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Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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• (1105)

[*English*]

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

Good morning. Welcome to meeting number 114 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, January 29, 2024, the committee is resuming its study of the experience of indigenous veterans and Black veterans.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, and as a reminder, all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[*English*]

I would like to welcome the witnesses for this meeting.

From the Canadian Aboriginal Veterans and Serving Members Association, we have Mr. Richard Blackwolf, national president. Welcome.

From the Veterans Association Food Bank, we have Ms. Marie Blackburn, executive director, and Tommy Wayne Benjamin, store clerk, Veterans Association Thrift Store. Welcome.

You will have five minutes for your opening statement. After that, members of the committee will ask you some questions.

I'm going to start with you, Mr. Blackwolf. You can speak for five minutes, please.

Mr. Richard Blackwolf (National President, Canadian Aboriginal Veterans and Serving Members Association): Good morning, Chairman Dubourg and honourable members of the committee. Thank you for your invitation to appear before you and make submissions on indigenous veterans' experiences.

My name is Richard Blackwolf. I am the national president of the Canadian Aboriginal Veterans and Serving Members Association. I am a Métis veteran of the Cold War era, having joined the Royal Canadian Navy in 1959, serving for a combination of 38 years in the navy and the Department of National Defence.

The Canadian Aboriginal Veterans and Serving Members Association, or CAV, is incorporated and has functioned as a nationwide indigenous veterans advocate for the past 54 years. This year, 2024, marks the 212th year that indigenous men and women have voluntarily enlisted to serve in the armed forces of Canada.

For time, I will move ahead.

In a quest for information, to gather information on our veterans' experience, both in the armed forces and after being released from the armed forces, we sent out 2,000 requests for their personal experience.

In terms of transition to civilian life, indigenous service personnel retiring after a full career with a pension and good health have experienced the least problems in transitioning to civilian life, as expected. Indigenous personnel who are forced to leave the military early in their career, largely because of medical problems, have experienced the most problems transitioning to civilian life. These are summaries of the many hundreds we've received.

A soldier reported that she was forced to leave the army because of PTSD. She received mental health treatment while in the army, and after she was released she received no mental health support from Veterans Affairs. With two young children to support, her need for mental health stability for employment is of the utmost importance, creating an immediate need for her to receive the appropriate mental health treatment. We have advised her to contact the veterans ombud for help in obtaining Veterans Affairs assistance.

In terms of veterans' housing, indigenous veterans returning to their first nations reserve have experienced the least problems in housing. Indigenous veterans forced to leave the military, being discharged mainly for health reasons, having no reserve to return to and having no likelihood of employment, are at the highest risk of becoming homeless and drug-addicted in urban centres.

In terms of shelters and food banks, our national website is currently being rebuilt after an 11-year run of 1.3 million visitors. Our veterans service page will provide indigenous veterans and their families with a comprehensive listing of shelters, health clinics and food banks available in the provinces and territories.

In terms of Veterans Affairs, the most frequent complaints received from indigenous veterans arise from the disconnect between Veterans Affairs' invitation to open an account and make application for disabilities benefits, which appears on their web page, and how then they find their applications being subject to "delay and deny" discouragement tactics. The sense of personal integrity of indigenous veterans with health and mental health issues can be severely impacted by the experience of feeling disbelieved, essentially being called a liar by Veterans Affairs when they receive rulings in letters denying them entitlement.

- (1110)

We consider this standard practice of denied entitlement rulings on first applications for disability benefits to be a deliberate breach of the right in the Veterans Bill of Rights to be treated with respect, dignity and fairness.

In my own experience of sending a Veterans Affairs application for disability benefits for hearing loss and tinnitus, the first result was the same thing: "We regret to inform you that you have been denied entitlement for hearing loss and tinnitus."

Two years later, it's the other way around. It took two years, but hearing loss entitlement is granted at five-fifths for tinnitus and hearing.

In summary, the 2015 stakeholders meeting held at the Citadelle in Quebec City was considered the best and gave us cause to believe that there would be positive changes at Veteran Affairs.

The main cause for delays in the processing of applications for disability benefits cited by Veteran Affairs was the interface delay in the progress of documents between DND records and Veteran Affairs. The delay was caused by the Privacy Act. The CAV made two proposals to expedite the transfer of records from DND to Veteran Affairs: an amendment to the Privacy Act and for the Minister of Veterans Affairs to also be the deputy minister of the national defence.

The Chair: Mr. Blackwolf, I know that you're not finished yet, but members of the committee will ask you questions so that you can go further in your testimony.

Mr. Richard Blackwolf: In that case, I will say my last words to the committee.

Thank you, Mr. Chair and honourable members of the committee. Thank you for your generous attention. *Merci. Meegwetch.*

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll go to Marie Blackburn, for five minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Marie Blackburn (Executive Director, Veterans Association Food Bank): I don't think I have five minutes, but you never know.

I'm Marie Blackburn and I am the executive director for the Veterans Association Food Bank in Calgary. I want to thank all of you for your invitation to have us here today. This is such an important

thing. It's always good when we can work together to improve the quality of life for our veterans.

I started the veterans association as there are many veterans out there who don't have access to Veterans Affairs because they weren't medically injured during their time of service. We fill that gap for other people. Our goal is simply to prevent homelessness, hunger, isolation and ultimately veteran suicide. When you have those first three in place, you give people hope for the rest.

When I was asked to participate, I was happy to contribute information that can hopefully be a learning experience for all involved.

In my past six years of assisting veterans, I've heard stories from indigenous veterans in particular that are disturbing and very sad.

I had a woman veteran who required shelter after her house had burned down. We usually call Veterans Affairs first to see if they can help with some of the assistance. The Veterans Affairs worker said to me that she couldn't give her the money directly because they just drink it away. I asked if that's because she's indigenous and she said that yes, that's the way it is. I said that I happened to be indigenous too, and that I don't have the same sentiments as she did.

When I encouraged the woman to talk to Veterans Affairs, she was terrified to report anything because she didn't want to lose the benefits that she had. With my confidence to her, I'm not allowed to say anything, but things like that are happening quite frequently, whether you're indigenous or not. If there is something that's happening between a worker and a client, they are not reporting it because they are afraid of losing things.

My other story is a little bit worse. I was told this by another lady veteran who served in Afghanistan and is pretty highly decorated. She needed help with a back injury claim. The Veterans Affairs worker said to her that if she can lie on her back to get pregnant, perhaps her claim isn't all that valid.

I've had indigenous veterans who have never had a claim generated because they were told they were not eligible, even though they clearly were. I've been told that once they transitioned out, they felt they had no support from Veterans Affairs whatsoever, for whatever reasons.

Our organization has built positive and strong relations with Veteran Affairs and is now addressing claims for indigenous veterans. It may not seem like many, but to date we've helped out eight to 10 veterans who, over the past 15 to 20 years, have been told that they weren't eligible for benefits or were too scared after the first denial to try to do anything different.

We know that those numbers will grow now that they have a safe place that they trust and that we will at least advocate for them and hope that they can get the benefits they're entitled to.

I do believe that teaching so many people about truth and reconciliation opened the doors for people to be more kind and understanding. Opening a door where they can actually come to us—Tommy is a big advocate for what we do—means these indigenous veterans will now start getting some of the benefits that they've been entitled to for many years, but have been denied.

• (1115)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Benjamin.

Mr. Tommy Wayne Benjamin (Store Clerk, Veterans Association Thrift Store, Veterans Association Food Bank): Thank you.

Good morning, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, members of the committee.

My name is Tommy Benjamin. I'm originally from Old Crow, Yukon Territory. I live in Calgary, Alberta. I'm a Gwich'in veteran.

In 1982, I enlisted in the Canadian Armed Forces. My basic training was at Canadian Forces Base Cornwallis in Nova Scotia. At that time, there were a large number of recruits from across the Arctic and the high Arctic who were a part of CFB Cornwallis training. At that time, we were also known as Indians and Eskimos. We're now known as first nations, so I'll use that term in my presentation.

The training staff immediately began to weed the first nations recruits out of the ranks. The term now, I believe, is “systemic racism.” I was assaulted at 2:30 in the morning by training staff. I was grabbed by my ankle and thrown to the floor from the top bunk I was assigned to. I was asleep at the time.

Today I have back problems. I had concussion issues at the time. I still managed to serve with those conditions.

One by one, the first nations recruits were breaking down, and some of them were crying because they were unfairly picked on. For the Inuit recruits, their last names were being mocked by the training staff during this time.

Racism and discrimination continued throughout my time in the military. I left the military early because of the abuse that I was serving under, the abuse that was happening to me and my fellow first nations recruits and members of the Canadian Armed Forces.

In my transition out of the military, I had a lot of difficulties. I still do today. I had a lot of difficulties with alcoholism and drug addiction, not to mention anxiety, social anxiety, a history of homelessness, unemployment and poverty—the list could go on forever. I experienced it. I lived it.

In 2007, as part of a clinic that first nations people go to in Calgary, they sent me for a diagnosis. Within half an hour, the results came back that I had chronic complex post-traumatic stress disorder from my experience in the military.

There was no such phrase as “transition out of the military” when I served, so I had a lot of difficulties with transferring out of the military. I always say that my mom didn't get the same person back that she sent to the military.

Today, I have to say that this is my fifth time applying for benefits with the Veterans Association Food Bank in Calgary, with their Veterans Association set-up and with David J. Thompson, who's the aboriginal liaison engagement officer who reviewed my file and said that I should have been on benefits in 2015.

• (1120)

I'm still in the process of applying for benefits. I pray that I will get them, because at this point I'm on what is called AISH in the province of Alberta. It's assured income for the severely handicapped that my doctor put me on.

That in itself, I believe, is my presentation. I thank you for your attention.

Ottawa is a beautiful city. It's my first time here. Thank you for having us.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Benjamin. I hope that you will take the time to visit the city.

Also, thank you for your courage to share your story with us today. It's really important for members of the committee.

Now we're going to start the first round of questions and answers.

I'll start with the vice-chair of the committee, Mr. Blake Richards, for six minutes, please.

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

First of all, Mr. Blackwolf and Mr. Benjamin, thank you for your service to our country. Thank you to all three of you for your service to fellow veterans.

Mr. Blackwolf referenced the triple-D policy that we often hear about from veterans.

This is a question I have for you, Marie. Mr. Blackwolf mentioned the triple-D policy that we often hear about from veterans. He mentioned it as delay, deny, discouragement. I kind of like that, because usually we hear it as delay, deny, die.

Mr. Benjamin, you're experiencing delays, obviously. I have to tell you the stories that we heard from you are completely unacceptable as to what happened to you.

Marie, the stories that you heard of what VAC caseworkers told the individuals you talked about are completely unacceptable. Thank you for sharing them with us, because we need to know those things.

Marie, you told me a story when I visited with you recently that really illustrates the delay, deny, die, triple-D policy.

Would you mind sharing that with this committee for the benefit of everyone?

Ms. Marie Blackburn: Yes, I can.

It was a hot summer day last year, and the air conditioning went out in the building, and I thought, you know what? I'm going to scoot out of here early and go home and have some gin and tonics on my deck and just cool down.

I'd seen this car in the parking lot all day long. He'd come and he'd go. He'd come, he'd go, and then he was just sitting there. When I was leaving, he came and tapped me on the shoulder and asked, "Are you able to help me?" I said, "What is it you need?" You could tell he was very stressed out and nervous, and he said that just needed some help with some family bills. We went back into that sweltering hot building, and we did the intake on him. He needed to pay his mortgage. He had no food for his family. He was behind on all of his bills. I said, "It's not a problem. We can pay all of that for you". Off he went, and off I went.

Then he called me about two months later, and he thanked me, because his family unit was back together. His wife and he had sorted out things. The kids were back in their soccer games, whatever the case may be. He said to me, "I just want you to know that would have been my last day on earth had you not helped me, because I had a gun under my seat, and if you had said no, I would have blown out my brains in your parking lot."

This is just another example of how long people are waiting to get these benefits that they're eligible for. It's ridiculous, really. It is. This is why we say that our mandate is to ultimately prevent veteran suicide. We are sort of between Veterans Affairs and the client to make sure that we can pay their bills, we can help with their kids or we can put food on their table. I don't know how you fix waiting for these benefits for as long as they have to sometimes, but something like this might give you a better understanding to figure out what we go through as boots on the ground.

• (1125)

Mr. Blake Richards: Well, thank God for you and the Veterans Association Food Bank—not just for that situation, but for many others like it. The fact that you're there is something that I'm sure we all appreciate, but you shouldn't have to be there. This should never get to where they need to come to you with the thoughts that veteran had because they couldn't get what they needed.

You know, Tommy talked about his situation. It's the same kind of a thing. He's waiting for stuff that is owed to him. It should never be the case, and it needs to be fixed. Thank you for sharing that with the committee.

I guess I'll broaden things out a little bit here.

Marie, I'll stick with you on this.

We're hearing from food banks that serve veterans all across the country that they are seeing massive increases over the last several years with the cost of living crisis and everything else. I've heard of four or five times increases in the need for services at some food banks.

Can you tell us a little bit about the situation that you've experienced in Calgary and what kind of demand there's been on your services?

Ms. Marie Blackburn: It's literally been astronomical. Our rental increases in Calgary are just ridiculous. The rents are going from, say, \$1,500 a month with raises anywhere from six hundred dollars to a thousand dollars a month extra.

In the whole year, we've had 38 veterans whom we've actually physically housed in hotels until we can find them another place. That's not always so easy, because if they're paying \$1,500 a month here and they're evicted because the landlord has raised the rent \$500, you're not going to find another place for \$1,500. They just don't exist.

We calculated that one stay for a veteran in a hotel for three months, which is about the average until we get them situated, is about \$10,000. On top of that, when they move, they have to have furniture, clothing, food and whatever, and those.... They are just our general people coming to use the food bank. In Edmonton, for example, over 200 veterans access the veterans' food bank every month. Ours is around 100. We have offices in Grande Prairie and Lethbridge, and there are around 50 people in those smaller communities.

It's just everything. We pay people's rent if they can't afford it. We now are subsidizing rents, because it's almost cheaper to subsidize a rent than to remove them and place them in a hotel somewhere. Our numbers over a six-month period literally tripled for the amount of money we're spending on keeping veterans housed, clothed, fed and in their homes.

It's like that everywhere. We have, every day, people from just the community asking us for help because they need food, but we can't because we only service our military veterans.

Blake, it's just sad what's happening to our veteran community.

Mr. Blake Richards: It really is, but we're so thankful that organizations like yours exist.

I guess I'll just close with this: For you, what would success look like?

Ms. Marie Blackburn: Somebody asked me that a while ago. I said it would be if I didn't have to have keys for this door anymore and I could just shut the whole thing down and walk away, but that's not the reality. We have to have those doors open and we're on call 24-7. We have veterans who call when they're having a tough time and thinking their only way out is that suicide route. We stabilize them until morning or go and sit with them until six in the morning and whatever the case may be.

I just started this sort of on a whim and had no idea it would be this big.

I just hope we don't keep seeing a trend in this. We'd like to level it out a bit, but success would be shutting the doors forever.

• (1130)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blackburn.

The Chair: Now I'd like to welcome one of our colleagues, Mr. Wayne Long, to the committee. Thank you.

Now for six minutes, Ms. Lisa Hepfner, please go ahead.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.): Thank you, Chair. Yes, I would also like to thank all of our witnesses for their testimony today.

Mr. Benjamin, I want to echo my colleague in thanking you for your bravery in coming here to share your story. It's really hard to hear. I can't imagine having to go through it, but it's important that we have that on the record here in Parliament today. We couldn't do that if you didn't have the strength to come here and share that story. Once again, thank you.

Ms. Blackburn, thank you for the work that you're doing.

These things are hard to hear. They're really hard to hear. What our committee is trying to get at are good recommendations and ways to move forward.

You've talked a bit about how you've been able to fill some of the gaps and help guide veterans to the services that they're entitled to. Could you explain that a bit more for us, and perhaps give us some suggestions as to how we can be better at helping veterans access whatever benefits they're entitled to as soon as they leave the military?

Ms. Marie Blackburn: In the case of veterans who are leaving the service now, we've heard from different veterans that some of the people helping them are fantastic at getting them all the services they need. For example, we had one who served for 38 years, and he's using my food bank. Why is that happening?

We advocate for them as a go-between when they ask whether they have any benefits when they leave and are told, "No, you're good. You have your pension."

We make sure that for every veteran who comes through that door, whether it's for food services, the Pet Promise program or the emergency fund program, the first thing we do is fill out that VAC paperwork. We've had quite a good success rate lately because of the relationships we've built with Veterans Affairs. That is the number one thing that we do.

I think we need better education. Don't be discriminatory to anybody. It doesn't matter if you're indigenous, green or yellow. Who cares? I think there has to be more in the line of teaching people that these men and women signed on the dotted line to save us and to protect us. You have a job because they have done this for you. I think really pushing that their service is that valuable in the lives that you all live is something that Veterans Affairs could really focus on.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: That's helpful. Thank you.

Recently our government created a veterans organizations emergency support fund with \$20 million, and I believe your organization got some funding from that.

Can you tell us about the impact of that funding? Should it be broader? Would you would like to see it continue? How did it all work? How did you use it?

Ms. Marie Blackburn: We got the emergency funding in July, and we haven't even advertised. We are now able to go to Manitoba, Saskatchewan, B.C., and then also Alberta.

I took one trip out to B.C., and within an hour I had 17 new clients without even advertising anything. They are younger veterans. They are the ones who are serving and who are going to be losing their homes because the money isn't there for them to pay for everything.

We will absolutely run out of our funding before March 1. We've asked the government what happens when that happens. I can't raise.... We do pretty well on fundraising, but I wouldn't be able to fundraise enough to support all those provinces.

We have asked what happens then, and they said that if the program's really successful, they would continue that funding, which would be amazing. On one day in Manitoba I had seven referrals because of Veterans Affairs workers knowing that we have this money now available to help the veterans, so it has been a godsend for sure.

• (1135)

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Perhaps a good recommendation for this report would be to increase and extend that funding even further.

Ms. Marie Blackburn: Absolutely, it would.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: I understand that you've also been part of the Canada summer jobs program. We were just speaking about that this morning. It's the summer program whereby the government will fund certain summer students to come and work in your organization.

Have you done that for many years? What's the impact of that program?

Ms. Marie Blackburn: We have done it for three years. This year I had to navigate my way through the paperwork, which was not a lot of fun, but we did it. It's amazing to have summer students—they're not students; they're just summer jobs—come and just learn and embrace what veterans have done for them, their families and all of the country.

It has been super-beneficial. It has given them a lot of training and new skills to move forward, so we've been very pleased with the summer jobs program.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: I have just about 30 seconds left, so if you or Mr. Benjamin have any final thoughts or recommendations on how your situations could be improved with recommendations coming from this committee....

Mr. Tommy Wayne Benjamin: I like the fact that Veterans Affairs Canada has aboriginal liaison engagement officers. I like that because it takes away—I want to say—the paperwork. More or less, it takes away the stress of having to apply and the disappointment of being turned down because of having done something or left something out, or maybe because of not being aware of the process.

I'm a strong advocate for having the liaison engagement officers, so good on the department and good on Veterans Affairs for having those positions. I agree with their assistance altogether. I wouldn't have been able to access some of the programs that are available if it weren't for these liaison officers, so I give thanks for that.

Thank you.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: That's an excellent recommendation.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hepfner.

[*Translation*]

We will now go to the second vice-chair of the committee.

Luc Desilets, go ahead.

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

Good morning, colleagues.

Thank you for your service, Mr. Benjamin. Your testimony was really very moving and quite disturbing, and I have a feeling that there is more to come.

Before I begin my questions, Mr. Chair, I want to move a motion. This may be a bit of a special situation. I actually planned to bring forward this motion sometime in the next few days, but I feel like now is the perfect time to do it.

The motion is as follows:

- That the committee undertake a study on suicide prevention among veterans, with this study to include four sessions, each lasting two hours;
- that the committee report its findings to the House;
- that, pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee request that the government table a comprehensive response to the report;
- and that the committee begin this study as soon as the study on the experience of Indigenous Veterans and Black Veterans is completed.

Let me explain very quickly. I don't want anyone to take—

The Chair: Excuse me.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I didn't want to take too much time.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I'd like to provide some numbers to flesh out the motion.

The Chair: In the meantime, we have a point of order.

Bryan May, go ahead.

[*English*]

Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.): I don't know if it's a point of order. I just wish to speak to this motion.

The Chair: You want to speak to this. Okay.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Mr. Desilets.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Once again, I have just a couple of points to make.

Between 2017 and 2023, 54 people committed suicide. Without going into too much detail, among male veterans, the suicide rate has increased 50%. Among young veterans, the suicide rate is 250% higher than in the general population.

Among female veterans, the suicide rate is 150% higher than in the general population. I came across these figures fairly recently. I plan to give an interview on this subject.

I am ready to answer questions, but I would like to table this motion, Madam Clerk.

• (1140)

The Chair: We're talking about a notice of motion. We can continue, unless Mr. May wants to say a few words.

Go ahead, Mr. May.

[*English*]

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

I just want to confirm some logistics here before I move on.

Am I correct that we don't have additional witnesses coming in the second hour?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Bryan May: We have witnesses in front of us. We have time later to speak at length about the order of different meetings or the content of a motion. My recommendation, and I hope everyone will agree, is that we return to the witnesses and come back to this motion in the second hour.

The Chair: First of all, Mr. Desilets was talking, so I stopped the time. We said we have one hour with the witnesses, so I'd like to stay with one hour.

On the second part that you are talking about, that the motion should be discussed in committee business, we should look to the members of the committee to see if they agree.

Go ahead, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: I would agree that this is the way we should proceed. I would encourage that we have two rounds of questioning with the witnesses and then move to that. I would agree with that.

The Chair: It's agreed. That's great.

Go ahead, Monsieur Desilets.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Mr. Benjamin, would you be able to identify the main issues facing indigenous veterans?

[English]

Ms. Marie Blackburn: I think the biggest problem is the denial of benefits.

The most common thing we see with our indigenous veteran community is, first of all, accepting the fact that they're a veteran, because a lot of them have been told, "You're not really like one of us." The second part is getting them in the door to get the paperwork filled out. We've had help from Blake in trying to fast-track some of this stuff, and from people within Veterans Affairs who understand that these guys have gone long enough without stuff. That is the main thing they're having to navigate through.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Can you explain what you mean by "denial"?

[English]

Ms. Marie Blackburn: We've had many indigenous veterans who, when they've applied for service, have been told that there is no record of injuries or whatever, or that their mental illnesses are not attributed to their veterans' service. You can clearly see.... Tommy can tell you enough stories about that, and our veterans community has also told us that. That's the denial part of things. They basically say, "We're not sure that you're even telling us the truth. Is this made up?"

That happens with all veterans—I shouldn't say all veterans, but quite a few veterans have had the same thing told to them as well. They're told, "We don't believe your story. Are you sure that's how it really happened?" but there's documentation that it did. That's the struggle we're going through, and the delays on everything.

Mr. Tommy Wayne Benjamin: If I might interject, I'm in the process again—the fifth time—of applying for benefits.

On my fourth attempt to apply for benefits through Veterans Affairs Canada, I was told that they have no record of my serving in the Canadian Armed Forces. My file has now gone to the national archives. Basically, they couldn't help me anymore and they told me goodbye. These are some of the obstacles I face.

Five times is a significant number of attempts to apply for benefits. It's a frustrating process. How can I explain to anyone that I did serve in the Canadian Armed Forces and then Veterans Affairs Canada tells me that I didn't? Who am I? Am I a non-person? Did I serve in the military? Of course I did, and I'm very proud of that fact. I would serve my country again under different circumstances. I do love my country.

• (1145)

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Those five applications, Mr. Benjamin, were for the same purpose, for the same thing.

When did you apply the first time?

[English]

Mr. Tommy Wayne Benjamin: I would probably have to say that in 2005, I believe, post-traumatic stress disorder was on top of the application for benefits. In the five times that I applied, it was for post-traumatic stress disorder and injuries I received in the military. Basically, they were pretty much the same conditions when

applying for benefits. I can't say that there were any deviations as far as injuries and conditions were concerned. Yes, I would say that it was pretty much the same thing each time I applied.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: In your opinion, is your experience, in other words, having to apply five separate times, is that common among your indigenous veteran colleagues?

[English]

Mr. Tommy Wayne Benjamin: In all honesty, I would have to say yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Do you feel like the target of racism, given the way the government is treating you?

[English]

Mr. Tommy Wayne Benjamin: I'm going to have to be honest and say that I have not experienced racism with my application, not in comparison with my service in the Canadian Armed Forces, which are two different things. If there is racism, I may not have experienced it, or possibly I'm not aware of it.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you very much for your testimony.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

[English]

Let's go to Ms. Rachel Blaney for six minutes, please.

Ms. Blaney, go ahead.

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

I want to thank the folks here who are our witnesses. Thank you for your service to our country, and thank you for your service to our veterans. I really deeply appreciate it.

I'm going to come to you first, Mr. Benjamin, because I'm really compelled by your story. Unfortunately, I've heard similar realities from people from different ethnic backgrounds and indigenous backgrounds who faced significant discrimination and racism during their service time, and I've heard about the lack of speed in responding to that.

I'm wondering if you could explain a few things to me.

I also want to start by apologizing, because I feel like one of the hardest parts of doing this work is that we ask people to come to this place to tell their personal stories and basically bleed in front of us so that we can prove that it's really happening. I want to apologize for the fact that this is where we're at and that it's what the system requires. I also want to say that if you feel uncomfortable, please let us know.

You said you started your service in 1982. I'm wondering if you could share with the committee how long you served.

• (1150)

Mr. Tommy Wayne Benjamin: I served possibly a few days less than two years.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you; that helps.

It sounded to me very much like part of the reason you left was based on what you were seeing. You talked about seeing Inuit people serving whose last names were being mocked, and a lot of the abuse was really profound.

I'm wondering if you could share an example of what you witnessed or experienced during your service that really was painful in terms of racism.

Mr. Tommy Wayne Benjamin: One incident still haunts me to this day. I used the term "weed out" because it's a military term that I believe is used to describe eliminating people from the ranks of any armed forces across the world.

One individual still haunts me to this day. I use that word compassionately, because they went after him. I remember his first name was Thomas, and he was from Kuujjuaq, I believe; they were just unmerciful to him and to all of us who, at that time, were known as Indians and Eskimos. This poor guy came to me and cried to me, and I couldn't help him because I couldn't help myself with what was going on. This was just happening, one by one, to all the Indian and Inuit veterans who were serving.

I always say that 1982 was the year that Canada's Constitution was repatriated back to Canada. For me, it was a sense of duty to serve my country. You can't serve your country with a criminal record. I didn't have a criminal record when I went into the military, but I sure got one when I came out.

I wasn't the same person I was when I went in, and to some extent I wasn't the same person I am today, but that doesn't mean I'm going to lie down and give up. I struggle at times. I'm coming back all the time.

One of the reasons I can say I'm doing better is because of this person here and her organization. She's helped me and countless other veterans a lot, including non-aboriginal veterans. It's a brotherhood and a sisterhood when we get together after being in the service. There is, I guess, a lot of forgiving, but there's probably not any forgetting.

That was my experience, and I can't deny it.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that. I think it's really important.

We recently did a study on women veterans and we heard from a lot of women who left. The reason they left was that they weren't getting the support. What you're telling me is that in trying to get that benefit, the indigenous component of veterans also often faced multiple challenges that are not documented. There's a different service that you did. When you faced that service, it meant you also had to face extreme racism, and it was traumatizing. You wanted to serve your country, not to be traumatized.

One of the other indigenous veterans who was here earlier talked about the fact that VAC doesn't have a place to bring indigenous veterans together to talk, come together and explain their experiences so that VAC can hear that feedback and really look at its services.

I'm wondering if you feel that this would be a good decision for VAC.

• (1155)

Mr. Tommy Wayne Benjamin: Absolutely, yes, I agree.

I'm sure there are going to be positives and negatives, as in anything. I would agree 101% to bring aboriginal veterans together, whether that's first nations, Inuit or Métis. There's always room to improve. Nothing is perfect. We can always make inroads and maybe even change some minds.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to do another round of questions for each party, for a total of 15 minutes. I ask members of the committee to try to respect the time allowed.

I'm going to start with Mr. Richards for five minutes, please.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

Mr. Blackwolf, you haven't had much of an opportunity with questions. I want to give you some opportunity here.

I understand that your organization was not included in the veterans organizations that were listed as partners for the King Charles Coronation Medal.

I wonder if you can tell us a little bit about why you think your organization was overlooked there and how that made you feel.

Mr. Richard Blackwolf: We became aware of that because people were phoning the office asking why we weren't on the list of participating organizations. When I looked at the list, we weren't there.

To start with, in our view, that exclusion was a public humiliation. When we asked about who and why, the standard answer was that the federal government had determined the list. In our view, we were publicly omitted by the federal government from participating in the King Charles medal program.

Our veterans feel that the decision to exclude the CAV was without cause or reason. They also believe it was contrary to the right to being treated fairly, with respect and dignity.

The CAV's exclusion also severs the indigenous veterans' long connection with the Crown. In our view, we have 212 years of connection with the Crown. We're very sensitive to anything that's an abuse of that connection, which is very important to us. Those were the things.

I contacted a number of people and received letters back and forth. It always ended in the same thing: The federal government had determined the list, and the list was set at 30,000 medals to be cast. We suggested, first, to respect that and not change any of those mandates. We requested a letter of introduction to the mint here in Ottawa. We would pay for our own veterans medals, to quell the groundswell that was developing of people wanting to know. We don't want roadblocks and things going up. We're trying to avoid that kind of thing.

Anyway, we haven't received anything, other than the fact that the program's running for a year.

• (1200)

Mr. Blake Richards: You've indicated to me that you've reached out to a lot of different people, including the Governor General, some of the ministers of the Trudeau government cabinet, the mint and the Prime Minister's office. What's your ultimate feeling here? Where do you think the decision on this lies? What could be done to fix it?

Mr. Richard Blackwolf: In every application, we've requested to know who made this decision and why, and we've yet to receive an answer to those questions. We know it came from the PMO, obviously, but we've never had that request answered.

Mr. Blake Richards: This government talks a lot about reconciliation, but the actions don't always line up with it. This sounds to me like another example of the actions not lining up with the words.

Mr. Richard Blackwolf: I don't believe in reconciliation. You can't reconcile what has occurred. From our view, the past is the past. We don't dwell on it. As veterans, we look ahead. We are guardians of the past, and that's why we're sensitive about our connection with the Crown—

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to interrupt you.

You mentioned we're focused on the future, but you're guardians of the past, and I appreciate that very much.

What would have to be done? What would the Prime Minister's office have to do to make this right?

Mr. Richard Blackwolf: We should be at least graced with who made the decision and why. It just didn't involve us. For some reason, the four main veterans organizations in Canada—Canadian Aboriginal Veterans, the NATO Veterans Organization of Canada and the two peacekeepers' groups—were all out of the medal running. All those presidents have sent letters, and in a lot of cases they didn't even get an answer back.

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

Now let's go to MP Bryan May for five minutes.

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

My questions are going to be directed to the food bank, but first I think it's important to address that last exchange.

I know that my colleague across the way likes to place everything at the feet of the PMO, but—and I stand to be corrected on this—I'm under the impression that the Governor General's office is

responsible for these particular medals. I don't want to get into a whole thing, but I think it's important to correct the record, in that the PMO, as far as I'm aware, did not determine these particular locations. I think it's important.

Very quickly, because I have a very short amount of time and most of my questions are—

Mr. Richard Blackwolf: [*Inaudible—Editor*] I had letters from the heads of those departments, and Peter Mills, who is secretary to the Governor General. They administer it, but they don't make the decisions. His letters clearly state that the federal government made the decisions. That's the list. It's final. It's closed. Our requests were to find out by whom, and why.

Mr. Bryan May: I'll dig into this, because I think this is an important distinction and I do think you should get a response. I think that's appropriate, but in all of my involvement for my constituents in organizing these medals, it has all been through the Governor General. It's not through the PMO at all.

I do have to move on to Ms. Blackburn.

Thank you so much to all of you for being here today. I can sense the frustration and I can sense the challenges that all of you are describing in your interventions.

Ms. Blackburn, I know you received a commendation from the Minister of Veterans Affairs in 2019 for the work that you do for veterans. It has become very evident here today why you received that commendation, not just from your testimony but from Mr. Benjamin's testimony as well. Again, thank you for being here and thank you for everything that you do for the veterans community.

As somebody who, prior to politics, was in the non-profit world, I had a lot of connections with folks in your line of work. I know that during COVID-19, many non-profit organizations and charitable organizations experienced an incredibly sudden and critical loss of fundraising revenues. I'm wondering if you could speak to that. Would that accurately describe your organization's experience through that time?

• (1205)

Ms. Marie Blackburn: We didn't really suffer a significant loss in revenue because, on the other side of the fence, we had so many veterans who were eligible for the COVID funding. If you had that money coming in, you didn't really need to use the food bank, so we were kind of shocked when all this started happening. We thought we were going to have lineups out the door, but it was actually different: Nobody was really coming in. We weren't at a loss for money coming in because we weren't really giving out a lot of money, either.

The toughest part of COVID for our veterans was the isolation component. Again, we'd worked really hard to get them out of those four corners, and now all of a sudden we've got them jammed back into four corners. We had four suicides during that time, which was heart-wrenching, because we had worked so hard with these people and there were just no resources for anybody at the time.

Hopefully, we'll never have another COVID incident, because it's....

Mr. Bryan May: I certainly agree with that. I hope none of us have to go through that again.

Ms. Marie Blackburn: It's not good.

Mr. Bryan May: I have a minute left.

Very quickly, we know that partnerships out in the community can help lead to progress, and when we work together, we can accomplish more than if we work in silos.

Can you speak to whether your organization works with other organizations, such as the Legion, to connect with the stakeholders you support? How is that working? Are there ways the federal government can help facilitate that?

Ms. Marie Blackburn: Our relationship with Legion branches is amazing. We all work on the same page. Our command office isn't so lovable, but that's okay.

We work with a lot of recovery centres, treatment centres and mental health facilities. In a study we were doing one day, we found that 86% of our money comes in from individual donors, but we're now working with bigger corporations to get those kinds of funding models into place for our veterans.

Most of it is within the veteran community, so we have the mental health facilities and treatment centres. We support them and they support us, so that's been very rewarding in that way, and our Legion branches are amazing. They raise a lot of money and food for us. We can't thank them enough for all the work they do.

Mr. Bryan May: Thank you so much for everything that you all do.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. May.

[Translation]

We will now hear a brief intervention from Mr. Luc Desilets.

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

Mr. Luc Desilets: Ms. Blackburn, given everything we've heard and from your experience, do you personally believe that there are

two types of veterans in terms of how the department recognizes them?

[English]

Ms. Marie Blackburn: In some regards, yes, there are. We have another veteran who is a Black gentleman, and he's had many struggles in trying to navigate through that, but even if there's one, that's too many.

I have first-hand experience with Tommy and a few of our other veterans being distinctly targeted for being different from the rest of us, in their opinion. It's not drastic, but it's there, and as long as it's there, it needs to stop.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: There are precisely 23,075 veterans across Canada.

Do you think the situation you've described is the same across Canada? Could there be any specific problems in the province where you work? I know you work elsewhere, but I'm thinking of Mr. Benjamin.

• (1210)

[English]

Ms. Marie Blackburn: I know for a fact that it happens in every province, because we've heard the stories from other people. When you have a group of indigenous people, they all talk, and those stories eventually filter back. We get calls from people all across Canada asking if we're able to help them. They live in Newfoundland or wherever, and they outline some of the problems they've had with Veterans Affairs and not being able to get their paperwork done. It's not rampant, but it's out there.

Mr. Tommy Wayne Benjamin: May I interject, please?

Mr. Luc Desilets: Yes, sir.

Mr. Tommy Wayne Benjamin: I would have to say that there are problems with indigenous veterans across Canada as a whole; I'm not an isolated case. You hear those stories all across the country.

I also want to say that for the indigenous community, no matter who you are, it's an honour to serve our country; it's almost like carrying a badge, but at the same time, there are difficulties for veterans across Canada.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

[English]

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

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'd like to start by moving a motion.

I move that the committee write a letter drawing the minister's attention to the urgency of Mr. Benjamin's case, and look into his benefits.

I'm hoping that everybody will support me in that.

The Chair: Did everyone hear that motion?

You can bring that forward later.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Do you want me to bring it in the second hour?

The Chair: Yes, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I can do that. I'll work on that for you, sir.

Mr. Benjamin, I want to say that I will always carry with me two things that you said today. You said that "my mom didn't get the same person back that she sent" and that "I couldn't help him because I couldn't help myself". Thank you for that. It will be my honour to carry those words with me.

I want to turn to you, Ms. Blackburn, and ask you a question. You testified earlier that when you spoke to a VAC worker, they actually said that indigenous people are more likely to be alcoholics—I just want to make sure I got that right and I wasn't confused—and that you've heard other things that were similar around indigenous racism.

When you hear that happen, is there any process for you to make complaints? Have you ever had anyone from VAC reach out to better understand what happened so that they could look at their service delivery practices?

Ms. Marie Blackburn: As I said, with the first lady there, she absolutely didn't want to put in a complaint because she was too afraid she'd lose her benefits. I did recommend that she ask for a new caseworker who could explain it to Veterans Affairs herself.

For the second one, it was the same thing. They don't want to cause any grief between themselves and their workers, because these women have children. They have to have these incomes coming in and they don't want to lose their benefits in any regard.

I know we have called out our two caseworkers. As I said earlier, we just had a gentleman who spent 32 years without any benefits after leaving the military. We have reported her for miscommunication. We call it miscommunication, but it was inappropriate behaviour with this veteran. We have his permission to carry on and put in a complaint, so that's in the works right now.

Most of them don't want to say anything because of their fear of losing benefits. That's the biggest thing.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Has VAC made you aware of any systems so that you could say, as an advocate, "I'm not going to identify people, but we've heard similar things like this, and we would like you to address this"?

Ms. Marie Blackburn: We have one gentleman who works for Veterans Affairs, and we do tell him the situation. Once again, we have the confidence of the client that we will not have it reported.

He is aware of the things that we go through sometimes, and he'll give us recommendations and say, "You absolutely have to report this, whether the client wants you to or not," but we never have, because our basis is still with the client.

• (1215)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: You don't want to break trust.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Our question period is over, but we have a comment from Mrs. Wagantall.

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

This will just take 30 seconds.

In light of only having the one hour instead of a longer time with these people and their great feedback, I want to ask Mr. Blackwolf a question.

You spoke of an advisory group you were a part of and two recommendations that you made. One was with regard to adjusting the Privacy Act so that veterans' files could be more readily available at VAC, and then you also talked about the Veterans Affairs minister becoming an associate minister with DND.

We can't have a conversation about it now, but could you send the committee some feedback on how you feel those two recommendations have been dealt with?

Mr. Richard Blackwolf: We were delighted that—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Could you send it? I'm not allowed to get an answer, unfortunately, but if you could send that information, I think that would be helpful to this study.

Mr. Richard Blackwolf: It's in my brief there.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I'll have my assistant send you something.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to go to the second hour, but now it's time to say thank you to the witnesses.

[*Translation*]

This morning we heard from Richard Blackwolf, the national president of the Canadian Aboriginal Veterans and Serving Members Association; Marie Blackburn, the executive director of the Veterans Association Food Bank; and Tommy Wayne Benjamin, a store clerk at the Veterans Association Thrift Store.

We're going to suspend for a moment while we go in camera for committee business.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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