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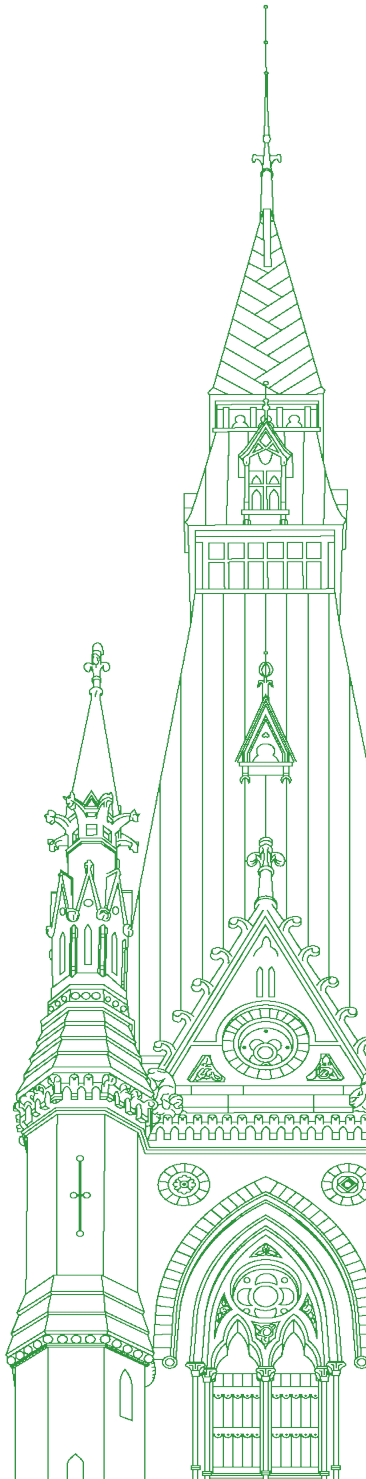

Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Monday, November 25, 2024

● (1535)

[*English*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 117 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 and Black veterans.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. I remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[*English*]

I'd like to inform the committee that the joint meeting with PROC and the delegation of Ukrainian parliamentarians will be held during the second hour of Thursday's regularly scheduled meeting, from noon to 1:30 p.m. Lunch will be served, and the meeting will be held in a room different from the committee's meeting room in this building. We will inform you where it will be.

[*Translation*]

In preparation for this meeting, a member must move the following motion, which must be carried:

> That the clerk of the committee make the necessary arrangements for an informal joint meeting with the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs and the delegation of Ukrainian Parliamentarians, on Thursday, November 28, 2024; and that the committee defray the hospitality expenses related to this meeting.

[*English*]

Do I have someone who can propose that motion?

I have Mr. Bryan May.

[*Translation*]

Is anyone opposed to the motion being carried?

(Motion agreed to)

● (1540)

The Chair: The motion is carried unanimously.

[*English*]

Now I'm going to introduce our witnesses.

For the first hour, we have, as an individual by video conference, Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval, veteran. We are trying to get in touch with him. We are not sure. We're going to try to have Mr. Dorval for the second hour.

Here in committee, we have, from the Assembly of First Nations' veterans council, Debbie Eisan. She is the community events manager for the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre. We also have Alan Knockwood, a member.

Also, last time, we had Dr. Lynne Gouliquer, sociologist. Now the video conference is working, so we have Dr. Gouliquer with us this afternoon.

You're going to have five minutes each for your opening statements. After that, we will ask you some questions. We will start with Dr. Lynne Gouliquer by video conference.

Please open your mic and start your testimony.

Dr. Lynne Gouliquer (Sociologist, Métis Veteran, As an Individual): Thank you.

Taanishi. Hello.

I am speaking to you today from the Robinson-Huron territory, home of the Anishinabe and Métis peoples.

I am a 16-year veteran, having served in the Canadian Armed Forces between the years of 1976 and 1995. My maternal grandfather served during the Second World War, and my paternal grandfather's brother died in the First World War.

I am an LGBT purge survivor, having served during the most harrowing years for anyone who identified as LGBT or as a woman.

I am Métis and my home territory is Treaty 3, which is located predominantly in northwestern Ontario. It's the only treaty in Canada that Métis or the “half-breeds”, as they were known then, were invited to sign. I'm a citizen of the Métis Nation of Ontario and a member of their veterans' council.

I identify as lesbian, woman, two-spirit, Métis and now as a veteran. The latter is more recent.

After leaving the military in 1995, I completed my M.A. and Ph.D. in sociology. For my bachelor's degree, I studied the Military Family Resource Centres and women. For my master's degree, I studied lesbian military members. For my Ph.D., I studied women military members. Following my Ph.D., I held a Banting fellowship, and in 2015, I secured a permanent position in academia at Laurentian University. I'm also an O'Brien fellow.

My program of research focuses on marginalization, specifically what marginalized groups experience when they are a member of or are associated with an institution—for example, LGBTQIA+ military members and their partners and the military.

With my colleague, Dr. Carmen Poulin, we have collaborated on two large tri-council funded studies involving the Canadian military and marginalization.

The first study was conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s. We examined the experiences of LGBT service members and their partners regarding the impact of military policy concerning homosexuality—the infamous CFAO 19-20. We interviewed 126 people comprised of three groups: those who that have been discharged, those who were LGBT and still serving, and civilian partners of these two groups.

The second study is in progress. We are examining the experiences of currently serving 2SLGBTQIA+ service members and their partners.

We are also conducting another tri-council funded study on Métis identity.

Personally, my military service left scars. I have PTSD that is associated with military sexual trauma and years of exposure to a deeply homophobic, anti-LGBT, anti-woman, anti-indigenous military culture and institution. I lived most of my career in the closet, not being able to openly identify as a lesbian, not wanting to identify as indigenous, and if I could have, not revealing that I was a woman.

I'm very happy and grateful for the advancements within both our military and Veterans Affairs. However, I think we still have more to do. While policies and practices have changed, invisible, deep-seated prejudice still exists and the culture needs to shift.

I believe that a certain amount of tunnel vision in the histories and stories of these marginalized people exists. For example, with regard to the LGBT purge, I know from our research that many LGBT military members served undetected for years and are now retired. They, however, carry the trauma of being subjected to that history of purging in the long-enduring culture and institution that embraced homophobia and that was dominated by toxic, masculinized heterosexism.

Our research done in the 1990s is the only study done in the pre-LGBT class action settlement time. Except for our study, the story of partners or spouses of the LGBT purge survivors remains unknown, invisible and unacknowledged.

With respect to being a veteran, from the outside, I am a success story, yet I walk around with the psychological wounds of having endured the marginalization of being an LGBT member during the purge years and of being a woman who served during those years—less than welcoming times. I often wonder whether anyone thinks of the ongoing impact that this has.

Does anyone wonder where the perpetrators are? I think about this often when Remembrance Day approaches, when I seek help from Veterans Affairs, if I'm going to a Legion or if I attend a gathering of veterans.

● (1545)

I also wonder what VAC and the military know about Métis, Métis veterans, Métis experiences and Métis histories. Have they thought about Louis Riel and how he died at the hands of Canada's military? He died for his people, defending them, their homes and livelihoods, yet he was charged with treason and hanged.

It's a challenge for me, on the one hand, to be a proud veteran who served their country and, on the other hand, to hold this knowledge of how the Métis were treated historically. I've yet to reconcile that contradiction. I wonder how much the VAC and the military know or acknowledge that part of Métis history.

Thank you. *Maarsii* for this time and for hearing me.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much for your presentation, Dr. Gouliquer.

We'll now go to Debbie Eisan.

[*English*]

You have five minutes for your statement. Please go ahead.

Ms. Debbie Eisan (Community Events Manager, Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre, Assembly of First Nations Veterans Council): Thank you. Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered here today on the Anishinabe Algonquin territory.

[*Witness spoke in Ojibwa*]

[*English*]

My name is Debbie Eisan. I am a 36-year veteran of the Canadian Armed Forces. I am originally from Batchewana First Nation in Ontario. I now reside in Nova Scotia, where my navy career brought me. My 36-year career took me from 1975 to 2011. I retired on a Friday in 2011, took my seaboots off and put on moccasins on the Monday. I've been at the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre ever since.

Today I am here as a first nation veteran and representative of the Assembly of First Nations' first nations veterans council. The first nations veterans council advocates for first nations veterans, families and communities, and provides a voice to the concerns raised by first nations veterans who have suffered from the trauma of service or war and its impact on families over generations.

First nations peoples have a long history of service in the Canadian Armed Forces, with many veterans returning to their communities after their service. The first nations veterans council recognizes the unique challenges faced by these veterans and has made supporting them a top priority. We come to share the untold stories, the unsung heroism and the ongoing challenges indigenous veterans face, specifically first nation veterans who have served this nation with unwavering dedication and sacrifice.

Key priorities of the first nations veterans council include, but are not limited to, advocating for better access to veterans' benefits and services for indigenous veterans; promoting cultural sensitivity in veterans supports programs; addressing the specific health needs of indigenous veterans, including mental health supports; and preserving and honouring the legacy of indigenous military service.

Key areas of concern raised by the first nations veterans council are as follows.

First is discrimination, as many first nation veterans were denied benefits, lost their Indian status and were excluded from memorials and Remembrance Day ceremonies. This shameful treatment is a stain on our nation's history that we must acknowledge and rectify.

Supporting indigenous veterans across diverse first nation communities represents unique challenges, as geographic isolation of some communities makes access to services difficult. There are also cultural and linguistic barriers in accessing mainstream veterans services, historical distrust of government institutions among some indigenous peoples and limited resources in many first nation communities for veterans support.

Challenges faced by female indigenous veterans include health care disparities: Female veterans often struggle to receive gender-specific care within the veterans health administration system, which has historically been male-oriented, with limited access to gynecological and reproductive health services, inadequate screening and treatment for conditions more common in women, and lack of privacy in some Veterans Affairs facilities that were not designed with women in mind.

Female veterans experience higher rates of military sexual trauma compared to their male counterparts, leading to long-term psychological effects, a higher prevalence of PTSD related to sexual assault or harassment during their service, and difficulty in reporting and seeking help due to fear of retaliation or stigma. With family and caregiver responsibilities, many female veterans face unique challenges in balancing their post-service lives with family obligations, with a higher likelihood of being single parents and of having difficulties in accessing child care during medical appointments or job training.

Indigenous female veterans often face cultural disconnects when seeking support services, a lack of culturally competent care in mainstream veteran support systems and difficulty in accessing traditional healing practices within Veterans Affairs health care. Many indigenous communities are located in remote areas, creating additional barriers to accessing veteran services, with limited access to Veterans Affairs facilities and specialized care, and challenges to participating in job training programs or educational opportunities.

● (1550)

The legacy of historical trauma can impact indigenous female veterans' willingness to seek help from government institutions. There is a hesitancy to engage with Veterans Affairs services due to past negative experiences with government agencies. There's a need for trust-building initiatives and community-based support systems.

Addressing the unique needs of female veterans, and particularly indigenous female veterans, requires targeted approaches and policies.

Recognizing and addressing these challenges, AFN's collaboration with Veterans Affairs Canada resulted in the signature of an AFN-VAC letter of understanding that focuses on expanding outreach, enhancing first nations representation in commemoration activities and establishing a historical record of first nations veterans.

The letter of understanding focuses on four key pillars. The first is access and expanded outreach activities for first nations veterans and their families. The second is establishing clear points of contact for first nations veterans' matters at VAC. The third is increasing indigenous representation in commemoration-related activities. The fourth is supporting the establishment of a historical record of first nations veterans and soldiers who have served in times of war, military conflicts and peace, including those undocumented by Canada.

Addressing the unique needs of female veterans, particularly indigenous female veterans, requires targeted approaches and policies. By recognizing and addressing these specific challenges, we can better support all veterans in their post-service lives.

Thank you. *Meegwetch*.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Knockwood, I know you would like to say something for an opening statement. Please go ahead.

Mr. Alan Knockwood (Member, Assembly of First Nations Veterans Council): My name is Alan Knockwood. I'm also one of the representatives of the Assembly of First Nations veterans council. I represent Nova Scotia.

I will now talk about what the first nations veterans council has been undertaking in the research on homelessness among first nations veterans. I'll then talk about phase two of the letter of understanding.

The Assembly of First Nations has recently undertaken to support the first nations veterans council on investigating homelessness among first nations veterans in Canada. The research project will allow the Assembly of First Nations to identify the distinct ways in which homelessness impacts first nations veterans, such as compounding the impacts of direct and intergenerational trauma caused by the Indian residential school system and the sixties scoop, and PTSD as a result of military service.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is currently a lack of culturally appropriate support for first nations veterans, which leads to an increased risk of homelessness and contributes to first nations' overrepresentation in the homeless veteran population—

The Chair: Excuse me. I think we have a problem with the interpretation.

Mr. May.

Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.): It was making a weird chiming noise.

The Chair: I know that from English to French, we have a problem, but....

Mr. Bryan May: It's a weird chiming noise.

The Chair: It's not working. Okay.

I'm sorry, Mr. Knockwood. I'm going to suspend for a minute or two in order to repair this problem.

The meeting is suspended.

● (1550)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1600)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

[*English*]

Mr. Knockwood, you have the floor for your opening remarks. I'm sorry for the interruption.

Mr. Alan Knockwood: As I was saying, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is currently a lack of culturally appropriate support for first nations veterans, which leads to an increased risk of homelessness and contributes to first nations' overrepresentation in the homeless veteran population.

The Assembly of First Nations is advocating for a culturally appropriate network of support and services available to first nations veterans, particularly ensuring that first nations have the resources and the jurisdiction to provide these services themselves.

The Assembly of First Nations' first nations veterans council is currently developing phase two of the letter of understanding with Veterans Affairs Canada. This phase will build on the shared commitment outlined in the letter of understanding signed in April 2023. This aims to collaboratively address the specific needs of first nations veterans, serving members and their families. The goal is to enhance their overall well-being by establishing a framework on how Veterans Affairs Canada can create and support culturally appropriate healing models in service delivery.

The letter of understanding focuses on four pillars. The first is to ensure the meaningful inclusion of first nations culture in Assembly of First Nations and Veterans Affairs Canada-led commemorative ceremonies and events. The second is to document and share the history of those who served. The third is culturally appropriate supports for veterans. The fourth is to address the barriers to access to Veterans Affairs Canada programs and services.

Lastly, I'd like to thank you again for inviting us to attend on the Anishinabe Algonquin territory. Thank you for your attention to this crucial matter. We look forward to your questions and to a productive dialogue that will lead to a tangible improvement in the lives of veterans across Canada.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to start this discussion right now.

[*English*]

I'd like to thank all of our witnesses for their opening remarks. Thank you also for your service.

[*Translation*]

I believe that, based on an agreement among the parties, the second vice-chair, Luc Desilets, is allowed to make a brief special intervention.

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor.

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

It's very kind of my colleagues to grant me this right to speak.

I want to speak to you today about a situation that I consider urgent and that I've been grappling with for the past three days. One of our committee's objectives is to work on the services offered to veterans and to improve them, if possible, so as not to leave these members of the military who defended Quebec and Canada on their own.

Last Friday, I was made aware of an extremely serious situation that I can't ignore and that you will probably hear about in the coming days.

We all know that the wait time for services or benefits is not acceptable. Wait times have always been exceeded for decades. This committee has been working on this issue for a very long time, perhaps too long. Here in committee, we have heard about atrocities that have shaken us as human beings. We all have a responsibility as parliamentarians to intervene as best we can.

The Auditor General clearly said last year that the Department of Veterans Affairs was doing very little to remedy the various problems we've seen here in committee, which were identified a very long time ago.

Former deputy minister Paul Tellier very recently said that the public service doesn't work anymore and that the federal government no longer provides the services it is there to provide.

As I speak, a man in Quebec City, veteran and former master corporal Michel Marceau, is on day 6 of a hunger strike to alert us and force us to take action. This man, who served with honour, is now fighting the insane bureaucracy at Veterans Affairs. He's unable to get a family doctor and is constantly fighting for compensation that doesn't come or comes years later. He told me that he was desperate to find psychological support for himself, and particularly for his son. He's caught up in what looks like a remake of the film *The Twelve Tasks of Asterix*.

You will agree that each day we do nothing, in a way we're betraying those who have given so much for us. Michel Marceau is just one example, but he is pushing the envelope right now by going on a hunger strike that could be harmful to his health and quite simply threaten his life.

● (1605)

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Desilets. There's a technical problem with the interpretation.

We're going to suspend the meeting while we fix the problem, but, if the committee members agree, I could first let you finish your intervention.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I think I have less than a minute left.

The Chair: In that case, please finish, Mr. Desilets.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I'm sure you can see where I'm going with this. We have a moral and social responsibility to act.

Situations like the one I just described to you may be happening without our knowledge in Quebec and Canada. I was alerted to this one. I've spoken with the veteran. I had to call 911 to make sure he was fit to continue. People intervened.

I would just urge committee members to remember why we're here and what our priorities are. In our interventions for this committee, we should not take situations like this lightly—and I'm not saying we do—they can be dramatic.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you for your comments, Mr. Desilets. I understand your contribution and the sympathy you have in such situations.

Colleagues, we will resume the meeting with the witnesses we had the pleasure of inviting.

[*English*]

We're going to start with—

Mr. Bryan May: Mr. Chair, I'm sorry, but I can barely hear you.

The Chair: I'm sorry. I'm going to suspend one more time.

● (1605)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1620)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

[*English*]

I'm sorry, but we did not expect those communication problems.

If you have any additional information, even though you've given only your opening remarks, you can send it to the clerk and we will keep that for our report.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I'm really sorry to interrupt you, Mr. Chair, but we're hearing two voices in French.

[*English*]

The Chair: I will suspend the meeting.

● (1620)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1625)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

[*English*]

Colleagues, I was about to tell you that we're going to have only one round of questions. I suggest five minutes for each group, because we have another hour with other witnesses.

I'm pleased to invite the first vice-chair of the committee, Mr. Blake Richards, to go ahead for five minutes.

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

First of all, let me just say to all of the veterans who are with us today, thank you for your service.

I would also like to add my voice to what Mr. Desilets had to say. We often hear veterans talk about a triple-D policy. There are so many delays and denials that lead veterans into places where hunger strikes become necessary, where they feel like they have to take their personal details to the media and where unfortunately many veterans end up committing suicide. Others have even been offered assisted suicide by the department itself. That's disgraceful and shameful, and I'm glad that you raised it. I want to add my voice to the fact that this is not right and something must be done.

Let me turn to you...and I'll leave it to you, Debbie and Alan, to decide who would like to answer on behalf of the AFN veterans council. I'm sure you're familiar with the program that the Canadian Armed Forces has started called the Black Bear program.

Do you think that programs like that, which are helping to bring more indigenous people into the military, are going to serve to help indigenous members of our forces have a better experience in our military?

Ms. Debbie Eisan: I can answer that question.

I am very intimate with the Black Bear program, the Raven program, the ALOY program and the CFAE program. In my time in the military, I was part of a team that brought those programs to the Canadian Armed Forces. They are excellent programs for indigenous people.

The problem with those programs is aftercare. Through those programs, indigenous members decide to join the Canadian Armed Forces, and they come in. There's a problem with discrimination and racism within the ranks. I know the Canadian Armed Forces are working very hard to try to eliminate that.

The issues now facing indigenous people are when they come out of uniform, and they have to look for care from a spiritual perspective. Our culture and our way is through spirituality, especially when we have to come through very difficult times.

The other one is the pride in who we are as veterans. Our veterans will often not ask for help. It's not just indigenous veterans; it's all veterans. I myself have been down that road looking for help, and you don't want to....

I didn't think I was going to do this.

Because of the pride, you don't want to ask for help, but especially if you're indigenous, our way to helping ourselves is through our spirituality. If that is not offered, it's very difficult to go down that road.

Our families are a very huge part of who we are in our culture. When Veterans Affairs officials are working with an indigenous veteran, they have to also work with our families through our culture, through our spirituality and through our ways. If we cannot connect that way, our indigenous veterans will often fall between the cracks.

Yes, I agree. I opened the Black Bear program when it first went into Borden. I have a little bit of guilt from that because of what happens after those kids go through that program. What happens to them if they decide to join? I'm telling them a career in the Canadian Armed Forces is a great career. However, when they join, and something happens with them, they don't get that care through Veterans Affairs.

It's not frustration, but that's where I'm focusing my energies—trying to make sure that Veterans Affairs understands the spiritual and the cultural aspects of looking after our indigenous veterans.

Meegwetch. Thank you.

● (1630)

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

It's like you anticipated the second question I had, which was that second part to that, which was about the follow-up when they become a veteran and if you felt that Veterans Affairs was prepared to deal with that. What I think I've heard very clearly from you is that you don't believe they are at the present moment. You spoke specifically to a couple of things, but there's one of them you didn't elaborate on a whole lot, which was the family portion of it. I'll give you that opportunity,

I would actually say this is certainly one that I think is not unique to indigenous veterans. I think that, for all veterans, there needs to be more done to ensure that the families are a part of everything. They're a part of the service, so they should be a part of receiving support and care afterwards and should be a part of the opportunities that are made available to veterans. Do you want to speak just a little bit more to what more could be done to support the families?

I've talked different times about even some of the programs that are made available, educational programs and things like that. Should they not be made available to spouses or family members as well in cases where maybe the spouse becomes the breadwinner for the family, for example?

Ms. Debbie Eisan: Absolutely, and thank you.

I think that it's important for indigenous families to be involved. Back in the time when the treaties were signed, the indigenous folks signed those treaties to fight for Turtle Island. They didn't have to join the Canadian Forces. They chose to because they looked to hold up their side of the treaties. That's leaving their families, leaving their community, leaving their culture behind. If we come forward to nowadays like Afghanistan, the time in Rwanda, those kinds of things, when the veteran goes through those programs, if they get a program to help them through their PTSD or help them through trauma, the families have to be included because the families go through that with the veteran.

My husband is a veteran and when he came back from overseas the commanding officer sent a letter to say, your husband is coming home, and if he all of a sudden flies underneath a coffee table.... I knew that because I was military, but a lot of spouses wouldn't have known that. Why is he flying under a coffee table if he hears a loud noise? How come he can't sleep in a soft bed? It's those kinds of things. When a veteran is going through those kinds of things, those kinds of care, the families have to be included so that they understand the trauma that the veteran went through.

The Chair: Mr. Knockwood, would you like to conclude with a few words because time is running out?

Mr. Alan Knockwood: The cultural component is very important. We're all treaty people, each and every one of us. You signed it. I signed it. My father signed it. My grandfather signed it. My stepfather served with the Royal Canadian Air Force. My biological father served with the merchant mariners. He wasn't even recognized as a veteran for the longest time. In fact, when he finally was recognized as a veteran, he got his check 10 days after he died. I don't know if he cashed it or not, but I took it to where he was. When we come home from service, we are left with a blank slate. There's absolutely no place to go.

It took us years to get the Canadian veterans administration to sit at our table and write this MOU. It's a learning curve for them and for us. It has to get things done, but the need for these things to be done is immediate. We're running into situations like he brought up with what this poor person in Quebec is doing right now. That goes on in all the reserves I know of with veterans. We put these veterans under the wheels for no reason whatsoever, complete ignorance. That's unfair. It's not right. I don't care what colour the veteran might be. If they're going to be ignored, why do we have a veterans administration? The bureaucracy in that administration is so slow. We can improve it. You and I can improve it.

● (1635)

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much, Mr. Knockwood.

We'll now go to Parliamentary Secretary Randeep Sarai, for five minutes.

[*English*]

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

Thanks to both of you, Mr. Knockwood and Ms. Eisan.

Maybe I'll start with you, Mr. Knockwood.

What does the recognition of indigenous veterans mean to you personally, and how can it be done in a meaningful way that respects both your service and your culture?

Mr. Alan Knockwood: One, we have to recognize the fact that the Mi'kmaq people were one of the first peoples in North America to have to deal with colonial peoples. Our treaties were all Peace and Friendship Treaties at the very beginning. We still live by these treaties. These documents didn't die in 1762, 1763 or whenever. They are alive and well right now. We have a big war going on with fishermen on the south shore of Nova Scotia. It's over rights to allow us to fish, which is ironic, because we taught them how to fish. Ouch.

When a person signs up with the Canadian Armed Forces, or even the armed forces in America, we do that because of a treaty obligation. We stand by that treaty obligation, because it is alive and well. What we're asking for, as veterans, is to make sure that living arrangement carries through to when we're finished with our agreement. It hasn't yet. A lot of us are out there in the cold—not just natives but all veterans.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: What advice would you give to younger indigenous individuals who may be considering a career in the military?

Mr. Alan Knockwood: I have mixed feelings on both sides of that. We're looking at a change in the United States right now, with the idiot who's coming into power siding with Putin in Russia. We have a very volatile situation happening. Do I want to send my son and daughter into what possibly might be a nuclear war? Not really. Those are the realities we have to live with right now. We are living in Canada, supposedly a safe place. I'm sorry, but we're living right next to the elephant down there, and the elephant is going to roll over any moment now.

Right now, I would discourage them from joining the armed forces, because the certainty of death is too real. I already saw it in Vietnam. It's very hard for me to send someone over to something like that.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Ms. Eisan, can you elaborate on that? What advice would you have?

Ms. Debbie Eisan: One side of me agrees wholeheartedly with what Alan said. However, if I were talking to a young person who wanted to join the Canadian Armed Forces, I would tell them to stay true to their roots and to who they are as an indigenous person. Never let that go. If we do, we lose part of ourselves—who we are. We have to stay true to what our ancestors fought for—for us to be here today.

One of my jobs was as an indigenous aboriginal recruiting adviser for the Canadian Armed Forces. I wholeheartedly stood behind recruiting young indigenous people into the Canadian Armed Forces. Now my tune is changing a little, because I have a granddaughter looking to join. I honestly don't know what to say to her and whether to encourage her or not, because of everything that's happening and all of the stuff going on, like Alan said. Ever since she was a baby, I've brought her up with her culture, the knowledge of our teachings and the strength a woman should have in who she is. I don't want her to lose that. I'll never tell her no. However, as a grandmother, I will be doubly afraid if she joins up.

● (1640)

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Briefly, as I have a few seconds left, on that, are you saying that more as a indigenous mother or as a mother in general? I want to know. Is it a—

Ms. Debbie Eisan: I'd say both.

It's both because in our families the grandmother is the one who gives the teachings in our culture. I've spent more time with my grandchildren, with my granddaughter, than I have with my.... I spent 36 years in the military. You have to do what you've got to do, but the time I've spent with my grandchildren.... I'm closer with my grandchildren for the very reason that our culture says that the grandmother and the grandfather teach the children—their grandchildren—the culture, the teachings and the way of our people.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sarai.

[*Translation*]

I would remind members to keep in mind that Dr. Gouliquer is also online to answer questions.

I now invite Mr. Desilets to take the floor. He has the next five minutes.

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

Ms. Eisan, in your opinion, do indigenous veterans receive the same services as white veterans?

[*English*]

Ms. Debbie Eisan: No, I don't, and I say this not lightly, because a lot of times.... I work at the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre. I've been there since December 2011. Every day, I see veterans come in that door, and I connect with them. They can't get ahold.... Sometimes they are too nervous. I try to get them to go to Veterans Affairs for services. A lot of them don't want to go into government agencies because of the way they have been treated in the Canadian Armed Forces.

The way they need to be treated, especially for post-traumatic stress disorder, or because of the way they've been treated in the military and don't know how to get the help.... They need to be treated from a cultural way, from a cultural perspective. You cannot treat them the same way you treat other veterans. No disrespect to other veterans, but the way we are brought up is through sharing circles and through sweat lodges.

That's what helped me from my trauma when I came back from Rwanda. It was through sweat lodges and talking with my elders. That's what helped me through very difficult times. I can't say whether just going through talking to a psychologist would have helped, but I don't think they get the same treatment. People need to look at it from a different perspective with indigenous folks.

Thank you. *Meegwetch*.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Mr. Knockwood, I think you want to add something.

[*English*]

Mr. Alan Knockwood: When you look at the veterans' homes across Canada—and I mean really look at them and walk through them and walk down those halls—how many native veterans do you see in there? None. Why? It's because, more often than not, they're turned down. They're turned away. They're not good enough. They don't have enough money for it. They don't have this, and they don't have that. There is a whole multitude of reasons to not fulfill an obligation that veterans are entitled to.

I went to Normandy for the 80th anniversary. There were three native people: me, a native man from Ontario and a Métis man. We had to hold up a ceremony for a lot of the people because it was culturally inappropriate, for the most part, and we added that native component, a night of spirituality, to the program. I had Brigadier-General Robar come back after a session at the abbey, and he came to me when I sang the *Honour Song* there and said, "Thank you. You made my trip worthwhile."

That's the part people fail to see—that we are a viable part of the fabric of veterans but we're excluded. If we are added to that fabric, we make that fabric whole. That's all we ask, to be included in that thing. Cultural appropriation.... For our culture, the only thing it can do is nurture what's out there. Give us a chance to give that gift, and it is a gift that we are willing to give.

Thank you.

● (1645)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

Do any of you have any potential solutions to propose to us to bring the two communities closer together and to provide you with the same services and treat you adequately?

[*English*]

Ms. Debbie Eisan: Do you want me to go for it?

Mr. Alan Knockwood: Go for it.

Ms. Debbie Eisan: Okay.

From my perspective, I have been talking a long time, whenever I can use my voice, to reach indigenous veterans, especially in the urban context, and setting up offices—part-time, once a month or whatever—at the friendship centres across Canada. There are 126 friendship centres across Canada. Veterans go to the urban environment. Where they're going for help is through those friendship centres. That's one aspect of it.

The other aspect is that, for those indigenous veterans who are in remote areas, access to those services is very difficult, especially if they're homeless.

The other thing is for Veterans Affairs to look at and consider treatment from a spirituality aspect for us veterans, like sweat lodges and having access to elders to be able to talk to them to get through trauma and times like that. It's being back in a community and working through those spirituality aspects.

Mr. Alan Knockwood: We have to.... Wouldn't it be nice to have an Indian or a native person actually working at VAC? Period.

We'd get a lot done.

The Chair: Thank you—

Mr. Alan Knockwood: We can do it, you know,

[*Translation*]

in English, in French,

[*English*]

ilnu-eck-took.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now, by video conference, we have our colleague Rachel Blaney.

You have five minutes, Ms. Blaney. Go ahead.

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

I thank all of our witnesses and give a special thank you to those of you who have served.

I also give a very big, warm hello to Mr. Knockwood. I really enjoyed our time in Normandy, when we were there, recognizing D-Day. I'm really happy to see you again here in this role.

My first question is for Ms. Eisan.

I was really compelled by your testimony. One of the things I was really moved by was how you spoke about female indigenous veterans and how those specific needs seem to be left out and not honoured. Could expand on what that looks like and what knowledge you have of that, so the committee can better understand it? What solutions do you think might be helpful?

● (1650)

Ms. Debbie Eisan: When I speak about female indigenous veterans, the way that we do our ceremonies and the way that we do things culturally are a little bit different. When we're in sweat lodge ceremonies, female veterans—females, period—do not go into the sweat lodge. Because when we're on our moon time, we're considered to be very powerful, we don't take part in ceremonies and we don't take part in smudging ceremonies. These are the teachings that these indigenous women veterans need to get from female elders. The teachings are very different from what male elders would give to women. In order for female indigenous veterans to have access to culturally appropriate and spiritual...moving ahead, they need to have that ability to have one-on-one with an elder from their community.

I live in Halifax now, but I'm from Anishinabe territory by Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. If I was having difficulty and I needed to speak to an elder, I would need to speak to an Anishinabe female elder. I can't do that in Mi'kmaq territory, even though I respect the territory. I need to go back to my own territory to speak to Anishinabe women elders.

The way that our teachings come is very different, and I think that this is not an easy path to go down, what we're saying to you. It's going to take time. It's going to take a lot of understanding, and it's going to take a lot of self-reflection on how Veterans Affairs normally does things. It's looking from a two-eyed seeing approach—from the western eye in the way that you would normally work with veterans, but then from the indigenous eye in how indigenous people would work through issues and through problems. Elder Albert Marshall from the Mi'kmaq Eskasoni was the one who talked about the two-eyed seeing approach, and it's something that I've worked with my whole career, being able to move forward with that.

They are the teachings that we have to go with from the woman's perspective, and that's why it's so different.

Meegwetch. Thank you.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

I'm going to combine two questions in one and have you answer, Debbie, and then Alan after.

The first part is that you talked a lot about the spiritual supports that are needed and, of course, that they must come from an elder. I'm just wondering if there is any capacity for VAC to pay honorariums to these amazing elders who are helping with the healing. Are they even acknowledged in that role?

The second part is that you talked about the distrust of government agencies, which I believe has a special nuance for indigenous people that the rest of the population may not have. When we talk about culturally appropriate training so people from VAC can address that, do you think that's something that would help them deliver better services to indigenous veterans?

Mr. Alan Knockwood: I can only answer the second part of that question, in that culturally appropriate has to be geographically appropriate as well. We can't have a blanket policy that goes across Canada, because the Tlingit and the Mi'kmaq are two separate nations and have two ways of thinking, which is good. We have to have someone in those facilities from that culture, and we have none now.

When a person comes back with PTSD, for one example, the first thing they do is assign them a psychiatrist. Well, a psychiatrist knows diddly-squat about who I am, what I am or why I am as a native person. Whatever “treatment” I'd be getting is already beginning to be culturally inappropriate. If I go to a sweat lodge and get the healing from that, that works.

When I came back from Vietnam, I did not go to a psychiatrist because it was like talking to that wall; it just bounced off. He had absolutely no idea what I was talking about. I went to a spiritualist, and I went through a ceremony in the Navajo tradition for a start. Then I went to a Mi'kmaq spiritualist with the late David Gehue. I can honestly say that I don't have PTSD anymore because it was a culturally appropriate treatment for it the entire time. Let's start there.

Thank you.

● (1655)

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

We're going to stop right here.

I'm curious, Ms. Eisan. I know that you are proud to wear your medals. You have one on the right side. Can you tell us why?

Ms. Debbie Eisan: This is the aboriginal veterans medallion. This is part of the work that we have done in the Canadian Armed Forces—when I was still in uniform—to allow indigenous Canadian Armed Forces members to wear this medallion when we go to indigenous events. We had the braid instituted in the same way and the Métis can wear a sash when they're in uniform. That's what this is.

Thank you.

The Chair: I'd like to thank all of you.

Thank you to Dr. Lynne Gouliquer, sociologist and Métis veteran.

We also had the Assembly of First Nations' veteran's council.

[*Translation*]

From the Assembly of First Nations Veterans Council, we have heard from Debbie Eisan, community events manager at the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre, and Alan Knockwood, member.

We will suspend the meeting briefly so we can welcome the witnesses who will be with us for the next hour.

● (1655)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1705)

[*English*]

The Chair: We are resuming our meeting.

For the second part of committee today, we have with us, from the Neeginan Centre, as a witness by video conference, Mr. William Shead, board of directors chairperson. From the Vimy Foundation, we have Caitlin Bailey, executive director, by video conference.

Welcome. You're going to have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Let's say congratulations to the Vimy Foundation.

[*Translation*]

I know she recently moved into Maison Louis-Joseph-Forget, so I congratulate you for that.

[*English*]

I'm going to start with you, Ms. Caitlin Bailey. You have five minutes for your opening statement. After that, we'll ask you some questions.

Please open your mic and go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Caitlin Bailey (Executive Director, The Vimy Foundation): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

We did in fact open our new office space last week. We were very happy to have some members of the committee come visit beforehand.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for that. That's very kind.

[*English*]

Good afternoon. Thank you for the invitation to present to the standing committee. My name is Caitlin Bailey. I'm here today representing the Vimy Foundation, a First World War commemoration and education organization that has worked with the Department of Veterans Affairs since 2010.

[*Translation*]

Our mission in youth and public education includes running major national programs that tell the stories of Canadians who lived through the First World War from 1914 to 1918.

[*English*]

These programs reach hundreds of thousands of Canadians each year.

As part of our work, we engage with many equity-seeking communities. We have committed to weaving the experiences of indigenous and Black veterans during the First World War throughout our programming, focusing on their service during the conflict and highlighting the particular difficulties they faced receiving recognition for the same.

In a recent national educator survey that we performed in the fall of 2024, 50% of responding educators noted that they already teach Black and indigenous experiences of the First World War, but that they lack sufficient digital educational resources for their teaching.

[*Translation*]

In addition, our internal surveys of young participants and our programs reveal that more people want to learn more about these communities and their experiences during the First World War.

[*English*]

Organizations like ours, and the many others that have presented during this committee study, serve to help address these identified gaps. Our suite of digital projects leading up to Vimy's 110th anniversary in 2027 will reach hundreds of thousands of Canadians and highlight stories of many First World War veterans, including Black and indigenous veterans. However, they require investment to help us meet the needs of the educators and the public we serve.

I'd like to thank you again for your attention. I'm looking forward to answering your questions.

[*Translation*]

Thank you again.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your remarks, Ms. Bailey.

[*English*]

I'm going to invite Mr. Shead from the Neeginan Centre to give his opening remarks.

Please go ahead.

Mr. William Shead (Board of Directors Chairperson, Neeginan Centre): Good afternoon.

Thank you for this opportunity to appear at this meeting of the committee.

As the chair said, I am Bill Shead. I'm an 85-year-old Cree member of the Peguis First Nation, a navy veteran and currently chair of the Neeginan Centre, where indigenous people are helped in their transition to urban life.

This is a rather unique approach that I'm going to be talking about. It doesn't deal directly with services to veterans, but I think it's a model that perhaps those who are involved in delivering services to veterans, indigenous and non-indigenous, might learn from.

As migration of indigenous people into urban centres increased, governments rolled out programs and funding to NGOs—that's non-governmental organizations or charities, not-for-profits—to help indigenous people adjust to urban life, and most programs addressed transition issues in an ad hoc silo fashion. NGOs operated independently from one another, yet on associated issues affecting transition, different government agencies would fund different NGOs to operate programs for each issue, such as literacy, training, etc.

Complicating matters further, funding for rental space for program delivery was often inadequate. NGOs were limited to renting space as is, where is, and the spaces were unrenovated, not suitable for service and in difficult to access sites.

Working together, several NGOs in Winnipeg resolved to improve workspace and service delivery shortcomings. They incorporated as the Aboriginal Centre of Winnipeg, and in 1990.... I'm sorry; that's when they incorporated. In 1992, they purchased Winnipeg's historic CP railroad station.

I have been associated with the Neeginan Centre since the beginning of 1993, initially as CEO responsible for the restoration and renovation of the station into a one-stop service centre. On completion, the 120-year-old building emerged as an operational service centre that the people who first incorporated as the Aboriginal Centre of Winnipeg envisioned.

At the Neeginan Centre, indigenous people receive a variety of education, training and support services to help them improve their life opportunities. Two major NGOs operate out of the centre. I'll talk about each of them.

Neeginan Education, Training and Employment Services provides education, training, student support services and employment opportunities. It operates the Aboriginal Community Campus; Neeginan College of Applied Technology; Kookum's Place Daycare; Neeginan Village, a student housing complex; and the aboriginal aerospace initiative and technical training centre.

The Aboriginal Health & Wellness Centre is a community-based health and wellness resource agency. Programs and services offered include a primary care clinic, community outreach and education, and health promotion and prevention with the services of physicians, nurses, community health workers and traditional healers. Abinotci Mino-Ayawin is a children's health head start program. They also operate a fetal alcohol syndrome and effects prevention program.

In the late 1990s, aboriginal veterans argued for more public recognition. This led to the mayor of the City of Winnipeg declaring Aboriginal Veterans Day for the city in 1993. In 1994, the Neeginan Centre staff and students put on the first Aboriginal Veterans Day service in the rotunda of the Neeginan Centre. That service has continued ever since, with the exception of the COVID years.

There is one other program I wanted to speak very briefly about. I'm a member of the board of directors of Indspire. Indspire is a charity that raises money for post-secondary education for indigenous students.

● (1710)

This program started when the former name for Indspire was the Canadian Native Arts Foundation. It took responsibility for the stewardship of the national aboriginal veterans scholarships fund, initiated by the Government of Canada on a recommendation of the Senate committee on indigenous veterans, chaired by the late Senator Len Marchand.

The $1.1-million fund has stimulated fantastic growth in the work of Indspire. It is now funding, through scholarships and bursaries, indigenous students pursuing careers in post-secondary education and training. Since 1996, Indspire has distributed $270 million in scholarships and bursaries to some 74,000 students. This year alone we will have distributed $32 million to 8,400 students. These two organizations, Indspire and Neeginan, were really the initiative of indigenous leaders who took a very great chance.

Neeginan purchased a 120,000-square-foot building with an idea of turning it into a better place to deliver services in a coordinated fashion. It succeeded.

Indspire, stimulated by the requirement to have responsibility for a fund that had to be used to deliver scholarships and bursaries beyond its initial scope of arts, now has succeeded in what I think is beyond its wildest dreams, delivering so many scholarships to so many students in the past 20-some years.

My association with two of these organizations is indicative of the veterans who have been involved in the work of all of these efforts to improve life for indigenous people generally returning to the city. The fact that the Neeginan Centre alone has successfully proven that you can be successful delivering services in a coordinated one-stop service centre perhaps is something that the Department of Veterans Affairs could look at, as well as others who want to help veterans who are returning to life in home communities.

● (1715)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Shead, for your opening remarks.

Because of technical problems, we started late—

Mr. William Shead: I understand.

The Chair: —and some of our colleagues cannot stay longer than 5:30, so I will give four minutes to each group to ask our witnesses questions.

I invite, first of all, Mrs. Wagantall for four minutes, please.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Mr. Shead, thank you so much for all that you have done. Clearly, you have invested in ways that encourage and inspire other people to also assist with what you have accomplished here.

I have one question for you. We have talked often at this committee about one-stop shops over the years, and what you have is an exemplary model.

Why do you think that Veterans Affairs needs to recreate it? Why would we not ask Veterans Affairs to provide the funding veterans need and allow them to go to places like this? We know that veterans serving veterans—veterans helping veterans—is the best way to see them succeed, because those are the people who understand the best.

Do you see this model that you have serving the needs of indigenous veterans?

Mr. William Shead: I really don't want to be critical of the public servants in departments like the Department of Veterans Affairs, who have a worthy client base who need service.

However, if you look at some of the NGOs that are out there—and I'll just use the general term "NGO" to represent any non-profit organization or charity that's doing work to deliver service—they sometimes can do the job in a more expeditious way because they can call on other resources outside of, say, what the government has available.

For example, when we were doing the railroad station conversion, we used something like 25 different contribution agreements from maybe a dozen federal departments and provincial departments.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Sir, I'm sorry—

Mr. William Shead: That's it.

● (1720)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I hate that I only have four minutes.

I appreciate that. Could you send us some notes on your perspective?

I'm not in any way trying to belittle Veterans Affairs. It's a question of what their role should be and what would be most efficient.

Mr. William Shead: I was going to say that I think there is an efficiency in funding the veteran, so that he or she can access service from an NGO. It could be the Legion, for instance.

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

Ms. Bailey, very quickly, I'm sorry I don't have more time. You talked about, I understand, a digital project you were working on. You're working towards Vimy's 110-year anniversary, which is coming up.

I know you need to plan. What do you see as some of the roadblocks or barriers to your being able to do everything you would like to do to prepare in advance and make that event as amazing as it should be?

Ms. Caitlin Bailey: Yes, we do need time to prepare. For us, one of the major roadblocks certainly is funding. I will not beat around the bush. Our ability to deliver projects to their full size depends on the funding. We have 50% of what we need raised for these digital projects. The projects are going forward, but the scale of the projects and how they're rolled out will be dependent on funding.

The timeline—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Can I ask—

Ms. Caitlin Bailey: —for us is two years.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you. That's what I wanted to ask.

There's a timeline by which you need to know this funding will be there and available so that you can continue on. How much time do you need in advance?

Ms. Caitlin Bailey: We need probably 18 months to two years.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay. Thank you.

Ms. Caitlin Bailey: Thank you.

The Chair: Mrs. Wagantall, you have 30 seconds for a question and an answer.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Sure.

Ms. Bailey, I had the opportunity to go to Vimy Ridge, and we are talking about our indigenous veterans.

In a nutshell, can you just describe why we were successful at Vimy Ridge in relation to the role our indigenous veterans played with the rolling barrage?

Ms. Caitlin Bailey: Vimy Ridge was a success because it was very well organized. Part of that organization was scouting, maps and sniping, and really being able to bring together all of the services to do what everyone did best, I suppose.

During the First World War, there were 4,000 identified indigenous veterans—there are probably many more—who were involved in those battalions. Frequently, they did serve in positions as snipers and scouts, and they would have been extremely important in the success of the Battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we go to Mr. Wilson Miao, who is joining us by video conference.

Mr. Miao, you have four minutes, please.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for joining us today on this very important study.

I'd like to direct my first question to Ms. Bailey.

What steps has the Vimy Foundation taken to research, preserve and highlight the stories of Black and indigenous veterans who served in uniform, and how can Canadians learn more about these veterans' experiences?

Ms. Caitlin Bailey: Our work is underpinned by the TRC and the calls to action of the TRC. That runs throughout our public education programs and our youth education programs. We've done significant research on both topics, as well as other groups involved in the First World War, such as women, for example, and francophones outside of Quebec.

All of these are topics we've spent a deep amount of time researching and ensuring they are included in all of our curriculums, so if you are using a curriculum in our school and accessing one of our programs, those stories and those viewpoints are very clearly shown and they're very clearly illustrated to Canadians as part of the full context of the First World War.

All of these are available through our website, and the educators access them through multiple different points and different programs we run.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Could you share with us more details on how the Vimy Foundation supports and engages with indigenous communities to honour and preserve the legacy of indigenous veterans?

● (1725)

Ms. Caitlin Bailey: Yes. Absolutely.

We spend a lot of time communicating directly with different indigenous communities. We focus particularly on schools that have large populations of reserve students. Many of those relationships are one-on-one relationships. As the previous panel mentioned, indigenous communities in Canada are not a single bloc. We approach each of those communities separately based on the needs and expressed desires of that community for our services.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you.

Mr. Shead, I really thank you for your service. I understand that you're considered one of the founders of the national Indigenous Veterans Day in Canada, which goes back 30 years. How would you say Indigenous Veterans Day has evolved over these past three decades?

Mr. William Shead: First of all, I really don't consider myself a founder. I certainly was there for the first service. I had responsibility for overseeing whatever was happening in Neeginan Centre. I really helped the staff and students put on that thing, but everything that was done with respect to that first service was done by staff and students, with a little bit of consultation from not just me but also indigenous veterans.

I don't know what other communities are doing, but certainly the service we hold in Winnipeg at Neeginan Centre is quite moving. We do it in a rotunda. We can seat about 400 people on the rotunda floor. This is the old waiting room area of the train station. Every service we have is filled. It's well supported by not just the indigenous veterans but also the non-indigenous veterans. The local military militias and reserve forces and what have you also send representatives, as do the governments. We also get support from Veterans Affairs Canada.

Now, if that is being repeated elsewhere in other big cities, boy, that's really something. Winnipeg is a pretty unusual city, because I think our indigenous population is now about 25% of the city's population.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Do you have any suggestions on how we can better recognize Indigenous Veterans Day, not just in Winnipeg but across Canada?

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Shead. We have only 15 seconds.

Mr. William Shead: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much. They have only four minutes in total.

[*Translation*]

Now I'll give the floor to Mr. Desilets. I'd like to take this opportunity to welcome our colleague Mr. Simard.

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

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

Good afternoon, Ms. Bailey. It's good to see you again. I had the pleasure of visiting the Vimy Foundation two weeks ago on Sherbrooke Street in Montreal. You have some really amazing facilities there. There are impressive artifacts and maps from the First World War that are breathtaking.

I know you're looking for a lot more funding, since you've only secured 50% of your budget. Have you heard anything from Veterans Affairs Canada?

Ms. Caitlin Bailey: Not yet, no. We're still waiting for the end of the federal budget process. We also plan to submit requests under the community anniversaries component of the building communities through arts and heritage program, which does provide funding to us.

However, that process takes about six months, and we do that on a project-by-project basis. So it's not a large envelope. That will be used to fund each project for the next three years.

Mr. Luc Desilets: How does the Vimy Foundation support Black, Métis and indigenous veterans?

Ms. Caitlin Bailey: We focus on education. We're not a service for veterans, we're an educational service.

We believe that Canadians, as well as indigenous and Black veterans who want to be recognized for their service, benefit from knowing about these events. It's part of our national knowledge. If people don't know about it, they're not going to take the next steps to get support and learn more about the various experiences of indigenous and Black veterans.

● (1730)

Mr. Luc Desilets: Okay.

Do you encounter any difficulties in this quest to pass on our veterans' knowledge?

Ms. Caitlin Bailey: Sure. Your colleague already mentioned research. The facts are not well known, especially when it comes to the First World War, because they were somewhat set aside.

Research is the foundation of everything we do. However, doing research takes time and it costs money. At the end of the day, it's really a matter of having the human resources, time and money, among other things, to discover these facts and bring them to light.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Okay.

Still on the topic of Black, Métis and indigenous veterans, what main partners inform your research on these aspects of history?

Ms. Caitlin Bailey: It really comes from the groups themselves. These are facts conveyed by family members, and often they are oral versions. We work a lot with communities to discuss these facts, express them and find a way to pass them on to the community.

We're not here to take ownership of the facts, make them known and then forget about the community. It really is a partnership, and it takes time to build relationships.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Ms. Bailey.

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

To close this meeting, I now give the floor to Rachel Blaney, who is joining us by video conference. You have four minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here.

Ms. Bailey, you were already asked everything I wanted to ask you. I've met you a couple of times. I really appreciate the work you're doing in terms of educating so many people about Canada's sacrifice and about the nuances experienced by the communities.

Mr. Shead, I was really moved by your presentation, and I've read a bit about you. You have done a lot of really amazing things, and I appreciate that.

We heard from the testimony of the last witnesses about the culturally appropriate and spiritual supports that are often required by indigenous people, when they return from service.

Could you talk about your knowledge about that? Could you also talk about your organization, and if you provide any of those services?

Mr. William Shead: When you're in a local situation like Neeginan Centre, it's relatively easy to provide cultural services because your focus is narrower. However, if you're in an organization like the Canadian Forces, or some group that does national service, it becomes very difficult to be culturally sensitive across the country. There are so many differences in languages and in our traditions and cultures. It is a challenge.

My only suggestion is that, if you make an honest effort to do something, even if it's as simple as smudging or asking somebody to offer a prayer to open a session of a meeting, whatever the case may be, that, to me, would be welcomed by anybody, because it's seen as an honest effort.

I know that 70 years ago—gosh, it's been that long—it was very difficult for a group of us to come together with a single idea of how to show a group of English people how we could be identified singly as an Indian, for example. We were from different groups from across the country. The only thing that we could decide on was that perhaps all we could do was be the John Wayne Indian and join them in a little bit of a laugh, but that's not appropriate anymore. You can't do that.

You have to make an effort to be sensitive to the spirituality and the cultures, generally. It all comes back to being respectful. Just be respectful to an individual. Treat the individual like an individual and try to extend a true hand of friendship. From that, I think you can start to get an understanding of how the individual has been affected by what has happened, and maybe you can then buy him a beer, if that's the case. I don't know.

● (1735)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: That's an excellent answer. I really appreciate it. Thank you for sharing that. I really appreciate the nuance of the local reality versus a national reality, and how to make those two work together. The chair is giving me a time out.

Thank you so much for answering my questions.

Mr. William Shead: I think he's going to drop the guillotine on many of us.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

While we have to stop here, on behalf of members of the committee, I'd like to thank you for your contributions.

[*Translation*]

Colleagues, we have heard from William Shead, board of directors chairperson at Neeginan Centre, and Caitlin Bailey, executive director of the Vimy Foundation.

Thank you again for your participation.

The meeting is adjourned.