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# Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg





## Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Tuesday, December 12, 2023

• (1605)

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

Welcome to meeting number 76 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, November 28, 2023, the committee is commencing its study of the subject matter of supplementary estimates (B), 2023-24.

[*Translation*]

As you know, the room is equipped with a high-quality audio system. However, when you are speaking, please keep your ear-piece away from the microphone. This can cause static and damage the interpreters' hearing. Please be extremely careful.

Keep in mind that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

Since we have witnesses on the video conference, I would like to let the committee members know that the necessary connection tests were completed, pursuant to our routine motion.

Now I wish to welcome the witnesses.

[*English*]

We have the Honourable Ginette Petitpas Taylor, P.C., Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence. With her, we have, from the Department of Veterans Affairs, Mr. Paul Ledwell, deputy minister; Sara Lantz, assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and corporate services; and, by video conference, Mr. Steven Harris, assistant deputy minister, service delivery branch.

[*Translation*]

You have five minutes for your opening remarks, Minister. After that, members will ask their questions.

Please go ahead.

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

[*English*]

Good afternoon, everyone.

Thank you to the committee members for the invitation to appear before the committee today to discuss supplementary estimates (B) for my department, Veterans Affairs Canada.

I appreciate and welcome these appearances concerning supplementary estimates, as they allow us to make sure Canada's veterans are being served and supported as efficiently as possible.

[*Translation*]

As you know, more than 90% of the Veterans Affairs Canada, or VAC, budget represents payments to veterans, for supports and services that were hard-earned by those who served in the Canadian Armed Forces, or CAF, and the family members who sustained them at home.

Our government cares deeply about Canada's veterans and their families, Mr. Chair, and continues to make investments that aim to maximize their overall well-being in post-service life.

[*English*]

Just last month, I announced that we made an investment of \$164.4 million so that we can continue to improve the services that veterans and their families count on by retaining more than 600 Veterans Affairs employees for an additional two-year period.

To date, federal investments have supported the hiring of additional case managers and support staff to lower the caseload of frontline service delivery employees and to reduce the volume of disability applications currently in the queue.

[*Translation*]

This investment builds on the \$156.7 million investment outlined in budget 2023, bringing the funding up to a total of \$321.1 million over five years, plus \$14.4 million ongoing to support services to veterans and members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, or RCMP.

It is no secret, Mr. Chair, that the timely and efficient delivery of these services is the top priority for our veterans and an ongoing challenge that we are continually working to address. It's why the estimates include \$15 million to modernize information technology, or IT, infrastructure, digitalize paper files, and implement digital technologies to support faster processing times—all of which will make the delivery of services more efficient for our veterans.

[English]

The estimates also plan for a \$6.9-million increase in the budget for the Veterans Review and Appeal Board to continue its efforts to address their backlog.

Our estimates also include \$5 million for VAC's campaign on mental health and remembrance. For the mental health campaign, funding will be used to promote and create awareness among the veteran community of services and supports available to them immediately. Through the remembrance campaign, we will honour the Canadians who served our country during times of war, military conflict and peace. The campaign will also play a pivotal role in engaging Canadians in acts of remembrance and recognition of past and present sacrifices.

[Translation]

As growing numbers of veterans continue to approach the department for support and services, we are seeing a significant increase in demand for the income replacement benefit and the rehabilitation services and vocational assistance program. The \$3.6 million in the estimates will be used to help meet these needs among the veteran community.

Demand for legal counsel from the bureau of pension advocates has also risen in the past few years. This has led to a backlog and longer wait times for veterans to receive the support they need.

[English]

Overall, the investments in these estimates reflect the priorities identified by veterans themselves and will ensure that we are able to meet their needs. Specifically, the supplementary estimates (B) add a total of \$42.2 million to the Veterans Affairs Canada budget. I can assure you that this additional funding represents an important and necessary investment in the health and well-being of our veterans and their families.

[Translation]

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before the committee today.

My department officials and I look forward to answering your questions.

Thank you.

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

[English]

I'd like to welcome our colleague MP Julie Dzerowicz, who will replace Carolyn Bennett.

Let's start the first round of questions. I invite MP Blake Richards to take his six minutes, please.

**Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC):** Thanks, Minister.

The stories I hear from veterans who call or write to my office every single day are heartbreaking. I wanted to share with you a few of those that I've heard recently.

Retired sergeant Graham Kerr served four combat tours in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq, and he has fought for years with VAC just to get coverage and treatment for his disabilities.

Retired lieutenant-commander Dr. Greg Passey says that his claims for support took 29 months to adjudicate while he battled cancer.

Retired master corporal Eric Lavergne was a victim of military sexual trauma and has struggled with PTSD and mental health for years. He told us last week that he has been asking for help, and that VAC continues to deny him the help that he's asking for.

Kent Gulliford says that both he and his wife are having incredible difficulties processing claims under the new insurance provider, and there seems to be no recourse available to even complain about the lack of service they've received.

Retired captain Robert Dimmer had 22 years of service, and he's been fighting with VAC for almost two years to receive help for hearing loss. He says he believes that VAC is just denying him until he dies, rather than helping him. Those are his words.

Minister, I want to ask if they sound to you like veterans who are satisfied with the services they receive. Do they sound like veterans who are physically and mentally well to you?

• (1610)

[Translation]

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Thank you for your question, Mr. Richards.

We take the situations that veterans in your riding have told you about very seriously. We are always looking to improve the programs and services we provide to veterans. That is why I think it is so important for the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs to examine issues and conduct studies to hear from people who are dealing with situations that are often unacceptable.

As the Minister of Veterans Affairs, I will do my part to make sure that we are constantly improving our programs for veterans. As the minister in charge, I want to make sure that we are always able to deliver better services to our veterans. That is a top priority for me and my department.

[English]

**Mr. Blake Richards:** In order to improve the services that are available, the first thing you have to do is set some targets. We talked about this the last time you were here. In looking at your most recent departmental plan, we see that it lists a number of departmental results indicators. There are 17 of them actually, and only six of those 17 have any targets attached to them.

You can hear why those targets are so important. If you're going to accomplish something, you have to know what you're trying to accomplish and how you're going to accomplish it. When you hear stories like these heartbreaking stories—and these are just a handful of the ones I've heard—it tells you exactly why that is so important.

Veterans need to understand.... You need to understand that they are real people and that they have real concerns. They deserve better than what they've received from this government so far. I really hope that you will start to take that into consideration when you're setting targets so that you actually have targets and stop failing these veterans so badly.

I've also heard from retired corporal Drew, who is living with a service-related disability. He's now having to live with his parents because housing expenses have gotten so bad with inflation and the cost of living. There are three of them, and they barely can afford to make payments on some shelter for themselves.

Then you look at veterans food banks across this country, which are reporting that the demand for their services has quadrupled in the last three years under this Trudeau government. There is a growing problem of homelessness amongst veterans. Inflation and the cost of living have gotten so bad in this country that now we're even hearing reports of serving members of our Canadian Armed Forces having to live in their cars because they can't afford a place to live.

Would you not agree that this is just one more proof that your government has clearly failed at these results indicators and that you've failed the veterans you are supposed to serve?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Mr. Richards, once again what I'll say to that is that we certainly recognize that the cost of living is impacting Canadians from coast to coast to coast, and our veterans are certainly not excluded from that.

Just last week, the government had an opportunity, however, to help support veterans, when it comes to housing with rent supports and wraparound services. Unfortunately, your party voted against those supports.

Again, I ask you.... It is really important that our veterans, yes, are a priority, but we have to work together—

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Minister. Please address your response through the chair, please.

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Again, I think it is really important that we want to better support our veterans, but we have to work together. When we see a party that is voting against providing additional services, support services, when it comes to housing—rent supports and wraparound services—to make sure we set up our veterans for success, I would be a bit ashamed, I guess, if I were the member opposite with respect to that decision that was made.

• (1615)

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Frankly, Minister, what we did was vote non-confidence in a government that not only has failed all Canadians but, in particular, has failed our veterans. Your government has absolutely failed to provide the services and support in any kind of a timely fashion that our veterans deserve.

They fought for this country. They served this country, and they deserve far better than they're getting from your government. That is why we're voting non-confidence in your government, and it's why I believe veterans have lost any trust or any faith in your government. They need to see a government that will come in and fix the mess that you've left behind, and we'll certainly be the government that will do just that.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Now I'd like to invite Mr. Wilson Miao to the floor for six minutes, please.

Mr. Miao.

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

Thank you to the minister and her team for appearing today.

I'd like to leave you some time to respond to the previous question. Please go ahead.

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Thank you so much for that.

I was just going to respond a bit to Mr. Richards' comment with respect to the differences, perhaps, of the services that we have provided to veterans over the past eight years.

We have to take a road down history. If we remember, the previous Conservative government actually slashed 1,000 jobs from Veterans Affairs Canada. We can't forget that. Those were direct jobs that provided direct services to our veterans. That's a fact.

We also can't forget that the previous government closed nine Veterans Affairs offices across this country, offices that, again, provided crucial services to our veterans—I believe even in Surrey. We reopened that office. It is quite rich that the party opposite is trying to say that we are not providing additional services to veterans. We can always do better, and I think that, as parliamentarians, we do always want to do better when it comes to our veterans. However, we have no lessons to take from the Conservative Party of Canada.

The other thing, as well, that I am going to add is that, since we formed government, we have added an additional \$11 billion in direct supports to veterans in the past eight years. That's a significant amount of money. Again, our veterans deserve all the services that we've put in place. We've listened to them, and we want to make sure that they have access to those services. We will continue to be there to support our veterans.

However, again, if we look at the differences that both governments have made, then I think we see that this government has made significant investments in our veterans, and again, they deserve every investment that we've made.

**Mr. Wilson Miao:** Thank you, Minister, for sharing that with the committee.

Through the chair to the minister, I think we were all quite disappointed to see the Conservative voting in the House last week on the supplementary estimates. These are measures that are essential to supporting Canadians from coast to coast to coast, whether it's funding, as you mentioned earlier, to support the construction of new affordable housing or even the brand new 988 mental health crisis line.

I have to say, though, in this committee, I'm quite shocked at the fact that Conservatives also voted against funding to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board.

Minister, can you share with this committee what those funds are used for and how you reacted to this vote from the Conservative Party?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Once again, thank you for that question.

Last week, I think we saw 120 votes that happened in the House of Commons. I was disappointed when I saw the votes when it came to the funding and investments we're making for Veterans Affairs Canada. Again, these are estimates; these are monies that have been budgeted to make sure we can provide help and support to veterans and those who are in need.

When we look at voting against investments to help on the housing front, just as Mr. Richards indicated, we certainly recognize that many individuals are dealing with affordability challenges. As a government, we're moving forward with programs. We want to make sure we're able to be there to help them with rent subsidies, but also, importantly, wraparound services, to be able to set up our veterans for success. We want to make sure they receive services—whether it be for mental health, substance use and addictions, whatever the case may be—and that not only are they going to have housing, but they're going to have access to the supports they need.

I was disappointed when I saw that.

When we look at VRAB as well, the appeal board, we certainly recognize that they're dealing with a backlog. They've asked us for more funding to make sure they can get through that appeal process more quickly.

Again, these are valuable and important services for our veterans, and we want to be there for them.

You asked how I felt. I was disappointed when I saw the results of that vote last week.

• (1620)

**Mr. Wilson Miao:** Thank you, Minister, for sharing that.

Regarding the backlog, especially on disability benefit claims, in the recent report of the office of the veterans ombudsperson, she acknowledged the significant progress realized towards eliminating the backlog of disability claims. That said, there remains a portion of the backlog yet to be cleared right now.

Can you provide an update on the progress to eliminate that backlog?

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** That's a very good question.

We still have work to do, but I have to say that we have made progress. Last month, we announced some \$163 million so we could continue to hire people to process claims.

We realize we still have a ways to go to hit our magic number, so we have to keep making sure we have capacity on the ground to deal with the backlog.

[*English*]

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

Minister, as you know, we are currently conducting a significant study on women veterans here at ACVA. We have heard from a lot of witnesses about the challenges that women veterans face once they leave the Canadian Armed Forces. Equipment affects their bodies differently, and the types of conditions they report, and the frequency, are unique. They have oftentimes faced barriers and unconscious bias throughout their careers.

These factors mean that their requests need to be processed differently. Can you speak to us about what work is being done to reduce the gap in processing times between men and women veterans, particularly regarding disability benefits?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Thank you—

**The Chair:** You have 15 seconds, please.

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** We'll have to come back to that one, for sure.

I can tell you I've been following the work that the committee has been doing with respect to women veterans, and there are a lot of stories and testimonies that are very disturbing. We certainly recognize that a lot of work needs to be done to make sure we can properly address the needs of our women veterans.

Again, I'm hoping that we'll have an opportunity to continue with this response, because it's—

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

[*Translation*]

We now go to Luc Desilets for six minutes.

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

Thank you, Minister.

We are really glad to have you here. As you know, I really mean that. However, I'm going to bring up a subject you aren't very fond of. It has to do with the estimates, for the benefit of my fellow committee members.

We now have proof that the Prime Minister's Office, or PMO, was involved in the affair. In May 2022, the PMO set up a meeting with people from the Privy Council Office, the Department of Canadian Heritage and the Department of Veterans Affairs to talk about the national monument to Canada's mission in Afghanistan.

In July, the PMO asked whether any progress had been made. That's in the 400 pages of information we received.

Do you think all that is true?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** I didn't quite understand your question, but—

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** For a long time, we have been trying to figure out how involved the Prime Minister or his office was in this situation.

The documents we received contain two pieces of evidence that an invitation was sent and that the PMO wanted to know whether any progress had been made on the file.

Do you agree with that statement?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Again, Mr. Desilets, it is important to recognize that the decision regarding the monument was made by the Department of Veterans Affairs, as I've said numerous times.

We did inform the PMO that a decision had been made.

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

Why was the PMO interested?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** First of all, the decision was made by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

As you know, we may not have followed the planned process exactly. We wanted to make sure the PMO was aware of the decision the department had made.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Is the Department of Veterans Affairs independent, or does it have to answer to the PMO for a relatively small expenditure like this \$3-million contract?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Mr. Desilets, the Department of Veterans Affairs made the decision regarding the design and construction of the monument, but the Department of Canadian Heritage was consulted on the decision.

The final decision was made by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Minister, would you have made a decision like that?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Again, Mr. Desilets, the process included surveying veterans to find out their thoughts on the monument, which is very important.

Their position was very clear. They chose the Team Stimson design.

They felt it reflected the courage and sacrifice of the men and women who served in the mission.

• (1625)

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** You are excellent at toeing the party line—

**The Chair:** Mr. Desilets, please address your comments through the chair, like everyone else.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Yes, that's right. I almost forgot about you.

**The Chair:** I'm still here. All comments must be addressed through the chair.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** We don't have to discuss the survey. It was dismissed out of hand pretty quickly.

Now you are trying to put the responsibility for the government's decision on veterans who supposedly answered a completely bogus survey.

Can you tell me whether the survey respondents included any women?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** We don't have the gender breakdown for that information.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Can you tell me whether someone could have been tempted to take the survey twice, or did?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Again, I think I was clear in the explanation I gave the last time I was here. An email went out to veterans through the My VAC Account system letting them know that we would be surveying them for their views.

That is why we received 12,000 responses to the survey, which is a lot.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** In that case, what do you say in response to Ms. Arbour's interview?

I sent it to you, in fact. I'm a good sport, don't you think?

In that interview, she says she doesn't believe that 10,000 veterans answered the survey, because that's not how it was done. Veterans and veterans' families answered the survey. It's not valid. People could fill out the survey more than once.

According to Ms. Arbour, all the better if 10,000 veterans filled out the survey, but the total number of veterans in the country is 460,000.

Let's pretend the survey is valid. Are you claiming that the opinion of 10,000 people reflects the opinion of 460,000 veterans?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** According to my department officials, 12,000 respondents to a survey or questionnaire about a monument is a really high number.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Set them straight, Minister, or we will bring in a Quebec polling firm to give them some training.

I want to underscore something.

How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair:** You have a minute and a half.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Very well.

**The Chair:** Don't forget to address your comments through me.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Yes.

I want to read you something it says in a document available on the Department of Justice's website:

Ministers are also responsible for preserving public trust and confidence in the integrity of public sector organizations and for upholding the tradition...of a professional non-partisan federal public sector.

My apologies to the interpreter.

I hope you are upholding that tradition while you are in office.

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

**The Chair:** Go ahead. I stopped the clock.

The floor is yours, Mr. Desilets.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:**

That, as part of its study on the National Monument to Canada's Mission in Afghanistan, the Committee invite the following witnesses to appear no later than February 13, 2024:

(a) for one hour each:

- i. Kaltie Telford, Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister;
- ii. John Hannaford, Clerk of the Privy Council, and Nathalie G. Drouin, Deputy Clerk of the Privy Council; and

(b) jointly, for two hours:

- i. Pablo Rodriguez, former Minister of Canadian Heritage, and Lawrence MacAulay, former Minister of Veterans Affairs,

That the Committee add meetings to its regular schedule in order to meet the time frames in this motion, and that additional resources be allocated on a priority basis to hold these meetings.

That is the motion I want to put on notice. I don't need to discuss it now.

**The Chair:** Thank you for giving notice of your motion, Mr. Desilets.

You have a minute left.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Ms. Petitpas Taylor, I am sure you are going to change things. As an eternal optimist, I genuinely believe that. However, I wish you would have distanced yourself, even just a little, from this preposterous affair out of respect for veterans. It is tarnishing their image. You are tying them to this wonderful project, which is more than a project. We are talking about a monument that will be standing for the next century, and my fear is that it will be seen as a symbol of shame or division.

I will just wrap up with one small question. Do you have a way out of this crisis? Some members of your party are talking about two monuments.

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Mr. Desilets, I would argue it's the exact opposite. The veterans I've met with right across the country have told me how eager they are to see the monument built and for it to be officially unveiled.

I want to make a quick comment. You cited the number Ms. Arbour mentioned, but it is important to keep in mind that 40,000 veterans contributed to Canada's mission in Afghanistan. We are talking about a specific percentage of the veteran population, so let's not compare apples and oranges.

● (1630)

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

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** With all due respect, we are talking about Justice Arbour, are we not?

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

[*English*]

The last speaker for this first round will be MP Rachel Blaney for six minutes.

Go ahead, please.

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

Of course, thank you to the minister and her team who are here with us today.

Through the chair, I recently submitted an Order Paper question to Veterans Affairs asking about appointments that both the minister and the deputy minister have taken concerning specifically veterans who are women, indigenous and members of the 2SLGBTQ+ communities or persons living with disability.

Rather than getting an answer, I have received a response saying that it was simply too difficult to track. For the sake of transparency and to make sure that we're seeing the minister's leadership support marginalized veterans, could you table with this committee the list of appointments that you and your deputy minister have taken since you became minister?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** I would be happy to do that.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you. I appreciate that.

The next question I have is on the recurring issue, which veterans have raised repeatedly, around the fact that so many of them are still struggling to find a permanent home or have serious housing insecurity. We've heard clearly as well, through the study on women veterans that we've been having lately, that women are really challenged to feel safe in some of their living spaces.

Is there any consideration at your level around having veterans housing that is for women only?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** As you're probably aware, we've made a recent funding announcement when it comes to veterans' homelessness. We've received a number of applications that are actually being assessed and evaluated right now with the department of infrastructure and also our department. Certainly, the issue of women's housing is an area that I think is a great priority. It's needed. Through the study that you've done over the past number of weeks, I certainly have recognized that the topic has come up as well.

I am certainly committed and looking into that. We recognize that \$80 million for the funding, or almost that, is certainly not going to address the entire issue, but I think we can certainly make some progress in that area.

Also, there's making sure that... When it comes to rent supps, sometimes it's making sure that women can choose where they want to live and that the subsidy will help them pay that rent. That will go a long way as well. Again, it's making sure that those wraparound services are appropriate and trauma-informed in some areas where they need to be. All of that will be taken into consideration, depending on the applications we've received as well.

Again, I want to share with the committee that the applications are closed and those applications are being evaluated right now. I'm hoping, in the very near future, that we'll be able to make some funding announcements regarding some projects.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you for that. I certainly hope to see some focus on women-only centres. We know and have heard repeatedly that this seems to be a significant gap in the services.



The other factor we've heard about repeatedly from women veterans is that they feel invisible, and it's particularly around health concerns not being properly recorded while they were serving in the CAF. Often, these women were silenced. They were bullied to not speak up. They were ignored. We've heard of women who were raped and there was no rape kit offered. Often, women were just standing the line because they fought so hard to get there that they didn't want to see their service diminished in that way.

I'm just wondering: How will the minister address this reality in terms of the work at VAC? Women often do not have the appropriate documentation to support the significant physical and mental health needs they have because of the lack of records from CAF. Is there any discussion happening at a ministerial level to, number one, start addressing this more and, number two, offer an official apology to the women who serve so that it can be recognized by the public of Canada?

• (1635)

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Through the chair, it's an excellent question, Ms. Blaney.

Again, I have been following very closely the study you have done, because it's an area that's near and dear to my heart, having been a social worker prior to entering politics. The stories and the testimonies I heard at this committee are heart-wrenching. They were tough and they were hard to hear, but they needed to be heard and they need to be heard. If we want to do better, we have to know what's going on. We have to know on the ground what's going on in order to put better policies in place.

I've been a minister for the past four months now, and the file when it comes to women veterans is of great interest to me. All the files are of great interest, but I have a keen interest in this one. One of the first things I've done is to ask my staff.... This is probably not even public knowledge yet, but I am going to be putting in place a women's advisory ministerial committee to really look at women's issues. I think we recognize that women are 51% of the population, and I think getting their input with respect to what is needed will certainly better inform the decisions that I make as a minister. We are in the process right now of looking at the terms of reference, the mandate of this committee and the membership of this committee, but again, I'm looking forward to the very near future, in the new year. That is a concrete step that I'm taking and, again, we're wanting to hear from veterans themselves to see what is working and what is not.

The other thing that I really want to make sure of as well is that, when female veterans and all veterans are contacting Veterans Affairs, they are treated with empathy and with professionalism as well. Again, I know that we have heard some stories here at committee that were tough to hear. I certainly want to make sure that our veterans receive the best care and service possible. Looking at those types of policies and what can be done to ameliorate, to help, to better the situation is absolutely a priority of mine.

Finally, the last comment I'm going to make is with respect to GBA+. When we look at gender-based analysis, it's not just words and it's not just the ticking of a box. We really have to look at all of our policies that we put in place and do that analysis: How does this impact women? We all recognize that different policies can affect

men, women or different genders differently, so we have to make sure that we take the appropriate time to put that lens on with respect to the policies. That includes physical injuries as well as mental health injuries. I think we have a lot of work that needs to be done in that area, and I am committed to doing that.

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

Now let's go to the second round of questions.

We have Mr. Blake Richards for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Minister, do injured veterans who are seeking to appeal a disability benefit decision have a right to retain independent legal counsel or advice before Veterans Affairs or the Veterans Review and Appeal Board?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** If an individual goes before the VRAB and cannot afford a lawyer, they are able to have a lawyer that is paid for by the department. If they choose that they want to hire their own lawyer, they are able to do so.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Okay. If a veteran chooses to hire independent legal counsel, they have the right to do so is what you're telling us.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Absolutely.

[*English*]

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Interestingly, there is a veteran who has filed in Federal Court because she believes she's been told that's not in fact the case. Perhaps that can be settled very quickly—I hope.

I think the very fact that veterans even feel the need to want to hire independent legal counsel to be able to navigate the complex and bureaucratic processes in VAC is more proof that your government is failing our veterans. These are people who have served this country, and they go to this department for help.

They're asking your government for help. They're finding that the process is so complicated, convoluted and lengthy that they don't even feel that they can navigate it by themselves. They feel they need to go and hire a lawyer to do it. Does that not tell you there's something wrong?

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Mr. Richards, I think we can always do better when it comes to our services. That's why it is so important we do everything possible to make improvements.

That said, I can tell you that we have made historic investments. We want to keep supporting veterans. We can always provide better services, and that's exactly what we will keep doing.

[English]

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Every time, whether it be you or your predecessor, it's always the same answer: We're trying to do better. We're not doing very well right now, but we're trying to do better. It happens every single time. At some point you have to be accountable and actually do better. I don't think you can measure it by... You've talked about how many people you've hired. You've talked about all the announcements you've made and haven't delivered on. You've talked about how much money you've spent. Veterans want to see results. That's all they care about. All the rest of it doesn't matter. It's the results.

Frankly, every single day I hear from veterans who are finding it's not taking months. In many cases, it's measured in years the amount of time it takes to get any kind of a decision. They have to go all the way through a whole set of appeals processes. Many of them feel like giving up; it's just that complicated.

I really hope you're going to reflect so that maybe next time when you come back you can actually tell us about some results, rather than saying you'll try to do better next time. We need results. That's what veterans expect.

• (1640)

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Mr. Chair, I certainly—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Let's look at another of your departmental results indicators: "Veterans are able to adapt, manage, and cope within post-service life". I hear from veterans like Wade Ritchie, petty officer, 2nd class, who happens to be a constituent of mine, who says that his transition to civilian life was held up and complicated. In fact, he was left to his own devices. He was having so much trouble navigating the bureaucratic maze that is both VAC and the PCVRS situation. His own case manager won't even get back to him to try to help him navigate that.

Doug Kromrey reached out on behalf of one of his former soldiers who was diagnosed with PTSD while he was in the military but who then had to fight to try to re-prove that condition to VAC when he left the military. He was then denied the support he needed. Even though while in the military he was diagnosed with it, VAC didn't recognize it. He couldn't seem to convince VAC that the condition the military told him he had existed.

Nicole Murillo is one of many veterans who can't find a family doctor. She therefore can't get prescriptions or the referrals she needs for the VAC programs.

I just can't stress enough that we hear from dozens of veterans every single week who have lost access to services they once had due to VAC's sloppy transition to this new service provider. How can our veterans thrive post-service when they suddenly lose their benefits and supports or when they can't even get them to begin with?

[Translation]

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** As I said, we are constantly working to improve our programming. We are making investments, and we have hired additional staff to make sure that all applications are processed much more quickly.

I would ask you to consider why you didn't support the additional investments we wanted to secure for the Department of Veterans Affairs last week. That was truly shameful.

[English]

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Minister, we just hear it time and time again from you and your predecessors: We're going to try to do better. When are you going to actually deliver results? It's time for some results. Veterans deserve better than what they're getting here.

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Mr. Richards, with respect to doing better, I think we have to look at the facts. When it comes to Veterans Affairs Canada, we have seen a 61% increase in applications. Since 2015 we've invested more than \$11 billion in additional support for veterans. We continue to make sure that more services are provided to them, and more applications are coming in. We are always going to be there to help support our veterans.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** It's time they started receiving better from you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. Time is over.

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

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

Madam Minister, thanks for being here and for accepting the invitation to come before us so promptly to talk about the estimates. I am actually going to ask you about the estimates.

Mr. Richards talked about some heartbreaking stories, including one where a veteran had a matter that took 29 months to adjudicate. In the estimates that were voted on the other night, there was one item there for service excellence to veterans by reducing backlogs and improving service, for \$8.3 million. The Conservatives voted against that particular measure.

If the Conservatives had been successful in defeating that allocation, if there were enough votes for them to get their way, what impact would it have had on people like the veteran Mr. Richards referred to who had to wait 29 months?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Again, the main estimates and the budget requests that we've made are as a direct result of making sure that we can better serve our veterans, our client base. One area where we certainly recognize there is a backlog is the appeal board. As such, that is why we have been successful in receiving additional funding.

What would not having that funding mean? It would mean that veterans would have to wait even longer to get their decisions. Again, that creates significant anxiety and distress for veterans. We want to make sure that we're doing things in a timely fashion. We have to make sure that the resources are there and are in place. Fortunately, we've been able to receive that additional funding because it will make a huge difference with respect to addressing that backlog at VRAB.

• (1645)

**Mr. Sean Casey:** I want to come back to the appeal board again because another case that was referenced by Mr. Richards was that there were.... He's hearing stories from veterans who have been repeatedly denied, including from one with a hearing loss fight with Veterans Affairs.

As you rightly pointed out, the Department of Veterans Affairs actually pays lawyers to fight the department on behalf of veterans. It's the bureau of pensions advocates. When it came time to vote on estimates, to allot some additional funds to the bureau of pensions advocates, to provide veterans with lawyers to fight against the department to get them what they feel they are entitled to, the Conservatives voted against that. If they had gotten their way and were able to block that additional expenditure, what impact would that have had on veterans coming before Veterans Affairs to get what they feel they are rightly entitled to?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Again, we would be talking about more delays, more delays and more delays. We want to make sure that veterans have access to the legal counsel they need in a timely manner, and we want to make sure, more importantly, that their files are properly assessed. Again, if we were not successful in receiving that additional funding, the ones who were going to suffer in all that were our veterans. At the end of the day, we want to be there for veterans and to make sure that they have the services they need.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Finally, the income replacement benefit, the rehabilitation services and the vocational assistance program were another vote that we had in that all-night voting session, and the Conservatives, again, voted against that. If they had gotten their way and were able to block that additional allocation for the vocational assistance program, the income replacement benefits and the rehabilitation services, what would the impact on veterans have been?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Blocking that funding would, again, have affected the basic needs of our veterans, their basic needs for survival. Once again, we wanted to make sure that we had the appropriate amount of money available to properly support our veterans. Again, that is why I was very disappointed to see that the Conservative Party of Canada did not support those investments.

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

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

[Translation]

The next two members will have two and a half minutes each.

First is Mr. Desilets.

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

A meeting of the foursome took place in late May or early June 2022. I'm referring to VAC, the Department of Canadian Heritage, another department and the PMO.

Were you there, Mr. Ledwell, or was it Mr. Thomson?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Mr. Chair, I was the one at the meeting, among others, to represent the department.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I see.

Do you have anything to tell us about the meeting?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Mr. Chair, two departments, VAC and the Department of Canadian Heritage, were jointly responsible for this file. It's always important to focus on important files, and that was our goal in this case.

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

In the 400 pages of documentation we received, it says that VAC and Canadian Heritage officials did not agree with changing the project. They agreed that the contract should be awarded to the firm Daoust at the time.

Do you agree?

• (1650)

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** I don't entirely agree, Mr. Chair.

At the time, we had to find ways to address certain issues that had come up during the process. It was just about figuring out the key components and the process we should follow.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** The documentation clearly shows that the two departments were in favour of the jury's choice and did not at all encourage the change that was asked for. Am I wrong about that?

A yes, no or maybe will do.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** I don't recall that.

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

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** The discussions were always about identifying the key components and perspectives. For us, at VAC, it was always about figuring out what the objectives were and what veterans were asking for.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Mr. Ledwell, as a senior civil servant, were you in favour of the government changing the jury selection, yes or no?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** I wasn't the one who decided that.

It was really about finding the best way to meet the needs and demands of the veterans...

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

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

[English]

For two minutes and a half, I'd like to invite Ms. Blaney next, please.

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

My next question for the minister is around the Merlo Davidson compensation. We know that the veterans ombud voiced some significant concern about the minister and the department not implementing its recommendation to publish VAC's methodology for determining the compensation, to cease disability pension reductions or clawbacks for the claimants at levels three to six, and to issue corrective payments to the women from whom pension amounts have been clawed back.

My question is on when this is going to be implemented. Does the minister recognize the harm that is being done to these women by having their disability pensions clawed back?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** I've met with the ombudsperson and we certainly discussed a number of issues, this being one of them. I think you all received her report as well, which she tabled last week or two weeks ago. Again, we certainly accept the recommendations that she's made.

With respect to where we are in all of that, I'm going to pass it over to my deputy for a bit more clarity.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** If you'll permit, Mr. Chair, that has been responded to and those payments have been corrected to those women as part of the Merlo Davidson. In fact, the minister recently received a letter from the ombud underlining and confirming her appreciation of the attention on this file.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** A lot of RCMP veterans did not put forward or share their claims because they were worried about the ramifications. Has any communication gone out to RCMP veterans to alert them that this work has been completed, or will there be?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** We have engaged with RCMP women veterans groups and the leadership and have encouraged that communication to go out within that network and invited others to come forward. We certainly have encouraged that. We have not seen any come forward to this point.

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

I'm also wondering what the current status on the King's coronation medal is. Medals are usually introduced with the design and criteria established, but since the PM announced the medal in the spring, there's been no further information or news on design or criteria.

I'm curious. Where does the medal stand at this point and how many veterans will be included in the process?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Again, that's a very good question.

Last week, I had a meeting where that item came up. I'm going to be following up with the Governor General's office as well, because they play a key role in that. As soon as I have information, I'll be more than happy to share that with the committee.

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

We have two last interventions of five minutes each.

I will invite Mr. Fraser Tolmie, for five minutes, please.

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

Thank you, Minister, for being with us today.

Mr. Chair, through you to the minister, have you ever bought a house?

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Yes, I once bought a house.

[*English*]

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Good. How many times did you pay for it?

• (1655)

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** I don't have the exact amount.

[*English*]

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** How many times did you pay for your house?

Have you ever bought a car?

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

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** It's relevant.

**Mr. Bryan May:** With respect, that's not the member's business.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Please go ahead, Mr. Tolmie.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Mr. Chair, I wouldn't have confidence in someone who paid for a house more than once or twice or paid for a car more than once or twice.

I'm going to give you a bit of information. According to its 2022-23 annual report, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board says that 94% of its hearings are for cases concerning hearing loss and tinnitus, and that over 90% of these cases are adjudicated favourably in funding and support for these veterans. This corroborates what many veterans have been sharing with us, which is that VAC acts more like an insurance company denying veterans claims.

Why not approve these claims in the first place, reduce wait times and reduce stress on veterans?

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** First of all, I can tell you that I completely agree with you on this question.

Since I took office as Minister of Veterans Affairs, I've had the chance to meet many veterans, as well as the people responsible for these files. I think there's a lot of work to be done to make sure we find a solution that will be more effective with the right resources. I think there's work to be done, particularly with regard to this specific condition.

Second, both departments are working on it.

[English]

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Through you, Chair, I think that being efficient would be to approve their claims the first time around. Would you not agree?

[Translation]

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Once again, as I said, we're working on this specific condition to see what we can do to find more effective solutions.

I'll say it again; I agree with you.

[English]

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Again, I'm very perplexed because Veterans Affairs has just recently taken a victory lap for resolving the backlog, but the review and appeals board caseloads have skyrocketed.

Minister, you've said that more money is being invested in clearing the backlog. The backlog has been created because of denials of approval. You're spending more money on a problem that you've created. That is like buying a house more than once or buying a car more than once. Would you not agree?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** I think what you're forgetting right now as well is that we have received 61% more applications at the department because of additional investments that we've made for direct services for veterans. That is also contributing to the backlog.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** But you're denying them. You're denying the initial claims when they come to you.

[Translation]

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Again, as I said, there's definitely work to be done in terms of some of the conditions you talked about.

I agree with you that we need to make sure that applications can be approved much more quickly.

[English]

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Minister, did you clear the backlog by simply denying veterans claims that they were ultimately entitled to?

[Translation]

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** I don't understand your question.

[English]

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** It's quite simple. Did you clear the backlog by simply denying veterans claims that they were ultimately entitled to?

[Translation]

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Absolutely not.

[English]

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Why do we have a backlog?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Again, as I've just indicated to you, we have a 61% increase in our applications at Veterans Affairs Canada.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** I'm sorry. Through you, Chair, that's not the backlog. That's an initial veteran coming to you and saying, "I need

help". That number may have increased, but that doesn't mean the backlog should have increased.

If you're going to accept veterans and say that they have hearing loss and that they have to go through the process more than once, you're creating that backlog.

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** As I've indicated, with respect to hearing and tinnitus, I agree that we have to find efficiencies and make sure those files are handled way more efficiently. That's exactly what the department is doing, making sure that we—

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Through you, Chair, this should be done. This is something that has not gone away. I've been in this chair for two years, and I've been hearing this for two years. Nothing has improved.

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Actually, I am doing something about it.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Through you, Chair, I'd like to hear what that is, because I know that veterans would like to hear what that is.

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Again, as I've indicated, we are working on exactly that specific issue and are making sure that we can find those efficiencies and that we can deal with those files as quickly as possible.

● (1700)

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

The last intervention will be with Randeep Sarai for five minutes.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for coming here.

One thing we've seen in my short time here in this committee is that some of the scars of battle that veterans carry are visible, but others are not. Those invisible scars manifest themselves through occupational stress injuries, which have a significant impact on a veteran's quality of life.

Can you speak to us about this and how Veterans Affairs is working to improve the mental health supports it offers veterans?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Thanks so much for that question.

I think we all recognize that mental health and physical health is health. We have to make sure that our veterans have access to the services they need in a timely manner. We can call it an operational stress injury, we can call it a moral injury or we can call it PTSD.

I think that, first and foremost, we have to deal with the stigma that sometimes is still attached to mental health injuries. We're doing a better job, but again, I think more work can be done in ensuring people have access and can ask for the services they need when they need them. As a department, we've heard it loud and clear. I think that recommendation was perhaps even brought up here at the VAC committee. Again, we have to find efficiencies to make sure that people have access to mental health services in a timely fashion.

Instead of contacting Veterans Affairs Canada and going through an application process and that taking some time, we've made sure that when people are accessing or asking for mental health services those approvals are done immediately. Again, when people are asking for help, we have to make sure that they don't have to wait for the services. Through the department, I think we've been very effective and efficient in making sure that our veterans do have access to those services in a very timely fashion.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Thank you, Minister.

Also, when it comes to homelessness, it's on the rise in many cases in Canada. It's no different in Surrey. It's a reality that's facing too many veterans who have bravely served our country. Obviously, everyone deserves to have a safe and affordable home, so it's vitally important that we do everything in our power to help and assist homeless veterans. They fought bravely for our country, and they deserve a safe and affordable place to call home.

I know that the Government of Canada launched a dedicated veteran homelessness program. Can you tell us what action the government is taking on this critical issue?

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** With respect to different types of programs, on the latest program that we announced there was a call for proposals this year. Again, we've received a number of applications from different groups across the country. As indicated, the infrastructure department and Veterans Affairs are in the process of reviewing those applications, and I'm certainly hoping that we'll be able to make some announcements in the very near future.

Again, on the monies, the investments, for those programs, we are really talking about two tranches, if you will. One part of the funding will be utilized for rent supplements, because we want to make sure that veterans will have that supplement to pay for their rent. Also, in some areas, we want to ensure that the wraparound services—if some are needed—are also available there.

I've seen some of the preliminary applications that have come in. Again, we have some groups that have been working with veterans. That's what they do day in and day out. They know their clients. They know veterans, and some of them are veterans. I'm looking forward to being able to roll out those funds to make sure that the agencies receive the funds. Then, from there, at the end of the day, they'll be able to provide services, help and support to our veterans.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Quickly, then, Minister, since I have a minute, the significant contributions of indigenous veterans unfortunately have not always been recognized as they should. I've heard about that in the last little while as well. I know that there is a commemorative partnership program that invested in funding for projects in indigenous communities. Maybe you can let us know

what you're doing to ensure that the sacrifices of these brave women and men get their due recognition, which they deserve.

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Thanks so much for that.

Again, I think that our department and government are certainly committed to supporting and recognizing the contributions that indigenous veterans have made to this country. When it comes to commemoration, we certainly want to make sure that we do our part in including them in all of the commemoration events that are going on. That is why at Veterans Affairs Canada we have a dedicated team of indigenous employees that are working on this. We are going out into communities and actually doing outreach with indigenous communities across the country.

We also want to make sure that indigenous veterans are aware of the services and supports they are entitled to. We have teams that go out in different parts of the country, again, to make sure that they can meet with indigenous veterans, whether it be in the northern part of the country or...because sometimes it's a bit more isolated. Again, we want to make sure that we do all we can to recognize and to support the contributions they've made.

• (1705)

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

[Translation]

This concludes the first hour of our meeting.

On behalf of the members of the committee and on my own behalf as well, I would like to thank the witnesses. Appearing before the committee were the Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor, Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence; Mr. Paul Ledwell, deputy minister; Ms. Sara Lantz, assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and corporate services; and, by videoconference, Mr. Steven Harris, assistant deputy minister, service delivery branch.

We'll suspend for a few moments while we test the connection of new witnesses. We'll be back in about four minutes.

• (1705)

(Pause)

• (1710)

[English]

**The Chair:** I call this meeting to back to order.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Tuesday, November 28, 2023, the committee is resuming its study on the subject matter of supplementary estimates (B), 2023-24.

[Translation]

In accordance with our routine motion, sound checks have been completed.

We extend a warm welcome to the witnesses for the second hour of the meeting.

[English]

We have a number of witnesses for the second hour: Ms. Sara Lantz, assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and corporate services; Mr. Pierre Tessier, assistant deputy minister, strategic policy, planning and performance branch; Mr. Steven Harris, assistant deputy minister, service delivery branch, by video conference; and Ms. Amy Meunier, assistant deputy minister, commemoration and public affairs branch, by video conference.

Welcome to all.

Mr. Harris or Mr. Tessier, I don't know if you have an opening statement. I could give you five minutes.

• (1715)

**Mr. Pierre Tessier (Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Mr. Chair, we don't have any opening statements.

**The Chair:** Okay. Perfect.

Let's start the first round of questions with MP Blake Richards for six minutes, please.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I'll share some time with Mr. Dowdall, but I have one or two quick questions first.

Ms. Meunier, with regard to the national monument to the mission in Afghanistan, was the Prime Minister's Office involved in the decision to change the awarding of the contract, or were they involved in the discussions around the changing of that decision?

**Ms. Amy Meunier (Assistant Deputy Minister, Commemoration and Public Affairs Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Members of the Prime Minister's Office and of the Privy Council Office were part of a general discussion about the topic, along with Canadian Heritage officials and Veterans Affairs Canada officials.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** A discussion on that took place in a number of meetings and in a number of emails over what looks like about a year and a half. Who ultimately made the decision? When it came right down to it, who made the decision to make that change?

**Ms. Amy Meunier:** It was the Minister of Veterans Affairs.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** The minister was the one who signed off on the decision and there was no involvement of the Prime Minister's Office in the making of that decision.

**Ms. Amy Meunier:** I'm not aware of any involvement.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** You're not aware of any involvement. You're not saying there wasn't, but you're not aware of it.

**Ms. Amy Meunier:** I've not been in any meeting where I saw any odd involvement whatsoever.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** But the Prime Minister's Office was involved in meetings around that decision. Is that correct?

**Ms. Amy Meunier:** That's correct. As with any other file of consequence or importance such as this one, we would update both the Privy Council and the Prime Minister's Office.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Okay. Thank you.

I'll turn my time over to Mr. Dowdall.

**Mr. Terry Dowdall (Simcoe—Grey, CPC):** Thank you, Blake, and thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here today. I was glad to see the minister here. I was actually quite happy to hear her two concerns for the veterans, and that number one is that we listen to them. That's probably the number one call I get. They don't think they're listened to, quite frankly. When they call me or email me, they don't think they're listened to. The other thing is access to services. That's the other item I get most of my calls about. The access is difficult to navigate. It's certainly not simple for people who aren't computer-literate or good at paperwork. They're frustrated with that.

I also heard this morning that the VAC website and system crashed. It was unusable. Basically, that means veterans were unable to upload forms, contact their case managers or contact VAC online. It also means that caseworkers from PCVRS and medical service providers could not upload forms or send referrals to their VAC counterparts to process veterans' claims for support.

This has happened before. I believe less than two weeks ago the site was down for a couple of days as well. We've heard that sometimes that's the case. I'm just wondering what we're doing to improve this so that it doesn't happen to veterans when they're trying to log in.

**Mr. Steven Harris (Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Perhaps I can take that question, Mr. Chair.

We regularly do updates to systems. Generally, we schedule those for outside of normal working hours. The website for the My VAC Account that you're referring to is available 24-7, essentially, other than scheduled outages. There are occasional technical issues that require updates. Sometimes those come to us unannounced as a result of a system problem that may affect multiple systems. Veterans can continue to call the national client contact centre if the My VAC Account isn't working to get access to supports and services.

Sometimes there can be delays when a system is down for a couple of hours during the working day. That's certainly unfortunate, but part of the issue of maintaining multiple systems is making sure they're updated, functioning correctly and are secure and protected as well. A couple of incidents happened on that. I'm not aware of anything where there were two days of a lack of access to service in place, but we do work to make sure it's available as often and ultimately as frequently as possible to help support veterans who might want to access it at whatever time of day is convenient for them.

**Mr. Terry Dowdall:** We also heard from the Davidson Institute that it takes them over a hundred hours of work just to process the claims for one veteran to enter their program, which is really tailor-made to help veterans with trauma.

Once again, I'm just wondering about the system. We hear it constantly, and it seems that the same issues are brought up over and over again. I'm just wondering how long it will take for us to simplify the system so that maybe we won't have the backlogs we're seeing now, and we'll actually provide a better service to those who have served us.

• (1720)

**Ms. Sara Lantz (Assistant Deputy Minister, Chief Financial Officer and Corporate Services, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Let me jump in here, Mr. Chair.

As we have hired people to work on the backlog, we have concurrently invested in our IT infrastructure as well. When we launched our pension for life programs, we introduced the newer, more modern GC case management system, and we continue to move all of our programs over to that system.

Getting on that newer infrastructure will give us the agility and ability to do more with technology to simplify and to help—

**Mr. Terry Dowdall:** I don't have a lot of time. I hate to be rude, but I have just one more quick comment to make.

I know that we do these studies regularly. Sometimes we do a study again. A lot of studies on transitioning have been done. There has been one every few years.

What do you do when you get the recommendations from a study? Where do those go? Do you follow up to see what recommendations are followed up on to make the service better?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I think I can take that as it relates to transition.

Frankly, with any of the recommendations that come from the committee itself, obviously the first thing we do is a formal government response. We take the recommendations that are issued in any report that is coming from ACVA or, frankly, any of the other parliamentary committees and we look at those in detail as to where we can make improvements.

Sometimes those involve an individual department. Sometimes they are collaborative, in the case of working with our Canadian Armed Forces colleagues, RCMP or others. We respond to the report with respect to whether we accept a recommendation, and we work towards that and make improvements, frankly, based on the excellent recommendations that come in from the committee.

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

Now let's go to Mr. Miao for six minutes.

Go ahead, please.

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

Thank you to all the officials for being here today.

I would like to talk more about the backlog. Between 2015 and 2016, and 2022 and 2023, Veterans Affairs Canada experienced a

61% increase in the number of applications received for disability benefits.

Is the number of applications stabilizing at this time?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** The number of applications varies.

We saw some variability during the COVID period. It seems that every year since about 2015-16 it has gone up. There has been an increase in applications for a variety of programs but mostly for the disability benefits program.

As I said, there was some variability during the COVID period. It is stabilizing at this point at a consistently higher level.

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

Since 2020, VAC has also reduced the backlog by 75%, and in the supplementary estimates there is an amount of \$3.6 million to deliver service excellence to veterans by reducing backlogs and improving service standards.

Can you explain in more detail how this amount will help and what exactly it will be used for?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** This specific amount relates to some of the service standard wait times that exist at our bureau of pensions advocates in particular. It's primarily for reducing the amount of time it might take for a lawyer who works in the bureau of pensions advocates to be able to assist a veteran who may be going through an appeals process.

There's also some funding for what I would describe as program integrity. This allows for additional staff to be in place to help ensure that we have enough capacity to meet the demand by veterans who may be coming in through various programs. We've seen enormous growth. The member mentioned the growth in applications. We've seen enormous growth in applications and participation in other programs, such as the rehabilitation program, over the course of the last number of years.

That increase requires some additional staff to ensure that the program functions effectively and it's supporting veterans well, and that we have the capacity needed to respond and maintain the support that veterans require. Those are some of the other areas into which that funding is going.

**Mr. Wilson Miao:** Thank you, Mr. Harris.

Last February, the government also announced funding of \$139.6 million over two years, to last until March of 2024, to extend temporary employees in order to continue to reduce the processing times for disability benefits.

Do you still expect to have significantly reduced processing times by March?

• (1725)

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Yes, we've been reducing the turnaround times for disability benefits applications over the course of the last number of years. As a result of the additional funding we received and the additional human resources capacity we've had on hand to address files beyond our service standard of 16 weeks, what's commonly referred to as the backlog has been reduced, as noted by the member, by about 75%.



In real terms, however, that means benefits being provided for veterans and treatment access for veterans, and it actually means reduced wait times—significantly reduced wait times. Even just a couple of years ago, we had turnaround times or wait times for applications of 40 weeks. The average times as of this current fiscal year, the first couple of quarters for this current fiscal year, are down into the early twenties. We still have work to do to make sure we're meeting our 16-week service standard, but I can add for the committee that, in the first couple of months of this year, our service standard, or our ability to meet our service standard, is up closer to 70%, which is near to the 80% service standard that we set.

Again, there is additional work that needs to be done. As we go through some of the files that have been in the queue for some time, those decisions have impacts on the turnaround times. The longer it has been waiting, when the decision is made, the more effect it has on the turnaround times, but veterans are getting decisions for their disability applications much more quickly than they were even just a couple years ago.

**Mr. Wilson Miao:** Thank you, Mr. Harris. To you again, through the chair, what variables determine the amount needed to reduce and eventually eliminate the processing delays?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I would say that there are three things.

The one we can't control is the number of applications that come forward to us. The department has made and has put an exceptional effort into making sure we're publicizing the benefits, services and programs that we have available. What that means is that more veterans might come forward to apply. That's a good story, but it also challenges us from a resource point of view. We can't control the amount of intake that comes in. We want to make sure that we're responding to any veteran who comes forward with that need.

The second variable would be our ability from an automation or automatic point of view to reduce the challenges in the application process to make it easier for veterans and to make it easier for service providers, health professionals and others to submit the documentation we might need.

Lastly, it's the actual capacity that we have in the department, from a human resources point of view, to be able to process these things. We've had an ability to improve or increase our number of staff on that over the last number of years, and that's been showing up in the reduction of the backlog.

**Mr. Wilson Miao:** Thanks, Mr. Harris.

I think my time is almost up.

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

[*Translation*]

I now invite Mr. Desilets to take the floor for the next six minutes.

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

Mr. Harris, who conducted this survey on the monument?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I can't answer that question, since I wasn't involved in the file.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** You weren't involved in the monument file at all?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** No, not at all.

I'm involved in service delivery, but the commemoration issue is not one of my responsibilities.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** To your knowledge, at Veterans Affairs, have the results of a survey like this ever been used to make decisions?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** We use surveys at every opportunity. We survey veterans every two years or so to learn more about their experiences related to programs and their accessibility, as well as their level of satisfaction with them. We use the results of these surveys to learn more about how we should improve or change our programs to better meet veterans' demands.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** You're really telling me about the serious, scientific surveys you're setting up.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Yes, but we also conduct consultations with veterans, particularly through the Let's Talk Veterans site, which allows us to ask them a number of questions. Recently, we consulted them about their experience with the service application process. We asked them questions to see if they had any tips for improving the process, for example.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I've seen several of these surveys, which are well designed. However, in the case of the monument, we're not talking about the same kind of survey.

I know you're very sensitive to the cause of veterans and their perception. If, in the case of the monument, veterans had been clearly asked whether they would prefer to choose it themselves or have a jury choose it, what do you think they would have said?

• (1730)

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Unfortunately, I can't answer that kind of question. I was not part of the discussion.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Mr. Harris, you must have heard about this. You have meetings with other deputy ministers. You're aware that the file has moved along, that a jury had been set up and that the jury's choice had to be endorsed by both ministers and created, outright. You must be aware of all this.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I follow the progress of the file, because I want to get good results for our veterans. Unfortunately, I'm not privy to everything.

I'm personally responsible for a rather important file, and I must devote my full attention to it.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I will move on to another issue.

I've been on the committee for four years. I'm going to continue along the same lines as my colleague. We're talking about backlogs.

Do you think it's normal to base a system on backlogs, i.e., the inability to respond to requests?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I didn't create this system. I want to make sure veterans can get answers as quickly as possible. Steps can be taken to improve the system, to increase capacity and to respond to all requests.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** You understand my question, and I understand that you may not feel like answering it.

In the health care field, would there be a way of operating that's similar to this? In other words, let's try to lose as few individuals as possible and work towards as few deaths as possible.

You set a threshold, a certain number of days to settle cases. You haven't been able to reach it for millennia, it seems. Is it normal for things to work like this?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** We're well on our way to achieving our service targets. As I said earlier, nearly 70% of decisions are made in 16 weeks or less, in the case of the additional pain and suffering benefit and other benefits. We can certainly take steps to ensure that we respond to claims within a reasonable time frame. In fact, we've already taken some.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Can you tell me about the processing times, over the last six months, for applications made by francophones as compared to those made by anglophones? They were very different. Can you also tell me about the processing times for requests made by women compared to those made by men?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Yes, certainly.

For the current fiscal year, so far, processing times for requests in French are less than those for requests made in English. We have responded to more requests made by French speakers, and the gap is now 0.4%.

When it comes to requests made by men and women, there's a three-week gap. The processing time for applications made by women is three weeks longer, but...

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** When will we have these results?

What you are saying is historic.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** These results will soon be published on our website. There is always a delay.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Did you say it was the same in the case of requests made by women?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** When it comes to claims made by women, the gap is currently three weeks. Last year, the gap was one week. Since the number of claims made by female veterans is smaller, at 15% to 17% of the total claims received by Veterans Affairs, this varies a little from year to year. However, we have gone from a gap of 10 to 12 weeks to a gap of 1 to 3 weeks. Female veterans' experience has shown that the processing time for their applications is faster than for male veterans.

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

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

[English]

Now I will invite Ms. Rachel Blaney to take the floor for six minutes, please.

• (1735)

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

Thank you to the folks who are left over to chat with us a little bit more about Veterans Affairs.

I will allow you to decide who the best person is to answer, but if you don't answer soon, I'll have to bother Mr. Harris, I think. That's just a little heads-up.

One of the concerns that we've heard, especially during our study on women veterans, is about identifying any preventable causes of sex-specific illnesses and injuries in the CAF. Women are calling for VAC to communicate to the CAF the lessons learned from the first few decades of service by women in operational roles and environments.

I'm wondering if the department has any plans to work together with the CAF to prevent unnecessary sex-specific injuries and illnesses among military women. If so, could you elaborate on how that might happen, and if not, can you explain why?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Sure. I can—

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Going once...?

Mr. Harris, it's good to see you.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I'm happy to jump in.

It's nice to see you, even though I feel like a leftover.

The answer to the question is that we actually already do what you've indicated in terms of communicating back and forth and working with our Canadian Armed Forces colleagues on anything we see as a trend line.

This happens for women or men veterans. If we see changes in the kinds of applications we're getting, if we see specific kinds of things changing, we do communicate. We have a health professionals group in my own organization that works very closely as well with the Canadian Armed Forces health services group to identify, to share research with one another—

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Mr. Harris, thank you. You answered my question.

My next questions are these: Could you provide the committee with the trends that you're seeing, specifically around women and sex-specific injuries and illnesses? What have you identified as a trend, as you just spoke about?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Sure. What I was talking about from a high-level perspective is that the groups work together to share any information. If we see trends that are different between men and women veterans—

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** That is excellent. Are you going to table that with the committee?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I can share information with you. Yes.

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

We know that women veterans are calling for reproductive health research that follows them from military to veteran status, while also capturing the possible health impacts that their service had on their offspring. Of course, I hope everybody in this room has heard the testimony from the women veterans and sees how important this is.

I'm wondering what the department is doing to ensure that women's reproductive health is considered in the health coverage and services provided by VAC.

I want to remind everyone here of the question I asked the minister. One challenge, of course, is that women are often not coming forward, or when they do come forward, the assessment around their health care isn't done properly. For example, we heard that some women were getting breast reductions to be able to wear their kit.

When these things happen, I want to know if that is actually being followed up. What is VAC doing to address the specific reproductive health issues that have been a consequence of their service? How is that communication happening between the CAF and VAC to address it?

I'm assuming it's Mr. Harris answering again.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I might start, and then I might ask Mr. Tessier to talk a little bit about research from that point of view.

We are consistently looking at the testimony that appears here. We look forward to the recommendations and to the report that comes back from the committee on this very extensive research into women's health.

Whether it's reproductive health or women's health overall, we continue to examine existing research, new research that's done within the community, within the Five Eyes community as well as others. CIMVHR, our centres of excellence—

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Can I just pause you there?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Yes, absolutely.

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

Just for clarification, you're talking about reviewing other research done with our partners. Could you reference any research or commitment to research that Canada has around these particular concerns?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** In this case, I might ask Mr. Tessier to respond to the kinds of research that VAC undertakes and is able to do.

**Mr. Pierre Tessier:** Thank you for the question.

As we work very closely with our CAF health professional colleagues, we do look at research that's under way in the CAF and research that's under way within VAC. These are some of the future VAC projects that I have here today that are specifically around this area: examining barriers to service for LGBT purge survivors; investigating women veterans' reproductive challenges, specifically looking at that issue and doing further research; and scoping new intimate partner violence among veterans.

We are continuing that research while working very closely with our CAF colleagues to exchange the research so that we don't duplicate research and can build off what we have.

● (1740)

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** We've heard through testimony in the women's study that one of the challenges is not having enough Canada-focused research on both sides.

The follow-up questions are these: What is the commitment to invest in this research? How is the department collaborating with the CAF to make sure the research is done on both sides, so that we can see the collaboration between the service and then the response after service?

**Mr. Pierre Tessier:** Thank you for the question.

In the 18 months since I've joined Veterans Affairs, we have formed a research and policy ADM steering committee and a DG steering committee to review the research that is happening currently and the research that's being planned so that we can build off it. The research I've mentioned is definitely looking to be in the pending and approval stages, so we're definitely committed to this research.

We're also looking forward to the study on women veterans that's occurring today and also taking some of those recommendations into our research as we have it today.

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

For the next round, we're going to have four interventions.

I will invite Mrs. Cathay Wagantall, for five minutes, please.

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

My first question is around the role of our minister, who is also the Associate Minister of National Defence. I see that she has a significant number of people working with her.

Are you all just on the back side of things? Who is it who works alongside her in this role as Associate Minister of National Defence?

Mr. Harris, do you know?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** That's correct. We just work with her in supporting her role from a Veterans Affairs point of view. That said, we do a lot of work with our Canadian Armed Forces colleagues at the ADM level and throughout many working groups as well, so we're in close contact with them.

Her role as Associate Minister of National Defence is focused mainly on personnel.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Okay, I just want to know then.... The deputy minister doesn't have a specific role in relation to working with her on things of concern. We're talking about a seamless transition here. I think that's why this position was created—which appears great.

I'm asking this question: Is there anyone designated, the way we have a deputy minister for Veterans Affairs Canada, to her services in regard to being the Associate Minister of National Defence?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** No, and I think that actually speaks to the seamless nature of it. The deputy minister works with his partner at DND—

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Thank you. This is why I'm asking this question.

We had a young woman veteran testify last week, Stephanie Hayward...and I hope that the minister has followed up with her.

From her testimony, which I hope you would all read, her concerns are with VAC. She faced an atrocious gang rape within the Canadian Armed Forces. When she reported it and whatnot, she ended up in isolation until she was removed.

When she finally tried to get assistance through VAC, the bureau of pensions advocates discovered that there were files that belonged with her medical files that were stored elsewhere. If they had not looked and found them, she would not have known they existed.

I want to know whether our Associate Minister of National Defence, who is responsible for Veterans Affairs, has looked into this to know where those files were hidden, whether there are more and whether or not those files will be released to be with the rest of the files in relation to those particular veterans.

Are you aware of any work—being in association with her on pretty well everything that she does—that she's done or any research into what happened here with the Canadian Armed Forces and those files?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I'm not able to speak on behalf of the minister herself. What I can say is that we continue to work to ensure that the transition for every Canadian Armed Forces member is handled efficiently and effectively.

• (1745)

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** I would like to know specifically about those files. If it's possible to have it on the record, we ask that those questions be provided to the minister and to the deputy minister to respond to this committee in that regard.

We have a really serious issue here around the treatment of women specifically with military sexual trauma. This one was very hard for me to stomach, especially the fact that her injuries impacted her ability to have children. VAC has not responded. This is something that I think we need to work significantly on.

We have talked a lot about medical files over the last eight years and how they aren't accessible to our veterans. I'm understanding that more and more. My understanding is that VAC doesn't have them. The veterans are considered third party, and in Canada they.... There's no access.

Has there been any movement on this issue? It was part of the recommendations that medical files be digitized and become property available to veterans at any time that they may want to have them.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** The medical file of a particular Canadian Armed Forces serving member or released member is not a property of Veterans Affairs. What we ask for are relevant sections of a veteran's medical file to be provided to us to be able to adjudicate in cases—

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Can I ask—?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** —where claims, be they disability or otherwise, are being made.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Yes, I understand that you ask for what you need. However, you don't always see everything or know whether there's something you should have that you aren't aware you should have.

Why is it that you don't have access to them and veterans don't have access to them?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Veterans can get access to their medical files, but it's not through Veterans Affairs Canada. They can make the request to be able to access their medical file—

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** This is not a seamless transition, sir.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** We would not have a veteran's entire medical file. We're not considered to have a need to have an entire veteran's medical file, from a privacy point of view and others.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** I have 30 seconds and a quick question.

The \$2 million for research projects comes from a transfer from the Department of National Defence—\$1.65 million. I would like to know whether that's coming from their research funding or a different source. Also, for the reallocation of internal resources, where did the \$350,000 come from that was added to that for research projects?

**Mr. Pierre Tessier:** I'll answer the question.

The funding that comes from the CAF and DND comes from their research area. That's my understanding.

**Ms. Sara Lantz:** The \$350,000 that you see coming internally within the department is really just a change in how PSPC advised us we should be moving the money—from a contract base to traditional grants and contributions—to fund the research. It was just an internal transfer across the vote to appropriately fund the research.

It's all the same money.

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

Now let's get to Mr. Sean Casey for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to start with Mr. Harris.

Mr. Harris, during Mrs. Wagantall's questions, it seemed as though there were a few occasions where you were trying to provide a more complete answer and were prevented from doing so, specifically on the subject of a seamless transition between DND and VAC. If there is any information that you want to share with the committee that you weren't able to, this is your chance.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Thank you very much.

I would just try to explain the purpose for which Veterans Affairs obtains medical files in looking at a veteran's application for any number of programs, most specifically disability benefits. We do access information from the Canadian Armed Forces and the Department of National Defence in support of those applications for which we have to determine a service relationship for an injury or illness that's been suffered by a Canadian Armed Forces member, transitioning member or veteran.

We only ask for the information relevant to the disability, illness or injury that they are looking for so that we don't access, inappropriately, an entire file of information on medical history or otherwise that we don't actually need to render a decision for a particular benefit. We only access that part. The file remains the property of the Department of National Defence, ultimately, for the individual veteran of the Canadian Armed Forces or the member.

We do have still-serving Canadian Armed Forces members who make applications. That information, again, comes when they make the application. In the need or intent to provide seamless transition, our interests and our obligation are to try to make sure that all of the benefits that need to be in place to help support somebody going through a transitory process are in place before that person transitions. We work very diligently with the Canadian Armed Forces to do so.

● (1750)

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

Now I would like to bring the conversation back to the estimates, and I'm going to take a page out of Ms. Blaney's book. Whoever feels that they have the information with which to answer, feel free to pipe up.

Mr. Tolmie talked about the fact that there are so many people with hearing loss claims who find themselves in front of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. Their appeals are upheld. In the estimates that were voted on the other night, there was \$15 million dedicated to the modernization of IT infrastructure to make advancements in process automation for the most common medical conditions. I understand that tinnitus and hearing loss are two of them.

If the Conservatives had gotten their way and had successfully blocked this investment, what would the impact be on the processing of these types of claims?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Perhaps I can offer some insight on the actual processing.

I'm not trying to speak exactly to the impact in the way in which the question is framed but to earlier questioning and information shared related to how often something is approved or not approved, how difficult it is or why the Veterans Review and Appeal Board approves something.

With respect to tinnitus, it's actually approved 93% of the time on first application. Hearing loss is 82%. Our overall first-application approval rate is 90%. The question then becomes, why does the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, for example, approve a number of hearing loss or tinnitus claims when the appeals come to it?

In many cases, it is using new information. In other words, the veteran is submitting new information as part of the application on the appeal. Therefore, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board has information at that point in time that was not available to the Veterans Affairs decision-maker. That is particularly true because in a decision letter that would say that a particular application is not going to be approved, we point out where the lack of evidence is. When a veteran comes back through the appeals process, it is with

very specific information as to the kinds of things that need to be shown as evidence to be able to get a positive decision.

That's likely why the approval rate of Veterans Review and Appeal Board decisions is much higher on those than what might have been presented as an application that didn't have all the evidence at that time.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** There was one measure contained in the estimates that the Conservatives didn't get the chance to vote against and that was the additional funding of \$800,000 for the veterans emergency fund, which was the result of an internal reallocation. Why is that important?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** We have a number of veterans who obviously have come forward. An emergency fund was set up through our new program about five years ago to be able to respond to veterans in crisis, in emergencies, who need short-term assistance on any number of things. It could be something related to immediate housing. It could be related to medical expenses and/or others.

The program is slightly oversubscribed. In other words, the allocation for the department is \$1 million annually. However, our experience has been that we require somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$1.5 million or \$2 million on an annual basis to help support individuals. That was a little higher in cases of COVID and others. We've reallocated money to ensure there are enough funds in the veterans emergency fund to carry through the entire fiscal year and to be able to support veterans throughout the fiscal year.

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

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

[Translation]

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

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

Mr. Tessier, as part of our study on women, witnesses often said that there wasn't enough research, that it wasn't sufficiently funded, etc.

Another thing that came up was the problem of coordination between research projects. What do you think about this?

[English]

**Mr. Pierre Tessier:** Thank you for the question.

On the coordination of research, I would say that there are two aspects to it. Overall, the first one is that not all research is commissioned by the Department of National Defence, CAF and Veterans Affairs. A lot of it is commissioned through academia research and interest, and priority within the civilian population.

I would say that the second portion is where and how departments—not just CAF and Veterans Affairs but also Health Canada—look at research and capitalize on that research, but also coordinate on the findings of that research and ensure there's no duplication as we plan research. To me, that is the premise of how we should look at research in the future and also use it to take evidence-based policy decisions.

• (1755)

[*Translation*]

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

You alluded to a study on the impact of military life on reproduction. It was very interesting.

Is there anything on the impact of pregnancy and post-pregnancy, i.e., children's first years of life? Witnesses have alluded to this: certain products to which they may have been exposed could have created developmental problems. I'd like a quick response, because I'm running out of time.

[*English*]

**Mr. Pierre Tessier:** Thank you for the question.

I don't have that at my fingertips, but if we do have it, I'd be happy to provide it to the committee.

[*Translation*]

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

My next question is for all of the witnesses.

Have any of you heard of women experiencing breast reduction due to so-called inadequate equipment in the Canadian Armed Forces?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I'm not aware of any specific examples.

In general, we know that equipment can have different effects on female veterans. These are not necessary adjustments that female veterans would have made themselves, but consequences that equipment can have on them, such as different illnesses or lived experiences.

Examples, requirements and service consequences may differ from one woman to another.

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

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

[*English*]

To close this meeting, I'm pleased to invite Ms. Rachel Blaney to take her two and a half minutes, please.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you, Chair. I always enjoy getting the last word in, so I appreciate that.

I'm going to go, through the chair, to Mr. Harris. If there's somebody else who should answer the two questions I'm going to start with, please let me know. I would appreciate that.

First—and I believe I have this correct—the minister said that since 2015 there has been an increase of \$11 billion in investment for the department. I'm wondering if the math has been done around that investment versus the amount that has been returned at the end of every fiscal year, and if that has been done, whether that math could be shared with us.

The second question I have is around the survivor's pension. You know and I think everybody knows that the survivor's pension is of significant concern to me. We know that a lot of senior women are living in poverty because they don't have any benefits from their spouse because they married after 60. We know that in 2019, four

years ago now, the announcement was made that \$150 million would be put towards a survivor's pension, and every time I've asked so far, what I've heard is that they're still in a process of looking at how that money will be disseminated.

Could the department table with this committee how much money has actually gone out to survivors since 2019 and how many survivors it has supported?

Mr. Harris, go ahead.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** For the question on the financials, I would ask Ms. Lantz to respond.

**Ms. Sara Lantz:** Thank you for the question.

We do have a detailed analysis of all the surpluses or the lapses against our full budgetary authorities each year. I believe I just signed off on a response to you on that with the details.

We analyze that every year and the reason for that. In the most recent years, we have had a little bit more surplus than in others due to the volatility in predicting our forecasted expenditures. We've come down below the 5% again, which is our annual target.

I would just remind you that any of those lapsed funds that are part of the quasi-statutory amount we do not lose. They go back into the bank account for when a veteran comes forward. We're essentially trying to forecast what is needed within a fiscal year, but if that funding is not used up in that fiscal year, it is available when the veteran may come forward in a future year.

• (1800)

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** What about the question of marriage after 60? I didn't get a response on that. I just asked if that could be tabled with the committee. If I could get confirmation that it would be tabled, I would be happy with that response.

**A witness:** That could be tabled.

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

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

[*Translation*]

We welcomed four assistant deputy ministers during this second hour, including, by videoconference: Mr. Steven Harris, assistant deputy minister, service delivery branch; also by videoconference, Ms. Amy Meunier, assistant deputy minister, commemoration and public affairs branch; Ms. Sara Lantz, assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and corporate services; and Mr. Pierre Tessier, assistant deputy minister, strategic policy, planning and performance branch.

On behalf of the members of the committee and on my own behalf as well, thank you for participating in this meeting.

I don't know if you noticed that the clerk this afternoon was Ms. Carine Grand-Jean, and that she accompanied us perfectly during the meeting. I'd like to thank her for that. I also thank the interpreters, who were with us on site, as well as the technicians.

[*English*]

Members of the committee, my plan personally is to come back next year.

I don't know, Mr. Richards....

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I was just going to say we might try to ruin those plans and see if we can call an election. No, that wasn't actually what.... We tried that 135 times last week so....

Actually what I wanted to do was to ask you about Thursday. What are the plans for Thursday's committee business?

**The Chair:** I don't have any other instructions, but personally, I spoke to the clerk and said, "Wow—we have a lot of motions. Maybe we should be having a subcommittee and discussing all of those and starting a new session in January."

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Okay. That's understood.

What about the drafting instructions for the women's study? Are we planning on doing that?

**The Chair:** Yes. For the women's study, the analyst has told me that he has already started the report, but he said he's going to present something to us. He said it would be too difficult to ask you guys to bring your recommendations. It's going to be a lot of work, because it's....

He can say a few words.

**Mr. Jean-Rodrigue Paré (Committee Researcher):** You should receive a draft early next year. I've been writing the draft. I'm not waiting for the end of the study. You should be receiving something quite early in the new year, and then I would expect you to react to that with potential recommendations to add to it. I think I'm covering most of the issues that have been brought up and are of interest to the committee. Of course, I will have forgotten a few.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Mr. Desilets, you have the floor.

[*English*]

You don't have the last word, Ms. Blaney.

[*Translation*]

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

As I understand it, we're going to go through the motions, and there are several. I think there are several motions on the Conservative side that we haven't dealt with yet.

Would it be possible to tidy up these motions? Could we have motions 1, 2, 3, 4 and 12 sent to us?

**The Chair:** It will be my pleasure.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you. That's perfect.

**The Chair:** I'll ask the clerk to send us the motions based on the dates they were filed as well, because there are actually several.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I think some motions are only at the notice of motion stage.

**The Chair:** Yes. These are just notices of motion. We can debate them in committee.

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

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Ms. Blaney.

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

I just wanted to see if the analyst would like us to send any recommendations that we may have to help him while he's writing.

• (1805)

**Mr. Jean-Rodrigue Paré:** The issue here is that the recommendations you will send me I've probably already considered—maybe not all of them. The issue is that, in the first draft, I do not want to receive contradictory recommendations, because it makes it very difficult to argue, prior to the recommendations, why it is there. If I receive "A" and "non-A", I cannot argue for both at the same time in the same draft.

I would encourage you to trust that I've been fair and wide on the issues. Then you will have the opportunity to react to the draft when it's—

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I could just send recommendations and everybody else could agree not to.

**Mr. Jean-Rodrigue Paré:** You can send them to me and then—

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Yes, I think that's excellent. I'm asking for unanimous consent—

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I reserve the right to take that on the next study, then.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**The Chair:** Ms. Blaney, you have the last word.

It's been so lovely to work with you guys. I thank you every day for everything.

I wish happy holidays to all of you and your staff and families.

The meeting is adjourned.







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