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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg



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• (1640)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number 94 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veteran Affairs.

[Translation]

Today, the committee is looking at the main estimates 2024-25 and the subject matter of the supplementary estimates (C) 2023-24.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format.

We're pleased to welcome the Honourable Mona Fortier, who is joining us by video conference. Pierre Paul-Hus will also be attending the meeting.

We have new guidelines for the acoustics in the room. As you will have noticed, the microphones are now farther apart. This isn't because of COVID. It's simply to avoid any interference. You can also see that the earpieces have been placed in a specific position next to you. Avoid bringing the earpiece close to the microphone. This causes disruptions or interference, which can seriously harm the interpreters. Hence the need for special measures. When you have the floor, take extreme care to keep your earpiece away from the microphone. When you aren't speaking, please turn off your microphone and place your earpiece on the table. On behalf of the interpreters, thank you for your co-operation.

Lastly, I would like to remind you that all comments should be addressed to the chair.

[English]

I would now like to welcome the Minister of Veteran Affairs and officials from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

[Translation]

For the first hour, we have with us the Honourable Ginette Petitpas Taylor, member of Parliament and Minister of Veterans Affairs. From the Department of Veterans Affairs, we have Paul Ledwell, deputy minister; and Steven Harris, senior assistant deputy minister, service delivery branch.

Minister, you have five minutes to give your opening remarks. The committee members will then be happy to ask you questions through the chair. You now have the floor.

• (1645)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair and colleagues, thank you for inviting me here today. I'm always pleased to have the opportunity to brief the committee on government business, especially as it relates to veterans and their families.

[English]

First, I would like to briefly inform you about two important events that my department, Veterans Affairs Canada, held in Montreal in March—the national stakeholder summit and the Women Veterans Forum. I believe all of you had received invitations. Again, it was really well attended.

More than 300 veterans, stakeholders and community partners attended the two events, with the opportunity to attend in person and online. At both events, we heard directly from the community on key topics. The feedback we received from veterans and stakeholders is invaluable to the work we do to make sure that everyone has access to the supports and services they need.

[Translation]

I'm also pleased to report that the government again recognized, in budget 2024, the need to take care of Canada's veterans. The government is investing in the veteran and family well-being fund, in telemedicine services and in the commemoration of veterans.

Last year, our government also made significant investments to improve application processing times. This gives veterans more timely access to the services and benefits that they need.

In the main estimates, the budget for the Department of Veterans Affairs increased by \$229 million compared to last year, bringing the department's total funding to \$6.21 billion for fiscal year 2024-25. This change reflects the government's ongoing commitment to veterans and their families.

[English]

As you know, Mr. Chair, the majority of Veterans Affairs Canada's programs are demand driven or otherwise known as quasi-statutory. In this case, the bulk of the increase comes from an additional \$202 million to cover a higher demand or increased expenditures related to the income replacement benefit, additional pain and suffering compensation and housekeeping and grounds maintenance.

The balance of the \$229-million increase can be attributed to \$23.1 million in new funding for collective bargaining and the Logan class action final settlement agreement and \$14.8 million to an overall increase in clients and expenditures in treatment and health care.

For the 2023-24 supplementary estimates (C), VAC requested and received \$14.1 million in additional program funding to provide services to eligible veterans and their families.

As well, \$2.5 million in additional funding will support the refurbishment of the Newfoundland and Labrador national war memorial to construct a tomb of an unknown Newfoundland soldier.

In addition to this funding, Mr. Chair, you will see a \$55.6-million transfer from vote 1 to vote 5. This reallocation of resources is related to our annual quasi-statutory adjustment and will allow the department to meet the demand of the program.

[Translation]

The estimates also include a transfer of \$2.9 million from the Veterans Review and Appeal Board to Veterans Affairs Canada. This amount will fund the services that the department provides to the board, in order to further improve application processing times.

This additional funding constitutes a significant and necessary investment in the health and well-being of our veterans and their families. It will help our government continue to provide the care and support that they need and deserve.

Thank you again for inviting me to speak today. I look forward to answering the committee members' questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll now move on to the first round of questions.

Mr. Richards, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Luc Desilets (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Mr. Chair, I would like to—

The Chair: Hold on, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor.

• (1650)

Mr. Luc Desilets: Given that the meeting started a bit late, when can we expect it to finish?

The Chair: I think that we have the resources to hold a two-hour meeting. We'll meet with the minister and guests for the first hour.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Good. Thank you.

The Chair: You're welcome.

Mr. Richards, you have the floor for six minutes.

[English]

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Minister, there are a lot of very frustrated veterans in this country right now. Not only are veterans struggling to get the benefits and services they need and deserve from your government and from Veterans Affairs to deal with the physical or mental injuries they've suffered as a result of their service to our country, but, like many Canadians out there right now, there are also far too many veterans who are homeless, who are having to use food banks, because of the cost of living crisis that your government has created. I talk to food banks often that tell me these food banks that serve our veterans specifically cannot keep enough food on the shelves to serve those veterans.

They're hurting. They're struggling. There are far too many veterans who are suffering from mental health issues and addictions, all because they cannot afford to live any longer.

In the short time you've been minister, the committee has requested three separate times that you to come and appear to be held accountable to veterans through the members of this committee. On all three occasions we've requested that you come for two hours to answer for your government's policies and to speak to veterans. This is their opportunity to hear directly from you and to have you questioned on their behalf by the members who sit on this committee.

On all three occasions, you've come for only one hour of the two hours requested of you. I have to wonder how any veteran can have any confidence that you're going to show any respect for their needs, their desires and what they're looking for in terms of solutions when you can't even find two hours of your time to come and answer their questions.

The Chair: Excuse me, Minister.

I have to say to the members of the committee and to the witnesses, please address your questions and answers through the chair.

[Translation]

Otherwise, I'll need to stop your comments.

Minister, you have the floor.

[English]

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

First and foremost, again, it's an absolute privilege for me to be here with all of you today. This is my third committee appearance here at the veterans affairs committee. On the two first occasions, I was here for a two-hour period. I was more than happy to do so.

More importantly, I think, Mr. Richards, since I've taken on this role as the veterans affairs minister, I have made it my number one priority to meet with veterans across the country. I have met hundreds if not thousands of veterans, and personally wanted to hear their issues and their concerns. When I talked earlier about the forum and the summit that we held in Montreal, I spent four days there, for the totality of those summits and the forum, to hear first-hand about the issues and struggles our veterans are facing, and to find out their priorities.

To accuse me today of not paying attention to veterans I think is a bit rich on your part, because, again, I take this job extremely seriously. My number one priority is to make sure that veterans have access to the services and benefits they need. I will continue to meet and listen to veterans when I can.

Mr. Blake Richards: You take this job so seriously that you're willing to come for only one hour to answer the questions that veterans have. I hear every day—I know that many members of this committee would hear the same—that veterans are frustrated. They're hurting. They cannot get the help they need. They're waiting not months but years, in many cases, to try to get the services they need and the benefits they need. They are just not getting it from your government. They're not seeing even the basic respect.

I want to speak to that basic respect for just a second. We have a situation where many of the veterans who served this country in Afghanistan are frustrated. They feel disrespected. Many of the families of the 158 Canadians who gave their lives in Afghanistan are feeling the same way. A monument was supposed to be created for the men and women who served in that mission. Right now, because of the interference of your Prime Minister, that monument has been delayed. No one knows when it will be built, and veterans are feeling frustrated. They're feeling disrespected.

We have a situation here where this committee is trying to get to the bottom of that situation. We've been trying for months now to get the documents to be able to figure out what exactly caused all of these delays. Liberal members of this committee have filibustered and have found every tactic to try to avoid that from happening, and yet we're simply asking for something that will help clear up this issue for veterans.

Minister, you could show that respect to veterans right here today if you would just commit—I'm asking you to do so—to provide the documents, the communications, since November 8 of 2021, between your department and your office of the Minister of Veterans Affairs, between the department and the Privy Council Office, and between your Minister of Veterans Affairs office and the Office of the Prime Minister.

Would you commit to providing those documents today so that we can get to the bottom of this on behalf of our veterans?

• (1655)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Richards, once again, the issue of commemorating Canada's mission in Afghanistan continues

to be a priority for me and the government. That is why we continue to work forward and to move forward with respect to the erection of this monument—a monument that is very important, as you indicate.

Mr. Blake Richards: Minister, the question was about whether you were going to provide those documents to be able to get to the bottom of the situation that caused this delay. It's a simple yes-or-no question. Would you provide those document, yes or no?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: With respect to the work that the committee is doing, I believe you are undergoing a committee study on the matter. Once again....

The chair is telling me that I'm done.

The Chair: Yes. The time is running.

Mr. Blake Richards: That's convenient.

The Chair: I will now go to Ms. Hepfner for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lisa Hepfner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the minister for being here and answering our questions.

In another appearance, Veterans Affairs Canada officials told us about the telemedicine pilot project.

Our veterans and their families have sacrificed so much for our country. We have a solemn and sacred duty to support our veterans, who have served courageously and honourably.

We know how hard it can be for a veteran transitioning to civilian life to find a doctor. When they were in the Canadian Armed Forces, a number of veterans received their health care directly from the forces. Telemedicine is a good way to make health care more accessible. That's why I was happy to see this pilot project in budget 2024. I also know that the Conservatives have already stated that they wouldn't support the extension of the telemedicine pilot project.

Can you tell us more about this measure and why it's important for veterans?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you, Ms. Hepfner. Your French is excellent.

Again, we're pleased to see additional investments in budget 2024. As you said, our telemedicine pilot project, which focuses on veterans leaving the Canadian Armed Forces for medical reasons, will ensure that they have access to medical care.

The pilot project has many benefits. That's the reason for the extension request. Our project focuses not only on veterans leaving the Canadian Armed Forces for medical reasons, but also on all members leaving the Canadian Forces.

As you said, members of the forces receive medical services from the Department of National Defence. When they leave the forces, they're affected by the same labour shortage as all Canadians. We need to make sure that they can access these services. I'm not just talking about veterans, but also their family members, since they also need to move.

The \$9.2 million investment will be used to expand the pilot project to reach more people. This includes not only the people leaving the forces for medical reasons, but also all veterans and their family members. In my opinion, this will benefit them. Again, it will give them access to additional resources. We're making sure that they receive the necessary services.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: I think that this topic is really important. I haven't been on the committee long, but I've heard about it a number of times.

As you know, we just conducted a major study on the experiences of women veterans. We've been careful to ensure that our report properly reflects the challenges and concerns of women veterans. I can't wait for this report to be released and for women veterans to read it. This study goes beyond partisanship and will make a real difference—or, at least, it should.

Can you tell us about what your department has already done to help veterans? Also, can you tell us about the next steps to improve services for veterans?

• (1700)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you for this important question.

I would like to thank all the committee members for conducting this study, which was key to understanding the dynamics and needs of women veterans. I would also like to thank the women veterans who are keeping up with our work. I acknowledge that, for the women who appeared before the committee, it wasn't always easy to share their experiences. I want to thank them and tip my hat to them, again.

I look forward to receiving the committee's recommendations and reading its report. I know that everyone has worked hard on this. The Department of Veterans Affairs started making internal changes even before the committee studied the issue. One change, which was made a few years ago, concerns women veterans who contact the Department of Veterans Affairs to receive services as a result of the incidents that they experienced. We now have a team that specializes in handling requests from women veterans.

We also want to ensure that the women who have been sexually assaulted or sexually harassed feel comfortable with the people assigned to work with them and with their case manager. These managers are trained to respond appropriately. We'll continue to improve these programs in order to serve women veterans properly.

I'll soon be announcing the creation of a women veterans advisory council. This council will give advice to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, meaning me, on women's issues. I can't wait to make this announcement. Again, I want to make sure that I'm well informed about the challenges that women face. I'm really looking forward to working with this committee.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: That is very important, especially given the number of women veterans who told the committee they felt invisible.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hepfner. Your time is up.

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

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

Good evening, colleagues.

We are pleased to see you, Mr. Ledwell and Mr. Harris, and Minister Petitpas Taylor.

Ms. Petitpas Taylor, I want to commend you for attending the four-day summit in Montreal; I was also there. Wonderful that you did that at the beginning of your mandate.

My questions are not so pleasant, I'm afraid.

Are you willing to acknowledge that the government is responsible for the delays in the construction of the monument, owing to its various nonsensical decisions?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you very much, Mr. Desilets. I want to thank you as well for attending the stakeholder summit. It was very important to see you there.

As to the monument, I think we have to acknowledge that a number of problems delayed construction. In 2014, a site had been chosen for the monument, but in the end the site was not satisfactory to veterans. They told us they were unhappy with the fact that people would not be able to see the monument in the winter and that there could be flooding in the spring. So we restarted the process to choose a new site in 2015. Then the work began.

I also fully acknowledge that there were some delays relating to the whole issue of erecting the monument and selecting the monument's design team.

Mr. Luc Desilets: So you do admit that your government is partly responsible for that.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I recognize that the whole selection process for the team who would build the monument took some time. We were careful to conduct the necessary consultations.

Now we are in the construction phase. We are working with the National Capital Commission to make sure the monument will indeed be unveiled.

• (1705)

Mr. Luc Desilets: Yes, we are aware of all of that.

The initial cost of the monument was \$3.4 million. By August 2023, it had risen to \$4.7 million. What is the current estimate?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: The most recent figure I received is the last amount you mentioned.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Perfect.

Our colleague Mr. Sarai, who is of course a member of this committee, stated the following on March 18: “The documents have shown that the government deviated from the established procurement process against the advice of Canadian Heritage officials.”

Do you accept that statement?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: If listening to veterans means deviating from the process, then the answer is yes.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Okay.

You know, we and the veterans have a lot of trouble with that. We have talked about it a number of times. I would simply like to mention that a veterans' petition will be put forward soon, as some of my colleagues around the table know already. The person who started the petition said that the national monument has been marked by political scandal and interference, and that the political scandal amounted to interference that undermined the 10th anniversary of the mission in Afghanistan, that the political game overshadowed the intention of erecting the national monument and that, as a result, the monument no longer represented veterans' commitment and sacrifice. The petition will be circulated soon. That's why it is still hard for me to hear you say that this initiative represents the voice and input of veterans.

On another topic, a new colleague on the committee, Ms. Hepfner, has reviewed all the discussions and asked us whether the committee had discussed the idea of erecting two monuments. She does not see why that could not be done. Have you set aside funding for that?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: First of all, I had not heard about the petition at all. I have just learned something new today. That's good.

I have to tell you though, Mr. Desilets, that over the past nine months I have, as I said, had the opportunity to meet with hundreds if not thousands of veterans. When they talk to me about the monument commemorating the mission in Afghanistan, they simply ask me when it will be completed. That is the only thing they ask me. Just last week, I met with representatives of the Royal Canadian Legion here, in Ottawa, who also just wanted to make sure that the monument would be erected.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I understand, everyone is impatient.

I have to ask you nonetheless if you agree with Ms. Hepfner's remarks: Are there plans to erect two monuments?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Veterans of the Afghanistan mission have asked us for a national monument, and that is exactly what we are in the process of designing and erecting. With this national monument, we want to make sure they have a pilgrimage site to visit with their family and children. That is exactly what we are in the process of doing.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Perfect. You have not commented on Ms. Hepfner's request.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I am speaking about the veterans' request itself. Veterans want a national monument here, in Ottawa, and that is exactly what we are in the process of giving them.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Okay.

There are a lot of documents that the committee has requested but has not received. A colleague mentioned that earlier. We have also received documents under the Access to Information Act that are not among those provided by the department. I am referring to the conversations on April 15 between Steven Harris and Amy Meunier; we have not received those documents. There is some uncertainty, which concerns us, of course. We want transparency.

Based on these observations, we have filed a complaint against Veterans Affairs Canada with the Office of the Information Commissioner of Canada. The commissioner deemed the complaint admissible and opened an investigation into it. Can you confirm that your department will fully co-operate with that investigation and provide all the relevant documents that we wish to receive?

The Chair: Madam Minister, we need an answer in 15 or 20 seconds because Mr. Desilets' time is up.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Desilets, if you are looking for documents from my department, I can guarantee that your request will be honoured. I have learned something new once again today. I will make sure that the documents you have requested from my department will be provided to you.

Mr. Luc Desilets: They are documents from April 15; that just has to be checked. Thank you.

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

[English]

Now I'd like to invite Ms. Blaney for six minutes.

Go ahead, please. The floor is yours.

• (1710)

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you so much, Chair, and as always, everything is through the chair.

First of all, I'd like to thank the minister and her team for being here with us today. I appreciate the time. I am a little sad that we don't have the women's report tabled. There are a lot of things I would love to talk about, although I feel that this is not quite the right time. I do think it's really important to say that, in the testimony we heard, women spoke again and again about feeling invisible, both in their service and then afterwards in their treatment by VAC.

I would say that the number of women who are reaching out to our office, who want to be here when the tabling happens, who want to know when it's going to happen and who have put a lot of pressure on this committee to make sure it happens tells you that there's a lot of need for it, but there's also a lot of hope.

Sometimes it worries me to give people hope, because if there's no follow-through, it's more devastating. I hope that all of us in this place are carrying that very carefully.

In the context of that opening statement, you did mention the minister's advisory group on women veterans that you're going to have. I know you are not yet in a place where you can announce who that will be, but I am curious about a couple of things. What is the structure in terms of choosing who's going to be in that advisory group? Also, what are the commitments around diversity?

During the time when we were doing this amazing work—and I'm so grateful for it—we did identify that we did not see enough women veterans from the Black, indigenous and people-of-colour communities. We know it's going to be a great report, but there's definitely going to be a gap in that component.

I'm curious about how you're going to select these folks who will be guiding you. What is the commitment with respect to diversity? What is the commitment about its being largely veteran women?

Thank you.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you so much, Rachel, and for your leadership when it comes to this study and when it comes to women veterans. I know you were instrumental in that as well.

I certainly can't share at this table right now all of the terms of reference, because we haven't made them public yet, but I can guarantee you that, when it comes to the composition of the veterans advisory committee, the women's advisory committee, we certainly want to make sure that diversity is reflected within this group.

I also want to make sure that women veterans are going to be on this committee, whether retired CAF members or RCMP members.

I think it's really important to make sure we have a good cross-section of folks. Again I am relying on a group of women veterans, who have actually helped us construct the terms of reference, and also on the membership of this committee.

I want this committee to be for women and by women, and making sure we get input from them has been very valuable.

I want to thank the women who have helped put together the terms of reference, because I want to make sure they are comfortable with what we're moving forward with and that we can move the agenda forward.

Just as you don't, I don't want veterans to have expectations and then to feel that we've under-delivered, if you will. I carry that burden as well. Moving the needle when it comes to women veterans is really a priority of mine, and that is why the women's study that you guys did is so important, and that is why, to me, the creation of this advisory council is so important as well.

When you say that women veterans feel invisible and feel unseen within the department and throughout their career, I heard that at the summit and I hear it when I meet women veterans. When we know better, we need to do better, and that is really what I want to do.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

I just want to qualify that when I speak of women, I'm including trans women.

I also have to say that given the fierceness of the women who have been part of this study and the women who have stood in solidarity, I have no doubt that we will be pushed to do that work.

The next question I have, speaking of invisible women, is around the veterans survivor plan that was put forward around implementing supports for women who have married veterans after age 60.

We know that \$150 million was allocated for that in 2019. We know that has not been implemented yet. I'm just wondering whether you have a date for when that's going to be implemented and what the delay is. Again, these are some of the poorest women across Canada, and there's a desire, of course, to address marriage after 60. I thought this would be the first step in that. After waiting for this many years, a lot of these women and their spouses are giving up hope, and I hate to see that happen.

I'm just wondering if we could have an implementation timeline for this.

• (1715)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you so much, Ms. Blaney, for that question. I know that this has been an area for which you've advocated for a number of years.

I'm going to be very honest. When I became the Minister of Veterans Affairs, I really thought that the creation of such a program would be fairly easy. Naively, I just thought that I was going to be able to do this, you know, very, very quickly. What I've come to realize, however, is that there could be some unintended consequences in moving forward with a program, so we really have to do our due diligence in making sure that, by creating a program, there are not going to be any unintended consequences. That is why it's taking longer than I had assumed to put together such a program.

I continue to work with my officials and to consult with other departments as well. Again, with respect to different groups, we fear there could be some broader implications with respect to other departments, and that is why it's taking longer than I had anticipated.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blaney. You're right on time.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul-Hus, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good evening, Madam Minister and gentlemen.

Madam Minister, we have had a number of meetings about the National Monument to Canada's Mission in Afghanistan, specifically last fall, with you and your colleague, the Minister of Heritage, Pascale St-Onge. We had questions about the process and, above all, about the political decision that was made. The process established to select the team to design the monument was conducted very professionally, but a political decision was made. At that meeting last fall, your colleague Ms. St-Onge was not at all aware of it. It was her predecessor, Pablo Rodriguez, who signed the document confirming the change in the winning team at the last minute. You learned about that when you took office, and now you know what happened.

In answering questions from my colleague from the Bloc Québécois earlier, you said it could be acceptable to deviate from the process when veterans were involved. We do not agree with that, Madam Minister. As a matter of fact, we learned from testimony from all the experts we met, and documents from Léger confirmed it, that the consultation process was bogus.

We need more information. On December 15, 2023, members of the committee wrote to the committee chair, asking for an emergency meeting to adopt a motion ordering the production of certain documents, including all “memoranda, briefing notes, e-mails, correspondence or any other records of conversations or communications (including text messages, Microsoft Teams messages, WhatsApp messages, Signal messages and other electronic messaging), with regard to the National Monument to Canada's Mission in Afghanistan, transmitted since November 8, 2021, between ... (vi) the Office of the Minister of Veterans Affairs and the Office of the Prime Minister.”

You said earlier that the documents had been provided. Will you undertake to provide those required documents to the committee within 21 days?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Yes, definitely. I will make that undertaking for the documents for which my department is responsible. As I said, I want to be sure that you have access to those documents. My deputy minister is also here.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: So you just confirmed that within 21 days we will be provided with all correspondence between the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Prime Minister's Office.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I can confirm that for the correspondence between my department and the Prime Minister's Office, definitely. I cannot however provide communications from the Prime Minister's Office.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Let us get back to the project.

In recent months, committee members from opposition parties have tried eight times to make progress on this, but the Liberals have obstructed every time. Can we finally get a clear answer to understand what really happened with this decision? Will the government live up to its responsibilities and confirm that it was a purely political decision?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Paul-Hus, this is the second time I have appeared before the committee for two hours, and I have answered questions about the National Monument to Canada's Mission in Afghanistan each time. I gave very clear answers. So it is a bit disappointing to be here once again today—

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Yes, I know, Madam Minister, but on December 15, we made a very clear request to the chair. Your Liberal colleagues blocked it and prevented us from putting forward those requests to get to the bottom of the purely political decision that was made and, in particular, even though this pertains less to you, the fact that the process at Canadian Heritage was disregarded. After a process that was conducted professionally, the winning team that was chosen by a jury of experts was set aside and the second team was chosen. This purely political decision was criticized by all the experts who have testified here, who said they had never seen that kind of thing before. It stands as a major political move in the history of Government of Canada processes.

• (1720)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: As to the final decision that was made on the national monument, Mr. Paul-Hus, I dare say that our veterans are also experts. They told us what they wanted. A number of veterans commended me on choosing that monument. They said they were pleased with the decision and encouraged me to continue on that path.

Once again, we chose to listen to veterans. That is what—

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Madam Minister, does that mean that if a commemorative monument has to be chosen for any reason, a bogus survey can be conducted and the decision will be based on the results of that survey? It will no longer be necessary to create a panel of experts and to work for months if not years to make the best choice possible.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Look, I completely understand what you are getting at. I do think it is important though to recognize that 40,000 Canadian soldiers took part in the mission in Afghanistan and that 158 of them lost their lives. It is absolutely essential to us to listen to those who have served our country, along with their family members. We are comfortable with the decision that was made.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Paul-Hus and Madam Minister.

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

[English]

Go ahead, please.

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

Thank you to the minister for being here today.

Welcome to all the guests who are joining our committee.

Since 2015 our government has been working quite hard to restore all the services and supports cut by the Conservative government and to improve services that support our veterans and their families. We put in place the veteran and family well-being fund, the veterans emergency fund and the veterans education and training benefit. We expanded access to the military resource centres for veterans' families. We've also made investments in mental health services and care for veterans and provide lifelong financial support for our ill and injured veterans. We also help veterans transition from military service to civilian life and offer support for caregivers. We put in place a national housing fund to prioritize support for vulnerable citizens, including veterans, and made investments to reduce backlogs, offer faster service and retain case managers.

Through the chair, Minister, the Conservatives have fought against all of these measures.

We can always do better. What comes next? What are your top priorities right now?

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

Again, it's really been the honour of my life to be appointed as the Minister of Veterans Affairs, having worked at the RCMP for a number of years and also having several family members who have served.

My top priority continues to be making sure that service delivery continues to be top of mind. I want to make sure, and our department wants to make sure, that when veterans apply for benefits, they will be receiving a decision in a very timely fashion. That is why we made additional investments just last November to make sure we could do better in meeting our service standards.

I'm proud to say that we are certainly almost there. We continue to see an increase in the level of applications that are coming in, which is good news. Since 2016 we have seen a 61% increase of new applications to Veterans Affairs Canada. That is a huge number of new applicants. As a result, we have been able to provide an additional \$11.5 billion—I say billion—in additional help and support to our veterans and their family members.

Again, when it comes to service delivery, service delivery is top of mind, as is making sure that veterans have access to the services and benefits they need.

The other thing is that we've also made a change recently. I was formerly a social worker, and when it comes to mental health and substance use and addictions, we certainly want to make sure that when people ask for mental health treatments, they receive them in a timely fashion as well. I'm very proud that in 2022, the decision was made by the department, before I was there, that when veterans are applying or asking for mental health services, they don't have to go through the entire adjudication process. We know that it can take several weeks and sometimes several months. When it comes to mental health benefits, when folks are applying for those benefits, they can have access to those services immediately.

Since 2022—I actually asked for this number recently—we have seen that 20,000 veterans were eligible to have access to those mental health supports immediately, but out of that 20,000, 40% of

them accessed those services immediately. Again, we want to make sure that we meet veterans where they're at, and that when they're asking for mental health supports, we're able to put those in place immediately. Again, we've seen that people have really appreciated those types of changes that we've done.

That continues to be a top-of-mind priority of mine—making sure we develop the programs and services and having access to the services in a timely fashion.

• (1725)

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you for that.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: If I may add one more thing—sorry—the other priority I'm working with right now as well, with my friend and colleague, the Minister of Housing.... If you remember well, last year, when Minister MacAulay was the minister, we received an \$80-million investment when it comes to homelessness and housing. As a result of that, we are in the process of and will be making some funding announcements in the very near future to different groups across the country who have applied for the funding and will be benefiting from that fund.

Finally, with respect to the types of supports, they are going to be rent subsidies that we'll be able to provide to veterans who are in need. Again, many different not-for-profit organizations will be managing that, and other groups as well will be providing wraparound services to the veterans who are in need. We certainly recognize that many individuals need that additional help and support. We want to set our veterans up for success. Making sure they have access to those services I think could be a game-changer for them. I'm looking forward to making those announcements over the next coming months.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you, Minister, for that very—

The Chair: Mr. Miao, I'm afraid your time is up.

Mr. Wilson Miao: All right.

Thank you. You answered my questions.

The Chair: It was five minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

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

Madam Minister, the purpose of the design competition was to commission a work of art. Are you saying that the Prime Minister's Office had the necessary expertise in the arts to choose the second concept?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: It was not the Prime Minister's Office that chose the Stimson team concept.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Did your office choose it?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: The final decision on the concept was made by Veterans Affairs Canada.

Mr. Luc Desilets: So you have expertise in the arts.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Desilets, veterans told us which concept they thought best represented the sacrifice—

Mr. Luc Desilets: That is how your department will proceed from now on regarding works of art. That is what you are saying.

Can you tell us what percentage of the budget that was tabled will go to veterans rather than the bureaucracy?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: That is a more technical question. I can tell you that the vast majority of funding in our budget is indeed earmarked for direct services, such as benefits to veterans.

I don't know the percentage, but Mr. Ledwell could tell you.

Mr. Paul Ledwell (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): More than 90% of our funding goes to veterans.

Mr. Luc Desilets: That's great.

I asked you something quickly earlier, Madam Minister, because I was running out of time. What is your reaction to the fact that the Office of the Information Commissioner received our complaint regarding the lack of transparency, the fact that we do not have the documents requested and the fact that the documents obtained under the Access to Information Act do not match other documents from your department, and will investigate this?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: As the minister, I am ultimately responsible. So I will be taking to my senior officials because I want to make sure that you will receive the documents requested. I am promising you that.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Perfect.

Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

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

Mr. Luc Desilets: You can have them then. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for your generosity.

[English]

Ms. Blaney, the floor is yours. You have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

For my next question, I'm really interested that the percentage of unfavourable applications of disability claims has gone up a bit. I understand, based on conversations and information digging, that VRAB usually takes those appeals, approves them and sends people back and they get the disability claims they asked for.

I'm just wondering, as we're seeing that percentage going up, is that the best plan to make veterans wait while they have to go through an appeal process to eventually get the disability claim they asked for in the first place?

• (1730)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I think, in the first part of the question, you indicated that the number of disability claims that are denied has increased, but I think we also have to recognize that we've seen a huge, substantive increase in applications. I think it's really proportional, the numbers that we're seeing of denied claims, when we look at that as a proportion of the number of claims we are receiving. I don't think there's any trend there. We have to rec-

ognize that sometimes it can fluctuate a bit, but we're not seeing a huge increase in denials—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I just want to make sure I get that clarifying point in, because when they do appeal the process, the vast majority of them are getting the disability claim they requested. I'm just wondering if there is a way to fix that so that the extra step is not added, which adds to the time the veteran has to wait and the stress of waiting, and it's another administrative process.

I'm just curious about how those two work together to make sure they're cleaning that up so we can have the best process possible for veterans.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I think it's a really great question, Ms. Blaney.

We recognize that our adjudicators have a role to play. They do the work.

In some instances—and perhaps Steven will be able to elaborate a bit as well—Veterans Affairs workers certainly tell folks what they need, the documentation they need to provide, before they can adjudicate a claim. Sometimes that information is received and sometimes it's not received. Sometimes files are incomplete.

I do think it's still important to make sure that we have that appeal process, though, because it allows the veterans to have access to a lawyer, which Veterans Affairs pays for, to make sure they are properly instructed about their rights. I think we also have to understand, Ms. Blaney, that when a veteran is denied their claim, we actually provide them with a letter indicating the reason for the denial. That is my understanding. From there, if they choose to appeal their decision, they can be sure they will have access to the documents and whatever information is needed.

Steven, I don't know if there's anything else to add there.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm out of time.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Okay. My apologies.

The Chair: That's okay. Thank you. The time is up.

Now we have two more interventions of five minutes each, one by Mr. Tolmie and the other by Mr. May.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie, you have five minutes. Please go ahead.

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

Through you, Chair, to the minister, I know the minister's time is precious.

Here's what I've heard from the veterans whom I have met in my stakeholder meetings. Veterans don't feel respected for their service. Their medical cases are being rejected. Dealing with Veterans Affairs is like dealing with the worst insurance company. They're dealing with housing issues such as veterans living on the streets. Veterans and service personnel are living in their cars. Veterans and service personnel can't find affordable housing. Given the cost of living or inflation, veterans and service personnel are going without meals. Veterans and service personnel are struggling to put food on the table. Veterans and service personnel are having to use food banks. In terms of care, veterans can't find family doctors. Their partners and spouses are being ignored, and the list goes on.

Did you, in your stakeholder meeting in Montreal, hear about any of those issues?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I did hear about some of those issues, and that's why it was very important for me to be at those stakeholder—

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Thank you.

Chair, through you, what are you going to do—

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Chair, may I continue to respond...?

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Well, I'm asking the questions, and I'd like to ask this next question.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Okay, but I think if you take one or two minutes to ask a question—

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: I got the answer I wanted. She said yes.

Thank you.

The Chair: —you can allow time, respectfully, to the minister to respond to you.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: I got the answer I wanted.

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead, Mr. Tolmie.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Thank you.

Thank you for responding.

That's what I expected you would have heard, and that's what we've heard here in this committee. So what are you going to do about it?

• (1735)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Chair, what I would ask is this: Why is the Conservative Party always voting against measures that we are bringing forward to help support our veterans and their family members?

Just last December, we had 30 hours of voting, and it wasn't a question of budget. It was vote by vote, line by line, and every time, every opportunity, the Conservative Party of Canada had to vote to help support veterans, what did they do? They voted against it. On December 7, 2023, they voted against funding to deal with veterans' homelessness, and they voted against additional funding to deal with the backlog.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Tolmie, go ahead, please.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: I know, as I said, that your time is extremely precious. What we've heard here in the committee has been a list of issues that continue to haunt and plague veterans. This has been going on since the Liberal government has been in power. This is an issue that has been caused by the Liberal government, and there's been a failure of recognition by this government to reverse the issues that have caused homelessness, that have caused a lack of care for our veterans.

Have you spoken to the Prime Minister and said to him that veterans are being ignored, that they're not asking too much, and that the policies the Liberal government has in place are actually hurting veterans and service personnel?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: What I will respond to that is I think.... You weren't back here in 2014, and you weren't here during the cuts by the Harper Conservatives. You weren't here when the Conservative Party of Canada closed nine Veterans Affairs offices, when they slashed 1,000 jobs from Veterans Affairs Canada—

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Mr. Chair—

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: —people who provided direct support to veterans, so we certainly have no—

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Thank you, Minister.

Through you, Mr. Chair, I would like for the record to be corrected. There were some efficiencies put in place, but the Liberal government since coming to power has not fixed the issues that are at hand here, so we are continually seeing this issue of homelessness—veterans living on the streets, veterans and service personnel living in their cars, and veterans not being able to afford housing.

This is not just affecting veterans; this is affecting families across Canada. This is an issue that has been created by the Liberal government. What are you going to do about it? Throwing more money at it and making promises like you've been doing for the last eight years doesn't fix the problem.

The Chair: Minister, you have 25 seconds to conclude this.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: If finding efficiencies during the previous government meant slashing Veterans Affairs' budgets, slashing 1,000 jobs, and also cutting Veterans Affairs offices, I beg to differ. That is not supporting veterans. That is causing more complications for veterans.

As a result, our government had to clean that up, and that's exactly what we did and what we continue to do. We will always be here to support our veterans. There is always more that we can do, and we are certainly going to do it.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Now let's go to Mr. Bryan May for the last five minutes.

Mr. May.

Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, and your officials, for joining us here today.

I have a question pertaining to something that I think this committee should in fact be taking a look at. The Public Service Commission of Canada pulls data on veterans from the Department of National Defence through a secure channel to identify eligible veterans and CAF members in the public service resourcing system. We learned recently that there was a technical problem that has kept thousands of veterans and CAF members from being hired or from having even the opportunity to apply for public service jobs. Apparently, this may have been going on for as long as three years.

Minister, I would like to hear your reaction on this and how it has impacted the department and, of course, veterans.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Again, I became aware of the situation probably earlier on this year. The Public Service Commission advised us of the glitch in the system. Since then, I've spoken to my officials—to Mr. Harris here just this week—just to ask again if we had received any feedback with respect to issues that our veterans had to deal with. Thus far, we really haven't received any information that veterans have been negatively impacted by that.

I don't know, Mr. Harris, if you want to elaborate a bit more on that, if there's anything else to add.

• (1740)

Mr. Steven Harris (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs): I think it's important to understand that Veterans Affairs and other departments that are implicated—like the Canadian Armed Forces, the Department of National Defence and others—are working together to try to make sure that we can find solutions for veterans and Canadian Armed Forces members who may have been impacted by the technical glitch with the Public Service Commission data.

We know that it's important to ensure safe transfer and transition of veterans and Canadian Armed Forces members to employment. We know that a lot of them want to come into the public service. We want to help that process. We're working with the PSC, the Public Service Commission, to find ways to ensure that those veterans who may have been affected or implicated have some recourse in moving forward.

Mr. Bryan May: Thank you.

Do I have a few more minutes?

The Chair: Sure.

Mr. Bryan May: Okay.

Minister, you spoke earlier about some of the outcomes, specifically some of the numbers of veterans who are applying. I think that despite the Conservatives' approach to the questions today, we really need to look at the outcomes and at what some of the outcomes have been.

I'm very proud to be working with a gentleman by the name of Aaron Dale, who I know you have had an opportunity to coordinate with. He is, of course, the coordinator of the military veterans wellness program and is a constable with the Toronto police force.

If you speak to Aaron, you will hear very clearly how proud he is, not just of the work they're doing but also of how collaborative VAC has been with him and his team, along with the Legion and OSISS.

I'm wondering if you can speak to that program a little bit and to whether there are ways that we can make sure that this program achieves its goal, which is to have that connection in every single police cruiser across Canada.

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

Again, I had the privilege and opportunity to meet with Aaron and his wife, sister and colleague. It was a very informative meeting. They indicated that they're actually, as a police officer, on the streets in Toronto making sure that when veterans are identified, they get in touch with Veterans Affairs Canada to ensure that if they need the emergency fund, they have access to that, and also to help them apply for whatever benefits they are entitled to.

They said it's been a game-changer for the veterans they've worked with. That's because these folks on the ground really care about making a difference for them. It was really great to be able to meet them. Being former veterans themselves, they certainly have walked the walk, and they can talk the talk with these folks.

As you've indicated, they are looking at expanding this program across the country. That is why I was happy to be able to meet with them. They spoke to me of the success stories when they meet with folks. They spoke to me about the collaboration with respect to the Veterans Affairs staff. They certainly want to ensure that this program is available across the country. To do that, they also need to make sure that the proper training is in place. That's why I was able to ensure that specific meetings were made with specific ministers in order to ensure that the conversation can continue.

I as Veterans Affairs minister have indicated that we will continue to collaborate with them as well. Again, so often people don't even recognize that they are veterans. It's important to go find them, ask them the specific questions and ask that right question to them. I'm looking forward to meeting with them.

Thank you again for making sure that the connection and the referral were made.

Mr. Bryan May: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

[Translation]

Madam Minister, the hour we had is up. I also want to say that the interpreters are used to how quickly you speak. On behalf of the committee members and myself, thank you for coming to meet with us today.

We have heard from the Honourable Ginette Petitpas Taylor, Member of Parliament and Minister of Veterans Affairs. With her were deputy minister Paul Ledwell and senior assistant deputy minister Steven Harris, who will stay on with us.

Committee members, we will take a five-minute break to welcome the new witnesses and conduct the required sound checks. I would also like you to think about the work we will be undertaking after the break week. Will we continue debate on the motion put forward by Mr. Richards or decide on something else?

The meeting is suspended for now.

● (1745) _____ (Pause) _____

● (1750)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

I would like to begin by welcoming the witnesses who are joining us for this second hour.

In the first hour, Paul Ledwell, deputy minister, and Steven Harris, senior assistant deputy minister, from the service delivery branch, were already here. They're staying with us for the second hour. Joining them are Sara Lantz, assistant deputy minister, from the chief financial officer and corporate services branch; Amy Meunier, assistant deputy minister, from the commemoration and public affairs branch, by video conference; and Pierre Tessier, assistant deputy minister, from the strategic policy, planning and performance branch.

Some of you are committee regulars, but I'd like to point out to Mr. Tessier and Ms. Lantz that a few things have changed with regard to acoustics since their last visit. People are asked to avoid bringing their earpieces close to their microphones, as this causes interference and acoustic problems for our interpreters. Since videoconferencing is less of a problem, I'm not addressing Ms. Meunier.

I'm not going to give each of you five minutes. If you wish, I will give Mr. Ledwell five minutes instead. If not, we'll go directly to questions from members.

Mr. Ledwell, you have the floor.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Thank you, Mr. Chair. We're pleased to be here, and we're ready to answer your questions.

The Chair: That's excellent. We're going to have a lot more time for questions.

I would ask committee members to please say who their questions are for, since we have five people here.

[English]

I'd like to invite Mrs. Cathay Wagantall to start this round of questions for six minutes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Thank you, all, for being here. I do have questions that I hope you can help me answer with regard to the estimates.

According to table 2 in the VAC 2024-25 departmental plan, the percentage of veterans whose household income is below the low-income measure went from 6% in 2021 to 17% in 2022-23, which is an increase of almost 300%. I'm assuming that means that they have lost buying power, that they have lost the ability to purchase the things they need, such as food and whatnot. They have lost the ability to take care of their own needs. I would just like to know how you would explain that increase in the number of veterans who are below the low income measure.

I'm sorry. I don't know who is best to answer my questions.

Mr. Ledwell, can you answer that one for me?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: I'm happy to start and to invite others....

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Answer as quickly as possible because I do have a number of questions, and there are four of you.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: First of all, I'll thank you for raising this question and for identifying this issue. It's something that we do track, that we pay attention to, because it is very important to understand how our veterans are doing economically.

● (1755)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Do you know why? I want the why.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: The survey that is drawn for the year where there is 17% is a different sample size than the survey from before. We have broadened the veterans from whom we are seeking information. The veteran health research survey is the one that we are using now. It's a much broader sample size.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay, so, it's a larger sample size. Obviously, if there are more people, it's a higher percentage of the number. It's not staying at the same percentage of the sample size.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: That's right, so in this regard, we want it to be transparent because it is an issue that's very important to report on. However, as the report indicates, it's drawn from two different styles of surveys. The second, the larger survey, includes—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: That's good. That gives me an answer. Thank you very much.

It still concerns me because that's a significant number of our veterans who are below the low income measure. Knowing the high inflation that we've been facing, the increase in the cost of food and gas and all of those basic life necessities because of the carbon tax.... This is impacting our veterans significantly. It does concern me that there are even that many below the low income measure.

That being said, I would like some conversation around the \$11.7 million that is for "other transfers to persons", which is a little cryptic to me. I don't know what that means. It says that these transfers include "the various benefits paid to low-income war veterans under the War Veterans Allowance Act", yet we're seeing that this amount has seen a 130% reduction in transfers to other persons. How does that impact our low-income veterans when they're actually seeing less?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: If I could just clarify which document you're referring to in that regard....

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: It's from your report on the estimates.

Alice, can you help me?

The table is titled "Other Transfers to Persons". It's had a decrease in percentage terms of 130.8%. It's gone from \$15,262,999 to \$11,667,500. There's less money there, and that's impacting the various benefits that are then paid to low-income war veterans under the War Veterans Allowance Act.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: The principal effect, Mr. Chair, of all of our programs is to provide the adequate supports to those veterans who come forward to seek those particular supports through various programs, including in this program.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay, but in light of the increased cost of living now, we're actually spending less on meeting those needs of our veterans.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Well, these programs would be demand-driven, so these are veterans who are coming forward to seek those supports. The funds are provided to the veterans who make application, and year over year, that would be the case.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay, thank you.

It then says that "certain programs offered under the Veterans Well-Being Act", the new Veterans Charter, are impacted under this "Other Transfers to Persons" category, which has seen a 130% reduction in transfers. One of them it mentions is the critical injury benefit.

As far as I'm aware, there have only been two awards, one to an individual and then.... Well, the one that I'm specifically referring to is Stephanie Hayward. In her testimony, she says, "Having received an award in 2021 of 21% for sexual dysfunction and the first critical injury benefit for sexual assault in 2021, and also other disability claims that equal 100% due to my military conditions," and goes on to talk about how she really has not received good treatment. However, she received the first critical injury benefit for sexual assault in 2021.

Clearly, this is an ongoing issue. Hers was a very horrendous case, but we have decreased the amount of funding available. My understanding is that she was told—and this other individual—that there wouldn't be others awarded. Is the critical injury benefit avail-

able to others who have had the same symptoms and struggles as she did? When I look at the requirements for that critical injury benefit, I don't even really see how it is that you came to the decision to give it to her. I'm glad you did.

• (1800)

The Chair: Mr. Ledwell, you have 25 seconds to answer the question, please.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: The critical injury benefit is not a benefit. It's a one-time payment—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Yes, I know.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: —in recognition of a significant—in many cases tragic—incident—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: A traumatic....

Mr. Paul Ledwell: —that has a direct impact: trauma.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Yes, trauma.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: We have made an adjustment in the policy around the critical injury benefit to allow for it to be offered, to be reflected, to those who might come forward with significant psychological trauma—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Can I see a copy of those changes to the requirements—

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Absolutely.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: —and could we please know, then—

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Wagantall.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: —that it is still available?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: I'm happy to provide that.

The Chair: That's more than six minutes. Thank you.

I'd like to go now to Mr. Bryan May for six minutes, please.

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

Thank you to all of the officials for being here.

In the previous hour, I asked the minister specifically about the reports that we're hearing regarding the technical glitch.

Mr. Harris, you spoke a bit about it. I'm wondering if there is anything you could add to that testimony.

Mr. Steven Harris: Thanks very much.

What I'd add to the testimony is a couple of clarifying remarks.

There are three particular categories for priority status for releasing Canadian Armed Forces members.

One is based on medical release. These individuals were not affected by the issues in the data transfer with PSC. Those are our most severely affected veterans leaving the Canadian Armed Forces as a result of a medical condition. Their priority status was actually without any trouble.

There are two other categories of individuals who might be affected. It's Canadian Armed Forces members who could see opportunities in the public service across the country outside of the geographic area within which they would normally have access to opportunities. They weren't able to see those other positions, because the trigger that allowed them to do that was not in the system. The other group is a group that might have had priority status for hiring as part of public service competitions.

As I said, we've been working with the Public Service Commission, which is leading on addressing this issue. They've had a number of information sessions for all veterans who were affected by this, where they've shared information and shared the work that they've undertaken to try to address this and will continue to do. They're currently conducting a review of existing public service competitions to see if any adjustments need to be made, but they're doing a good job of keeping veterans and Canadian Armed Forces members who are affected aware of what's going on.

As we know, employment is a key issue for veterans. We've spoken a lot, today even, about economic issues. Many veterans, when they leave the Canadian Armed Forces, want to go and work in some capacity somewhere else—sometimes in the public service, sometimes in the private sector. Veterans Affairs has a number of programs, like an education and training benefit, like career transition services, to help them on that journey as well.

The minister is committed to releasing a national veterans employment strategy as well. I know she's working on that, and we will expect to see that in the near future as well.

Mr. Bryan May: Do we have a timeline on that?

Mr. Steven Harris: It's near-term.

Mr. Bryan May: Near-term? Okay. Very good. Thank you for that clarification.

I believe my next question is going to Assistant Deputy Minister Meunier, who is here virtually.

In budget 2024, we propose to provide \$4 million in 2024-25 to Veterans Affairs Canada to commemorate significant Canadian military milestones. Can you tell us how this investment will help VAC to better commemorate our veterans?

Ms. Amy Meunier (Assistant Deputy Minister, Commemoration and Public Affairs Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs): Sure. Thank you very much for the question.

The proposed allocation of \$4 million in the budget presents, as you've noted, a very valuable opportunity to honour and recognize the diverse contributions and experiences of our veterans. This will enable us to implement a range of commemorative initiatives.

Some specifics would include bringing a delegation over to France to celebrate the 80th anniversary of D-Day and the Battle of Normandy. It will also support another delegation that is going over

to Cyprus in November of this year to recognize Canada's longest peacekeeping mission.

We also will be able to recognize veterans of more recent operations or missions, through additional educational materials, working with teachers across the country, more in-Canada events, building up greater awareness of more recent missions among Canadian communities and doing more interviews with modern veterans or veterans of more recent missions, so that we're sharing their stories and they're captured for many more years to come, as well as further developing our website, which can house a lot of these stories.

Furthermore, this funding supports the development and implementation of programs that, again, foster understanding, dialogue, and appreciation for some extreme stories, really, of veterans of recent years. We'll be able to highlight the diversity of veterans and better represent those populations who really had their stories hidden away and not told. The budget money really will help us achieve greater heights in this regard, and I'm very much looking forward to working on these initiatives.

• (1805)

Mr. Bryan May: Thank you for that.

There was previous testimony last fall about the importance of commemorating the modern-day veterans, and you spoke a little bit about that here. When we think of veterans and Canadians think of veterans, far too often we're thinking only of World War I or World War II veterans. I've been to many ceremonies throughout the years, for both Remembrance Day and otherwise, at which there have been very specific veterans.

Can you speak a little bit more about how we can do more to commemorate modern-day veterans?

Ms. Amy Meunier: Thank you so much for that question.

We recognize that if you asked an average Canadian what they envision or think of when they hear the word "veteran", they might think about a World War II veteran or a veteran of the Korean War, but Canada has 460,000-plus veterans here, many from modern conflicts.

It's part of making sure we take an opportunity to recognize those key milestones, that we're better telling the stories and that we're talking about the Canadian Armed Forces and their domestic efforts.

Over the last year we've taken time to put together educational materials and events to recognize the Red River flood, the ice storms and the downing of Swissair Flight 111.

However, more importantly, our "CAF Around the World" commemorative strategic plan, which is available on our website, really allows us to hone in and focus on particular regions and areas so that we can better tell those stories.

I would say that we're coming at it from several approaches—education and awareness, community engagement—

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bryan May: Thank you very much.

Ms. Amy Meunier: I'm sorry. I have lots to say. My apologies.

The Chair: No, but the time is over.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meunier, thank you very much for your comments.

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

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

Mr. Ledwell or Mr. Harris, I understand that the last post fund has seen a fairly significant decrease in its financial capacity since 2018-19. Yet we're told that veterans' cemeteries are in a pitiful state. Can you explain that?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: This question is more for Ms. Meunier. It's the part of the department she belongs to that manages all that.

Still, I can tell you that a lot of work has been done to restore cemeteries to the state they should be in, across Canada, out of respect for our veterans. A lot of work has been done over the last five years. That work is ongoing. We're following a process to ensure that work is done every year in the cemeteries, and that will continue. The fact remains that the bulk of the work was done last year.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Even so, the last post fund's financial capacity has been reduced.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Yes. However, this reduction was expected, given that the bulk of the work has been done over the past five years.

Mr. Luc Desilets: There's a cemetery in the Montreal area that you're probably very familiar with, the National Field of Honour, which was established in 1930. Can you tell us what kind of funding or assistance the department provides in that case? There's also a private component to this funding, but how much of it is funded by the department?

• (1810)

Mr. Paul Ledwell: I'll ask Ms. Meunier to tell us more about those obligations, but I would point out that amounts are available for all cemeteries, even those with a large number of veterans in them. These places are very important to us. We have those responsibilities across the country, not just for specific cemeteries.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Harris, can you give us an update on the processing times?

Mr. Steven Harris: Thank you for your question.

Since 2020, we've reduced the backlog of applications by 77%. So now there are only about 5,000 files waiting to be processed. In addition, last year, the wait time for francophones was 19.3 weeks, on average, whereas it was 20.3 weeks for anglophones. So the files that were processed the fastest last year were those of francophones. Finally, 35% of employees who process files late and make decisions are bilingual.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I would say it's about time francophone files were processed a little more quickly.

Can you give me some details on the gap between men and women in terms of the backlog of their applications?

Mr. Steven Harris: Last year, they were more or less equal. According to the most recent data I have, the gap is about two or two and a half weeks between male and female veterans, because female veterans' files represent a smaller percentage and their processing time varies more.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Okay.

Is that two-week gap for women? Is it longer for them?

Mr. Steven Harris: Yes.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Great.

Are compensation costs of a legal nature, among other things, included in the budget of the Department of Veterans Affairs?

Mr. Steven Harris: If you're talking about the fees that we pay outside of legal decisions, the answer is yes.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Okay. So they're covered by the department.

Mr. Steven Harris: Yes.

Mr. Luc Desilets: That's excellent.

Let's move on to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. We know that the board wants to hire employees. Correct me if I'm wrong, but the board would need five permanent employees and 12 temporary employees. Is that correct?

Mr. Steven Harris: Unfortunately, I don't think we're in a position to talk about the board, because it reports directly to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, not the deputy minister. So we can't really talk about his files and his commitments.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Okay. Had I known, I would have put the question to the minister earlier.

Out of curiosity, too, how much does a mission cost? Perhaps Ms. Meunier could answer that question. The figures are significant for commemorations, in particular, and I'm not questioning the missions, regardless of the figures. However, for a mission like the "unknown soldier", which will take place in two or three weeks, or for another mission like the one that will take place in Normandy, how much does it cost?

[English]

Ms. Amy Meunier: Thank you for that question.

It does slightly depend on the size of the engagement. For example, the upcoming 80th anniversary of D-Day and the Battle of Normandy will be quite a large event for the international community. There will be tens of thousands of individuals participating. Thousands of Canadians will be going overseas to also participate in that. I believe we are up to about 14 D-Day veterans who will be joining us. That also includes caregivers.

So it depends on the size of the delegation. We bring members of Parliament. We bring a medical team to ensure that the veterans with us are well taken care of. It does depend on the size. An estimate for the D-Day remembrance might be about \$3 million. For example—

• (1815)

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Meunier. Thank you.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Desilets. Your time is up.

[English]

Now let's go to Ms. Blaney for six minutes, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

I thank everyone for being here today. I look forward to having some questions answered.

First, I want to talk about the fact that we know that Veterans Affairs has gone through a GBA process. What we don't know is what that means, because the information isn't public. I'm wondering about a few things. Will there be anything public that talks about where you found problems and how they're being addressed? I think that's really important, especially in the context of the women's report that we just finished and hopefully will be tabled soon.

The other component is that it seems to me, based on conversations I've had with veterans and with RCMP police veterans, that the role of SMSRC is not clear. I'm curious to know whether that system as well was reviewed through that GBA lens and whether there are any discussions about how to make sure that information is more accessible so that people know where to go when they're in need of those types of services.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: If I could, Chair, I will start and then invite my other colleagues to try to answer the questions from Ms. Blaney.

First of all, as with other federal departments, we're very, very serious about the application of GBA+ in everything we do. We have mandatory training that everyone in the department has to undertake to better understand, better situate and better apply GBA+

in all that we do, whether that's developing new policies or considering legislation and regulation or programs.

One area in which we are very serious—this has been strongly encouraged, of course, and quite rightly—is updating our table of disabilities and our entitlement guidelines so that they truly are reflective of gender. This is something that we have taken up and have been working on for a number of years. We've seen some application and updating of that for the benefit of women veterans who have served so that they are quite rightly getting the benefits they require and deserve.

We are happy to share how the application of GBA+ is making a difference. We certainly do that internally, and we reflect that, I think, in some of the programs and deliveries.

When it comes to SMSRC, that is a responsibility of the Department of National Defence, but we contribute to its consideration, particularly through the peer support program pilots. That's something we've been very actively engaged in, along with partners at the Department of National Defence, delivered through SMSRC, but with our direct involvement and encouragement.

That is a particular area that we can take a GBA+ lens to because of our direct involvement, but on the broader SMSRC, that's more of a responsibility of National Defence.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that. That's clarified a bit for me.

The next thing that I really want to talk about is in the context of the previous question as well. I think the testimony alone of all the women tells us that there is a pretty significant need to address these issues. Again, the word they used repeatedly was "invisible". I think that's one of the hardest parts about addressing these issues. It's not that there's a conscious effort to ignore people; it's that the unconscious effort is to ignore. That leaves people invisible.

In that context, one thing I've heard very clearly and repeatedly from veterans is that they often feel retraumatized by accessing services. To be quite frank and honest in this room, I've been forwarded letters where I can tell, by the way they're written, that the people writing these letters are not themselves trained in trauma-informed practices. That means they can say the same thing, but the way they say it matters.

With regard to developing services for veterans, is there any exploration of really educating not just caseworkers but everybody in the roles about what is a trauma-informed practice and how to work with people who are traumatized?

I want to give another example of context. We had one veteran we worked with who had been told by VAC that he couldn't call them anymore because he yelled too much. I'm sure it was disrespectful. I'm sure he did yell too much. But this is supposed to be the place veterans go to get help. It doesn't make sense to me that there's a veteran that you say no to. It seems to me to make sense that you make sure, when you have a veteran who's expressing these...that there are more trauma-informed practices to support the veteran and not let go of the veteran.

What is actually being done around this? Is anything being done?

● (1820)

Mr. Paul Ledwell: There are a couple of things I would underline. First of all, I fully agree on the importance of providing trauma-informed training to everyone. That's something we are taking up in the department.

There is mandatory and regular training and upgrading for those who are directly interacting with veterans. Absolutely that's the case, but you're quite right that it's something that everyone who is involved should be taking up and understanding better.

I reflect with our folks that we are all in the world of delivering services to veterans, regardless of where we are in the organization. Therefore, in the same respect, we need to be thinking of that training around trauma.

We have also heard very clearly from many veterans—and especially from those who have been severely traumatized through their experiences—about the tell-me-once principle and not having to come back and retell their stories. That's something we are taking up further and further in the organization so that we are not requiring people to come forward and repeat the trauma they have experienced.

I should say too, to your last point, that we do seek every means possible for those who are in a bad situation and who are very aggravated with their situation and who sometimes take out that frustration on us. Sometimes they have that frustration towards the department because we are asking questions that they may not be in a good position to answer or maybe they feel as though they've answered those questions before. We do have means to ensure they are responded to in a respectful and clear way and that they are not shut out. That's a really serious objective that we continue to have.

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

Now for five minutes, we go to Mr. Blake Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: I have questions in several areas, but before I get to those questions, at the beginning of the meeting with the minister, we had a conversation about the lack of respect that I believe has been shown to veterans by the minister's failure to show up for the two-hour time frames that she's been requested to show up for. That's the time for veterans to have their questions answered through us.

The minister made a statement so confidently that it made me question whether I had even been accurate in what I was saying. I actually had to go back to triple-check to make sure. She stated that she believed she'd been here previously for two-hour periods. I went back and triple-checked, and that wasn't the case. This com-

mittee invited the minister for two hours in October, and she came for one. At that point we as a committee had a discussion about expressing our displeasure. It was ultimately decided that we wouldn't do that because maybe there was a good excuse.

In December she was again asked to come for two hours. She came for one hour. We even gave her an extension of the time we were asking for so that she could accommodate the two hours, and still she came for only one. This time around we also asked for two hours. The committee had a vote on that. We clearly expressed our wishes that she'd be here for two hours.

This is becoming a pattern. It's the time that we have to hold the minister accountable to veterans, and it's not being respected. Therefore, I move the following:

That committee report to the House of Commons its deep disappointment that the Minister of Veterans Affairs has once again disrespected veterans by not fulfilling her obligation to appear publicly before the committee for the time requested of her, showing disregard for Canadian veterans who expect transparency and accountability from the government.

● (1825)

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Luc Desilets: Is it a motion that's being put forward, or is it just a censure that we would report to the House?

The Chair: That's what the clerk has gone to check, so that we can react. I'm going to suspend the meeting for a few seconds so that we can look at the proposal.

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards: There's no need to suspend, Chair. I've moved the motion. Can we have debate now?

The Chair: Yes, but we're not sure if it's a motion—

Mr. Blake Richards: It's a motion. I've moved it.

The Chair: Yes, but we are not so sure.

Mr. Blake Richards: I've moved the motion. It's in order, Chair.

I don't know why we need to suspend. It's clearly in order.

The Chair: It's a motion.

Mr. Blake Richards: I say we call a vote.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Mr. Chair, we haven't received the French version yet, but I'm told that we will be, which is fantastic. Long live Quebec!

The Chair: The motion has been moved by Blake Richards, who would like us to debate it now.

While everyone is looking at the motion, I'd like to remind the witnesses of the usual procedure: We have to debate the motion, but we will come back to the discussion afterwards. I know they're aware of how things work, since they're regulars on the committee.

Ms. Hefner, the floor is yours.

[*English*]

Ms. Lisa Hefner: Thank you, Chair.

I'm completely opposed to this motion. We just had the minister here for more than an hour. She's completely generous with her time. We've had her here three times in the last few months. Whether it was for an hour or two hours, she's been here and she's answered all of our questions. She's taken her time. Over the last couple of months I've been on this committee, I've watched her take more time than she's required to. She really gives all of her effort to the veterans she meets. She goes above and beyond.

I heard her answer everybody's questions today. I don't think anybody had further questions that they could have kept her here for. I think it was disrespectful to bring this motion.

I heard the Conservatives talk over her while she was here. I hear them talk over the chair. I'm concerned that the party opposite is being disrespectful not only to the elected members of this committee, but to the institutions we're supposed to uphold here. If we have a problem with democracy right now, it's because of stuff like this. It's the Conservatives constantly attacking all of the institutions that make up our democracy.

It's a real shame that our committee time is being wasted with partisan, personal attacks like these. It's shameful. I don't think any of the veterans in this room would support this motion.

An hon. member: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Ms. Lisa Hefner: I hear a lot of people trying to talk over me, Mr. Chair, but I think I still have the floor.

It's really disappointing to me to see these kinds of attacks, particularly when we have women ministers. There's a reason it's difficult for women to run in politics. It's stuff like this, and people like Mr. Richards, who attack and talk over women when they're talking.

That's all I have to say.

• (1830)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now let's go to Mr. Sarai and then to Ms. Blaney.

Mr. Sarai.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I find this pretty surprising, when the whole gist of Mr. Richards' argument has been that he wants the veterans to be able to ask questions and wants them to be able to get answers. We not only have the deputy minister, the ADM and several officials in the back, but we've also had a minister here.

This is the opportunity to get to the questions. It's about supplementary estimates, if anybody who is not watching the political shenanigans but actually wants to know and is trying to watch to

see what the budget has for them and what the estimates show for them, and we're supposed to derive questions out of that to find out what program is enhanced, what program might be cut back, where the resources are going or what needs to be done.

I find it appalling that they just want to make a political statement. Nobody's suppressing their Twitter or their Facebook or their social media feeds to say whatever they want. In fact, they do that regularly, and if that's what they want to do, they should continue to do that, but to take away time from asking questions of our very learned and very astute officials who have given their time, as they're duty bound to do, to answer those questions.... The minister was here, and even during that time, we heard more statements from the opposition about their allotting and their stuff than actual questions, and, when questions were actually thoroughly answered, they were quite afraid and actually shut down their questions really quickly, which is strange, since the value of that time was so immense that we need to do a motion right now to show that there's only one hour.

In fact, I think the minister gave ample time, but I don't think the time is here to give statements, rhetorical statements, for themselves. They can do that whenever they want. It's the time to ask questions. If they're indeed asking questions for the veterans, they should be asking concrete questions about programs, concrete questions about delivery and concrete questions about how we can move forward to make their lives better.

I have 5,000 veterans in my region. I have the only new Veterans Affairs office after the nine were closed down by the Conservatives. Not only did our government reopen the nine of them, but we also opened a new one. Out of the whole country, I think my riding has the most. I don't have those veterans coming to me stating these types of concerns that this motion suggests. I have them coming and asking me to help with the amazing housing complex that we did. I—

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Sarai. I have a point of order.

Mr. Blake Richards: Yes, on a point of order, Chair, I really question the relevance of the comments being made. We're speaking to a motion—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Richards, I'm not going to give you the floor. You're talking about whether this is relevant or not—

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm asking you to rule—

The Chair: I don't think so.

I don't think so. Let's go back to Mr. Sarai.

Mr. Sarai, please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Chair, those are the questions that my constituents are asking me. They're asking me, "How can we help more homeless veterans to be housed?" We have a beautiful veterans village in my riding that was built by the Legion, in their ingenuity in this regard, where they're trying to house veterans as well. I think that's the type of question we need to ask.

Anyway, Chair, I think this is a very frivolous motion, but I do want to hear what other members, including Ms. Blaney, have to say on this.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

On the list, I have Ms. Blaney, Mr. Miao and Mr. Brian May.

Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm hoping that we can just call the vote and get this out of the way so that we can move on.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blaney, but I still have people on the list.

Mr. Miao.

Mr. Wilson Miao: I do agree. Let's call the vote because this is really a waste of time for our committee, and it's disrespecting our democratic system right here.

The Chair: For the last intervention—maybe the last—I have Mr. May.

Mr. Bryan May: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I too think we should vote.

The only point I would like to make is that two-thirds of the question time that the Conservatives used had nothing to do with the estimates, which is what the minister was actually asked to appear for today.

I suggest we vote.

Thank you.

• (1835)

The Chair: I have no other interventions.

I will ask the clerk to take the vote on that motion, please.

(Motion negatived: nays 7; yeas 4)

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Richards, you have two minutes left. The floor is yours.

[English]

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The last time you were here, Mr. Ledwell, we talked about homeless veterans. I asked a question at that time about how many homeless veterans were out there and if you had a number for that. You were able to give us a rough guess, but told us it was difficult to figure that out. I can appreciate that it probably is, but clearly, we're seeing a situation in this country with the cost of living crisis whereby more and more veterans are homeless.

I think it's something that we all understand is happening. It's a shame. It's something that needs to change.

Obviously, the first step in being able to address something is being able to figure out the extent of the problem. I'm wondering if, since the time you were last here, there have been some efforts made to try to better determine the number of homeless veterans who are out there, and if there's been an effort made to reach out to them to let them know about the programs that might be available to help them.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Mr. Chair, in answer to Mr. Richards' question, we continue to monitor and try to get the number of how many veterans are homeless across the country. We work with partners who work with homeless Canadians regularly to seek to identify how many of them are veterans. We work with partners who are on the ground, supporting veterans who may find themselves homeless.

The number I gave you the last time is the number that we still have, so it's approximately 2,300 veterans—

Mr. Blake Richards: Would you say you don't think the the problem's growing, or are you just not able to find a better way to count?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: We can't say the problem is growing by the count, but the seriousness and the urgency of responding to the problem have not changed.

Mr. Blake Richards: What sorts of new measures have been put in place to try to respond to this?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: We are working now to confirm and will soon be announcing a number of supports across the country.

The minister referred to rent supplements that will be provided and wraparound supports, working with partners located in places right across this country where we may find homeless veterans to provide those supports. We also have our own officials working in our field operations, who are there to support veterans and to get them the programs of support they need, including housing, and we continue that work.

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

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

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In 2019, the government launched a veteran and family well-being fund, which provides funding to public, private and academic organizations to advance research projects and innovative approaches to deliver services to veterans and their families. I know many in my riding have utilized that.

In budget 2024, our government proposed to provide \$6 million over three years to VAC for the veteran and family well-being fund. How is this additional investment helping the department to deliver services to veterans and their families?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Thank you for the question.

This program has been really tremendous at building up capacity within the community to support veterans in various ways. It could be for veterans who are women who need particular supports, indigenous veterans or veterans who require specific care. Also, in terms of innovation with respect to both research and treatment, it's really built up a community of organizations that are very much attuned to and active in providing supports to veterans in community. These additional funds that have been committed in budget 2024 will allow us to extend that work even further.

We're going to put a particular emphasis on that, as it has been identified in the budget documents, and on diversity—supports for women veterans, indigenous veterans and racialized veterans—to ensure that those particular issues of support are considered and put in place. Again, this will be in communities both small and large.

It's a tremendous ability to build that entire community, because we understand that as a federal department, we can't respond to everything with respect to veterans. As has been indicated before in testimony, some veterans don't want to approach a federal government department, but they will approach an organization, so those partnerships are absolutely essential and critical, and the veteran family well-being fund allows us to extend that even further.

• (1840)

Mr. Randeep Sarai: My understanding is that it's a versatile fund, from research to non-profits that have programming and perhaps alternative ways to deliver veteran outcomes. Is that a good, accurate analysis of it?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: That's absolutely accurate, and they all come forward with new considerations. Many of them are working regularly with veterans already, so they are identifying what initiatives they are already seeing as having an impact on veterans, so they're bringing that forward to us. With this support, it allows them to extend that work even further, and it's shown tremendous impact to veterans, again, in communities across the country.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

In the 2023-24 supplementary estimates (C), I think VAC received \$14 million or \$14.1 million in additional program funding to provide services to eligible veterans and their families.

Can you tell us more about these programs and the services, and about how this investment gets distributed among them?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: As we stated earlier, one of the principles is that the funds will be there for any veteran who requires a particular area of support from Veterans Affairs Canada, that is, from the Government of Canada.

In this case, that \$14.1 million was spread across 10 different programs to allow us to make sure that the funds were in place to meet the needs of the veterans who were coming forward to seek particular supports. That's just an adjustment that was made during the supplementaries to, again, make that commitment, to ensure that those funds were there and to ensure that the support was there for those veterans and their families.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I don't know my time, but if I'm at liberty to ask, I attended the four-day forum that Mr. Desilets and the minister were at as well. I think I did about three days there. It was very effective as it covered indigenous veterans, women veterans, veter-

ans at large, and had a whole array of stakeholders there who were able to express themselves freely and openly.

For those who might be listening, is this on an annual basis, or is this semi-annual or every two or three years? After doing that one, what's the analysis of how it will go forward?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: We are committed to doing this regularly, and I think the minister underlined that commitment at the close of both the summit and the forum.

The Women Veterans Forum is something that we have done, or tried to do, on an annual basis, and will continue to do so.

The summit is something that we will aim to do every other year to really convene those stakeholder groups, those veterans, as well as others who are supporting veterans together. It is a tremendous community that is coming together with a commitment towards Canada's veterans, and it was very much evident, as you saw, in both of those gatherings. We want to encourage more of that.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Before giving the floor to Mr. Desilets, I must remind you that we absolutely must vote on the estimates before we leave today, so the next round will be limited to two and a half minutes.

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor.

• (1845)

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

Ms. Meunier, I know that the question of whether or not the Gulf War meets the definition of a war is contentious, but is the department still considering honouring the people who participated in the Gulf War?

[*English*]

Ms. Amy Meunier: Thank you for that question, and the answer is yes. In fact, we just recently had a ceremony at the National War Memorial to recognize the anniversary of that service.

We have recently built additional learning and educational materials and have shared that with educators across the country. Absolutely, I meet regularly with the Persian Gulf veterans association, and very much appreciate their insights into how we can continue to evolve and better share information about that service.

Yes. I think there is plenty of opportunity, and we do much of that right now.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

You all know that we've just devoted 23 meetings to the largest study in 200 years on the experience of women veterans. *Vétérane* is the new word we're using in Quebec to describe a female veteran. Is there a special way we could pay tribute to these women, who unsettled us all in these meetings with their stories? If not, could the department at least find a way to talk about it during the usual major commemoration events?

[English]

Ms. Amy Meunier: There are a lot of opportunities.

First, I would say make sure that women veterans and women in service are well represented in the commemorative and recognition activities that we undertake today and to make adjustments to that programming. As the minister was saying earlier, we will soon have a women veterans council, and this will be one of the items I would like to seek a lot of feedback on about what would be meaningful for that community.

Certainly at the Women Veterans Forum and through many of the conversations I've had with women service personnel and women veterans, there are many ideas on how we can improve the way we recognize women. We have put a larger effort on meeting with women veterans and recording their stories so that we can share them and profile those more so that the Canadian population and the world, in fact, are much more well aware of the very important service women have played in our military history.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Ms. Meunier.

[Translation]

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

[English]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

I will stick to my time, because I'm getting a little afraid of you at this point.

I'm just going to come back, through the chair, to Mr. Ledwell.

I was fascinated by the conversation we had about trauma-informed training and services. We've heard repeatedly that this is a concern. You responded that there's work in progress. How is it being measured, and how is the measurement process being transparent for the veterans who access the services?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: I think the clearest measure in all of this is how we are doing in responding to their particular requests for supports and services. That is in terms of the work we're doing with disability applications and other programs and supports, and being very serious about being responsive in the overall work on what we've all called the "backlog". Making sure that we get to our service standard with respect to disability adjudication is at the core of all of it. That does have an impact on every veteran, including those veterans who find themselves in traumatic situations.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm going to interrupt you, because I think I had the response there, and I only have a minute and a bit.

The next and last question—I promise, Chair—is about the veteran family wellness fund. I've heard from a lot of women veteran-owned non-profits that they've applied and never been successful. When you are sending out the funds, are there measurements that

include making sure that there's access for women-specific services?

• (1850)

Mr. Paul Ledwell: It's very much part of our consideration as we review all of the applications. I can tell you that, since the creation of the veteran and family well-being fund, close to \$10 million has gone out to support women-led and women-focused initiatives through that fund, and we will continue to emphasize that.

I think that the budget announcement made very clear that a proportion of the funds are to be earmarked for diversity, including towards women, and we'll be very serious about that and make sure that happens.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'll be watching.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we have time for two quick interventions, if you need it. We have maybe one and a half minutes for Mr. Dowdall and for Ms. Hepfner, if you really need them, because we have to vote on the main estimates.

The floor is yours, Mr. Dowdall.

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

I'm certainly glad to have everyone here tonight.

I have a follow-up question. In my riding, we have a food bank that I visited. It is getting a lot of military members and veterans going there and, with the cost of living, they can't find any place to live. Are you hearing a lot of that from the people who you talk to in your office? I guess the people who might report to you would probably be there, but is it a discussion that you guys carry on there to see how we can solve that part and the frustrations?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: One issue that we do pay attention to and offer to any veteran is what we've termed as the "veterans emergency fund", which can provide a one-time payment of up to \$10,000 to a veteran and their family who may be facing a difficult circumstance.

We do offer that. We pay attention to the veterans who come forward seeking that and the circumstances they find themselves in.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: What I'm trying to say is, are you proactive when you deal with the government officials who come in? Is there anyone in your organization who highlights why we're seeing what we're seeing here, particularly now? Is there not some direction we can take to hopefully perhaps lower some of those costs for those veterans so that they will be able to buy some food and have somewhere to live? Is there anybody in the organization who forwards that and says that maybe we have to think of a different way or different solutions?

The Chair: You have 10 seconds for an answer, Mr. Ledwell.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: We are very much focused on the wellness of the entire veteran, including their economic wellness. We are constantly looking for ways in which we can improve that wellness, including economic wellness, through research analysis and engagement with the veterans themselves. We are looking for opportunities to ensure that their needs are being met economically.

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

Ms. Hepfner, go ahead quickly, please.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Thank you, Chair. We know that we haven't always properly recognized indigenous veterans in this country. Can you tell us more about the commemorative partnership program and how that works and maybe about other supports we've put into place for indigenous veterans?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: I will encourage my colleague Amy Meunier to answer that. She is our indigenous champion and is also responsible for commemoration. Let me say that the work of reaching out and working alongside indigenous leadership has been really critical in that, so that the indigenous veterans and their communities that support them recognize the significance of their service. That is being done together with them, and that's critically important. But perhaps there are just a few seconds—

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Maybe I'll just ask a more specific question quickly if I have the time. In Six Nations, there's a former residential school, and the Woodland Cultural Centre is right next door. The community wants to rebuild that centre for arts and history and everything else, but if there's another section of that in which they're recognizing indigenous veterans, could they access some funds from this program?

Ms. Amy Meunier: Yes.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Absolutely, yes.

The Chair: You have your answer. Thank you so much.

[*Translation*]

We now have to vote on the estimates, which is extremely important.

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$1,368,262,515

Vote 5—Grants and contributions.....\$4,800,622,351

(Votes 1 and 5 agreed to on division)

VETERANS REVIEW AND APPEAL BOARD

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$20,045,176

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall the chair report the main estimates for 2024-25, less the amounts granted in interim supply, to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: On division.

The Chair: Before bidding them farewell, I want to thank the witnesses for appearing before the committee.

● (1855)

[*English*]

For the second hour we had with us from the Department of Veterans Affairs, Paul Ledwell, deputy minister; Steven Harris, senior assistant deputy minister, service delivery branch; Sara Lantz, assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and corporate services; Amy Meunier, assistant deputy minister, commemoration and public affairs branch by video conference, and Pierre Tessier, assistant deputy minister, strategic policy planning and performance branch.

[*Translation*]

I will remind the department that the committee has asked the minister for documents to be provided. I would ask the department to send those documents to the clerk of the committee.

If committee members have no objection to our considering Mr. Richards' motion for the documents when we return from the constituency week, I will instruct the clerk to send out the notice after the constituency week.

If it is now the will of the committee to adjourn, I will thank the technical team, the interpreters, the analysts and the clerks.

The meeting is adjourned.

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