 20, 2022

Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg



Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Thursday, October 20, 2022

• (1535)

[Translation]

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

Welcome to meeting number 22 of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

I would like to welcome two new members of the committee: Terry Dowdall and Blake Richards. I welcome both of them, as well as Michael Cooper, who is replacing Cathay Wagantall.

I also want to let the committee members know that Naaman Sugrue is our procedural clerk this afternoon. Audrée Dallaire is still here to ensure that the committee meeting goes smoothly.

[English]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on Monday, October 3, 2022, the committee is meeting on its study of allegations that medical assistance in dying was offered to a veteran, unprompted, by a Veterans Affairs Canada employee.

[Translation]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of Thursday, June 23, 2022. Members may participate in person or through the Zoom application. The proceedings will be made available on the House of Commons website. For your information, the webcast will always show the individual speaking, rather than the entirety committee.

[English]

For those participating virtually, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

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

[Translation]

I ask that all participants speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your microphone should be on mute.

I would now like to welcome the witnesses. First, we welcome the Honourable Lawrence MacAulay, Minister of Veterans Affairs. He is joined by Deputy Minister Paul Ledwell and Assistant

Deputy Minister of the Service Delivery Branch Steven Harris, who is participating in the meeting by video conference.

Before I give the floor to Mr. MacAulay, I would like to point out that two weeks ago we participated in an announcement regarding Juno Beach. I want to make sure that the committee is aware of that because the committee made recommendations and wrote a report on Juno Beach. In fact, Mr. Desilets, the vice-chair of the committee, attended the conference.

Before I recognize the minister, I will allow Mr. Desilets to speak.

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor.

Mr. Luc Desilets (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Mr. Chair, my request is very simple.

Can we confirm that the sound tests were performed for the witnesses participating in the meeting remotely and were successful?

The Chair: Yes, that has been done.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Lawrence MacAulay, you have five minutes or less for your opening statement. Please go ahead.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you for your invitation to come before the committee.

I would also like to welcome the new members of the committee. I look forward to the work that you will do on behalf of Canada's veterans and their families over the coming weeks.

I hope to be able to address the members' concern about an unfortunate situation that came up over the summer, when a Veterans Affairs employee brought up medical assistance in dying with a veteran.

The first thing that needs to be said, Mr. Chair, is that this was completely unacceptable. Our government places the highest priority on ensuring that veterans and their families have the support and services they need when and where they need them. This includes ensuring that encounters with Veterans Affairs Canada are conducted in a respectful and compassionate way.

Once I learned of the incident, Mr. Chair, I immediately ordered a thorough internal investigation into the matter and asked my department to ensure that something like this would not happen again. Thankfully, to our knowledge, we found that this issue is isolated to one employee and is not indicative of a pattern of behaviour or a systemic issue.

It is absolutely not our department's place to provide advice about medical assistance in dying, and it never has been. Our front-line staff have no mandate or role to recommend medical assistance in dying to our veteran clients. We have made that clear to all front-line staff, as well as that any conversations on the matter are for the patient to have with their primary health care professional.

Since the incident, our employees have received updated guidance about how to handle situations when a client brings this up in conversation. We have communicated specifically about medical assistance in dying with all of our frontline managers and employees to ensure that something like this does not happen again.

Again, Mr. Chair, this is a very regrettable incident and it was completely unacceptable, but the issue was isolated to one person.

On the whole, Veterans Affairs employees always strive to provide the best compassionate service to Canada's veterans.

I thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1540)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, for your opening remarks.

For the first six-minute round of questions, I'd like to invite MP Blake Richards to start.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Thank you.

Thank you for your remarks, Minister.

As the new shadow minister for the veterans affairs file, I want to say what I've said to you privately, and publicly as well. When we talk about our veterans, I don't think it should be a partisan issue. You have a commitment from me that this is not how I will approach this file.

However, I will do something that is critically important: I will always demand from you, from your government and from your department that veterans be shown the utmost respect and that they always be shown that respect for the service they have given to our country. I think the subject we're talking about today is an example of that failing to happen. You've acknowledged that, and I appreciate it.

What we're talking about is a situation of a veteran coming to Veterans Affairs looking for help in a very serious situation that he was dealing with. He was crying out for help. What he got instead was the suggestion that he consider accepting assistance to kill himself, and it wasn't made just one time; it was suggested to him numerous times, and there was some insistence on the part of the official who suggested this to him. That's the understanding that I have of the situation. It is completely and utterly unacceptable, and it does not show the respect for our veterans that they deserve.

I appreciate that you've acknowledged that you regret the incident happened, and I appreciate that you have made steps to try to

move forward and make sure that it doesn't happen again. You said in your opening remarks, and you have said publicly, that you have been assured that administrative action has been taken, and you are confident in ensuring this will never happen again.

Can you tell us, Minister, exactly what actions have been taken? Have all of those actions been completed? Are you absolutely confident that this will never happen again?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: First of all, I thank you very much for your words, because you're absolutely right that while partisan issues may exist in other areas, when it comes to veterans and what they've done for our country, for democracy and for peace, and when we look at what's taking place in the world.... I thank you so much, because in working together, we can make it better for sure.

I can assure you that immediately upon hearing this, I instructed my deputy to conduct an investigation on just what happened and what took place. He's sitting right here with me, so I think it would be more than wise to ask him to explain that to you.

Mr. Blake Richards: Could you do so as briefly as you can? We don't have a lot of time, obviously. I would like to hear what steps have been taken, but I would like to hear from you before we do that, Minister.

Can you assure us and assure veterans that something like this will never happen again?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I will assure you, my friend, that I will do everything to make sure.

We're dealing with human beings. We're trying to help human beings. There's no excuse for what happened here. It's totally wrong and unacceptable. I'll do everything in my power—and I'm sure the deputy will emphasize that—to make sure that the likes of this.... It is awful, unacceptable and just terrible. We have to make sure that this does not happen.

We have a great group of public servants in Veterans Affairs. This was wrong in every way, but I want to give my deputy a minute. Go ahead.

Mr. Blake Richards: Just before we go to your deputy, because we do have him for some more time later, can you tell me what the consequences were for the VAC worker involved in making this repeated suggestion to a veteran, which was completely and utterly offside? What were the consequences in that situation?

• (1545)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Of course, this part of the investigation is handled by the department. I asked for it to take place, and he will report back to me on what took place. It's an ongoing situation, I believe, that's being dealt with just to make sure that the staff is trained and updated and they know how to handle these issues.

For an example, a veteran can ask whatever they wish to a worker, but a frontline worker cannot discuss this issue with a veteran.

If this does happen, they're instructed to go to their supervisor right away with that issue and indicate to the veteran—and that's exactly what they did—just to make sure that this is handled and to do everything possible to make sure this horrible situation does not happen again.

Mr. Blake Richards: You just indicated that the investigation is ongoing. That's what I think I heard there.

Now, it's been just a little over two months since this was reported publicly and longer than that since the incident occurred. When we're talking about a situation of a veteran coming crying for help to Veterans Affairs and instead it's suggested that maybe they should consider killing themselves, to me that sounds like it should be a high priority to deal with.

I would suggest this is far too long for an investigation into that. It should be a number one priority to make sure this doesn't happen again. When an investigation is ongoing, that tells me that maybe it wasn't taken as seriously as it should have been.

Can you tell me when the investigation will be done and what kinds of consequences would be faced on the part of an employee if this occurred again in the future?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Of course, the consequences that will be taken now or in the future are up to the department. They administer the staff at the department. That is what they do. We put the rules in place and the department implements the rules. That's what they're doing right now.

Again, in all fairness, when you wish to speak to the deputy, I would have to let him explain it to you and to take a minute and just give you some—

Mr. Blake Richards: I would be happy to let him do so now, but it sounds like that might not be possible. I guess I'll have to see if I can—

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: You can ask in another round.

Indeed I can tell you, Mr. Richards, that when I heard of it, I immediately instructed him to do this and to make sure that every measure was taken.

Mr. Blake Richards: I appreciate that and I will ask him about it when—

The Chair: Minister, I'm sorry; the time is up.

I'll just remind members that the minister is here for an hour and that we'll have the two other witnesses with us later.

Right now I'd like to go to MP Churence Rogers for six minutes, please.

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

Welcome to the new members of the committee, by the way. I'm looking forward to working with you on behalf of all of our veterans.

Thank you, Minister, for being here, and Mr. Ledwell, thank you for being here as well.

I too was shocked, Mr. Minister, when we heard about this. Quite frankly, it's a very sensitive issue that I was somewhat aghast about. I'm wondering what kind of questions I should even ask you today on how something like this could possibly happen.

Anyway, I heard your initial comments, so I'll go through some of these.

Can we continue to improve VAC staff training in light of this?

I'll also ask you what safeguards can be put in place or have been put in place to ensure that an incident like this never happens again, particularly when we hire new staff going forward.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much, Mr. Rogers.

I indicated what was done. What I did immediately when I heard of it is I went to the deputy and said that I want this investigated and dealt with. How that's dealt with is up to the department.

What we have to do, and make sure that we continue to do, is have the appropriate training for veterans. You never expect the likes of this to ever happen. It's inappropriate no matter what way you look at it, totally wrong, but you have human beings dealing with human beings. What we have to do is make sure....

I've been around politics a long time—in fact, I've been in Veterans Affairs previously—and I would have to say that the Veterans Affairs staff are probably the most dedicated public servants I've ever met, but this was a mistake and it was wrong and it was unacceptable. In whatever words you could use, it's totally wrong in every way.

What you do when this comes up is you put a training program in place. It will probably include more than that, but that's not the field I'm in. I will make sure this is properly investigated and dealt with and that the training programs are in place. The deputy will indicate to you later, or right now if you wish, what is taking place.

Perhaps you'd like to hear that.

• (1550)

Mr. Churence Rogers: Sure.

Mr. Ledwell, if you'd like to comment, sure.

Mr. Paul Ledwell (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): To be clear, our first order of business when this transpired was to focus on the veteran with whom this transpired and to make sure that veteran is addressed. That took place immediately and regularly upon learning of this.

In terms of the training, we put out a notice to all our staff to make it very clear that our employees are not to engage on medical assistance in dying. We can provide support for questions that are brought forward for anyone who might have questions with respect to benefits and anything that might affect the benefits for them or their family members. We provided that clarification. We undertook training sessions with the entirety of our frontline staff, any staff member who is engaging with veterans.

That training has occurred now with 75% of those frontline staff. We will get to 100%. That training also will be underlined and made mandatory for every member of staff and every new member of staff to underline the fact that we are a department, we are employees who are not to engage with veterans on medical assistance in dying. We are only to be there to respond to any questions they might have with respect to the benefits and the effect on that.

Mr. Churence Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Ledwell.

Minister, I was somewhat relieved to hear that this was an isolated incident, that there were not a number of these cases. That in itself was a bit of a relief.

Going forward, Minister, we know it's important to hire and retain staff people who deal directly with veterans, and the more experience they have, the better they are at their jobs.

Have we made any recent investments in our frontline staff to try to make sure we get the right people in place and the right number of people?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: That's a very good question and it's totally appropriate. Yes, we place the highest priority on making sure that veterans and their families receive the support they should, and with that, it's exactly what you said: It's to have the people in place in order to deal with it.

We have increased funding for case management service in response to meeting demands. We have about 14,000 veterans dealing with case managers. In fact, we just have invested \$43 million to extend 89 frontline staff, including 50 case managers and 25 veterans service agents for an additional three years, which will help reduce the ratio and allow veteran managers to spend more time with their veterans.

You continually attempt and work hard to make sure you have the appropriate people in place to deal with the veterans. I think it's fair to say that we do that.

Mr. Churence Rogers: Mr. Chair, we're done. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[*Translation*]

I would now like to invite Luc Desilets to take the floor for six minutes.

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

Thank you, Mr. MacAulay, Mr. Ledwell, and Mr. Harris, for being here with us.

I am convinced that this story is an isolated incident. It could have happened in another way and in any other department.

I would like us to continue the discussion on the same topic.

Do we know what was said verbatim—the words used by the veteran and by the official? What exactly was said?

I am asking this question because all we know is what has appeared in the newspapers. Now we are having two committee meetings on this issue, and there may be a third.

My question may be more for Mr. Ledwell or Mr. Harris.

• (1555)

[*English*]

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: You're absolutely right: I do not have that information, nor should I have that information. I will leave it to Mr. Harris to perhaps expand on that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Steven Harris (Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you for your question.

We don't have the full record of the conversation, because Veterans Affairs doesn't record every call. The only ones that are recorded are the ones that our call centre receives. The call in question was not made to the call centre. However, I can confirm that the employee who initiated this conversation raised the subject of medical assistance in dying with the veteran. It is true that this incident occurred with one of our employees.

Mr. Luc Desilets: You understand the relevance of having access to the exact words spoken on both sides. The words “medical assistance in dying” can be used in any way and in any context. I am not trying to protect the employee at all.

Is there any more detailed information about this employee? Is she, among other things, an experienced person? Does she hold a permanent position or is she on contract?

Today, I learned that the employee is a woman.

Mr. Harris could start.

Mr. Steven Harris: I cannot speak in detail about the employee's exact situation, as it is protected by the Privacy Act. However, it has been confirmed that this discussion about medical assistance in dying took place. However, I cannot confirm what the veteran or the employee said, as the call was not recorded.

Mr. Luc Desilets: If I were not kind, I would ask in this case for what reason this request for additional information or follow-up was made, but I will not ask you.

I will instead ask the following: will the report be made public?

Mr. MacAulay, I am interested in hearing from you because you have not spoken in a long time.

[English]

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Should the committee request that the report be made public, I will certainly deal with the committee on that issue, yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: We will probably go in that direction later.

That's all for me, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Desilets.

[English]

I would like to invite Ms. Rachel Blaney to go ahead for six minutes, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Chair, as always.

Thank you to all the members who are here with us today. I appreciate your taking the time, because this is a very serious incident. I think all of us appreciate deeply the service that the people who serve us in uniform provide for us. We want to make sure that when they need assistance, they get the assistance they require. We don't want, in any way, for that assistance to go sideways. Unfortunately, this is a clear example of it going somewhere that I think none of us are comfortable with.

My first questions are, of course, for the minister.

Through the chair, Minister, how did you find out about this situation? Was it through the media report or was there a complaint provided from the veteran directly to the minister?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much, Rachel. I certainly fully endorse everything you said previous to the question.

I was informed through my department...or by my staff, not by the department. That's how I found out. I expect that the department informed the staff.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much.

Minister, have you had the opportunity to reach out to that veteran and personally apologize for this?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: No.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: No. Okay. Thank you for that.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: But I have indicated quite clearly how inappropriate it was and how sorry I am. I apologized and did everything you can do legally in order to deal with this most unfortunate incident, to say the least.

• (1600)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I will send out this question and allow all of you to decide who should be the best person to answer it.

What I am really curious about is this: Do we have any sense of how long this member worked in the department and what their role was?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Well, employee privacy issues and all those things come in, and I think I will let the deputy minister handle that.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: As Mr. Harris indicated before, we can't get into the details of the individual employee, but we can tell you that it is an employee who was well established as a veterans service agent. I can also indicate to you—to earlier questions, as well—that since this came to light, this employee has not been interacting with veterans while we ascertain the issues contained in this particular circumstance.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: It leads to another question for me around training. In the training that is provided to people who work directly with veterans, I would hope there is some sort of assistance with how to address issues of MAID if the veteran brings them forward. That is because this is a very important conversation that should happen only between a person and their health provider.

We also know that veterans are often calling in distress. I would imagine that there was a thorough training process for all of those folks, so that when veterans come to them in distress, there is some capacity to address those issues and give them supports and references for where they need to go next.

Is there anything you can share with us, or could provide at a later date, around training for folks who work in the department, specifically around addressing the issue of MAID if it is brought forward? On the other part of that training, is there anything that says that a staff member should ever bring forward that idea?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much, Rachel. That's absolutely correct. There is no way that an employee should ever bring that up.

However, as you've asked, any veteran can ask any question they wish, but if any question is asked to the department official on the front line, they are instructed through training to make sure that they bring this immediately to their supervisor and that the veteran is made aware that it's being brought to the supervisor, because we want to be open and clear. We certainly...

Veterans Affairs staff have no authority to discuss MAID or assisted dying. Of course, the veteran can ask about their pension and about programs and how programs are involved. However, the training indicates quite clearly that if any veteran brings up the issue of MAID, they are to be told that the supervisor will be informed, and the supervisor will deal with it. It's an issue that Veterans Affairs frontline workers are not to deal with.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: The supervisor must be given some training on how to address that issue when they are interacting on the other side of responding to a veteran. Could I get some clarity on what that would look like?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I would let the deputy continue on that. As you know, with MAID it is between health authorities and the individuals themselves that the discussion is to take place. Veterans Affairs is for assistance and help in making sure that the veteran has a better life. It is not a department that deals with MAID.

Deputy, go ahead.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: The policy and the guidelines are very clear that our employees are not to engage directly on MAID. The only time, as indicated earlier, that they are to respond to MAID is if there is a technical question about the benefits and the impact on them. The relationship is between the veteran and their professional health care provider when it comes to the issue of MAID.

All of our frontline staff who are interacting with veterans are equipped with trauma-informed training, with training around suicide prevention and suicide awareness, and many other aspects, because of the circumstances that veterans are coming forward on. Every single member is equipped. When it comes to sensitive issues, those get elevated to more senior people within the organization.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ledwell.

Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

Let's go to a second round of questions. It is the last one with the minister.

I will start with Mr. Fraser Tolmie for five minutes, please.

• (1605)

Mr. Fraser Tolmie (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, for joining us today.

Mr. Minister, you stated earlier that you've been around politics for a very long time, and I think you would probably agree with me that politics is a performance-based industry.

Recently we've sat in these committees where reports from the ombudsman general auditor and the PBO and our own committee reports say that wait times for service delivery have not decreased. This has continued to go on. Now we're sitting here dealing with how the service is being delivered.

Your statement mentions training for frontline staff. I have a question about what kind of training there can be, since under the law, MAID is a discussion to be had between a physician and a patient, and your department has no mandate to be part of that discussion. This law was passed back in 2016, which the department should have been made aware of, and the department should have had policies in place.

My question to you is this: If this is an isolated incident, why is the investigation still continuing?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much. The investigation and the training are both continuing to make sure that the frontline staff are aware of what they can and cannot do. Because of this issue, as you are fully aware, because of this happening, we have to make sure that the frontline staff are fully abreast of that.

As far as the training goes, I'm not much on the training side. If you wish, if you want to let the deputy speak to that, he can for a minute or so.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: No, that's okay, Mr. Minister, because the question that I asked was about the investigation, not about the training.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Well, thank you very much. I don't do the investigation.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: I'll continue down this line of questioning, because the question I have is this: How do we know that it's only one employee and just one case?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I appreciate your question and your concern. The only thing you can do as a minister is go to your deputy and indicate that there's a difficulty and that it has to be dealt with and has to be investigated. That's exactly what I did, and that is what, from my understanding, the deputy is doing and what the department is doing.

What happened in this situation, what happens with the employee or whatever down the road, and the training part to make sure that the frontline workers are fully abreast of what they can and cannot do, as we've said here before—and I apologize for repeating—the fact is that if a veteran brings up the issue, which a veteran can do, then they have to know how to deal with it.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Veterans come from a background where there's a code that they live by. One of the continuing themes that we see in this committee is that vets do not feel valued for their service, so my question is this: How does someone who has PTSD and is facing this challenge feel valued if someone then comes to them and says, "We have a way to end your life."

On top of that, when they bring that forward, how do they feel valued if you haven't gone to them and apologized to them?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I only have a very short time, but the fact is that I think veterans are more respected than they have been. I've been around for a long time, as I've said, and what impresses me is the commemoration events. I don't want to do this to kill time, but the fact is, veterans are more respected and they are more thanked in this country. Years ago I was in Veterans Affairs, and you went to Europe and you saw big crowds. Now you see big crowds in Canada. I think it's only fair to say that the Canadian people truly appreciate what the veterans have done.

I agree with what you're talking about. Quite simply, it should not happen. It is wrong.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Will you apologize to that gentleman? Will you apologize to that person who brought forward that complaint, on behalf of the Government of Canada?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I apologize any time for anything like that, for sure.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Well, I think he deserves that apology. Will you apologize to him?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I apologize right now to the individual this happened to. I have no problem with that, and I think it's right to do, because that person worked hard to make sure that I can do this and you can do what you're doing with me, and I respect that, but Canadians respect that too, and we have to protect that.

• (1610)

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Well, I think a personal apology would work, because again, we've been talking about feeling valued and the situation as it is, I can't at the moment. However, I would just love to shake hands and say to whoever the individual is that I'm sorry this happened, because it's totally inappropriate. We know that and you know that and Canadians know that.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Well, I appreciate your saying that and I understand your saying it, but because of the privacy aspect and the situation as it is, I can't at the moment. However, I would just love to shake hands and say to whoever the individual is that I'm sorry this happened, because it's totally inappropriate. We know that and you know that and Canadians know that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tolmie.

Now I'd like to invite Mr. Wilson Miao, who is on Zoom, to ask questions.

Go ahead, please. You have five minutes.

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

Thank you, Minister, and thank you to your team for joining us today.

It's unacceptable. That's one thing that comes to my mind. Veterans need help. I'd like to thank you and the department, Minister, for all the work you have done for our veterans across Canada.

Maybe I can ask this question. Are there more findings on the investigation that was undertaken by the department that can be shared with the committee?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I appreciate the question, but in all fairness, the man who's in charge of the investigation is to my left. I think it would be more than appropriate for him to explain to you just what takes place. I do not handle an investigation. He does.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: If I could, Mr. Chair, I would just indicate that the thoroughness of this investigation was in relation to the seriousness of the incident that occurred.

First we reviewed all of the files that were handled by this veterans service agent to see if there was any reference at all to anything similar or like this in their dealings or interactions with veterans. Second, we reviewed all the files through the department and the interactions with veterans to ascertain whether any situation like this may have occurred that was not brought to our attention.

In both those cases, we identified that there were no other cases. There was one other incident with this veterans service agent responding to an issue as it was brought forward on MAID by a veteran, but in no other instance have we found that the issue was raised proactively by a Veterans Affairs Canada employee with a veteran.

We also ensured that the veteran's file was reviewed to ensure that we were providing all the supports that were necessary to that veteran in their history in dealing with Veterans Affairs Canada.

All of that was undertaken with as much thoroughness as we possibly could to ensure that this was an issue that was identified and, as we confirmed, was isolated in the department. That does not negate or diminish the seriousness of the issue.

I think the undertaking of the investigation and the response to it is in relation to the seriousness of the particular incident.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you for that response, Mr. Ledwell.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I would just like to say that what the committee is doing right here puts more light on how horrible this is and how unacceptable it is nationwide. I appreciate it.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Ledwell, can you share a little bit more on what VAC is actually doing to help veterans struggling with mental health conditions? Can you speak a little bit more on that?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

As you're fully aware, we announced a \$140-million mental health program. Of course, that's so vitally important. The difference with this mental health program is that the veterans can start receiving benefits immediately upon applying. They have two years in order to work on the issue and go to a doctor, let's say, or a psychiatrist or whatever. They have two years to do this. Of course, if it's approved, they continue on, but the benefits start immediately with the \$140 million.

Mental health is such a big issue countrywide, so that's a good question. It's important that veterans know that. If they deal with the issue earlier, it's much better for the veteran. That's what we're trying to do. We're trying to make sure that we get the assistance to the veteran as quickly as possible. The \$140 million and the immediacy of when you're able to start receiving benefits are both so important.

Thank you for the question.

• (1615)

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, do I have the red card, or...?

The Chair: Not yet; you have 30 seconds left.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Okay, well, I have all my questions asked.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you so much, Mr. Miao.

[Translation]

We will now have two short interventions of two and a half minutes.

Mr. Desilets, go ahead.

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

I am not procedurally savvy, but would it be okay to ask that the committee formally request that the department provide us with a copy of the report once it is completed?

The Chair: I am looking at the clerk and I think that, yes, committee members can put a request to the minister.

Mr. Luc Desilets: So the request is made officially and we will have a copy of the report. Is this correct?

[*English*]

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Yes, I can assure the committee that it will have a copy of the report.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Excellent.

[*English*]

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: You asked for it, I take it, officially, so you will get it—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: The clerk has just informed me that this has to be done through a motion and that it has to be passed by the committee.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Okay. Will that be done soon?

My time is being eaten up, Mr. Chair. I'm going to get upset.

The Chair: Yes, we can do that at any time during the meeting, and then we will vote.

Mr. Luc Desilets: That's fine. So we can do that after my questions.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Mr. Harris, can you tell me how long an investigation like this takes?

Mr. Steven Harris: It depends. In this kind of an investigation, a lot of data needs to be considered and many people need to be consulted. The people are not always available, either because they are on vacation or on sick leave, or for any other reason.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I have no idea how many people you have to meet with. What can we expect, roughly? Will it take three months or six months, for example?

Mr. Steven Harris: It depends on people's availability. So it may take a few months. You're right, it could take anywhere from three months to six months, depending on the availability of the people involved in the investigation.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Very good. Thank you.

Minister, it is difficult for me to judge such an incident, again, because I am not privy to the facts, and this sad situation could have happened anywhere. We don't have any information on the employee, but don't you think that, if there were more permanent employees in the department, this kind of a mess could be prevented better? Half of the employees are permanent and the rest are contract employees, which creates an appalling turnover rate. That's not good.

What do you think?

[*English*]

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I will turn this over to my deputy. He's the one who handles the investigation, and I think the employee has been around for a while.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Ledwell: I should point out that there are many more permanent employees in this area. It's not like the other case that has been talked about a lot, where services to veterans are being provided. Mr. Harris will be able to give you more details, but the vast majority of the employees in this area are permanent.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

[*English*]

Now I'd like to invite Ms. Rachel Blaney for two and a half minutes, please.

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

Thank you for the information so far. I think it's helped me clarify some things in my mind.

We talked earlier, and my questions were about the training process. I guess my next question is this: Due to this incident, will there be any modifications to the process of training that you're doing? Is there something you're adding to hopefully address this? I also want to know if that training is going to apply to new hires, as well as to people who have been around for a while, obviously.

• (1620)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I can assure you that the frontline staff who are hired and are dealing with veterans' calls will certainly be trained in this process. Again, the man who is doing the training is to my left, so I should let him answer, but we had to make sure that this happened for sure—and the managers.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: We should be clear that this reference, this policy and these guidelines have been in place. There has been training in reference to this for some time, but this incident has augmented the focus of this aspect in the training.

It is mandatory. It will be mandatory for all new and existing employees to undertake this training and to be refreshed on the training on a regular basis.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you. That's very helpful.

I'll be going to Mr. Harris on this question.

It's very good to see you. I haven't seen you in a while, Mr. Harris. As you know, I always enjoy my time with you.

I know that there are privacy rules, so I'm trying to be respectful of them. When you were talking, it sounded to me as though it was the worker who called the veteran. Could you give us anything more concrete about how this interaction happened and if it was engaged in from the veteran or from the worker?

Mr. Steven Harris: Thanks very much for the question. It's nice to see you as well.

Without going into too many details and incorporating a private conversation between the VAC employee and the veteran, there was a discussion around the current status of how folks were doing. As the minister and the deputy have indicated, a consideration for medical assistance in dying was brought up inappropriately when somebody was expressing some difficulty that they were having. I would acknowledge that the employee brought it up inappropriately and then the discussion sort of went from there into a much more difficult circumstance, as I understand it.

I don't have a recording of the phone call. We won't have a recording of the phone call that took place. It was, as I understand it, the veteran who called in to the veterans service agent. They had a discussion around status, benefits and things of that nature. That was one of the elements of the conversation that came up.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Harris.

Now I'd like to invite our new colleague on the committee, Mr. Terry Dowdall, to have the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Terry Dowdall (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank everyone. I'm excited to be here and be part of this committee.

I come from Simcoe—Grey. I have CFB Borden in my riding. When individuals happen to leave the forces, a lot who are there stay in the area for a couple of reasons: The taxes are low and they have a great member of Parliament.

To begin with, thank you for being here, Minister.

I heard you say a little earlier that you went to the deputy minister. Who found out about this first? I would think that probably the deputy minister would find out and let the minister know.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

I was informed by my office staff. Of course, I'll leave it to the deputy, but he found out and he informed my staff. I instructed that we would have the investigation right away because there's no trouble to say, as you fully know, that this was terrible.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: My concern is that if somebody didn't do it through the media, how would we have known? You should know that information immediately, I would think; you shouldn't find out through some other source and then go to the minister.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I appreciate your question, but I don't have any access to first-line worker calls in the department. I do not have access to that at all, or anything that happens there.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Through the media, the veteran in question said that your department.... I'm going to quote this. The media report said that "the service agent told him in the call about having helped another veteran access resources for medical assistance in dying through Veterans Affairs Canada, including support for that person's children who were struggling with the impending death."

Have you or your officials been able to confirm if this is the case?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: No. I cannot confirm that at all, but I'll leave it with my deputy.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Thanks very much for the question.

We can confirm that this is the case. There was another veteran who raised the issue with that particular veteran's service agent.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Are there other individuals that you know of—or the minister directly—outside of this who perhaps have used MAID or been recommended to use MAID?

• (1625)

Mr. Paul Ledwell: In no other case that we've been able to ascertain has an employee of Veterans Affairs Canada encouraged and engaged in the conversation about MAID without the issue being raised first by the veteran.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: To follow up, I would say from my municipal background that if there was a health and safety issue through the ministry, it was not only that individual who would be looked at. I think there's a bigger problem. I was worried when you said this was an employee who was well established. To me, that brings more sirens to the fact that perhaps there are other issues that need to be looked at.

I want to state this for a fact. I came from the Department of National Defence before this. We have a hard time getting new people because there are so many issues and red flags popping up. I can tell you that these veterans who are leaving, with their wait times and with these kinds of issues, aren't the ones who would suggest to people, "This is a great career to go into, to be there for us as Canadians."

What's your comment on that?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Do you mean on the wait times?

Mr. Terry Dowdall: It's just in general. We need more people to enter.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Absolutely. We would not—

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Who would go there with the issues we're seeing here? Who is going to speak positively about it?

I just got on this committee two days ago and I'm getting calls from veterans who are struggling. I just got my name on the sheet. I'm saying there are some major issues with the department, and if any more people died on this through MAID, there has to be a big investigation into it.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I want to be sure that I'm following you. Are you talking about MAID or people who are in trouble generally, who are in difficulty and in need of help?

Mr. Terry Dowdall: I mean people in the military who got recommendations to go and use MAID.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I can't respond to that. I would have to let the deputy do it. I would not have that information.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: As I've indicated and will say again, our investigation and a thorough review of this situation suggest that this was a single, isolated situation in which the issue was raised, unprompted, by the employee with the veteran. Any other case has been a case of a veteran getting clarification on the impacts on their benefits if they were to pursue this. The relationship and the understanding around that issue is between them and their health professional.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: One other sad thing, when I was at National Defence—I think it's great that you have this joint suicide prevention strategy between the two ministries; I think that's fantastic—there were still 12 deaths, which is sad. The number's not going down.

Do you keep stats for Veterans Affairs? Are there follow-ups for those individuals? Do you keep those statistics? You did a study. Is there any follow-up?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: As much as we can, yes, we follow those stats. We also, if there is an incident—

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Do you know how many people? Is that number going down in your ministry, or is the number going up?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: I'll defer this question to my colleague who, in his area, tracks these things more closely. There will be a lag in terms of the reporting on this, of course.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ledwell. We don't have time for that.

The last questions to the minister are going to come from MP Rechie Valdez for five minutes.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.): Thank you, Minister, for joining us.

Mr. Ledwell and Mr. Harris, I appreciate your joining this discussion. I remember the time I opened the news on my phone and read the article. I was completely shocked by what could have possibly happened to our veteran. I'm putting myself in a veteran's shoes right now, and it doesn't feel so good. It's heartbreaking.

I used to manage a very large, high-paced call centre. My colleagues have already brought up the questions around frontline training and all that stuff. What I want to know is this: How are we training the managers and the leaders in VAC who support our frontline staff? What type of training do they have?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you so much for the question. I believe the deputy would have to handle it.

In every section or area in Veterans Affairs, there are different types of training. Of course, this issue created a situation that had to be dealt with immediately. We had to find out if it was a core problem—that's what we did—and make sure it was addressed. Without question, all people who work with Veterans Affairs are fully trained.

I said before that without any question, they're the most caring, and their heart is in their work for sure. I'm not saying other public servants' aren't, but when you deal with veterans affairs, you're dealing with human issues. Without question, they truly care.

Deputy, you can take over.

• (1630)

Mr. Paul Ledwell: We provide regular and advanced training for our managers and our senior people who are supervising and providing oversight for other officials. As I mentioned earlier, there's a lot of training around suicide prevention, suicide awareness and trauma-informed training as well that is provided to every frontline staff member, and there's more advanced training awareness and understanding.

Many of our employees have been with us for a long time and have developed an innate and great understanding of the issues that veterans are facing. They're very professional, as the minister indicated previously, in their interactions and dealings with veterans. Many of them come to us, even as new employees, having had some experience in dealing with those who have served in the military. We place some privilege over those who are coming in with that kind of experience.

We have very professional staff who are constantly trained up and retrained. The capacity is constantly being addressed.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you.

Mr. Ledwell, can you clarify how coaching happens in the environment? Is it side by side? Are they listening to calls of their frontline staff just to ensure ongoing support for the frontline staff?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: If I could, I'll ask my colleague, Mr. Steven Harris, who is responsible for this whole area, to speak about that issue.

Mr. Steven Harris: Sure.

There are a lot of different kinds of [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] training. Over the course of the last number of years, during the pandemic, we've been doing more things remotely, but we also do training as we bring new individuals into the organization. They start with a smaller caseload as part of their work. Their work is reviewed by quality assurance officers and training officers.

We have training officers. We have folks who do quality assurance. We have regular training sessions that happen, sometimes in person, although more recently virtually. We have messages and resource kits that are available for folks to be able to keep up to date on changes in our policy, our legislation, our benefits or our services as well. Those are shared regularly with staff. We use a variety of means to make sure that our staff are up to date, not only in terms of their knowledge but also, as the deputy mentioned, in the side elements they have to deal with, whether those be suicide, trauma-informed care, working with folks having issues of mental illness or other issues, to make sure that they can be sensitive in all of those situations. That training is ongoing and is intensified for both those who come on or are starting with the department.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you.

The last question I have—

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I would like to indicate to Mr. Dowdall that without a question, mental health issues are front of mind and of great concern. That's why we pushed to get the \$140 million to make sure it was successful right away.

Your questions are very important, and all questions are so important, but I didn't get a chance to respond to that. They are vitally important, sir, and I appreciate that question.

Working together, the more we can do to make it better for veterans.... That is what I'm here for, but I thank you for that question, very much so.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, and you also, Mrs. Valdez.

[*Translation*]

I would like to come back to Mr. Desilets' comments.

If the department wants to send the report to the clerk, the clerk will gladly distribute it to the members. I would add that the law clerk can redact the parts of the report that contain personal information. Otherwise, it is up to the committee to propose a motion on that.

What does the department think about this?

[*English*]

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Mr. Chair, I can assure you that if the committee asks for the report, you will receive the report.

The Chair: Okay.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: It's appropriate for you to ask for the report, and we'll make sure you receive the report.

Mr. Blake Richards: Let's make the request, then, as a committee. I'll make the suggestion now that we request the report.

The Chair: Yes, okay.

Do we need a written motion?

No. It's clear. However, we have to specify a date by which the minister should send the report to the clerk.

• (1635)

Mr. Blake Richards: I would just suggest that it be immediately upon its being available.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I agree. We have heard clearly from the testimony that they don't know exactly when it's going to be available, so I don't want to put a date on it that they can't fulfill.

I thank Luc for bringing this forward. I agree with the timeline that Mr. Richards put forward.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Minister, the floor is your.

[*English*]

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Yes, I can assure you that when the report is completed and ready to be transmitted to this committee, it will be.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Desilets, can you read the motion out loud?

Mr. Luc Desilets: The motion was just sent to the clerk, but I don't know if he has received it. Obviously, it hasn't been translated yet, since we just moved it.

Here is the text of the motion:

That, once finalized, Veterans Affairs Canada provide the committee with a copy of the investigation report on the allegations that medical assistance in dying was offered to a veteran unprompted by a Veterans Affairs Canada employee.

It seems that one of my staff members had time to translate the motion. He is amazing.

The Chair: Did you start with, "That once the report"?

Mr. Luc Desilets: That's right. We don't give a specific time frame.

We understand that it is between three and six months, and we respect that.

The Chair: Okay.

Do all the members of the committee agree with the translation?

Can we put this motion to a vote?

Are there any objections to the adoption of this motion?

There are none.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Minister, the request has been made formally to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you, Minister, for appearing before the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

Without suspending the meeting, we will continue with the deputy minister and the assistant deputy minister for the next hour.

[*English*]

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

The Chair: You're very welcome, sir.

[*Translation*]

On second thought, we will take a break to acknowledge the minister. Therefore, the meeting is suspended for one minute.

The Chair: We are resuming the meeting.

[*English*]

Members of the committee, I would like to remind you to submit your witness lists for the study on a national strategy for veterans employment after service, in order of priority, to the clerk by October 28, 2022, by 4 p.m.

Yes, Madam Blaney?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm sorry. Please carry on.

The Chair: Second, I'd like to remind the committee that you have already received the report on marriage after 60. We will study that report on Thursday, October 27.

• (1640)

[*Translation*]

We will consider this report in camera over the course of maybe two meetings.

[*English*]

Go ahead, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Chair, I'm sorry to interrupt you. Thank you so much for giving me this time.

I just wanted to check in with you, Chair, because I think at this point we don't have a first vice-chair. I was just hoping that I could move a motion to nominate Blake Richards as the first vice-chair of this committee.

The Chair: Okay.

[*Translation*]

That's fine.

So we move to the election of the first vice-chair.

Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the first vice-chair must be a member of the official opposition.

I am now prepared to receive motions for the position of first vice-chair.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm happy to nominate Blake Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: You've nominated me twice?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Twice—you owe me, my friend.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

[*Translation*]

Rachel Blaney has moved that Blake Richards be elected first vice-chair of the committee.

Are there any further motions?

There are no further motions.

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

I see that we have consent.

I declare the motion carried and Blake Richards duly elected first vice-chair of the committee.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Congratulations.

Let's go back to our witnesses, whom I thank for their patience.

We now turn to Michael Cooper, for the next five minutes.

[*English*]

Please go ahead, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Deputy Minister, the minister described the conduct of the veterans service agent in pressuring a veteran to have MAID as completely unacceptable and horrible. He used other words to condemn those actions, and rightly so, but I would submit that not only are they completely inappropriate and horrible; they may also be criminal.

Under section 241 of the Criminal Code, it is an indictable offence, punishable up to 14 years, for someone to counsel or aid in suicide, whether or not a suicide occurs. There is an exemption, a very specific and narrow exemption, that provides that a medical practitioner or nurse practitioner is exempt from the general offence provided they offer such advice in the context of MAID in accordance with the MAID provisions of the Criminal Code.

With that in mind, has this matter been referred to law enforcement?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: I appreciate the question very much, and the particular aspect that you're raising.

As part of our review and our investigation into this, we're looking at all aspects, including the seriousness of the issues as you are raising them. In this case, this was a conversation and not advice to pursue this MAID, but we are very much understanding the issues that you're raising and the context of the code that you are underlining. This is part of the consideration. We're looking at all aspects of this incident as part of the review and the investigation.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that, Mr. Deputy Minister.

The investigation is ongoing, so if there is evidence that arises in the course of the investigation to establish the possibility of criminal wrongdoing, I presume that this will be immediately referred to law enforcement so that a criminal investigation can be opened and potentially the individual could be criminally prosecuted. That's if there is evidence of criminal wrongdoing, recognizing that there is an ongoing investigation.

• (1645)

Mr. Paul Ledwell: I think the point is whether there is evidence that is well established in this regard. Our undertaking and our review of this is very much in terms of the operations under which we function as a department, and the guidelines and the policy by which we function, as well as the labour considerations in relation to this incident. That's been the primary focus of this undertaking.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I think there ought to be some real focus on exactly what this employee engaged in and their specific conduct, including whether or not they crossed the line, broke the law and committed an offence that, again, is an indictable offence punishable by up to 14 years behind bars. A very serious criminal offence potentially could have taken place. I hope that is not brushed aside. I hope that is vigorously pursued. I think the veteran who was impacted and victimized by this employee deserves that, and all veterans deserve that, if in fact the minister is sincere, and I believe he is, that he does not want to see this ever happen again and that it should never happen again.

Now, with respect to this particular employee, I concur with Mr. Dowdall that alarm bells are ringing that this was a long-serving employee who frankly should have known better, one would hope. Both you and the minister spoke about the protocol that is in place. The protocol that was explained is that as soon as MAID is brought up, an agent is to then go to their supervisor and cease engaging on the topic of MAID.

Based upon what I understand you said, that didn't happen in the case of that other individual. Am I correct in that? There was this veteran, but there was also another veteran. They broke the protocol...?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: The issue in this case is the situation of the individual employee raising the issue of MAID with the veteran, which we have identified and acknowledged as highly inappropriate. That's been well established.

Mr. Michael Cooper: But in the other incident, where—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Cooper. Your time is up.

Now I'd like to go to MP Sean Casey for five minutes, please.

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

It has been suggested, and I think stated as fact in the preamble to some of the questions, that the employee in question suggested several times to the veteran—insisted upon—the availability of medical assistance in dying, and pressured the veteran into medical assistance in dying. Are any of these things true?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: We have not been able to verify or establish those as the situation in this case. We have been able to establish and verify that the employee has acknowledged, and certainly the veteran has identified, that this issue was raised with them unprompted, which was highly inappropriate. We've not been able to see any case of the employee in question persisting in this and continuing. Certainly if there's any information in that regard, we would seek that to come forward so that we can include it in the consideration and the review of the investigation of this situation.

Mr. Sean Casey: The minister was pressed very hard to apologize directly to the veteran. Does the minister know the identity and the whereabouts of the veteran?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: No, the minister does not.

Mr. Sean Casey: Why not?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: The minister is not in a position, and frankly other senior people in the department aren't in a position, to engage directly on files and interactions between the veterans and those who are established in our department to professionally engage and support those veterans. The minister doesn't know the name, the identity or the location of the veteran. I don't know the name or the identity of the veteran either.

Mr. Sean Casey: Is a veterans service agent the same as a case manager?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: No, they're not. Case managers work with 14,000 or 14,500 veterans who have complex issues and who are identified as requiring intensive case management. Veterans service agents work with veterans who have less complex issues and needs, and that was the case in this situation.

• (1650)

Mr. Sean Casey: Which union represents veterans service agents?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: I'll refer that to my colleague Mr. Harris, but I think it's our Union of Veterans' Affairs Employees, or UVAE.

Mr. Steven Harris: That's correct.

Mr. Sean Casey: Has the union taken a position on this case?

Mr. Steven Harris: In this case, it is the Union of Veterans' Affairs Employees for our veterans service agents.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: The union has not taken a public position on this case.

Mr. Sean Casey: We've often heard that it's difficult if not impossible within the federal public service to terminate an employee. It's something that happens without a great deal of difficulty in the private sector, I can tell you. I've done it myself.

Is it true that it's almost impossible to terminate an employee in the public service? If the answer is “no”, then just how hard is it?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: That's a very good question. I have not had experience in having to undertake a termination, quite honestly. I know that there are union agreements or collective agreements that guide all of our relationships with our unionized employees. We follow those very closely. Those contain guidelines and rules by which employees are to function and by which employers are to function. We undertake all of our labour relations in those contexts.

Mr. Steven Harris: I would add, if I may, that it is not impossible to fire or release an employee in the federal public service, as you've noted, but there are rules that govern that—labour relations processes, collective agreements and policies that come from our chief human resources officer.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you. Those are my questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Casey.

[Translation]

I invite Luc Desilets to make a short comment.

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

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

Mr. Ledwell, was this employee suspended during the investigation?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: I cannot give specifics on this employee, as there are rules to follow. However, I can say that this employee currently has no contact with veterans.

Mr. Luc Desilets: We take this investigation seriously. In my opinion, this information should be made public.

Is the union protecting this employee currently?

What is the union doing to protect this employee?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: I don't know if the union has been involved, but Mr. Harris may have more information on that.

The union represents all employees, not just this one.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I understand.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Mr. Harris, has the union made any formal commitments?

Mr. Steven Harris: I don't have any details on that at the moment.

Mr. Luc Desilets: That's fine.

Can either of you tell me how an investigative committee like this is set up? Who is on it?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: The minister asked me to lead the investigation. As assistant deputy minister, Mr. Harris is responsible for that whole part of the department. He gives me the report and the information on the investigation. I then pass it on to the minister.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Is the committee made up of the two of you or others, as well?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: We don't have a committee. The fact is that we would like to keep—

Mr. Luc Desilets: It's not a committee. It's an investigation. I see.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: We would like to keep a distance between those who conduct the investigation and take care of all the details, and those who receive the investigation.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Who is conducting the investigation in this case?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: The people who are responsible for that branch. So there is Mr. Harris, as the assistant deputy minister, and the director general, who is responsible for all of our interactions with veterans in that branch.

• (1655)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

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

[*English*]

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

I think it's important that we acknowledge the fact that the department has removed this person from providing direct service. I think that's something we have to respect. There are a lot of things we have to consider, but making sure that the veteran is cared for is obviously a priority. I just want to honour that.

I'm coming back to you, Mr. Harris, through the chair, of course. I apologize for my confusion. I'm sure you will clear it up. I'm hearing things, and I just want to clarify. I think you said that this was not a call through the call centre. I think what I heard you say was that the veteran made the call directly to the service agent.

From my understanding, there isn't a way to do that. Is there a way to speak directly with a frontline worker, such as a service agent, without going through the call centre? The reason I ask this, of course, is that when you do call in, it's very clear that all conversations are recorded and can be looked at afterward. I think that's what I've heard when I've called in before.

I'm wondering if you could clear that up so that I better understand the process of how this connection was made.

Mr. Steven Harris: Sure. Thanks very much.

The short answer to the question is that calls into our national client contact centre are recorded. Calls between veterans and case managers or veterans service agents that take place through the normal access of someone calling in to ask questions of somebody who may be responsible for their file, such as in the case of a case-managed veteran or in the case of a veteran who may be going through guided support and has a veterans service agent associated with them, can be direct phone calls that can come in from that point of view. It's also true that the case managers or veterans service agents could call out to people they have a responsibility for in helping them through whatever level of support they might need, so you're right that there's a two-way flow of calls that could happen.

It could come from the department if somebody's calling out to see how their veteran is doing, but it also could come in from a veteran who has a direct contact, be it a case manager or veterans service agent, to follow up on some issues or questions they might have.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: You're saying that the veteran called in directly and had a direct line to someone. I'm just trying to make sure I got that clear.

Mr. Steven Harris: That is my understanding in this case.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much.

To clarify, service agents then have a direct number that they can give out. Is that what you're saying?

Mr. Steven Harris: Yes, that could happen in certain instances, depending on the support that's being advised. Veterans service agents provide guidance support to veterans, but they also undertake incoming calls from various areas when they may need to triage a call in from a veteran, a member of the general public or others as well. There are a variety of supports offered through our veterans service agents. Sometimes they are working directly with veterans or others.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris.

Now let's go to our first vice-chair, Blake Richards, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

Let me pick up where Ms. Blaney left off about this call. To be honest, I'm still a little unclear. This is what I understood, and correct me if I'm wrong.

If a veteran calls in to the general number, then those calls are recorded. However, if the veteran calls a direct number of a caseworker, that's not recorded. If the caseworker makes an outgoing call, that's not recorded either. Only in the case where they've called a general number are the calls recorded. Nothing else is recorded. Is that what I understood?

Mr. Steven Harris: Perhaps I can take this. I'd actually like to offer a clarification. In this case, the veterans service agent had called the veteran. Let me correct my earlier comment to the member, when I said the veteran called in; in this specific case, the veterans service agent had called out to the veteran.

Further to your question, calls in to our client centre, our 1-800 contact centre, are recorded. Calls that take place on a regular basis between veterans and case managers or veterans service agents, calls that go back and forth, don't go through that and are not recorded.

• (1700)

Mr. Blake Richards: That seems odd to me, but we'll leave it there. It seems to me that for just about every call we make to any large organization these days is recorded, so it's odd to me that only a call to the general number would be recorded and none of the other interactions would be, but so be it. We won't get into that policy today.

What communication has there been with the veteran whose caseworker suggested medical assistance in dying? What communication has there been between Veterans Affairs and the veteran who had this suggested to him? Since that call with the worker and the terrible incident that occurred, what communication has there been with that veteran? How has that been undertaken?

Mr. Steven Harris: Again, perhaps I can speak to that a little bit.

The veteran had the initial call with the veterans service agent and was rightly upset. He contacted Veterans Affairs again to indicate that he had just had a troubling phone call with one of our veterans service agents. When that call came back into the department, it was escalated back to the local area office. Somebody who is in a managerial position called the veteran back, understanding that this was the issue and that it has been raised inappropriately. Somebody who was a senior manager in the position called the veteran back to speak with that individual about the concerns they had related to that phone call. That conversation has continued and had continued over several weeks following the initial incident.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. I appreciate that clarification and understanding as well.

I want to go back, Mr. Ledwell, because I'm still a little unclear. In the first 45 minutes or so of the meeting, we seemed to be repeatedly hearing that there had been one incident. Then it seemed that all of a sudden, about an hour into the meeting, there was a bit of a shift in that. I'm a little unclear, and I need to understand which version is accurate. Maybe I misunderstood; I don't know, but I seemed to be hearing two different versions. All of a sudden there

was an introduction that there had been actually a second individual who'd had discussions undertaken with a caseworker.

If I even understood that correctly, that individual actually had gone through with medical assistance in dying. Did I misunderstand that?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: I can't speak to that particular last aspect that you are raising, but we did ascertain, as part of this file review and investigation, that this veterans service agent had had a conversation with a veteran previously, a case in which the veteran raised the issue with the veterans service agent. It was in fact that conversation that was referenced in the second case, a conversation that led to the veterans service agent raising the issue unprompted to that veteran—

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. Then the difference was that in one case, it was prompted by the veteran and there was a conversation around it, and in the other case, it was unprompted.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Correct.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay, and it's possible—maybe you can't tell us, but it's possible—that there may be a veteran who has passed away or taken their life as a result of that conversation. You can't confirm that, but it's possible that this is the case. That's obviously concerning.

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Richards. Maybe in the next round you'll be able to ask questions again.

Now I'd like to invite MP Darrell Samson, who is on Zoom, to go ahead for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

I want to welcome all the new members to this important committee. It's a committee that's very emotional, as you can see. What I find very important is that in the past, all parties have worked together in supporting our men and women who have served and who continue to serve. I thank you for being on this very important committee.

I would like to start my questions with the deputy.

Paul, it's nice to see you and Steven back here with us, of course, in support and to share some of the information that we are looking for.

Deputy, when I heard the news about the discussion about medical assistance in dying with an agent, a lot of emotions went through me. I'm just wondering how you felt when you heard that and if you want to share some of your thoughts around that.

• (1705)

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Thanks very much, Member.

I think the first reaction was one of surprise, even shock, that this kind of a conversation would take place. The relationship we and the people in our department have with veterans is one that is built on trust, one that is built on service and one that is built on ensuring that the veteran is getting what they need. This case clearly indicated, at least when it came to light, that it was a conversation that went beyond where the employee should have gone. Most significantly, it created a great deal of trouble and negative reaction, understandably—a challenging reaction by the veteran.

I think the first thing is to make sure the veteran is doing all right and that we are doing whatever we can to reach out to that veteran to ensure that it is identified as an occurrence that should not have happened, and that if they are going through any trauma as a result of the conversation, we're there to support them and respond to that.

My first reaction was one of surprise. My second reaction was to ask how we are supporting and addressing the needs of this particular veteran who has gone through this circumstance. My third reaction was to ask how we correct this and make sure it doesn't occur again.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you, Deputy. I really appreciate the fact that you shared with the committee not only the discussion around the file of the employee and all other employees—the verification—but also the fact that you brought to the table the continuous review and discussions with the veterans to make sure that the veteran is in good health and their needs and benefits are being reviewed and discussed. I think it's important that we continue that relationship on that front.

Now, I know the minister apologized publicly and the department apologized publicly, but I have to assume that the managerial person who made the call to verify what took place with the veteran probably also apologized directly. Would we be able to confirm that?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: I think the individual in the circumstances in which this transpired realized while it was transpiring or through the transpiring of this that it had gone to a point that was unacceptable. That doesn't excuse the action, but I think that the individual, the employee, certainly recognized that. We still have to deal with the effects and the impact of it, and that's what we're doing very seriously.

Has that individual apologized directly to the veteran? I can't say that. I don't believe that's the case, because the conversation came to a close. I can't say that for certain.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you. It's important for the committee to note that it's not part of VAC's services to speak or advise on medical assistance in dying. I do know that once MAID was passed, some training and information were sent down, and now, of course, there's much more.

Just for the committee's understanding, if someone, a veteran, brings it up, what type of conversation would we expect to hear?

The Chair: Excuse me. Maybe you could give us a 10-second answer, please. If not, we have to go.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Very quickly, Member, the veteran would be referred to their health care professional—to their physician or their

nurse practitioner—who would be the only one in a position to provide that kind of guidance.

• (1710)

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Samson.

Now I'd like to go back to Mr. Blake Richards for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thanks.

I want to pick up from where we were cut off before.

It sounds as though, in the course of the investigation of what occurred, the caseworker in question in the incident that initiated the investigation has now been determined to have.... There have been two times when there have been conversations about medical assistance in dying. As you said, one was prompted and one was not. In one case, we may have a veteran who has taken their life as a result.

Obviously, there's more concern now than there was before. Now we're talking about two instances at least. It's isolated to one caseworker—it's what you believe—but it may be at least two instances. We don't know how many instances. Are there other veterans who are now dead as a result?

What I need to ask is where the investigation is going. Is the investigation now going back through all of the files of this caseworker to determine whether there have been other instances besides these two in which there has been counselling—inappropriately—about medical assistance in dying? How many veterans are now dead as a result?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: I can assure you, Member, that this is part of this review. It's to do a complete and thorough review of the files of this veterans service agent to see and ascertain where this issue may have been raised.

What we have been able to identify thus far is that there is the case that is before us, a very troubling case. It was raised unprompted between that veterans service agent and the veteran. There's one other case with this veterans service agent in engagement with a veteran in which it was the veteran who raised this as a consideration.

We don't know—and I can't tell you right now—what transpired in that case. This was a situation in which it was the veteran who raised the issue, with a view to asking, as I understand it, what kind of implication that would have on the benefits for that veteran and/or their family.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. I think I understand that, but what I need to hear from you is whether the investigation is now going back through all of the files of this particular caseworker to determine whether there have been other instances besides these two, and whether veterans are now dead as a result.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Yes, to the first question, absolutely.

Mr. Blake Richards: What about that second question, then? Will the investigation determine whether there are veterans who are now deceased as a result?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: I think that the implication of the first question, and the answer to it, is yes to the second question—

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay, but I wanted to be sure. I'm glad to hear that.

I came into this meeting quite concerned about this situation. I think everyone around this table is, without exception, and I'm sure all Canadians are quite concerned about what happened, but I will say that now, leaving this meeting, I'm more concerned.

I'm glad to hear that there's an investigation happening. I'm glad that all of those files are being looked at. Are we talking about the active files of this individual, or will the files all the way back be looked at?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: My understanding is that it's all of the files related to this employee.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. That's also good news.

I would assume that the information will then become part of the report, which you have now indicated you will share. The minister has indicated that it will be shared with this committee.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: That's correct.

Mr. Blake Richards: That's good.

There are a couple of other things, and I have one minute, so I'm probably going to touch on one of the other things. It was raised earlier a couple of times. It's about the minister apologizing directly to the veteran involved in the case that led to this meeting.

I'm well aware of the privacy issues that exist, etc. Would it not be the case that if the minister wanted to apologize directly to this individual, it could be asked of whoever at Veterans Affairs is now in contact with that particular veteran to just indicate that the minister would like to personally apologize to the veteran and to ask the veteran if they would be willing to accept that phone call? Could that not be done?

• (1715)

Mr. Paul Ledwell: I think that absolutely it could be done. The question could be posed to the veteran, and if they're open and willing to receive that.... I think that in this case, for everyone and most especially for the veteran, we want to ensure that all of the review and investigation is complete before that's done.

Mr. Blake Richards: I would just suggest to you—because the minister's no longer here, obviously—that you make that suggestion. He did indicate he would like to have that opportunity if it were available to him. I would just ask that you make that suggestion to him. Maybe we could see that move forward so that he could....

I think it would mean a lot to the veteran to have the Minister of Veterans Affairs make that apology. I think it's the right thing to do. I hope you'll make that suggestion.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Absolutely. I think that contained in that understanding is the seriousness with which this issue has to be reviewed and reported on, as the minister identified.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: That is all the time we have.

Thank you.

I should also remind you that this is the last round of questions and answers we will do, given the amount of time we have.

I now invite Churence Rogers to take the floor for the next five minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Churence Rogers: Mr. Chair, I don't know if I need five minutes, but I do have one particular question I'd like to put to Mr. Ledwell.

Can you clarify for the committee what the actual role of a VAC employee is when it comes to a veteran's request? When they request medical assistance in dying, what's the actual role of the employee at Veterans Affairs?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: The first role of the employee is to make it very clear that it's a consideration the veteran should be engaging in with their health professionals and their medical professionals. That's an issue we cannot engage with them on in terms of the determination or the consideration the veteran may be going through with respect to MAID.

Where we do have a function and a responsibility is in responding to the issues that the veteran may have with respect to the implications of anything they may undertake on their benefits and the supports they are receiving and the supports their family members will continue to receive, and considerations around those things. We have all of the understanding and the technical expertise to provide that advice to the veteran. We cannot engage on the consideration of medically assisted dying. That's very clear in our policy and very clear in our guidelines, and that has now been considerably reinforced through this isolated incident.

Mr. Churence Rogers: I guess, then, that it's safe to assume that once you have a veteran requesting medical assistance in dying, that sets off alarm bells, and the department engages all the medical professionals who need to be engaged to deal with the veteran.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Well, our case managers and our veterans service agents are in situations of being in direct and regular interaction with the veterans they serve. These are conversations, as I think Mr. Harris indicated, that transpire regularly. There are a lot of phone calls by the veteran to their case manager or their veterans service agent and by the veterans service agent or the case manager to the veteran to make sure they're doing okay, to make sure they have the supports they require, to ensure they are getting access to not just health supports but also social supports and supports with respect to employment, connection to community and everything else. That's a regular undertaking.

There's a relationship that's built up between these individuals, and an important level of trust, of course, needs to be established through that relationship. The communication is active. We seek to be responsive and to provide the right advice and direction to the veteran so they can live a healthy life. That's really at the heart of these relationships and our service to them.

Mr. Churence Rogers: Well, it's comforting to know at least that once they've reached that level of thinking, there are people who react and follow up and try to support them even further.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: That's right, and in many cases if something troubling transpires between a veteran and their case manager or the veterans service agent, which might require the case manager or the veterans service agent to come back and reflect on it, they can then either reach out personally or raise it, as the minister and as we have indicated, with a supervisor. That supervisor can reach out to that individual.

In this case, when this issue came to light, it was the veteran team service manager who reached out the next day to that veteran to apologize for what had transpired, to check in on the veteran to see how that veteran was doing and to see what we could do to rectify the situation that had occurred the previous day. It was that fast. It's really important, I think, to underline that, because of the seriousness of this issue that has been identified and because of the importance of the relationship and the trust we have with the veterans we serve.

• (1720)

Mr. Churence Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have no further questions.

The Chair: Thank you so much. There are 15 seconds left, so I don't think we have time.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Mr. Chair, I—

The Chair: You'll take it, Mr. Samson? Okay, go ahead. You have 10 seconds.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I just want to say that mental health is a very important issue and we need to do more, and I was very happy to see the \$140-million investment for veterans so that they can have the services they need right away while they're waiting for their applications to be processed. That was a very important approach in this program, and I'm really pleased with that.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Samson, for your comment.
[Translation]

I would like to invite Luc Desilets to take the floor for two and a half minutes.

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

You said that this employee's file would be thoroughly reviewed. I don't feel like much data will be found during the exercise. An employee who does something more or less relevant usually doesn't note it in their file. I'm just saying that.

Here is the other thing that bothers me. You said that, after the first exchange between the agent and the veteran, a manager intervened. A second manager and then a third one also intervened afterwards. Is that the case?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: There was no third intervention. A supervisor spoke with the veteran twice.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Okay.

Were the supervisor's two calls not recorded?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Notes were taken, but no call has been recorded.

Mr. Luc Desilets: What differentiates cases where you record the conversation from those where you don't?

Why do you do it in some cases, and not in others?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: If I may, that question should be put to Mr. Harris. Having said that, I would just like to point out that there are all kinds of exchanges that take place between veterans and their agents. Many of the topics discussed with veterans are confidential. So these are not discussions that lend themselves to being recorded.

Mr. Luc Desilets: At the beginning of phone calls with insurance companies, for example, we are regularly told that the call will be recorded. If you are faced with potential cases like this, shouldn't you think about that?

I know we don't know all the details of the case, but I wonder if, in the case of conversations with a client who is going through an excruciating situation where medical assistance in dying is being discussed, conversations with higher-level managers should not be recorded.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: There is a difference between calls where the veteran reaches out to the department and calls, like this one, where they are calling an employee with whom they have a relationship similar to that with a doctor. The employee works very closely with the individual. These types of calls are not recorded.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ledwell.

[English]

Now, for two minutes and a half, Ms. Blaney, the floor is yours.

• (1725)

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

I want to make sure that it's clear for the record that for a person in this country to receive MAID, they have to meet certain criteria. I don't want there to be any impression leaving this place or this room that people can call in and have a conversation with anybody and then, as a result, have MAID quickly as part of the solution. There are very clear criteria. I just want to make sure that's on the record and that there's not a misunderstanding or misinformation.

Coming back to this very important discussion around assuring the best care for our veterans, which I believe everybody in this room is committed to, I hear now from Mr. Ledwell that not all calls are recorded. I'm wondering if there are any discussions happening within the department around this.

After having an incident like this, is it something that should be considered? Should all calls be recorded—obviously, with very high confidentiality as part of that—to ensure that if there's an incident that is concerning in any way, shape or form, there's a clear way of checking the pathway and making sure the practice is at a level that we are all comfortable with as Canadians when we serve the people who served us?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Perhaps I'll begin and then ask Steven if he could respond as well.

We're not giving this active consideration at the present time. That's not to say we will not give it active consideration in the future. As I mentioned in the earlier response, some of these are highly sensitive conversations, and we want to be able to protect the confidentiality that exists between the veteran and the case manager, especially—and these are veterans with very complex needs and issues—to ensure there is a degree of safety in that relationship and that it does not get reported out by any means, either intentionally or unintentionally.

We're not giving that active consideration for that primary reason, I think, but we are also aware that issues may be raised that do require more senior and perhaps even more sensitive attention, so we do have systems in place to ensure, as we've indicated before, that those get escalated and that those get addressed that way. As a consequence of that, of course, there are notes in files related to veterans, but not recordings of those relationships or those conversations.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now, for five minutes, I'd like to invite MP Michael Cooper.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Ledwell, I'll direct my questions to you.

You have said more than once, and the minister said in his testimony more than once, that this was an isolated case. At first it was one case. Now it is two cases.

You have said that the investigation is ongoing. You further said, in answer to questions posed by Mr. Richards, that the files this employee was involved in are currently being reviewed, so given what is not known and given that there is an ongoing investigation and that case files are being reviewed, how can you say with any confidence that this was an isolated incident involving this employee?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: We've done a complete review of all of the files, and I should identify and underline, as I think we said earlier, that this was a case—it was inappropriate and unacceptable, as the minister said—in which a veterans service agent, an employee, was raising the issue unprompted. It was an isolated case, from what we have been able to determine, a single case in which an employee raised the issue unprompted, of their own accord, with a veteran.

We are also reviewing the files to ascertain in how many situations a veteran might have raised this issue. As we indicated earlier, a veteran could come forward to ask questions regarding his or her benefits. If a veteran were considering this undertaking, what kind of impact might that have on the benefits that the veteran and his or her family receives?

In that case, we do have guidance and a policy whereby our case managers, our veterans service agents and others who are interacting with veterans can provide indications and technical information on that element—

• (1730)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Okay. I understand that, but first of all, just to clarify, all of the files involving this employee have been reviewed. That is what you are saying.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: That's correct.

Mr. Michael Cooper: There are no further files that are being reviewed or that have yet to be reviewed. Is that correct?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: We are reviewing files right across the department for any references that may have been raised.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Okay. Again, that's ongoing, so how can you assert that this was an isolated incident?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: We have undertaken that review and have been able to determine that there was a single incident—

Mr. Michael Cooper: —so far.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: We've undertaken the review of all the files.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You've undertaken a review of all the files, but you said that it is ongoing—or is it not ongoing?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: The file review has been completed.

Mr. Michael Cooper: It's been completed? Okay.

Involving this particular employee, we know of the one incident involving the veteran that was unprompted. That's established. In the case of the second incident, which occurred earlier, do you have any details about what the nature of those conversations was?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: We have established that this was raised by the veteran.

Mr. Michael Cooper: It was raised by the veteran, but you said that the policy—and correct me if I'm misunderstanding anything—is that if it's raised by a veteran, then that Veterans Affairs employee can talk about benefits issues. Can they have further discussions pursuant to policy? They cannot.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: No, they cannot.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Was that conversation strictly confined to the issue of benefits?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: It was strictly confined to that issue—

Mr. Michael Cooper: How do you know that?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: It's based on the file note.

Mr. Steven Harris: Deputy, perhaps I could add here that as part of the review of those files, we've actually spoken to that veteran subsequent to the review. We've spoken to that veteran. That's to—

Mr. Michael Cooper: Sorry; you spoke to that veteran?

Mr. Steven Harris: —confirm details of that conversation—

Mr. Michael Cooper: I'm sorry. You spoke to that veteran? I'm just a little confused, because it was reported that that veteran had accessed MAID, and then you said, Mr. Ledwell, that you couldn't speak to whoever that veteran was who accessed MAID, and now you're saying that the veteran was spoken to. We're hearing three different things.

Mr. Steven Harris: No, sir, I don't believe it's three different things.

What you've heard was that the discussion was around the veteran's considering medical assistance in dying. Mr. Ledwell indicated that he couldn't confirm. I can confirm to you, though, that we've spoken with the veteran as part of the investigation. That's what I can confirm. That's how we know the details of the conversation. It's because we've spoken with the veteran.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris.

Thank you, Mr. Cooper.

Now we have one last question—

Mr. Rogers, would you like to intervene?

Mr. Churence Rogers: Mr. Chair, given the time, I suggest we adjourn.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you. I understand.

[*Translation*]

Are there any objections from committee members to adjourning the meeting?

I see that no one objects.

It must be said that we started the meeting five or seven minutes late.

On behalf of myself and the members of the committee, I want to thank the witnesses who participated in today's meeting.

First, I would like to thank Paul Ledwell, Deputy Minister of Veterans Affairs Canada, and Steven Harris, Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery Branch.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who is supporting the committee: our interpreters, the technical team, as well as Mr. Sugrue, who acted as procedural clerk today, and Ms. Dallaire, the clerk of the committee.

The meeting is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>