



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 065

Thursday, October 19, 2023

Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg



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• (1540)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number 65 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Tuesday, September 26, 2023, the committee is commencing a briefing with the Minister of Veterans Affairs and departmental officials.

[Translation]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Some committee members are therefore participating online.

To ensure that the meeting runs smoothly, I have the following instructions for you.

For those in the room who wish to speak, we will look after turning on the microphones, but those participating by video conference must turn on their own microphones before speaking. In addition, all comments should be addressed through the chair.

I have an important reminder. When you have the floor, please avoid bringing your earpiece close to the microphone, as this causes significant feedback, making it difficult for our interpreters to do their job. So please be mindful of that throughout the meeting.

In accordance with the committee's routine motion, I wish to inform you that all witnesses have completed the required connection tests prior to the meeting.

[English]

Now I would like to welcome our witnesses. We have the Honourable Ginette Petitpas Taylor, Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence.

Welcome.

From the Department of Veterans Affairs we have Steven Harris, assistant deputy minister, service delivery branch; Sara Lantz, assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and corporate services, by video conference; Paul Ledwell, deputy minister; Amy Meunier, assistant deputy minister, strategic policy and commemoration, by video conference also; and, by video conference, we have Pierre Tessier, assistant deputy minister, strategic policy, planning and performance branch.

[Translation]

We will now begin the first round of questions.

Committee regulars know the purpose of the two coloured cards I use. Each person will have the floor for five or six minutes. When they have one minute left, I will let them know. When their time is up, we'll have to turn off their microphone, unfortunately.

I now invite the minister to deliver her opening remarks.

Minister, you have the floor for five minutes.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Mr. Chair, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to appear before the committee today to speak about some of my priorities as the Minister of Veterans Affairs and the Associate Minister of National Defence. To be entrusted with this important portfolio is both an honour and a privilege.

[Translation]

I'm from Dieppe, New Brunswick. This small Acadian town was renamed in 1946 to commemorate those who lost their lives in action in Dieppe, France, during the Second World War. Growing up, we all heard about the Dieppe raid and the sacrifices made by many in the name of peace, freedom and democracy.

After all these years, it's an honour for me to work on behalf of the hundreds of thousands of Canadians who have donned our country's uniform in times of war, military conflict and peace.

[English]

As minister, my first priority is to make sure THAT Canada's veterans have access to programs and services, and to support them when and where they need them, as quickly and as efficiently as possible. I am aware of the many challenges that Veterans Affairs has experienced with processing benefit applications and getting veterans into the system. Addressing this continues to be my top priority.

[Translation]

Like my predecessor, I am fully committed to resolving this issue, and I am confident that we will continue to make considerable progress to that end.

As of September 30, the number of disability claims in excess of the 16-week service standard stood at 5,433, approximately 16,000 fewer cases than as of June 30, 2020. During that period, the total number of pending claims also dropped by over 13,000, from 45,296 to 31,481.

[English]

Our efforts have resulted in a reduction of the backlog of over 75%, but we are not stopping there. We will continue to explore all options and opportunities to improve how we support veterans and their families with the programs and services they need and to which they are entitled.

Another priority of mine, Mr. Chair, is to ensure that our veterans are always remembered and honoured for their service and their sacrifice, whether they fought at Juno Beach or helped respond to the Swissair disaster in Nova Scotia.

Twice in the past few years I have joined delegations that have travelled to Europe to visit Dieppe and other historic locations where Canadians have sacrificed and shed blood to defend democracy, human rights, peace, freedom and security. Both times, I have to say, I was humbled to hear from veterans about how their combat experience shaped their lives, and I was honoured to pay them tribute for the sacrifice they made on our behalf.

[Translation]

In September, I travelled to Nova Scotia to mark the 25th anniversary of the Swissair Flight 111 crash, and to Germany to celebrate the 2023 Invictus Games. Those two events reminded me that our servicemen and women continue to face enormous risks that most of us will never understand. These soldiers deserve all our gratitude for their service, as we continue to pay tribute to the valiant Canadians who participated in the major conflicts of the 20th century.

Finally, I want to tell the committee and all Canadian Armed Forces veterans that I am committed to ensuring that every veteran knows that we are attentive to their needs and responsive to their concerns.

[English]

Veterans have the right to receive services that correspond to their unique needs and unique experiences. That is why my department established an indigenous veterans engagement team that builds on the work the team has already been doing to support women veterans and also 2SLGBTQI+ veterans.

This dedicated team, comprised entirely of indigenous employees, has been meeting with indigenous communities across the country. Since May 31 of this year, they've conducted more than 30 outreach visits to ensure that first nations, Métis and Inuit veterans are aware of the programs and services available through Veterans Affairs and that they are receiving the support that they need.

• (1545)

[Translation]

As minister, it is my top priority to ensure that every veteran, regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, language or religion, receives the quality care and support he or she deserves, as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Once again, thank you so much for inviting us to be here today.

We are now pleased to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

[English]

I would like to welcome one of our members, Mr. Chahal, on the screen. He is replacing Mr. Sarai.

[Translation]

I would also like to welcome all of our guests in the room.

[English]

I especially welcome all veterans in the room.

Now we are going to start with the first round of questions of six minutes each, and I invite Mr. Richards to start, please.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Welcome, Minister. I want to talk to you about a couple of the things that you mentioned in your opening remarks in terms of your priorities.

One of the priorities you mentioned was ensuring that veterans are remembered. The pinnacle of remembrance in this country—and it shouldn't be the only time we remember—is November 11, Remembrance Day. That's a time when thousands of Canadians gather to pay their respects to those who have given the ultimate sacrifice and to show their support for our men and women who have served and who continue to serve. One of the key elements for many people in those ceremonies is an element of prayer. Unfortunately, there was a directive that came out under your government on October 11 indicating that Canadians will no longer be able to engage in prayer at public ceremonies such as Remembrance Day.

Can you tell us what's behind that decision that your government's made? Why are you telling Canadians that they don't have the right and the ability to pray for those who've fallen and those who fought for this country?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you very much, Mr. Richards. It's great to see you. We sat on PROC together, I believe, several years ago, and it's always good to see you at this committee.

I want to be extremely clear with respect to the question that was asked yesterday in the House of Commons, and I'll be frank, Mr. Richards, that question really took me by surprise and left me shaking my head.

I want to be very clear. There has been no directive that no prayer at all is allowed at Remembrance Day services.

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm sorry to interrupt.

That is, in fact, inaccurate. I have the directive that was sent. If the committee would like to give unanimous consent, I'd be happy to table that directive. It's very clear. It is indicating to chaplains that they are not to engage in prayer at our Remembrance Day ceremony.

I'd be happy to table that at committee.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Richards, again, I disagree with you completely on that.

We've looked into this matter and it's very clear that we certainly want.... There was a directive given out by the chaplain general with respect to this situation, and it does not say prayer is not allowed at the Remembrance Day ceremonies. It's actually to the contrary, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: It makes it quite clear.

Sixty-eight per cent of Canadians identify themselves as religious, and 54% of them indicate that it's incredibly important in their lives. To tell people they wouldn't be able to engage in that activity at a public ceremony that honours our soldiers is sad.

I would be happy to table that document with the committee.

Let's move on, then, seeing as you aren't going to acknowledge the existence of that directive.

Let's move to another topic you mentioned in your opening remarks: access to programs and services.

You've been minister for almost three months now. I'm sure you've had the opportunity to engage with some veterans and have discussions. I'm wondering what you're hearing from veterans when you talk to them.

Are they generally happy? Are they generally satisfied with the programs and services, and with the quality of service they're receiving from Veterans Affairs?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you.

With respect to my service, I've been appointed for almost three months now and have made it my priority, to be frank, to get out in the community from coast to coast to coast, in order to meet with veterans and stakeholders. It's very important for me to hear from them. My mother always told me, "Ginette, you have two ears and one mouth." It's important to listen to folks on the ground. I have a lot to learn from veterans, and also from organizations serving veterans.

I have to say the feedback I've received has been.... I've received some very positive feedback with respect to services veterans are receiving from Veterans Affairs Canada, but again, I think we can always improve.

As I've indicated to individuals, if we don't hear about the areas that perhaps need improvement, we can't make those changes.

● (1550)

Mr. Blake Richards: You're telling me you're generally hearing positive.... You're not hearing from a lot of veterans who have concerns about the quality of service.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I have not said that, Mr. Richards. You're putting words in my mouth.

Mr. Blake Richards: Let's get to that, then, because one thing I hear often from veterans is that they have a real lack of trust in Veterans Affairs. They tell us often that they're afraid to even speak up about their experiences, because they're afraid Veterans Affairs will retaliate against them and they'll lose the benefits and services they may have now. There's a real fear and lack of trust.

I'm wondering whether you can, from your conversations with veterans, tell me why you think that lack of trust exists.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Richards, I think we have to take a step back.

If we look at when individuals apply for benefits through Veterans Affairs.... We certainly recognize that 80% of people—and correct me if I'm wrong, Steven or Paul—are usually approved during their first application process. When Veterans Affairs Canada is looking at claims, it wants to approve these claims. The people who work at Veterans Affairs Canada want to provide services to veterans and—

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm sorry, Minister. Obviously, we have very limited time here.

Really, what it comes down to, I guess, is this: Veterans need to feel that way. I'm not even disputing that Veterans Affairs wants to provide that, but I think there are many veterans who don't feel that way. You often hear the term "delay, deny, die". That's a term many veterans use. That's the feeling they have about...what they're hearing from Veterans Affairs.

Can you tell me why you think that lack of trust exists, and are you personally happy with the level and quality of care veterans are receiving?

The Chair: Answer in 15 seconds, please. We don't have much time.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Richards, I truly believe any department can always do better,

Being the minister responsible for this file is an honour and a privilege. My commitment to veterans—if they are here today or listening—is that we certainly want to make any improvements we can to make sure they get the quality care they deserve. They served this country and deserve to have quality service from our department.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Now, I'd like to invite Mr. Casey on the screen for six minutes, to start.

[*Translation*]

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

Welcome, Minister. Congratulations on your appointment. As you know, this is a very important role for my fellow citizens. Our riding is the only one outside the national capital region to house the headquarters of a federal government department. So I hope we'll see you there regularly.

[English]

Minister, it's too bad that I always have to do this, but I do. You were asked questions by Mr. Richards. He didn't like your response, so he interrupted you.

Now is your chance to say what you wanted to say before you were interrupted, in particular with respect to his allegation—

The Chair: Excuse me, there is a point of order.

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: On a point of order, Chair, I think it's incumbent upon members to try to be accurate with statements. The member is indicating an interruption because someone didn't like the answers—

The Chair: Mr. Richards, it looks like debate—

Mr. Blake Richards: It needs to be clear that there's only so much time members are given to ask the questions they would like. It's their prerogative.

The Chair: Mr. Richards, it looks like debate.

You had your six minutes, Mr. Richards.

Now Mr. Casey, please go ahead.

Mr. Sean Casey: I hope you feel better, Minister; you're not the only one who gets interrupted.

My question for you is this. You attempted to answer Mr. Richards' question with regard to the directive from the department with respect to prayer on Remembrance Day. Go ahead and finish your answer.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you very much for that, Sean.

First and foremost, as indicated, actually the directive did not come from the department. I want to be clear. A directive was put forward by the chaplain general of DND. Let's be absolutely clear: In no way did that directive ban prayer at all.

To the contrary, the directive simply indicated that they wanted to ensure that when the chaplains did their public address, they made sure they were inclusive. It was to make sure that the veterans, the people and the members of the Canadian Armed Forces who were there felt reflected in the spiritual prayers that were made.

As such, I actually have a quote here that I want to read for the record. Chaplains shall “endeavour to ensure that all feel included and able to participate in the reflection...no matter their beliefs.”

I really have to believe that all Canadians would agree with that directive.

I know that when I'm in Moncton, New Brunswick and I attend my Remembrance Day ceremonies, where we have the chaplain

and someone from the Jewish faith and someone who gives us a moment of reflection.

We simply want to make sure that all Canadians who are attending the Remembrance Day events—this is the directive that was provided by the chaplain general, I should qualify that—feel a part of these services.

In no way is anyone saying that prayer is not allowed. It's to the contrary.

• (1555)

[Translation]

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you very much, Minister.

I'll now prepare you for Mr. Desilets' questions. Indeed, I expect he'll ask you a few questions about the monument to commemorate veterans who took part in the Afghanistan mission. In your opening remarks, you talked about the importance of commemoration. So I have a question for you on that.

I know that over 10,000 veterans and their families participated in the online survey asking their opinion on the five concepts proposed to the public. Respondents indicated their preference for the concept proposed by the Stimson team. The jury came to a different decision. From what I've read, among the veterans who responded to the survey, a majority of 63% preferred the Stimson team's concept. Among veterans and their family members, it was 56%. I think that's worth mentioning.

You knew that you and the Minister of Canadian Heritage were invited to testify before the committee. I'm going to ask you two questions, if I have enough time.

First of all, can you tell us who made the decision about the concept chosen for this monument?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you for asking that important question. It's coming up often during question period, these days.

First, let me take a step back. The whole issue of the memorial for the Canadian mission in Afghanistan began in 2014. Veterans were unhappy with the location the previous government had chosen to erect the monument.

In 2015, when we came to power, we began to do the necessary work to ensure we found a location that would suit veterans. We then launched a consultation on the creation of the monument. Canadian Heritage set up a jury, as you so aptly put it, and the jury members made their choice from among several proposed monuments. Allow me to add that we're blessed in Canada with top-quality artists who presented their concept for a high quality monument.

At the same time, Veterans Affairs conducted a survey to find out what veterans wanted. In the end, over 10,000 Canadians responded, as you said, and the Stimson team concept was chosen by the majority of veterans. That's why we chose this concept. The veterans told us it better represented the valour, sacrifice and loss of the veterans in question.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Casey.

Mr. Desilets, you have six minutes.

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

Mr. Casey, thank you for opening the door by raising this subject.

Thank you, Minister. We are pleased to welcome you. Of course, I'm going to talk about the monument. Surely you and others were expecting it.

It's standard practice in the world of public art for the Department of Canadian Heritage to partner with another department to set up a competition and a jury of experts to select the winning team for a given project. I say that for the benefit of all my colleagues, though they're probably well aware.

In the current case, Minister, as you and Mr. Casey were saying, the ministers of Canadian Heritage and Veterans Affairs effectively initiated the process and decided to override the jury's decision to award the contract to another team based on the results of an anonymous online survey. I think that's exactly where you were headed, Minister. It should be noted that even the jury was made aware of the survey's content and took it into consideration.

Minister, did the decision to reject the Daoust team come from your office or from Mr. Trudeau's office?

• (1600)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: First of all, thank you for the question, Mr. Desilets. I fully expected to have this exchange here today, and we'll probably have the opportunity to discuss it over the next few weeks as well.

What I find a bit surprising, when we get questions about the memorial for the Canadian mission in Afghanistan, is that we never hear about the veterans. We hear about the artists. I appreciate the essential nature of the work done by artists here. However, I repeat that, as Minister of Veterans Affairs, my priority is to look after veterans and make sure they are well served and listened to.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Minister, I understand and I am sure you'll do a good job. However, what I would like to know is whether the decision came from your department or Mr. Trudeau's office.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: The decision to choose the Stimson team's concept came from our government.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Are you talking about the Trudeau government or your own department?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: It's the government, Mr. Desilets.

Mr. Luc Desilets: All right.

Minister, were you aware that the Minister of Canadian Heritage requested a legal opinion following your decision, that is, the government's, to reject the Daoust team?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I wasn't at the department at that time.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Were you informed that a legal opinion had been requested?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: You gave me that information when I met with you a few weeks ago.

Mr. Luc Desilets: So you did not receive that information from others in the department. Very well.

In that case, were you aware that the Minister of Veterans Affairs needed Pablo Rodriguez's signature to authorize the exclusion of the Daoust team?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Once again, I learned that from conversations.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Do you agree with that?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Once again, Mr. Desilets, I repeat that as Minister of Veterans Affairs, I am taking into consideration the wishes of the majority of veterans who filled out the survey.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I'll come back to that.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: For me, that's a priority.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I understand.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Over 40,000 Canadians participated in the Afghanistan mission. We want to ensure that veterans, including those who are here today, see themselves in the monument that will be erected.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Minister, you are avoiding my questions.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: No.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I'll come back to the issue of veterans. As you know, for the past four years, I've been working very hard for veterans. But this issue isn't about veterans, in my opinion.

Are you aware that the Daoust firm received an offer of financial compensation for lost profits, according to reports?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I'm not aware of the details, but I am aware of something along those lines.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Are you aware that the process, your government's process, was not followed at all? To some extent, you have tainted both the process and the government in this affair.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Once again, we decided to truly listen to veterans.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Let's get back to the issue of veterans.

Canada's largest polling and analytical research firm, Léger, proved that the survey was not a survey and that the result was flawed, since said survey did not include any methodology. That is the opinion of the Léger firm, which in fact produced a magnificent four-page report to that effect.

In this context, do you think it's ethical to rely on a poll when you know it's invalid?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Desilets, it could have been a survey, a consultation or a questionnaire. All we wanted was to learn the opinion of Canadians across the country, and more specifically the opinion of veterans. That's why the Department of Veterans Affairs sent messages to veterans, using the various tools at its disposal. That's why the majority of survey respondents were veterans or members of their families.

Mr. Luc Desilets: But do you understand that the survey was not valid?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Once again, we sent out the questionnaire, the consultation document, from one end of the country to the other, since we wanted to know what veterans thought.

Mr. Luc Desilets: One of the main problems identified by Léger was that not everyone had the same amount of time to complete the survey. There was a six-day extension. Are you aware of this?

• (1605)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: No, I'm not aware of it.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Are you aware that the majority of people responding to the survey are from Ottawa? Are you aware that only 12% of respondents were francophones, even though they make up 25% of the population? These are examples of data distorted by methodology, Minister. This survey cannot be taken into account when deciding on a \$3-million project.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Making sure veterans are heard is a top priority for me. In my opinion, this survey, this consultation, this questionnaire—I don't know what word to use—is of great importance to make sure we hear the opinions of veterans and their family members, since they are the ones who made the sacrifices.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Do you know which province the Daoust firm is located in?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Yes, now I know.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Which province is that?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: It's located in Quebec, whereas Mr. Stimson is from Alberta.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Have you had any contact with the firm? They tried several times to call the department, the previous minister, then the current one.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Personally, I was quite open to meeting with the Daoust firm. I spoke to colleagues and told them I was prepared to meet with them.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you for your comments, Mr. Desilets.

That brings this round of questions to an end.

[English]

I invite Ms. Blaney to use her six minutes, please.

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

Thank you for being here, Minister. I really appreciate it. Welcome to this new role. I look forward to working with you and, hopefully, in a good way.

I want to acknowledge that in the audience we have a lot of veterans. It's really good to see that.

We have not only veterans here, of course, but the people who support veterans. Thank you as well for being here.

I do see that our Persian Gulf War veteran is here, so I hope, Madam, that you are taking this concern.... I hope you've been aware of it and that you take it up pretty seriously.

I also want to personally welcome Phil, who is here. He is a veteran who has been outside of the House for the last few days and is actually on the third day of a hunger strike.

I'm calling on you, Minister, to meet with him very soon, hopefully, to address the real issues that he has. I just thought I would bring that to your attention.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: If I may—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I need a quick response because I have only six minutes.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: If I may, Rachel—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Yes.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: —again, if there's a veteran who certainly wants to meet with me, I'm more than happy to do so—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Excellent.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: —and we will make those arrangements. Please, I will make sure that my staff reaches out to him and to you before I leave today. and we'll make some arrangements.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much. I really appreciate that.

You know, for me, I'm always going to ask questions about marriage after 60, because I have committed to many veterans and their spouses that this is a fight that I will continue fighting as long as I possibly can, hoping for a resolution sooner rather than later.

Mr. Chair, there was great participation at my event for women veterans. The minister was there and had a chance to meet with Madeline Landry, a person I have a great amount of respect for. Of course, I know that Madeline shared her story. The reality is that she was married for over 20 years to her veteran spouse and she now does not receive any survivor pension benefits.

We know that the annual pension payout from the federal government is \$12 billion. According to the PBO report, eliminating the gold digger clause would add an increase of less than 2% to the annual payout. I'm confused as to why this isn't addressed. I get a lot of largely women calling my office who are quite elderly and who tell me that they are not gold diggers. I believe that they are not gold diggers.

In 2019, \$150 million was put aside for the survivor's benefit. We're now in 2023. This is a crisis.

Minister, when you will eliminate this clause?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you so much, Ms. Blaney, for that question, and thank you again for hosting the event this week. It was important.

Don't forget that I'm a member of Parliament as well, and I meet with many constituents in my riding. I have also met with a few individuals in my office who are dealing with this situation.

The name of that clause I refuse even to say, because it's just not appropriate. That said, we certainly recognize that family members and spouses serve with their partners. We certainly recognize that many of them are left in vulnerable situations. We are committed to making sure that we provide them with some support. That's why in budget 2019 we announced the veterans survivors fund. Now, being week nine or 10 into the job, I'm absolutely still getting briefed up, but that area is a top priority of mine. We certainly want to look at ways in which we can better support our seniors now.

Another issue is how to identify these individuals as well. We have to keep in mind that many individuals aren't part of the Veterans Affairs system, if you will. They're not part of our accounts. That makes it a bit of a challenge to be able to find these individuals, but we have to be up to the challenge of being able to roll out some type of program that can help these individuals in their time of need.

I'm committed to making sure that we get that work done.

• (1610)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you. I'm sure a lot of these folks can self-identify and give you proper documentation. I hope that's done quickly. We need to get that money out the door for largely women who are struggling with immense poverty after years and years, in some cases, of caring for veterans.

I hear a lot from veterans about how bureaucratic the process is. There's frustration that they can't get things done. One thing that comes up a lot is that of course they have to submit, for a lot of their claims, medical documentation within 30 days. We all know in this country that a lot of people don't have family doctors. Trying to fit into that timeline can be very, very challenging.

We also know that the Veterans Review and Appeal Board has approved at 98% the claims for tinnitus and hearing loss. I'm just wondering, when are we going to get that automatic approval for this? This would really help with the amount of work that is being done in the department, and it would honour these folks. It seems a shame that they apply for it and then they have to go to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, where the rate is 98%. I think if we have an extra 2% who shouldn't have it, it's better than a lot of people not having the supports that they desperately need.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you for that question.

I certainly hear that when it comes to hearing loss and tinnitus, we have a large number of claims coming forward. I also hear that a large number of claims, if they're not approved at first glance from the adjudicator and they go to the review board, are approved. I think we certainly have to make sure, however, that the proper

documentation is in place to make sure that we can determine if it's service-related. At least some criteria, I think, have to be established.

Again, I was speaking to my deputy minister just this week, indicating there that have to be ways to find more efficiencies within our service in order to make sure that, again, we can take that load from our caseworkers to allow them to do more of the casework. That's an ongoing conversation.

Like you, Ms. Blaney, I truly do believe there are efficiencies that we would be able to find with respect to that type of medical condition.

I don't know if Steven wants to add anything.

The Chair: Sorry. The time is running out. We will have another tour, so you will be able to come back on that.

[*Translation*]

We will now begin the second round of questions, in which the speaking time will be allocated differently.

[*English*]

I'd like to invite Mr. Richards for five minutes, please.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I want to come back to the trust issue, but first I want to touch on one other thing.

Do you believe that the Persian Gulf War was, in fact, just that, a war?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I certainly recognize that it was a mission that our members took part in.

Mr. Blake Richards: Do you consider it a war?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Again, I am not the person, Mr. Richards, to define if it's a war or not. I think we recognize that the department, DND, is the one that makes the definition between war and special operations.

Mr. Blake Richards: What's your personal opinion? Would you call it a war?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I think that all members who are serving in the Canadian Armed Forces are sacrificing a lot for freedoms around the world, and I think that all of that service must be recognized and commemorated and honoured. We should thank them and honour them for all the work they've done.

Again, I want to add that I have several members who are serving in the Canadian Armed Forces. I take their service very seriously.

Mr. Blake Richards: We sure appreciate that, but I think there are many members who served in our armed forces who served in that war—I will call it that, a war—who feel they aren't properly recognized because it's not considered wartime service.

It even says in VAC's own publications that it was the Persian Gulf War, yet they're not recognized as having served in wartime. That leaves many of our veterans feeling like they aren't considered the way they deserve to be. I hope you'll give that some consideration as we go forward.

Let's go back to this trust issue.

Ms. Blaney mentioned Philip Brooks, who is here with us today. He is one example of many people I've heard from who have lost faith in Veterans Affairs. They've lost trust in Veterans Affairs to the point where they're being asked to provide proof for medical conditions that are, in many cases, lifelong conditions. They're being asked to provide this proof over and over again. It leads them to the point where they just don't know what to do anymore.

Philip is on a hunger strike right now because of this situation. He is certainly far from the only one, unfortunately, who is feeling this way.

There are changes—policy changes, procedure changes—and it causes them to have to relive what can be pretty traumatic experiences they may have been through, which have led them to having these lifelong conditions. They have to prove these things over and over again. It's heartbreaking.

I wonder if you can address this. I wonder if you could speak a little bit to this lack of faith, this lack of trust that many of these veterans have. I've brought it up previously, but I really hope you're taking this to heart. Can you tell us a little bit about why you think that trust doesn't exist and what you can do to fix that?

• (1615)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thanks, again, Mr. Richards. I am going to start again by first of all indicating that we have to recognize that 80% of our claims are approved immediately. However, there are 20% that, of course, will go to the review board.

I think we also have to keep in mind that there are some complicated medical conditions, and the adjudicators, first of all, have to do their work to make sure the condition is related to their service. Sometimes, yes, there is medical information that's required and that doctors—

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm sorry. I have to interrupt you there, because what I'm talking about specifically here are situations where veterans have proven that. They have demonstrated that, and they're being asked to do it over and over again simply because VAC has made changes to their providers, or they have made changes to their procedures or to their policies. These are individuals who have proven that it is a service-related injury, and they're being asked to prove it again.

They're saying, "Enough is enough. We're tired of having to prove this over and over again. We're tired of having to relive this situation." It becomes humiliating to the point where they say, "I can't do this anymore. I'm not going to provide the proof again, for the 17th time." That's the kind of situation we're talking about here.

That's what leads someone like Philip to be on a hunger strike.

Minister, please, show some compassion for these individuals. Tell us what you can do to fix this trust, to fix this lack of faith that

veterans have in Veterans Affairs. What are you going to do specifically? What concrete measures are you going to take to fix it?

The Chair: Excuse me.

I'd like to remind members of the committee that if you take two minutes to ask a question, you have to permit the minister to have at least one minute and a half to respond.

For now, Minister, you have only one minute to respond to that, so please be concise. Please go ahead.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Once again, Mr. Richards, there are processes that are in place, and sometimes the outcomes may not be exactly what the veterans or the applicants want. There's an appeal process that's in place for that. I think that, at all times, we need to be compassionate. We need to make sure that people receive the services that they need in a timely fashion, and we need to make sure that people—

Mr. Blake Richards: Minister, it's the processes themselves that these people have the concerns about; it's the processes themselves. They're not getting—

Mr. Sean Casey: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Blake Richards: —the ability to have the compassion that you're talking about, so what are you going to do about the process?

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Richards. There is a point of order.

Mr. Casey.

Mr. Sean Casey: Mr. Chair, you specifically directed Mr. Richards to allow the witness to be able to spend as much time answering the question as he spent posing it. He spent two minutes posing the question. He interrupted her after 12 seconds.

Mr. Blake Richards: Mr. Chair, just to respond to that point of order, I will say that, as members, we're given an opportunity, a block of five minutes, to ask questions. When a minister chooses to go down a path where they've either failed to understand the question or they're not addressing the question, it's important for us, as members, to have the latitude—

The Chair: Mr. Richards, I understand you, but—

Mr. Blake Richards: —to be able to—

The Chair: I understand you, but—

Mr. Blake Richards: Mr. Chair, let me finish my intervention.

The Chair: No, no, no, I understand what you are saying, but—

Mr. Blake Richards: Let me finish my intervention. I've asked for an opportunity to respond to the point of order before we rule—

The Chair: I understand, but we have to go on because—

Mr. Blake Richards: We have veterans in this room who are upset about the processes.

The Chair: I know. I know.

Mr. Blake Richards: I just want to ask the minister about that question. I'm doing it on behalf of veterans, Mr. Chair.

• (1620)

The Chair: I understand that. We are meeting on behalf of veterans, and it's televised. I know that. However, like I said, if you take three minutes to ask a question, you have to leave at least two minutes for the witnesses to answer your question, and you have to stop interrupting those interventions. That's why I'm saying that.

Mr. Blake Richards: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Could you point to where, in the Standing Orders, it indicates that it's required for someone to give the exact amount of time for the minister to answer a question as has been used to ask it?

The member has the opportunity to use that time to get answers. In this case, it's on behalf of veterans who are upset about the processes, and I'm trying to ask the minister about those processes.

The Chair: Mr. Richards, let me tell you. You have five minutes to ask questions and to wait for the answers. If you want to take your five minutes, your total five minutes, to comment or to say something, that's all. However, like I said, please do not interrupt. If you do not agree with the answer, I can understand that, but the witnesses should have their time to answer you, please.

So, now it's—

Mr. Blake Richards: I agree, Mr. Chair. Let's hear her answer about what she's going to do to fix those processes.

The Chair: It's okay.

Minister, I want to give you just 30 seconds to reply if you want to.

Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

His time is long gone. Through all the points of order and—

The Chair: No, no, no.

Mr. Bryan May:—his interventions throughout, his time is long gone.

The Chair: Mr. May, listen. I have my chrono right here, so I know. That's my job; I'm doing that. If I give 30 seconds to the minister, I'm allowed to.

All right, let's move on.

I'm sorry about the interruption, Minister. Please, if you have any comments, you have 30 seconds. After that, you can come back in another round to go further.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Again, we certainly recognize, Mr. Richards, that not all clients are 100% satisfied with Veterans Affairs Canada. That is why we can always improve our processes. That is why we have our ADMs working hard to make sure that we offer quality service and make the necessary investments to provide veterans with access to the case managers, to their agents—

Mr. Blake Richards: Can you tell us specifically what you're doing to improve the processes, though?

The Chair: Excuse me. Excuse me, sir. I just said that I would give the minister 30 seconds.

Mr. Blake Richards: Mr. Chair, it's not your job to cover for the minister.

The Chair: No, no, it's not my job, I know, but I said that she had 30 seconds, and within those 30 seconds, you're interrupting again. Please, we are in front of veterans. We are working for them, so we need answers.

You have 10 seconds.

Mr. Blake Richards: Exactly. We need answers about what she's going to do to fix the processes.

The Chair: Okay, now it's over, and I'd like to go now to Mr. Miao for five minutes, please.

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

Welcome, Minister. Congratulations on your appointment to this file.

As well, I'd like to welcome all the guests and veterans. I really appreciate all the service that you've done for our country.

Before I start my question, maybe I will let the minister finish her comment if she has more to add in response to the question that my colleague asked.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Miao.

Again, what I want to say is that we can always find efficiencies within our department, and that's exactly what I am committed to doing. We want to make sure that our veterans receive the help and support that they need in a timely fashion.

We saw cuts made to this department, you know, eight or nine years ago, and we've re-established all of those resources with respect to the staffing levels to make sure that we can review and accommodate the applications in a timely fashion.

If you look at the benefits that we've put in place, you will see that, since 2015, over \$11 billion in additional funding that goes directly to veterans has been invested because we care for veterans and want to make sure that they get the help that they need when they need it.

Can we do better? Absolutely, and we have to make sure that we do that.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you, Minister.

As you also know, the housing crisis is also affecting all Canadians, especially our veterans, and supply and prices continue to be an issue across the country. As a result, we're seeing veteran homelessness persisting as an issue in many parts of our country. I know that the government has announced funding to help address some of these challenges. Are you able to provide us with some of the updates on this program in how we support our veterans here?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Sure. Thank you so much for that really important question.

I think when we look at homelessness, it's an issue that impacts us from coast to coast to coast.

In the last budget, we announced almost \$80 million—I think it was \$79.6 million—to help alleviate the homelessness situation here within this country.

I'm working closely with my friend and colleague Minister Fraser with respect to outlining what that program is going to look like. We've put out a call for proposals and have received many applications thus far from different groups across the country. I'm looking forward to being able to make some of those announcements in the very near future.

With respect to that funding, however, there are two elements that are really important.

We want to make sure that veterans are going to have access to rent subsidies, in order to help them alleviate the high cost of rents in the country.

The other part of the funding, as well, is for wraparound services. We want to make sure that, for veterans who are struggling with mental health issues, substance use and addictions, or whatever the case may be, wraparound services will be available to them if they need them.

We want to set people up for success and not failure. Being a past social worker, I've heard many a time that if they don't have those wraparound services, it can be a bit of an issue.

Moving forward with this funding that we've announced, which we're going to be rolling out in the very near future.... Again, it will provide individuals with the type of help and support they need.

When it comes to housing, as well, I think we have to keep in mind that we have to work with all levels of government—municipalities, provinces and the federal government.

When I became the veterans affairs minister, I had an opportunity in the first week to be in Ottawa and to visit Veterans' House. I don't know if any of the committee members have had the opportunity to do that.

It's a not-for-profit organization that has built an apartment complex, and it is housing veterans. The first floor is more of a general area where many people can meet. They have access to wraparound services as well. So far, that program has worked very well. Using that model, the not-for-profit agency is hoping to open others of these apartment buildings across the country in two or three more cities they have been able to identify. Again, that's a type of an example of partnerships with provincial government, federal government and also municipalities.

Another quick example that I can give is the Surrey Legion. My friend and colleague Randeep Sarai is not here today, but in his area, the Surrey Legion had a wonderful piece of land. It was prime real estate.

Their legion perhaps wasn't as active as it usually is, so they took that piece of land, and a private developer came in, and they were able to establish a partnership. They were able to build a skyrise, if you will—not a skyrise but a multi-level apartment complex. The legion is still housed there, but it's a brand new facility. Up top, there are housing units for our veterans. Also downstairs is a medical clinic.

Again, it's not a one-size-fits-all. I think you can't have a cookie-cutter approach, but there are many options available for different folks across the country.

• (1625)

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you, Minister.

I look forward to having more information about those programs.

As we all know, our government has developed a lot of good programs for our veterans. Some in my riding have raised the concern that not all veterans are using digital platforms, and so they might not be aware of these programs—

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Miao. I said you had one minute left, but now the time is up. You will come back in another round.

Sorry, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor. You only have two and a half minutes this time.

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

Madam Minister, do you think that setting up a jury was a mistake, or that you made a mistake in choosing this jury?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Desilets, I don't think it was a mistake to set up a jury, any more than it was a mistake to carry out a consultation. In the end, two different results emerged from these processes.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Madam Minister, do you think the government has more expertise than a jury of experts when it comes to choosing a work of art?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: When it comes to a monument to commemorate a mission in the context of war or conflict, I think we absolutely have to listen to our veterans.

Mr. Luc Desilets: In that case, why didn't you conduct a scientific survey of veterans only?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Once again, we opted for a Canada-wide consultation open to all so that everyone could give us their point of view. Over 10,000 Canadians responded to the survey.

Again, Mr. Desilets, I think it's very important to make sure we hear from our veterans.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Madam Minister.

Furthermore, 40.6% of people who responded to the survey worked in Afghanistan or are veterans of that mission. That doesn't constitute a majority.

Mr. Chair, I would like to present a notice of motion.

The Chair: Okay. You can use your time to do that, yes.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I think you've received it, Mr. Clerk.

Shall I read it now, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Yes, go ahead.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I imagine my Conservative colleagues also have a copy of the following notice of motion:

That, after hearing from the Minister of Veterans Affairs, Ginette Petitpas Taylor, and the Minister of Canadian Heritage, Pascale St-Onge, regarding the controversy surrounding the competition and awarding of the contract for the design of the National Monument to Canada's Mission in Afghanistan, the Committee invite representatives from Daoust and from Leger to appear at a subsequent meeting for one hour each.

• (1630)

The Chair: Thank you.

We've just received the notice of motion, and it will be distributed. So I take it, Mr. Desilets, that this is just a notice of motion.

Mr. Luc Desilets: That's right, unless people decide that we should discuss it right away.

The Chair: According to the Standing Orders, this is a notice of motion. We will discuss this motion at the next opportunity.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Yes, I'm aware of that.

The Chair: Please note that you still have one minute left.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Madam Minister, can you imagine that, by making this choice based on a totally unscientific survey, you are alienating communities, including those in the arts and culture world? I'd even go so far as to say that you are alienating veterans who, like you and me, can see the irrelevance of the survey you've based your decision on.

Do you realize that this work of art will still be there in 200 years? No government in the world makes a decision like this based on nothing. This survey is nothing.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I don't agree with that Mr. Desilets.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I can imagine.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I think it's disrespectful to say that the opinions of veterans are worthless.

Mr. Luc Desilets: That's not what I said, madam.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: We take into account the opinions of veterans and their families.

It's true that 40% of survey respondents were Afghanistan veterans or members of their family, but a larger percentage were veterans of other missions around Canada or abroad.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

I would now like to invite Ms. Blaney to take her two and a half minutes, please.

Go ahead.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

Through you to the minister, I want to reflect on the fact that in some of the responses, I've heard you talking about efficiencies of services. I appreciate that, but what concerns me about that is that it's a departmental response to say, "Trying to be ever more efficient".

The real human concern of many veterans is that efficiency may be impacting in a negative way the services they require to have time and space. Again, a lot of the discussions I'm having with veterans are about how they want to see a department that's more veteran-centric. I hope that is work you will endeavour to do.

I want to touch on women veterans. As you know, the committee is finally studying women veterans. This is the first time it has ever been done in this place, which I think is quite astonishing. We've heard from a lot of women veterans—especially older women veterans who enlisted prior to 2000—who do not have appropriate medical documentation. The reason is that they were really new and there was pressure to not stand out, to be quiet and to not bring forward issues because they were concerned about harassment, bullying and other activities that were intimidating. Of course, there's also the sad history of our forces in terms of sexual misconduct.

The gap has been acknowledged by both DND and CAF. I am really curious about how this is going to be addressed, because so many women veterans are not getting the benefits they deserve because they simply do not have the medical documentation—for no fault of their own.

Retired captain Louise Siew was here from the navy. One of her recommendations really stuck with me, namely, that is to better to support women by giving them the disability benefit claims and just doing an automatic approval process because of the recognition by both DND and CAF. This would make such a big difference for these women, who are put in a place where they have to fight so often.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

To take 30 seconds, not even 30 seconds, when I talk about efficiencies, I certainly don't want to sound like a bureaucrat—and no offence to my bureaucrats who are with me here today. We want to make sure that we can get the job done and get services to veterans.

I'll use just one example. I think it was the committee that made this recommendation, which is that when people are applying for mental health benefits, making sure they get approved right away without any delays. When I talk about efficiencies, I mean streamlining those types of processes.

Coming back to your question with respect to women veterans—

• (1635)

The Chair: I'm sorry, Minister, but it was two minutes and a half. If we have another turn, you can maybe come back on that.

Now I'd like to invite Mr. Fraser Tolmie to speak, for five minutes, please.

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

Through you, Chair, congratulations, Minister, on your new portfolio. However, you have your work cut out for you. I've heard first-hand from veterans and their families about how broken things are.

You acknowledged in your opening remarks that you were aware of veterans trying to get into the system, which I believe you said was your top priority. I'll point out that veterans who are not in the system feel they are neglected and ignored.

In one of your replies to my colleague Mr. Richards, you said that you would address any improvements that you could. After three months, do you have a list of things that are broken in Veterans Affairs?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you so much for that question, Mr. Tolmie.

First of all, for the past three months, as the Minister of Veterans Affairs, I've certainly had an opportunity to meet with stakeholders from coast to coast to coast and to hear their of experiences first-hand. I've also met with many stakeholders. Again, as I indicated, we certainly heard many positive stories of individuals who have received services from Veterans Affairs. I also met with individuals who indicated there are some challenges there.

One challenge is the backlog. I believe my colleague Minister MacAulay, when he was here, reported back with respect to the work that's being done on that backlog. We certainly recognize that over the past number of years, we've had a 61% increase in the number of applications that have come to Veterans Affairs Canada. We're seeing an increase in numbers—

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Through you, Chair, I'll rephrase my question. Do you have a list of things that are broken at Veterans Affairs?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I indicated very clearly that there are efficiencies and ways to do things better, and that's exactly what we're working on.

When we talk about the backlog—

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Through you, Chair, could I get a list of what you have recognized as deficiencies?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: If you'll allow me to continue, please, when we talk about the backlog, that was one issue we heard time and time again. I continue to hear from veterans that they want us to address the backlog.

When it comes to services, and when it comes to—

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Through you, Mr. Chair, what else is broken?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: First and foremost, the language “broken” is your word. I'm not saying there are things that are broken in Veterans Affairs Canada, but I'm saying there are areas where we can improve.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Okay, let's use the word “deficiencies”. Would that be fair enough to use that word? What are the deficiencies?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: With respect to the other areas of work that we need to do, there is the area of commemoration and making sure that we commemorate our modern-day veterans.

We heard individuals today talk about the Gulf War. We need to make sure that we commemorate more of those missions of our modern-day veterans.

The other issue, as well, that's a priority—

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Through you, Mr. Chair, do you have a list? Have you started a list of things that you want to address at Veterans Affairs while you are in that chair?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Yes, I have.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: What is on that list?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Tackling the backlog, making sure that we—

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: But you said that the backlog has been addressed. What else is on the list?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: We still have some work to do, sir, when it comes to the backlog. We have not met our service standards yet. I indicated that 75% of the backlog has been dealt with, but we still have more work that needs to be done.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Thank you.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Addressing, as well—

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Thank you. I think that's enough. I appreciate that, Minister.

I'm going to ask you a question.

A veteran who is confined to a wheelchair goes into Veterans Affairs, and it's recognized that they are confined to a wheelchair from a service-related injury. Do they, in your opinion, have to prove that year after year after year? If so, what does that do to their dignity?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I think we need to make sure that our veterans receive the services they need and the compassion and empathy they deserve.

With respect to the process that's in place, I'm going to defer to my colleague here, my ADM, as I'm not aware of all of the steps that need to be taken. I don't have a problem admitting that. I'm not the one who does the arbitration of these types of cases.

I'm sure that Mr. Harris would be more than happy to elaborate on the process.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, we have a veteran here who has been from pillar to post, having to prove time and time again that they have gone through service-related injuries. They have to do all this paperwork to prove that over and over again.

What does that do to their dignity?

• (1640)

The Chair: You have 20 seconds, Mr. Harris.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: I'm sorry. I was asking the minister.

I was asking what it does to their dignity.

What, in your opinion, does it do?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: With respect to process, Mr. Tolmie, I'm not aware of each and every step. I want to be clear with you. With respect to proving other medical conditions, I agree. If an individual is in a wheelchair, I do not understand why that occurs. Again, I would ask Mr. Harris to perhaps provide—

The Chair: Thank you so much. The five minutes is gone now.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Bryan May for five minutes. He is on the screen. Oh, no—he's right here.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Bryan May: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I wasn't hiding on you. I promise.

First of all, Minister, thank you for being here. I do apologize for the behaviour of some of my colleagues and the constant interruptions. I promise I will give you ample opportunity to answer every question.

I will agree—

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Point of order.

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. May, but there's a point of order here.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Mr. Chair, anytime that I wanted to have an answer, I went through you, sir. I was acknowledged.

I would like an apology.

Mr. Bryan May: I don't think I mentioned your name, sir. You're making some wild assumptions that I was referring to you.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Well, you came right after me.

Mr. Bryan May: That's true. I don't get to pick when I answer these questions.

The Chair: Okay. Please, members of the committee, I know the committee is doing a lot, so I would like all of us to take it easy, to be relaxed and continue.

Mr. Bryan May: Thank you.

I will agree, however, through you, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: Yes, please, Mr. May, go directly to your intervention, please.

Mr. Bryan May: Thank you.

I will agree with my colleague's intervention somewhat with respect to the importance of trust and of establishing that trust with

veterans. I was the chair of this committee for two years. I was parliamentary secretary for the Minister of National Defence for two years. I can tell you that I spoke with a lot of members, both veterans and those transitioning to become veterans. I'll tell you, one of the ways that we establish trust is by continuing to support them.

One of the ways that we've done that in this government is, of course, by reopening the veterans offices that the previous government closed. We also changed the criteria to allow more veterans to be qualified for the supports. Of course, the impact of that created the backlog, which you talked a little bit about, Minister.

It's continuing that work and continuing on that path that will develop that trust. Trust is earned. It's not something we can snap our fingers and solve or throw money at and solve. It is earned, and it is something we need to continue to work towards.

Minister, through you Mr. Chair, this is a new role for you. I know that prior to politics your work was in social work. I'm wondering if maybe you could speak a little bit to the priorities you have in this role and the ability to draw from your previous experiences of providing service and listening to folks and how those might impact your priorities as the Minister of Veterans Affairs.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thanks so much, Bryan, for that question and for the opportunity to respond and perhaps talk a bit about my list of things to do and my priorities, as I've tried to explain to the member opposite.

As you've indicated, the backlog is certainly a top priority. We've dealt with about 75% of that backlog, but it's not just the backlog. We are seeing an increased volume of cases coming in, and that's a good thing, because people are applying for the services they need and deserve. We need to continue to make sure that we are tackling that backlog, and we can't take our foot off the gas when it comes to that.

The other thing as well, when it comes to commemoration, is what I talked about in my opening remarks. We really want to make sure that we do a better job of commemorating our modern-day veterans. Be it the Swissair disaster or the Afghanistan mission—the list goes on and on—we need to make sure as a department that we recognize and thank the veterans who have served on these missions. That is absolutely a priority of mine.

Finally, when it comes to the equity-seeking groups, we have a lot of work that needs to be done. Ms. Blaney talked about women veterans. That is an area of great interest to me. We certainly recognize that about 15% of CAF members are female. We are going to see more female CAF members becoming veterans, so we want to make sure that we have the appropriate services in place for them to meet their needs, because their needs are very different from those of men in some estimations.

For indigenous veterans, we certainly have to do a better job of making sure that they have access to the services they need as well.

Another area that I've heard a lot about recently is long-term care for our veterans. We certainly recognize that we have a baby-boomer generation that's happening right now, and some of them are getting older, and they are kind of wondering what that is going to look like for them. That's also an area in which I'm extremely interested in making sure that we see some movement.

Also there are our 2SLGBT+ veterans. Again, a lot of work needs to be done in that area.

Those are the priority areas that I have and the areas of interest where I certainly want to make sure we can make significant difference.

My background is social work. I was a frontline social worker for 23 years. I'm not a career politician, if you will. Perhaps now I am, but I am a lady who wants to listen to people. I want to build bridges together. I want to work collaboratively, and that is why I made it a point to go out to communities and meet with stakeholders. It's important to hear from folks on the ground and to hear from our veterans who are sitting here.

• (1645)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. May.

[Translation]

We'll now start the third round of questions.

[English]

I'd like to invite Ms. Wagantall for five minutes, please.

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

Welcome, Minister. I appreciate your being here and answering our questions.

You've mentioned the importance to you of doing better with efficiencies to improve things—in other words, to do better. So I have three things that I just would like to mention for you to consider.

I have been on this committee since I became a member in 2015. I think I am the matron of the community now. I have a lot of good friends who are veterans, and they talk to us. Again, this is where we really need to go to get our information for how to do better.

I would say that what veterans are saying is that they should not have to go through the effort of re-proving their injuries and conditions over and over and over again just because VAC changes policies and procedures. There has to be a way, once they have shared the information and their case managers have their information.... It is there, so any benefit of the doubt and any information they have given should be once and for all. That is how they feel.

I see you indicated that you disagreed with the report's finding on the new contract for the administration of Veteran Affairs Canada rehabilitation program, where we found there was a lack of communication in consulting with veterans. I can assure you that it is not a good take on that situation and that a lot was missed. Our vet-

erans in this circumstance, after facing backlogs and then suddenly having this change of third party services, think it was a mistake. That is just my perspective from their perspective.

Also my understanding is that, regarding the backlog, when a veteran's file is missing documents and the department has to go back to the veteran, that takes their case out of that backlog number. I would check that out because it's not accurate. It's not right. At that point, Veterans Affairs should be bending over backwards to help them to get those papers in.

Third, we do have a case here today, and I would like you to answer this question. Because of their not wanting to go through all of this again for that third party dynamic and because the case manager already has all of the files that my friend here has, he was threatened and is in a situation where he is no longer receiving his funding because he has not followed through with expectations, when his feeling is that his documents are there and available to VAC.

Do you feel that is right?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Again, as I've indicated, if there's a veteran here who wants to meet with me, I'm more than happy to have that conversation with him or her, and to discuss that matter.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay. Thank you very much.

I would certainly hope, on the basis of that example alone, that for every veteran who has not met whatever timeline is involved in this third party agreement, in no cases should any of them have their funds no longer provided until they meet that expectation. I believe that's Veterans Affairs' responsibility at this point, not theirs.

How much time do I have?

• (1650)

The Chair: You have two more minutes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay.

I think I'll leave this other question for later, but if you have anything else that you would want to share in that regard.... Are you aware of where files go when they're back in the veterans' hands, in that brown bag or letter sent to them where they have to provide more information? Are they still in that backlog list or not?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Again, if you permit me, I'm going to ask Mr. Harris to answer. I just want to give you a thorough answer to that question.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I'd appreciate that.

Mr. Steven Harris (Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs): Mr. Chair, when information is missing in an application, we contact the veteran. We indicate what information is missing. We give them an opportunity to come back and provide the information that's required.

If not, essentially the claim is held for when the veteran is able to come back with the information required to be able to actually go through and adjudicate the claim. It is held—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay. How do you contact the veteran?

Mr. Steven Harris: We contact them either by letter or directly through My VAC Account, depending on how they've contacted us, and we may actually reach out to them directly, in certain cases, to ensure that we can get the right information from them.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: When you say, "we", is that their case manager?

Mr. Steven Harris: No, actually, it's a different group within the department who does that. It would be disability adjudicators, people who work in our centralized operation division who work on disability benefits.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: If we want them to build those relationships and that trust level with their case manager, would it not be better to have the case manager communicating with them?

Mr. Steven Harris: Often the case manager can communicate with them about that kind of program as well. They can work through their case manager. They can also work with our disability benefits team, who are more intimately involved in the actual decision with respect to a disability adjudication.

There are many programs that we offer. Rehabilitation works directly working with case managers. The disability program goes through a bit of a different stream, but all of those connections can be helped back through the case management group as well.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I would think that we would be better to have one point of contact so that it's as efficient as possible.

Mr. Steven Harris: Except not every veteran has a case manager, or requires a case manager. Some may apply—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Or a service manager.

Mr. Steven Harris: —for disability benefits and not require case management support. That's where we need to be careful to say.... It can't just be one stream, necessarily. There may be many that are appropriate for that veteran.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I would suggest the ones struggling with responding are definitely in the hands of a case manager.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris.

Thank you, Mrs. Wagantall.

Now I'd like to invite the Honourable Carolyn Bennett to speak, please, for five minutes.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (Toronto—St. Paul's, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I, too, am a bit concerned about the bullying and the theatre around having the minister here. I think when Canadians or veterans are watching committees they expect us to work together and to be able to put veterans or Canadians first—not theatre.

It's been a while since I've been at committee, but I must say, I'm disappointed in the way some of my colleagues have been behaving.

I would like to follow up on a couple of the questions regarding the kind of paperwork involved. I chaired the subcommittee on persons with disabilities for five years and I know that some of the

concerns there were the same. Whether somebody has an amputation, that doesn't tend to change. Whether somebody needs a wheelchair, that can change. People can end up with occupational therapy. They can regain their mobility.

However, I understood from the way the question is worded is that there new or different approaches to the need for a wheelchair and those kinds of things. I realize that from filling out paperwork, people are frustrated. They know this, but how do you actually sort out the fact that every two years things might change and that it's kind of—without making assumptions—regarded however as if things are exactly the same?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Again, I'm going to defer to Mr. Harris, but I think there are some conditions where, I think we would all agree, the condition is not going to change—point-blank—but there are some conditions that, perhaps, do.

Mr. Harris, again, if you would like to elaborate a bit on that....

Mr. Steven Harris: Sure.

Thanks for the opportunity to clarify.

When a veteran has an established pension condition, they do not need to requalify for that pension condition. It's established in their file. They do not need to re-prove that as part of the department's work in helping to support them.

There are two reasons why they may come back and look for something else.

There may be a reassessment. In other words, their condition may have worsened. If their condition has worsened, they may come forward with documentation to suggest that it's worse and they may need access to different or more things. They may actually also be entitled to more compensation.

The other reason is that perhaps their circumstances have changed in other ways as well: not just from a request for additional compensation for the pain, illness or injury they've suffered, but also for additional supports. We often can reach out to veterans who have established conditions, not to ask them to re-prove it, but rather to ask them if they're doing okay and whether they need additional supports, whether that means additional treatment benefits, a visit from an occupational therapist who can help equip their house more appropriately for a disability or an injury they may have, or for other things as well.

There are reasons why we will speak to veterans about their condition. Often, it is not about re-proving a condition they have. Rather, it's about assuring that it's assessed properly and there are appropriate steps and actions in place to help support them.

● (1655)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thank you very much.

In the concerns that I've heard, and again, it was the same with CPP disability or others of those things, how many are turned down the first time, how many are approved the first time and that in this 80/20.... Do we have numbers about the people who don't go on to appeal and who just drop out? Do we have a gender-based analysis on the refusals? Or sometimes people have more complex conditions, perhaps, that need more explanation.

Mr. Steven Harris: There are a couple of different avenues.

With respect to disability benefits, an individual who may not be successful in applying for disability benefits the first time has access to a Veterans Affairs-funded lawyer through the Bureau of Pensions Advocates, who will support them in their appeal to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board.

Generally, the stats are that about 30% of people who may be declined for their application will go through the the Bureau of Pensions Advocates and go forward with a case to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. Sometimes they're counselled not to: There's not enough evidence, it's been determined essentially that there may not be a service relationship and they may not be successful. Many others, as has been indicated here, go forward to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board and are given a hearing and may be found favourable in those cases.

There are other appeal processes for other Veterans Affairs programs that involve treatment benefits, rehabilitation, education and training benefits. If they're not happy with the decision that comes the first time, there are many appeals processes for veterans to pursue, to give to another audience and have another opportunity for a favourable decision.

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

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Mr. Desilets. You have two and a half minutes.

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

Let's continue, Madam Minister.

The survey you carried out, while by no means scientific, was only intended as a tool for the jury. The jury read the results, but also had a wealth of documents in its possession. The jury was made up of experts, including museum directors and people who went to Afghanistan.

Do you really believe that a survey like that, with an image and a 90-second video, is more credible than the decision made by a jury of experts?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Let me be very clear, Mr. Desilets: I never used the word "scientific" in the survey or the consultation.

The Department of Veterans Affairs undertook a consultation to listen to veterans, whether you call it a questionnaire, a survey or whatever. More than 10,000 people responded. Yes, 40% of them were Afghanistan veterans or family members, but a large percentage of respondents were veterans. That's why their wishes were so important to us. They told us that they felt the Stimson team's concept better reflected the mission.

I'd like to add that I'm extremely grateful to the artists for submitting their concepts to the competition. In the end, we had to choose one, and as Minister of Veterans Affairs, my priority was to listen to veterans.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Did the Prime Minister's office intervene?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I don't think so.

Mr. Luc Desilets: You don't think so?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I would say no, but that's just my opinion. I don't have a more specific answer for you.

Mr. Luc Desilets: We'll see you again soon, so I would appreciate it if you could check this out before then, if you could.

• (1700)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Okay, I'll ask.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Great.

I may not be nice in saying this, but I get the impression that you and the government are blaming veterans for this lack of rigour and ethics on the part of the government. I'm the first to stand up for veterans. That's all I've been doing here for the past four years. In the current situation, I think you're using them.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Quite the opposite, Mr. Desilets.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Madam Minister, will you reconsider your decision?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: The decision has been made, Mr. Desilets, and we'll be moving ahead with the monument.

On the weekend, I...

We seem to be out of time, so I'll finish my answer next time.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Oh, that's too bad.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madam Minister.

Thank you for your intervention, Mr. Desilets.

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

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

I'll come back to the question I asked in the last round. I'll get her name right this time. Retired captain Louise Siew of the navy encouraged VAC to acknowledge and apologize for making it so difficult for women to receive those benefits, and recommended that an automatic approval process be put in place that does not require medical documentation.

I'm just wondering if this is something you would be willing to explore.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I'm always willing to explore and look at ways that we can better our services, Ms. Blaney, for sure.

What we have done with respect to women veterans as well is establish a team to make sure that when we receive those applications, we have a specialized team, if you will, that is assessing those.

Again, as I've indicated in the past, we've had lots of male veterans come forward. The assessment process has really been based on lots of those types of injuries that men carried and lived with. However, when it comes to women veterans, we are seeing that the Canadian Armed Forces is making an effort to ensure that we can recruit more women. As such, we're going to have more women veterans.

We want to make sure, again, that we have a team—a tiger team, if you will—to make sure that they can do those assessments and we talk about gender-based analysis. It's not just words: We are really doing the analysis to make sure that we know exactly how these policies are impacting women when we look at the level of injuries, etc. It's really important to make sure that we do all that we can.

I talk about equity-seeking groups, and we have some work to do in that area. That area for me is of great importance. We want—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I only have a few more seconds. I have to interrupt you, and I apologize.

I will say that we have repeatedly heard that women veterans feel invisible. If they feel invisible, then we need to make them visible. I'm calling on you to do that.

We know that at commemoration events lots of women veterans are often asked if they're wearing their husband's medals. That concerns me greatly. I'm wondering if there are any discussions moving forward about having an official acknowledgement of women veterans at commemoration services, so that we can make what is so often invisible, visible.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: When I attended your event that was hosted by Monsieur Desilets this week, I also heard that women veterans feel invisible. Really, it breaks my heart. They have served their country just as well as their male colleagues.

With respect to that suggestion, again, I'm very happy to bring that back and to look into that. We really need to make sure that women do see themselves and know that their service is valued. At Veterans Affairs Canada we want to make sure they receive the services they deserve and need, and also that we acknowledge and commemorate their service. It's truly important.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now let's go to Mr. Terry Dowdall for five minutes, please.

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

Thank you, Minister, for being here with us today.

I'm sure you're aware that on July 1, the insurance provider for the public service health care did a switchover from Sun Life Canada. There are quite a few different veterans who are on that service. I heard quite a bit about it at the time locally from some of my pharmacists in the area.

I have Base Borden in my riding. Lots of people, as they travel throughout their military career, pick a great spot—usually with a great representative—and they'll stay there. I'm fortunate that I have many veterans in my riding.

I'm just wondering how that transition's gone so far.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: As many Canadians, many of us and many individuals across the country, have gone through the transition process, some have been able to sign up fairly easily and others have had some issues. I think that where we're at now, things are going a lot better overall, but there were some bumps in the road at the beginning that we have to acknowledge.

I do have to say, though, that for those veterans who had not signed up to the new program, Veterans Affairs case managers or agents actually reached out to the veterans who had not signed up—

● (1705)

Mr. Terry Dowdall: That's my next question: Were they informed? How were the veterans informed prior to it? Did everyone get a notice on that one, and how did they get notice?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Everyone received it....

I'm going to let Mr. Harris explain, and then from there I'll continue with the response.

Mr. Steven Harris: They received notices in two ways. One was from the actual provider itself, Canada Life, the new provider of the public service health care plan. It's administered by our Treasury Board Secretariat colleagues.

They also received notices from Veterans Affairs that this was coming, in terms of letters, in terms of messages through the My VAC Account, a system that helps to enable them as well.

In cases where we knew people had not, essentially, signed up through the transition forms, we reached out directly to ask them if they needed any help, if they needed the forms and, if they had the forms, whether they were aware of what they needed to do to make that transition itself. We made several efforts on that front.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: In my riding I heard from quite a few who were frustrated: We have quite a few different letters from them, saying that they didn't know.

They needed their medicines. One example here is it's \$1,000 a month for their chronic illness. Even phoning, the amount of time to try and get through to everything was really frustrating for those individuals, so I'm hoping you can improve on that.

I'm going to move on to something else that we've heard quite a bit about as well. How many veterans are working at VAC after they finished their careers? Right now 5% of VAC employees are veterans, and at last count that would be roughly around 171 employees in the whole department. I would think or assume that there are good jobs for those who are leaving Veterans Affairs. It's always good to have a good, steady government job, I'm sure—something to look for.

That number itself seems kind of low, and I'm just wondering if you have committed to a certain number to improve in order to have more veterans work in the department.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: With respect to the employment strategy for veterans, it's certainly an area in which we have different levers. Making sure that veterans will have access to federal jobs is, of course, a part of the employment strategy per se.

To your exact question with respect to the percentage of employees we have who are veterans, I would have to defer either to Paul or Steven, as I'm not aware of the exact percentage.

Paul.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: As the minister, you would probably want to improve upon that number, I would think. You would probably have some kind of thought process to get more veterans actually working within the department.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: With respect to the employment strategy, it's really important to make sure that all of our veterans are not underemployed, but employed with the skill level they have. Many veterans are not even aware of the level of skills they have—their transferable skills. That is why it's important that we make sure as an employer—the federal government, be it at VAC or in different departments—we provide them with access to those opportunities. Again, our veterans have a lot of skill sets, and they're certainly able to fill these very meaningful jobs—well-paying jobs with benefits, as you've indicated—so we certainly want to make sure that is the case.

For the percentage, I'd like to turn it to Paul.

Mr. Paul Ledwell (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): If I could add quickly, Mr. Chair, the last number I have received is that 175 veterans are currently employed at Veterans Affairs Canada.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Is there a strategy to get more?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: We want to increase that.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Like I said, they would have the skills in the department. You could actually have them trained, almost, before they came to you, depending on what part of the military they're working in. Is that right?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: That's absolutely right. We want more of them employed at Veterans Affairs Canada, and, as the minister has indicated, right across the Government of Canada.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Is there no target? You haven't put a target.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: There's no target currently, but we're very open to establishing a target, absolutely.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: It's probably a good idea to have a target so you have something to go for.

There's just one other thing that I heard about. This is a lighter comment. I know that many people send Christmas cards, holiday cards—whatever—and have free postage. I have a letter from a resident in my riding here, Judith Armstrong, who wants to send some.

Every year the cost of stamps.... Inflation, as you know, is extremely high. Things, and the government, cost a lot. Why don't they have it so that you can send...? Sunnybrook in Ontario has fine

examples of those who have served. Why can't they send those at cost, during those periods of time, to those individuals? If you send one, it's over a dollar. For her to do it, it's hundreds of dollars to send those to them, to bring light to them.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I'll take that back. That's all that I can say.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Now I have Mr. Sean Casey for five minutes, please. He's on the screen.

• (1710)

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

First off, I just want to clarify something that was mentioned in a previous answer. That is the transfer of the health plan that was overseen by the Treasury Board Secretariat. I believe that someone may have misspoken.

It's my understanding that the health plan was transferred from Sun Life to Canada Life. Could someone just confirm that is, in fact, the case?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: That's correct.

Mr. Sean Casey: Great. Thank you.

We received some fantastic news over the weekend, Madam Minister. There is now new leadership at the head of the Union of Veterans' Affairs Employees. I would invite you, and if you wish, your colleagues on each side....

First of all, allow me to congratulate Toufic El-Daher on assuming the leadership of the national presidency of this union. Many of whose members are constituents of mine.

Perhaps you could comment on the opportunities that presents for labour management relations, a new era with new leadership. I would invite Mr. Ledwell or Mr. Harris to chime in as well. I know that they both have, I would say, more regular dealings with the union, but I would appreciate your comments on the opportunity that's presented by this new chapter, please.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you, Sean. I'll be brief.

I had an opportunity this week to speak to the new union president. I again want to congratulate him on his election this past weekend.

I also want to take a moment to thank the outgoing president for all the work she has done. She certainly had a lot of issues that she had to deal with, with respect to negotiations and a strike this year as well. We certainly want to thank her for the leadership she has shown.

Again, I don't know the new union president, but I spoke to him briefly and I look forward to working with him.

Perhaps I'll turn it over to Paul and then to Steven if they have a few comments to make.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Very quickly, Mr. Chair, I think it's important for us to interact in a respectful and a productive manner with all of our bargaining agents, including the UVAE. They are the largest representative bargaining unit on behalf of their members and our employees at Veterans Affairs Canada.

We have had very engaged interaction with that union. We've also dealt and worked closely with the new president. He was, for the last several years, the national vice-president of that same union, so we've been at tables together. We've collaborated. We'll continue to collaborate and look forward to a productive relationship with that union under his leadership.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you very much to both of you.

As you may be aware, prior to 2015, there were some deep and disproportionate cuts within the Department of Veterans Affairs that drastically affected service delivery, and certainly employee morale. I guess my question is this. It appears there has been a directive to look for savings. Much of the preoccupation of the employees during the Harper cuts was the continuation of the national headquarters in Charlottetown. That seemed to be a preoccupation with the union as well, until this latest change.

What comments can you offer with respect to the presence of the national headquarters in Charlottetown going forward?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Sean, I think we all know that it's really important to maintain the service level that we have, and the presence in Charlottetown is extremely important. We see that a lot of people from Charlottetown, from Prince Edward Island, are working at Veterans Affairs and have become very skilled at their jobs.

We also know that the morale, as you've indicated.... In years gone by, we saw that previous governments slashed the Veterans Affairs positions by 1,000, and we quickly rehired those individuals to make sure we could tackle the challenges that had caused. Losing 1,000 employees was very difficult for the morale. We've rehired them, and on top of that we've hired 350 additional case workers to address the backlog.

Keeping the office in Prince Edward Island is really important. We realize that people who work in Charlottetown, if they start working at Veterans Affairs, oftentimes will stay there for a long time during their career. Again, they're able to hone their skills and are able to provide good services, great services, to veterans.

Again, I want to be very clear. There is no talk at all of changing our national office. It's well established in Prince Edward Island, and there are no plans to change that.

• (1715)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Casey.

This is the last round of questions. We will have four interventions—first from Mr. Richards, then from Mr. Miao, Luc Desilets and Ms. Rachel Blaney.

I'll start with Mr. Richards for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thanks.

Minister, I think, of course, that when you're trying to accomplish something, it's important to have a sense of what your goals are—what things you're trying to accomplish. In your opening remarks, you mentioned a couple of things. I'll say they were somewhat vague, but they were things you are looking to try to accomplish. In response to some of the questioning, you talked a bit about wanting to see the backlog improved in terms of wait times, and you've had some chances to address that. You mentioned commemoration as something else that you'd like to see focused on. You mentioned that you have a list. I assume it's more than a list of two things that you'd like to see improved at Veterans Affairs. I'll put it that way.

Can you give us a sense of what some of those other things are on the list of what you'd like to see improved at Veterans Affairs, or of specific things you would like to accomplish during your time as minister—concrete measures you're looking to take, where there are problems?

Whether we agree or disagree on whether there are problems, there's no doubt that, when you have veterans on hunger strikes, or when you have veterans.... Some of the letters I get, and I'm sure you must get, from veterans indicate some pretty heartbreaking situations. You must be prepared to say that some things need to be fixed.

Tell us, what are some of those concrete things you want to fix?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Like you, Mr. Richards, yes, I hear those stories.

I've told my deputy minister that each week I want to receive a sample of the correspondence the department gets, as well. That's because I want to get a snapshot of exactly which matters are brought forward to us. They're not all good stories. There are some issues that need to be fixed.

To your specific question, and to finish my response, when we talk about the backlog, yes, that's a priority. Work is done, but under way.

When we talk about addressing the issue of equity-seeking groups.... Ms. Blaney asked about women veterans. We have to make sure that we address specific challenges when it comes to women veterans applying for benefits through Veterans Affairs Canada. When it comes to our indigenous communities, as well, we have many indigenous veterans who have served this country. They have not had access, or they did not know about the services they needed. We need to make sure we reach out—

Mr. Blake Richards: Minister, I am loath to interrupt, because I don't want to set off another round of concern about.... I guess what I'm trying to do is give you an opportunity. You obviously already had a chance to address these things during the meeting.

I want to get a sense of whether there's anything you haven't had a chance to address that you feel needs to be fixed at Veterans Affairs, because you mentioned some of these things already.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Again, you asked me specifically about my priorities, and I'm listing my priorities for you.

I think your colleague also asked—

Mr. Blake Richards: Can I ask this, then? Are there any priorities you have other than what you mentioned in your opening statement?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: With respect to the conversations I've had with many veterans across the country, the issue of long-term care has come up a lot. As I indicated, we have many veterans who are baby boomers at this time, and they are wondering about long-term care services. I think that's a conversation we need to have. What is that going to look like for veterans in five, 10 or 20 years? That, again, is an absolute priority we need to deal with.

The other thing is the veterans employment strategy. I am seized with that, as well—making sure that we can get our veterans employed. As I said, I don't want to see our veterans underemployed. I want to see them employed with skill sets and provide them with the best opportunities they can have.

Mr. Blake Richards: What are some of the concrete measures you intend to take in order to see employment among veterans increase?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Within the very near future, we'll be launching our employment strategy. That's with the help of the work this committee has done. I'm truly looking forward to receiving that report.

Again, working with the private sector—

Mr. Blake Richards: Can you give us an example of something concrete that you intend to introduce?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I will be rolling out the strategy in the very near future, Mr. Richards.

You will certainly be getting an invitation. How's that?

Mr. Blake Richards: We'll anxiously await that, then.

Let me ask you again about the idea of having targets. In the departmental plan for 2023-24, under “benefits, services and support”, there were 17 goals listed. Only six of them had targets or metrics that you were looking to achieve.

Can you commit that in next year's departmental plan, when you have goals, they will all have targets that you'll try to achieve, and due dates by which you will try to achieve those things?

• (1720)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I'm certainly really prepared to make sure that I speak to my team about that, for sure.

Mr. Blake Richards: I would sure rather have heard a commitment to making sure.

If you're going to have a goal, you have to have a target that you're trying to achieve and you have a due date to achieve it or else it's meaningless. That's what I think I see now when you only have six of 17.

I really hope that maybe in the future you'll commit to making sure that you do have targets and due dates for anything you're looking to achieve.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Having target dates and objectives is really important. I absolutely take your point.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we go to Mr. Miao for five minutes.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Allow me to ask my question again, Minister.

Our government has developed a lot of good programs for veterans. Some veterans in my riding of Richmond Centre have shared with me that because not everyone is using digital platforms, some might not be aware of what programs are offered by VAC, even when they are eligible.

What are some ways for those veterans to stay updated, even if they're unfamiliar with the technologies?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: That's a really great question.

Making sure that veterans have access to services continues to be a challenge. We certainly recognize, with the modern-day veterans, that they're perhaps more agile or skilful in making sure that they have access to the digital tools that we have out there.

I think that certainly more work needs to be done.

I gave the example earlier with respect to indigenous veterans. Many of them live in the northern part of Canada in very isolated areas. Many indigenous veterans are not or were not aware of the benefits and services they're entitled to. Some of the things we have taken on are to ensure that our tiger team, if you will, of experts at VAC who have been seized with the veterans portfolio, go out once a month in the northern part of Canada and meet with veterans face to face to make sure they are aware of the applications, the services and benefits they're entitled to.

Again, more work needs to be done. There are some tools with respect to My VAC Account and the rest of it, but that is a challenge that's been identified. We certainly want to make sure that individuals who are entitled to benefits are aware of those benefits.

I don't know if Steven or Paul want to add anything.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: I could add to that, Mr. Chair, just quickly.

One key aspect of this is working through other organizations as well. We know that the Royal Canadian Legion is very present across the country, as an example. It's providing support and services directly to veterans to better understand what's available to them and better help them gain access to the programs.

It's not just the Royal Canadian Legions. There are many organizations coast to coast to coast that are representing veterans, working with veterans and networking. Getting the word out through those organizations is very important as well.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you.

I'd like to take this opportunity to congratulate all of the brave soldiers and veterans who represented Canada at the recent Invictus Games in Germany. We're very happy and honoured that Canada will be hosting the Invictus Games in 2025. It is important for veterans to be able to share their stories. Through sports, the Invictus Games is a way to inspire recovery.

Can you tell us how the government supported our veterans who participated in this year's Invictus Games? Also, talk about the next Invictus Games in Vancouver in 2025.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: This year I was honoured and privileged to attend the Invictus Games that were held in Germany. I met with many of our competitors who were down there. I got to know them and got to hear their stories.

I'll share this story. When I got there, I asked some of the Veterans Affairs staff how many medals Canada had won so far. The staff didn't know the answer and said they would get back to me. After spending three hours with the athletes, I quickly realized it wasn't about the medals. I thought it was good for this Veterans Affairs employee that he didn't have the answer to that question because it's really not about the medals. It's really about seeing our athletes being together, supporting each other, sharing and bonding.

It was a very touching and moving event for me there.

You're right. Canada is going to be hosting the Invictus Games in 2025. It's a \$15-billion investment that the federal government has provided. Did I say billion? It's a \$15-million investment.

It's going to be really exciting because it's the second time that Canada is hosting the games. It will be in Vancouver and Whistler. It will be the first hybrid games and the first winter sports that we'll be hosting. Again, the athletes are really excited—even the ones from the Caribbean countries where snow is probably not readily available.

It's just a really great example of Canada again showing leadership in this area. It's a real honour and privilege that our country will be hosting the games for a second time.

• (1725)

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you very much for sharing that. I look forward to seeing whether members of our committee can also join together to attend the Invictus Games in Vancouver in 2025.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Miao.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets, you have two and a half minutes.

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

Of course, Mr. Miao, we want to be there.

Madam Minister, as someone who knows how a department works, how do you explain the fact that your department sent a letter to the winning firm, Daoust, in which it was offered a sum of money to compensate for lost revenue, so they say?

How do you explain that? In what context is this being done? Why is this being done?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Desilets, I think we need to take another step back. The decision was made this summer to give the winner's contract or prize to the Stimson team.

Did the Department of Veterans Affairs send the letter? I'm not sure which letter it is. Can you confirm that the letter in question came from the Department of Veterans Affairs?

Mr. Luc Desilets: Yes, that's correct.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Okay.

I'll ask one of my colleagues to give you an answer.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Yes, a letter was sent to Daoust. It's a fairly normal process in the context of the procurement of services within the government, whether for small or large issues. This offer was normal under the circumstances.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Isn't it an admission of guilt in a way? Why were they offered money?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: It's a matter of process. It was suggested that it was important to offer this amount to Daoust, since it had been very close between these two firms.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

Madam Minister, I would also like to point out that the bogus survey you're using to promote a project other than that of the Daoust firm makes no mention of women. It only mentions veterans. We don't know the gender of the respondents. So we don't even know if a single female veteran participated in the survey.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Desilets, I never said it was a scientific survey or questionnaire. We asked Canadians from coast to coast to coast. Over 10,000 Canadians responded to the survey. The vast majority were veterans. We wanted to hear from Canadians, and this is the result.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you very much, Ms. Petitpas Taylor.

This means that we'll be seeing you here again between now and November 9.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I think we'll have the chance to talk again here. I don't know what more I can add, but we'll meet. I'll be there.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

[*English*]

The last intervention by committee members is going to come from Ms. Blaney for two and a half minutes, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

I want to acknowledge again that I appreciate the minister for meeting with my friend Phil. I know he has no resources, and it's a shame having a veteran starving on our doorsteps. I really appreciate it and hope that it's dealt with as urgently as is required.

I have a question about the veteran and family well-being fund. My office has heard from a lot of smaller organizations that their applications for funding are being denied. I am seeing that a lot of larger organizations are often receiving very significant amounts of money.

Could the minister share with the committee how the decisions are made, who is making the decisions and whether there's clear criteria for how those decisions are being made?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: We certainly recognize, Ms. Blaney, that the veteran well-being fund is very much oversubscribed in many cases. Yes, many organizations apply for those funds. One thing is for certain, however. If those organizations want the feedback as to why they didn't qualify, they can always reach out to the department and get a bit of information with respect to that. That is my understanding.

Paul, go ahead.

• (1730)

Mr. Paul Ledwell: As the minister has indicated, there is an oversubscription to the program, but it has also been very successful. I would say there's been quite a mix of very small, focused, localized organizations and some larger organizations that are working on a pan-Canadian basis. Really, the effort is about finding supports for key issues around women's health, around homelessness, around indigenism—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I have less than a minute.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: There is a very clear process to come to terms on every application that comes in.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

A proposal did come to the minister's office back in June from a group that's working on a project called the Burns Way. They haven't heard anything back. I have met with the group, and it sounds like their project really focuses on connecting veterans to veterans. I think that is something incredibly important. I'm wondering if they will hear back, and I hope the minister will meet with them to discuss how this might be a project that could move forward.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I'll certainly ask my officials, Ms. Blaney, to follow up on that application. I don't have any of the details surrounding that application, but we'll certainly follow up.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

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

I've heard a few times, Madam Minister, that you're coming back to us. If there's anything, please feel free to send it to the clerk of the committee.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Yes, I look forward to it.

[*English*]

I would like to take a moment to thank the veterans as well who are in the room here today. I know it's been a long two hours, but I again want to thank them for being here and for their service.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

On that note, I would also like to thank you for being here. Allow me to wish you the best before you leave.

Ladies and gentlemen, we've had with us the Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor, Minister of Veterans Affairs and associate minister of National Defence.

She was accompanied by Steven Harris, assistant deputy minister of the service delivery branch; Sara Lantz, assistant deputy minister of chief financial officer and corporate services; Paul Ledwell, deputy minister; Amy Meunier, assistant deputy minister of strategic policy and commemoration; and Pierre Tessier, assistant deputy minister of the strategic policy, planning and performance branch.

I would also like to inform committee members that next week we will be continuing our study on the experience of women veterans. We have the list of witnesses who will be appearing.

Would you like to say something, Mr. Richards?

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards: The minister's appearance along with the Minister of Canadian Heritage has been mentioned a couple of times, which I think is due by mid-November, based on the motion. Do we have any update on when those ministers will be appearing together?

The Chair: The clerk is in contact with the—

Mr. Blake Richards: We do have the Minister of Veterans Affairs here. Maybe she could give some indication about when she's available now.

The Chair: Okay. The clerk will get in touch with those ministers to fulfill that motion we adopted to hold this meeting.

[*Translation*]

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adjourn the meeting?

Seeing no objection, the meeting is adjourned.

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