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Mr. David Sweet

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC)): Ladies and gentlemen, we'll call this meeting to order. We'll be continuing our comparison study of veterans affairs programs throughout the G8, and I believe we've gone more broadly than that as well.

We have with us today Lindee Lenox, who is the director of the memorial programs service.

Welcome, Ms. Lenox.

Ms. Lindee Lenox (As an Individual): Thank you.

The Chair: The United States has several areas that are quite complex, so we're going to be doing multiple meetings. This one will be focused specifically on the National Cemetery Administration, and I believe on that of remembrance as well, if I have that correct, Ms. Lenox.

Ms. Lindee Lenox: That's correct.

The Chair: Traditionally we allow the witnesses to present for 10 minutes, but certainly you have leeway if you'd like a little bit more time to make your initial presentation. Then we have a rotation system, whereby members from different parties can ask questions. They are limited as to time, but you are not limited as to time in your response. We keep the time on this, so you don't have to worry about it. You can be as brief or as robust as you would like in your answers in order to advise us.

As well, I'd like to say on behalf of the committee how much we appreciate the fact that you're taking this time to help us with this study so we can be of better service to our veterans here in Canada.

If you'd like to begin, feel free to go ahead at your convenience.

Ms. Lindee Lenox: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I really appreciate being here. I always enjoy talking about the National Cemetery Administration.

I'll give you just a little bit about my background. I am the director for the memorial programs service. The programs I administer are the government headstone and markers program, which I'll talk a little more about here, and the presidential memorial certificate program, which I'll also talk some more about.

I am an army veteran, and I have been with the federal government for 33 years in addition to my federal military service, so that's who I am.

Do you have the slide presentation here that I'm going to go through?

The Chair: If this is the deck, then we have it.

Ms. Lindee Lenox: Okay.

First I'm going to tell you about our responsibilities and then I'll go into a little more depth on them.

Our first and most visible responsibility is to provide burial space for veterans and to maintain our cemeteries as national shrines. We also administer the grants program, in which we provide funding to states to build veterans cemeteries within the states. We furnish headstones and markers that can be placed at national cemeteries, state cemeteries, and private cemeteries.

We administer the presidential memorial certificate program, and we have a new function that we recently took over from the Veterans Benefits Administration, which is managing what we call the first notice of death program. That is really just a matter of making sure that VA's information systems capture when a veteran dies. We weren't doing a really good job of that, so NCA has taken it over, and we'll be doing a much better job now.

The next slide shows you that our 128 national cemeteries are organized under five memorial service networks, as shown on the map. A memorial service network is like a region. As you can see, it's broken up across the country. It's mainly split up by population area. That's why you have some small ones, but they're in a large population area.

We execute our responsibilities with a workforce of approximately 1,500 employees nationwide. We maintain 2.9 million gravesites. In fiscal year 2008, we provided more than 103,000 interments in our cemeteries.

The next slide shows the status of our national cemeteries. We currently have 68 that are open. We have 21 additional ones that are open, but only for cremation. We have 39 that are closed, and these are historic sites. We have three that are in development. We're not burying in them yet.

"Closed" does not mean that the cemetery is completely closed. It may accept a second interment if a loved one is already buried there and we're going to inter the spouse who has died.

The three cemeteries under development that we're—

The Chair: Ms. Lenox, if I could just interrupt you for just a second, it seems that we might be having some trouble with translation here. I'll just ask you to pause for a moment. I'm sorry to interrupt you.

Ms. Lindee Lenox: That's fine.

The Chair: You can begin again. Please pick up where you left off. Thank you very much.

Ms. Lindee Lenox: We're on slide number four—the status of the national cemeteries.

This picture shows two different types of cemeteries. The top one is Fort Bliss National Cemetery, which has what is called water-wise landscaping. It's in the desert's southwest. This cemetery used to have grass. We converted it to xeriscaping; we call it water-wise. That's because there's not sufficient water out there to maintain this cemetery with grass. We also have a cemetery like that in Phoenix, Arizona, and we're building a new one with the water-wise landscaping in Bakersfield, California.

Other than those cemeteries, the one below, with the green grass, is typically what our cemeteries look like.

We in the National Cemetery Administration are very, very proud of the American customer satisfaction index 2007 survey results. Cemetery employees are committed to providing caring and compassionate service during the most difficult and emotional times in the life of a family. That commitment is reflected in the many expressions of customer satisfaction our employees earn. But this one is particularly important and meaningful. NCA earned a customer satisfaction rating of 95 out of a possible 100 points in the American customer satisfaction index. This is conducted by the University of Michigan. It's the highest rating in customer satisfaction ever received by a federal agency or private corporation, as recorded by the American customer satisfaction index. This achievement repeated the scores that were earned in the last survey, conducted in 2004, in which NCA also achieved a customer satisfaction score of 95.

Whether we're interacting with a veteran or a family member in arranging an interment, with visitors, or employees of funeral homes, our employees work hard to get it right the first time. We know in NCA that we have to get it right the first time, because you don't get a do-over. That is recognized in these scores.

Eligibility. Any member of the armed forces who dies on active duty is eligible for burial in one of our cemeteries. Any veteran who is discharged under conditions other than dishonourable is eligible, with certain exceptions. Service must be for a minimum of 24 continuous months, or the full period for which the person was called to active duty if he or she was a reservist or National Guard member. As you know, many reservists and National Guard were called to active duty for Iraq and Afghanistan. If they were called for a month and served the full time, then they would be eligible for burial. That's different from a regular enlisted person or officer in the military, who must serve 24 months in order to be eligible.

Spouses and minor children are eligible for burial in our cemeteries. State veteran cemeteries generally have eligibility requirements and provide benefits similar to our national cemeteries. Arlington National Cemetery is administered by the Department of

the Army, and they have special rules of eligibility that are slightly different from ours.

The burial benefits we provide include a gravesite, opening and closing of the grave, a grave liner, a headstone or marker, perpetual care of the gravesite, a U.S. flag, and a presidential memorial certificate. These are all free of charge to the veteran or family member. On the cemetery grounds, there is no cost. They do have to incur the expenses related to the funeral home and those kind of arrangements.

On page eight is the memorial program service. As I said, I am the director for memorial programs, so this has a special place in my heart. We provide all the headstones and markers that are placed in the national, state, and private cemeteries around the world. In fact, two-thirds of the headstones and markers we provide go to private cemeteries. The full range of products is available for private cemeteries. The family and the cemetery select what is allowable. Of those two-thirds provided outside the national cemeteries, we get claims for them. We adjudicate those claims and make those decisions. We place those orders individually and send them out individually.

● (1540)

We manage all of the contracts. Last year we were close to \$50 million in contracts for the headstones and markers and the transportation. That, of course, has been going up every year.

Families can also receive a presidential memorial certificate. You can see the picture of one there. This expresses the nation's gratitude. It is signed by the sitting President. The family of every veteran who is buried in one of our national cemeteries or state veterans cemeteries will automatically get one of these certificates in the mail. We're working on an automated system to also provide these certificates for those who are buried in private cemeteries. Right now, anyone can request a presidential memorial certificate on behalf of a veteran, so it can be a family member; it can be a friend; it can be anyone who requests it on behalf of the veteran. They can write us a letter, fill out a form, or apply on line; they can get that in any number of ways.

Turning to page nine, this shows the new cemetery construction. Our three newest cemeteries are located at Fort Jackson in Columbia, South Carolina, and Jacksonville and Sarasota, Florida. These cemeteries just opened in January 2009. Sacramento Valley and South Florida national cemeteries are fully operational, even as the phase one construction is being completed. They're still in phase one. Three additional cemeteries are now under construction or soon will be. These are the ones that are not yet open but where we have broken ground: Alabama National Cemetery, which will serve the Birmingham area in Alabama and is projected to open in May 2009; Bakersfield National Cemetery, which as I said will be one of our water-wise cemeteries and is projected to open in summer 2009; and Washington Crossing National Cemetery, which is in the Philadelphia region and is projected to open in fall 2009.

The next page presents the state cemetery grants program, which I talked a little bit about. VA provides 100% of the development costs to the states to build a cemetery. There are requirements associated with that. They have to build it to our standards; they have to maintain it to our standards. We don't buy the land, the state has to come up with the land. We'll then build it, and then it's a turnkey operation and we turn it over to the state. They then maintain it. Since 1980, \$344 million has been awarded in 172 grants.

These cemeteries augment our national cemeteries, and they are to serve veterans who lived in less densely populated areas. Grants have been used to establish, expand, or improve 72 cemeteries. There are 70 operational today.

Right now, we're projected to open five additional state cemetery grant cemeteries this year: Fort Riley, Kansas; Abilene, Texas; Springvale, Maine; Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri; and Alliance, Nebraska. So this is a great program for the states, and it really helps serve our veteran population.

Page 11 deals with the national shrine commitment. This is an initiative to maintain the appearance of VA cemeteries in a manner befitting their status as national shrines. We do consider them national shrines. VA national cemeteries are operated and maintained as national shrines befitting the veterans whose service we honour and commemorate. In a survey conducted recently by the National Cemetery Administration, 98% of visitors rated the appearance of VA national cemeteries as excellent. NCA's goal for this measure of performance is 100%.

This photograph is of the avenue of flags at Fort Custer National Cemetery in Michigan. Many cemeteries feature an avenue of flags, which is typically located on the main boulevard of the cemetery. During each interment service, the family is presented with an American flag as a symbol of gratitude for the service of the deceased veteran, and many families later donate the funeral flags for display at the cemetery. Most of the flags you see on the avenue of flags are, in fact, donated flags from family members.

This briefing has provided a summary of the mission and services of the National Cemetery Administration. With the expansion of national cemeteries and a culture of service that is second to none, veterans today have greater access to the kind of burial and memorial services they've earned and fully deserve.

• (1545)

That's all I have. I'd be pleased to answer any questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

You mentioned in your introduction that you are a veteran yourself, so we'd like to also thank you for your service to, of course, the United States of America.

Now we'll get to our questions. For the first round, and the Liberal Party, Madam Sgro, for seven minutes.

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Thank you very much, Ms. Lenox. It's very interesting to have you communicating with us via teleconferencing so that we're saving everybody's time, and being able to hear your comments and ask our questions.

Could I ask you what your budget is to deal with the cemetery administration?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: You can ask me that, and I'm going to have to get back to you on that. I apologize, I don't have that number for you. Mr. Muro would have it if he were here, and I do apologize for his not being here. He was called to a very important meeting. But I will get that answer for you.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Thank you.

It's certainly very interesting. I have visited a few of the national cemeteries, and it's a pretty terrific experience, I guess, in the sense that certainly you are doing a great job of ensuring that veterans are buried in a respectful way. I think anyone who visits these cemeteries cannot leave without being clearly moved by the number of veterans who are buried there.

This is an odd question for me to ask you. You've committed to the construction of 12 new national cemeteries. How did you arrive at the number of 12?

• (1550)

Ms. Lindee Lenox: We identify areas where cemeteries are needed based on the population. It's 170,000 veterans within a 75-mile radius. So we look at those population areas, we have a model, and that's where we identified the need. We identified the need for that many cemeteries with those population areas. That's where that came from. Congress did give us the authority for those, in those areas where we had identified the need.

Hon. Judy Sgro: In identifying, then, if you have a lot of soldiers in Alabama, you look at it and say, who have you got in the ranks of the forces? And that's how you would decide where you would need to have a cemetery?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: We look at the veteran population. If you have an active duty military installation, they are considered part of the veteran population. So yes, again it's 170,000 or more, of course, within a 75-mile area. That's the model.

Hon. Judy Sgro: What is the difference between the eligibility criteria for veterans who are buried in a national cemetery versus a state cemetery?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: It's the same in almost all instances. Some of the states may vary slightly, and I couldn't tell you from state to state what those variances might be, but for the most part it's going to be exactly the same.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Do veterans have a choice in where they are buried?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: Yes, they do, absolutely. An eligible veteran can be buried in any national cemetery as long as they're eligible. If they live in California they can be buried in a national cemetery in New York.

Some of the states are a little stricter about whether veterans from outside of their state can be buried there, but there may only be a few who fall into that category now, because we're trying to encourage them to allow veterans from across the state lines to be buried there. And they've been pretty cooperative about that.

Hon. Judy Sgro: I have a question for our chair.

Part of the role of the study is being able to compare what's happening in various other jurisdictions to what's going on in Canada. At what point would we have a grid to be able to do that comparison?

The Chair: I think what we've noticed is that there are quite a few differences, and researcher Michel pointed that out. I believe that at the end of the study we'll ask our researchers to aggregate all the information. I think it will be after we've finished all of our witness testimony, and they'd have to comb through the blues so they can actually develop that grid for us. Of course, then we'd have to do the job of ferreting through the information about what is equivalent and what isn't.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Would it not help us if we had that grid and layout of what we currently do for our veterans? We would be able to compare it on a much easier platform. We know what we're doing for our veterans in Canada now, but the role of the study is to compare it from country to country. It would help us as we go forward, rather than having to wait until the end of it to try to look at comparisons. It would have been helpful today, with Ms. Lenox here, to look at both of them.

The Chair: If that's something the committee would like to see, we could probably task the research staff with that and have something done up for the committee, as best we can, for the services that are available.

Hon. Judy Sgro: I'll pass it on to my colleague for a question.

Ms. Judy Foote (Random—Burin—St. George's, Lib.): Thank you.

I am interested in the comment about the national cemeteries that you don't actually have to buy the land, that the state provides the land.

Ms. Lindee Lenox: If it's a state cemetery they provide it; if it's a national cemetery we buy it.

Ms. Judy Foote: Okay. That's interesting. So if a veteran can be buried in a cemetery of their choice, I'm assuming their spouse and minor children can be buried with them as well?

• (1555)

Ms. Lindee Lenox: Yes, but they do not need to be in the same cemetery. The spouse and minor children gain eligibility based on the veteran's eligibility. As it sometimes happens, the spouse or the child may predecease the veteran. They may be buried in cemetery X, and the veteran may move across the country and die and be buried in a cemetery over there. So they may not necessarily be in the same cemetery.

Ms. Judy Foote: If the spouse and/or minor children die before the veteran, are all of the expenses associated with their burial covered?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: Yes, once they are on the cemetery grounds they're covered, but we don't cover the funeral expenses and what not.

Ms. Judy Foote: The funeral expenses aren't covered?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: We don't cover the funeral home and taking care of the body. But once they are on our grounds, from that point forward there is no expense. So the placing of the casket in the ground, the covering of the grave, the maintaining of the grave, the headstone, the marker—all of those things are at no expense. So the funeral procession comes in, and from that point forward there's no expense to the family.

Ms. Judy Foote: What is the situation with the veteran?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: It's the same thing.

Ms. Judy Foote: So the actual costs of the casket, the wake, and anything prior to the actual arrival at the site are not covered.

Ms. Lindee Lenox: That's correct.

The Chair: We're over seven minutes. Thank you very much.

Monsieur André.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy André (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): I am going to share my time with Mr. Gaudet.

Good afternoon, madam. I would like to know if you have any statistics on the percentage of veterans who choose to be buried in national cemeteries. And is the percentage tending to go up or down?

[English]

Ms. Lindee Lenox: Right now the percentage of veterans who elect to be buried in one of our cemeteries is running at about 14% or 15% of the entire veteran population. It doesn't sound like a lot, but it is by the numbers. When you add to that the government headstone and marker program that provides a headstone or marker for placement in a private cemetery, we are actually serving about 40% of the veteran population with either a burial option or a headstone or marker in a private cemetery.

We are not seeing an increase right now in the number of veterans served. This is an area that we're looking at. We feel that in many instances the veterans we're not serving probably do not know that they have this benefit, so it's our job to get that information out or do a better job of getting that information out to people.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy André: You said that lack of knowledge about the service is one of the reasons that explains the number of people wanting to be buried in national cemeteries. Are there other reasons why veterans would not want to be buried in those cemeteries? What are the main reasons? I know that, in Quebec, people often want to be buried with their families and loved ones. But the national cemeteries really are reserved for veterans only. Perhaps that is another reason. Could there be others? Could there be a reaction against war and conflict?

• (1600)

[English]

Ms. Lindee Lenox: I can't speak to all the reasons there might be. Certainly as you've pointed out, in many instances the veteran may have a family plot somewhere and they want to be buried with their family. They may not be very close to a national cemetery. We have the 75-mile radius for the population parts, but 75 miles is pretty far to drive for a family member and there are parts of the country that simply do not have a dense enough population for us to even put a cemetery there, so it becomes even farther for those veterans to have to go to be buried in the cemetery. And the only family members who would be eligible to be buried with them would be the spouse and the dependent children, so again that goes back to perhaps wanting to be in a cemetery that's near the parents or other family members.

As for whether the war...I simply don't know. I suppose there may be some who have some reason that they don't want to be buried there because they don't feel good about that, but I really couldn't tell you. I haven't heard that specifically.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet (Montcalm, BQ): Ms. Lenox, this question has already been asked, but I did not understand the answer very well. What is the difference between a state cemetery and a national cemetery?

[English]

Ms. Lindee Lenox: Our national cemeteries are managed by the federal government, by the Department of Veterans Affairs. There are three different types of national cemeteries. There are the VA national cemeteries, which are the 128 that we manage. There are national cemeteries that are managed by the United States park service and those are all historic sites, for example Gettysburg,

Antietam, those kind of historic sites, and they're not open. They're historic sites. And then there are the national cemeteries, such as Arlington, that are managed by the Department of the Army and there are only a couple of those, and then there are the state veterans cemeteries. Those cemeteries—the ones that we fund through the state cemetery grants program—mirror our standards as far as how they look and the veterans they serve. Some states have state veterans cemeteries that they've built on their own. They may be old, they may also be historic, but the difference is that they're either managed by the federal government or managed by the state government.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: In a rural area, if a veteran living more than 175 miles from a cemetery dies and is buried in a local cemetery, does the military pay the costs of the funeral?

[English]

Ms. Lindee Lenox: It's my understanding that there are some benefits payable through the veterans benefits claims process to reimburse some of the funeral expenses. We don't administer that program, so I can't really speak to that, but it wouldn't be the entire cost. There may be some reimbursement, and we do provide that headstone free of charge. That's just a simple claim that we provide that and then they don't have to furnish that.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: So, you just pay for the headstone when a veteran is buried more than 175 miles away. You do not pay for the grave, or for upkeep.

[English]

Ms. Lindee Lenox: That's correct. We have nothing to do with the upkeep of private cemeteries, no.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you for your questions, Mr. Gaudet.

[English]

Mr. Stoffer, five minutes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and madame. Thank you very much for appearing before us today. We greatly appreciate your appearance.

Madame, I also want to thank the United States for the liberation of the Netherlands in World War II. As you know, they liberated the southern part in Limburg, where my parents were from. The Kentucky brigade did the part, and we want to thank you very much for that.

I'd like my first question to be, what is your definition of a veteran in the United States?

• (1605)

Ms. Lindee Lenox: Wow. There's actually a definition within law, which I cannot cite for you because it goes on and on. For our purposes, any veteran who served on active duty prior to 1980, as long as they served and received an other than dishonourable discharge, they're going to be eligible for burial or for burial benefits. After 1980, a 24-month rule was added in, so the veteran had to serve 24 months to be eligible for burial.

Is this what you're looking for, or are you looking for a general, overall definition? A veteran is somebody who served in the military, basically.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: My concern would be this. If I am a brand new recruit and I go to a training base and I'm killed in training and I've only been there, say, for five weeks, would I be classified as a veteran and be allowed the burial benefits you've described here today?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: Yes. Anyone who's killed on active duty, as long as they were serving honourably when they were killed on active duty, is eligible.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Training is considered active duty. Thank you.

Ms. Lindee Lenox: Yes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: When you talked about the spouse as eligible for burial as well, I'm taking a scenario of an individual who served, say, in Korea or World War II and they were divorced and never remarried and that person passed on. Would their divorced spouse be eligible for burial as well?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: No.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: So once you're divorced, that cuts off any benefit in the long term in that regard.

Ms. Lindee Lenox: For that spouse, yes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you.

Also, how old does a child have to be before they lose that particular benefit? You say minor children and dependent children.

Ms. Lindee Lenox: It's up to the age of 23 if they're going to school full-time. After the age of 23, the only time they're eligible is if they're totally disabled and dependent. You could have a 50-year-old child if that person is disabled and totally dependent on the parents. Other than that, if they're not going to school full-time, then it's up to the age of 18.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: In this country, by the time we go to bed tonight, we'll probably lose anywhere from 75 to 85 World War II or Korean War veterans due to old age. If you include their spouses, you're looking at about 140 people a day who will pass on by the end of the night. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I assume that figure is 10 times higher in the United States, that you will lose anywhere from 900 to 1,000 World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam War veterans by the tonight. So your staff must be extremely busy trying to maintain all the statistical information to get the proper documentation and then the proper burial sites.

How do you manage to keep all that in check? That must be extremely busy for your department.

Ms. Lindee Lenox: We have wonderful statisticians and we have all that information. Yes, it's certainly a lot of information, but we do have it, and it's good information. Your numbers are exactly right; we lose approximately 1,000 a day.

I don't know how many staff it takes to keep up with all that, but we have it, and it's available to us.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: My last question for you is this. You mentioned the overseas sites you look after as well. In Canada a lot of our sites are done through the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The ones at Omaha and Sicily that you have, those are done strictly by the United States, am I correct, or do you do those in conjunction with any other allies as well?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: Those would be the American Battle Monuments Commission sites, and that's an entirely different federal agency from the VA, so we do not maintain those cemeteries. They're maintained separately. I don't know what the relationship is with the various countries.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: The last question for you is this. As you know, there's an island in Halifax where 200 American veterans from the War of 1812 are buried. Are you aware of that?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: I have a recollection of that, yes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: By way of invitation on behalf of my colleague, who's also from Nova Scotia, if you ever get a chance to come up, you're welcome to have a look at it. It's a beautiful site.

Ms. Lindee Lenox: Did we not provide a memorial or something up there?

• (1610)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Yes, you did.

Ms. Lindee Lenox: Yes, that came through my office.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Wonderful. Thank you very much.

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

Usually the chairman leaves his questions to the end, but there was a good point made that I wanted to capture. You mentioned that 14% of all veterans actually use your services. Is there any differentiation, or has that percentage changed from World War II veterans to Korean veterans to Vietnam veterans, right up to Iraq and Afghanistan, now that you're involved there? Has that diminished at all, or are there different groups that use your services more or less?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: I think it's increasing. I don't have the numbers to show you the incremental increases, but I do believe it is increasing. The younger veterans are more aware of their benefits. VA in particular is doing a much better job of letting the service members who are coming out of the service know about the benefits available to them. Of course, a lot of those who are killed in action are in fact buried in our cemeteries. That also raises the awareness of the benefit.

Now, the 14% figure is for burial. As I said, we actually serve about 41% with some burial options, which could be a headstone or a marker in a private cemetery. That demonstrates that the veterans are aware of the benefits available, but have just elected to be buried in a private cemetery as opposed to a national one.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Kerr, for seven minutes.

Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC): Oh, I still get seven minutes. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Madam Lenox, for joining us. This is a wonderful learning curve for us. I think I would like to add my thanks that you rescued Peter's family and put him amongst us over here in the Parliament of Canada.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Greg Kerr: But we'll reserve that one for a moment.

Looking at the satisfaction rate, I can understand why you are proud. Has that been a constant, or is it something that's improved as time has gone on?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: Well, this is only the second time we were involved in that particular survey, and both times we got 95%. So we're consistent at 95% so far. We're striving to get higher than that. They do it every two years, I believe. We have definitely improved. We do our own internal survey, and we have definitely improved. I don't have those numbers in front of me, but we have shown improvement, particularly since 2000, because we've really focused on putting standards of appearance in place for our cemeteries, and on developing what we call an organizational assessment and improvement process, where we have teams that go out and actually look at the cemeteries, and measure the headstones for their height. They also look at cleanliness, and at the height of the grass, and everything. It has made a big difference in the way the cemeteries are maintained and the way they look.

Mr. Greg Kerr: I think any government department on either side of the border would be quite pleased with a 95% satisfaction rate. So you ought to be proud of that.

I want to go to your page 9. It's been referred to, but I want a little more information on the location and the population, and your page 9 seemed to show it. I notice that the new cemeteries are basically in coastal states, except for Washington, and there's a huge territory in the middle. Is it likely that you're going to find a lot more state cemeteries inland, in the midland, or is that a population thing? Or is there some other reason?

I understand the growth along the coast, by population, but I'm just wondering if it is pretty static in the interior.

Ms. Lindee Lenox: What I don't have for you here, unfortunately, is a map showing all of our cemeteries. If you could see that, you would see they're all over the map. But yes, there's a less dense population in the middle of the country, whereas these areas that you're seeing are very dense. In the south particularly, you will see all of these new cemeteries in Florida. There are already several cemeteries in Florida, but these are new. A lot of retirees go to Florida, so it just makes sense that that's where the benefit is going to

be used. That's where it's a dense population, and along the east coast there.

The Washington Crossing National Cemetery is actually just outside Philadelphia, so it's really serving Philadelphia, New York, or that whole population area up in there.

But there are a lot of cemeteries in the middle of the country, we're just not seeing them there. Certainly there are state cemeteries there also.

•(1615)

Mr. Greg Kerr: If it were filled in, would there be a greater collection of state cemeteries inland, or would they be spread all over the country as well?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: They would be spread all over the country.

Mr. Greg Kerr: Thank you.

You mentioned that 75% of your headstones are outside the national cemeteries. I gather that it's because of the percentage of those who choose not to or for whatever reason are not in there. Is there any qualification that makes it different if you're not...? I know you said that anybody who's eligible can go into the national cemetery. Are there those that receive headstones outside that would not be qualified to go into the national cemeteries?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: The number is two-thirds. No, it's exactly the same requirement. It's the same eligibility requirement.

Mr. Greg Kerr: Okay.

Do you have a question, Phil?

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): I'm interested to explore with you, if I might—and certainly, thank you for all this great information—the standards you talked about briefly, just previously. It sounded as if, at a certain point in time, you decided to make certain upgrades to those standards and to then take measures to put them in place. Was that something that amounted to a large injection of funding into the system so that this could be accomplished?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: I think it was. I'm not going to say that there was a large injection of funding. Certainly there was some additional funding, but what really happened was an organizational decision, a leadership decision, that we needed to standardize what these cemeteries look like.

We do have some funding, which is part of this national shrine commitment, that has been set aside to do things such as major overhauls. If you have an old cemetery, where the headstones are tilted or are very dirty, we can do a major overhaul with this special funding for things like that. But the standards really apply to the day-to-day operational upkeep of the cemetery. If the cemetery staff are doing what they're supposed to be doing, they can keep those cemeteries at national shrine standards just by doing what they're supposed to be doing on a day-by-day basis. To get them there, we had to put those standards in place.

A lot of people worked for a very long time to get that right. Put them in place and it filters all the way down to the lowest-grade worker in the cemetery. They all understand what those standards are, all the way up to the leadership, and they can articulate them. Everybody knows. There's no question about how tall the grass should be. It's throughout the organization, with everybody understanding it. It's more about education and then holding people accountable.

The other thing we've done is develop an academy for our cemetery directors. This has been in place since 2003, I believe. All of our new directors go through a one-year program at an academy in St. Louis, Missouri. They learn cemetery operations in a standardized format. In the past, there were people who were hired from here, there, and everywhere, and they would go into this isolated area, and they were on their own. That's when things started to not look the way we wanted them to look. Now we've standardized it. We have an academy. We've graduated three or four classes now. And these new directors are going out and they understand it. It has just been phenomenal. It's wonderful.

The Chair: That's your time now. We'll move on to the next round.

We'll have Mr. Andrews for five minutes.

Mr. Scott Andrews (Avalon, Lib.): Thank you very much for coming today.

I have a couple of questions, and I'm going to start with eligibility. You said that they are eligible if they served prior to 1980 or if they serve 24 months of active service. Is that correct?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: Prior to 1980 they could have served one week of active service and been eligible. The law changed in 1980 so that they would have to have served for 24 months. That is your regular service person. I'll use me as an example. I served in the seventies. I served a two-year enlistment, and I'm eligible. If I had served 20 months instead of 24, and I had served in 1985, I would not be eligible.

• (1620)

Mr. Scott Andrews: Is there any lobbying right now or pressure to change that 24-month guideline?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: I believe it's being looked at, and that has to do, certainly, with the current conflicts. I can't really speak to where that's gone or who's looking at that, but it is being looked at.

Mr. Scott Andrews: Further, your National Guard and your reservists who spend 20 years of qualifying service have to be at least 60 years of age. So if someone serves 20 years of service and dies at 55, they're not eligible?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: They are. If they served the full qualifying service for retirement, and they would have been eligible for that at the age of 60, then yes, if they're 55 they're going to be eligible for burial if they would have been eligible for retirement at the age of 60.

Mr. Scott Andrews: Okay, fair enough.

Ms. Lindee Lenox: Does that make sense?

Mr. Scott Andrews: Yes, it does.

I'd like to explore this 41% that you do service. That means that 59% of eligible people do not take advantage of even a headstone. That's a pretty high number. How would you try to explain that?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: I can only speculate, and I will again use myself as an example.

I came to the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2001. I am a veteran; almost everybody in my family is a veteran. We all served our time, we got out, and we went on with our lives and never really thought much more about it. I did not know until I came to the Department of Veterans Affairs that I was eligible for these benefits.

So of that 59% of people whom you're talking about, I suspect that probably the majority of them simply are not aware. They served their time, they got out, and they went about their lives. When they reached an old age and were ready to pass on, they were making their decisions on that, and it just never occurred to them that they might be eligible for a burial benefit. That goes back, I believe, to our having the responsibility of doing a better job of getting the information out about what people are eligible for.

Mr. Scott Andrews: Would you say that any of it actually relates to the actual cost of the funeral? If they're buried in a cemetery, you're going to pay for the headstone and everything from the gate in. However, from the gate out is an essential cost to anyone burying anybody. How many veterans cannot even afford the whole burial process from the gate out? Is that of concern as well?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: There are certain veterans who are eligible for some reimbursement, as I said, and I don't know what that is. That's not the side of the house that I operate in. There are some veterans, and I believe it's veterans who are eligible for other benefits, who may be eligible for a reimbursement of some of the burial expenses. So there's that.

There are certainly others who probably have no money for the funeral. What options are available to them? Cremation, perhaps. We take care of indigent veterans. We actually have agreements with some of the local municipalities, cities, and what not, where, if they learn that an indigent was a veteran, they will come to us. They have some pool of money somewhere to take care of that and they deliver the veteran to us. We treat those veterans exactly the same as any other veteran. Once they come in, they get the full honours, they get the full everything.

So there are a number of safety nets, I guess, for veterans who don't have funding.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now on to Mr. McColeman for five minutes.

Mr. Phil McColeman: I'm interested and curious, more than anything, about a differentiation and I need you to clarify it for me. I think the national cemeteries like Arlington—and for the sake of better words, and I don't know if I'm using the right words here—are prestigious, elevated places for burial. They are no doubt finite in terms of the amount of space left to inter veterans there. Are you working towards a program to elevate the status of other facilities in that regard to that level of, say, an Arlington or a Gettysburg, or places like those? I'm sure a lot of veterans would be very honoured to think they would be able to be interred there.

● (1625)

Ms. Lindee Lenox: Well, as far as we're concerned, our cemeteries are just as prestigious as Arlington and any of the rest of them. We are constantly looking for ways to make sure we have space available forever.

Just as a side comment, Arlington is expanding. They are taking some additional land that's being donated, so they hope to stay open for a while longer. And we do service Arlington; we provide their headstones and markers.

We consider all of our cemeteries, every single one of them, to be national shrines. We maintain them to those standards, and we feel they are equal to Arlington.

Mr. Phil McColeman: I studied in the United States for my graduate work and I realized there are so many families in the United States who have lost a direct family member to one of the great wars, going right back, of course, to the Civil War. The sense of pride that Americans have is something I want to learn more about in terms of how we can translate some of that sense of pride to the sacrifices that the people in uniform make.

I'm wondering if there are any other advances you see on the horizon to be able to do that through the work you do. Do you have a wish list of things that you would change to improve?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: We're always looking for new things to do. In recent years we've participated in a program called wreaths across America, which you may or may not have heard about. During the holiday season wreaths will be put on graves in all of our cemeteries. It actually started at Arlington National Cemetery, and every single grave had a beautiful wreath put on it. Now it's across all of our cemeteries. That's one thing.

As far as a wish list is concerned, no, I can't think of anything. But I can say that we go out and speak on Veterans Day, we speak on Memorial Day. High-level people here in Washington—officials, governors, and so on—will go out to cemeteries across the country and they will speak. The ceremonies and events we have are phenomenal. There's always a great crowd, and it's a wonderful opportunity to instill that patriotism and get everybody remembering the veterans and the sacrifices. We do all those things and we're always looking for new ways, but in terms of a wish list of things, no, I can't think of anything like that.

Mr. Phil McColeman: I have one last question. There are always groups of individuals in society who become disenfranchised or are on the fringe, if I can put it that way. Are there any outreach programs to special communities to let them know about your services, let them know they exist? Because they participate in a less active way than the mainstream population of your vets.

Ms. Lindee Lenox: I think that's the group we're trying to get to, the folks who are not involved in any way in their veteran status. They don't belong to a veterans service organization. They don't go out to those Memorial Day events. We are trying to expand our outreach to groups like that, to go to places like nursing homes, where you wouldn't typically think of going. But those are the folks we want to get to, the folks who are veterans, many of whom just don't think of themselves, for whatever reason, as veterans. They don't identify in that way. So there are a lot of opportunities, and we are always seeking those opportunities.

The Veterans Benefits Administration, VA overall, has a number of programs to get out into the communities to try to get to veterans who are in need of our services. Ours, because we deal with burial benefits, is a little different, but certainly we're always looking for those opportunities.

● (1630)

Mr. Phil McColeman: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McColeman.

The Bloc Québécois has advised me they have exhausted their questions, so in rotation that would come back to Mr. Kerr, if you have more questions, sir, for five minutes.

Mr. Greg Kerr: I have just a couple.

You may have said this in your opening when the history came up, and I may have missed it, but when did the cemetery service start and when was the first recognized cemetery in the United States?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: I'm going to say the first cemetery was either in 1862 or 1863—it was the Civil War. President Lincoln started the cemetery system, and those cemeteries are all still around.

Mr. Greg Kerr: I'm not surprised that would be the case with the Civil War.

My colleague Phil was on to a point about outreach and so on. I know some of the challenges we have. Do you find a difference over time between some of the veterans who may want to resist service or recognition or contact; in other words, those who perhaps want to avoid recognition that they were part of the process of having been in war? Does one time period seem different from another, or is it pretty much the same challenge throughout?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: I think the older veterans, the World War II veterans in particular, are very, very proud of their service and very patriotic, but not ones to talk about it at all. We do see that. They're not going to step forward and ask for anything—for benefits, for services. It's just not part of their culture or their generation.

A lot more Vietnam veterans are much more apt to take advantage of benefits that may be available to them, and they are more vocal about what they believe they are entitled to and what their rights are.

As you move on up through the more recent and the current conflicts, these folks are very patriotic in the same way as World War II vets, but they're not afraid to ask for their benefits. It's a mixing of the two.

We, as an agency, are doing a much better job of reaching out to them and getting them early on and trying to deal with their issues while they're still transitioning out of the military so they understand their benefits. So they have much more knowledge and are there taking advantage of the services and benefits.

Mr. Greg Kerr: I think we've run through some of the similar challenges and recognition. Some groups are a little harder to approach than others, for similar reasons, for sure.

I'm going to turn to my colleague, who has a question.

Mr. Rob Clarke (Desnethé—Mississippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Are American veterans who now live in Canada entitled to the same benefits while living in Canada as other Americans?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: You mean the burial benefits?

Mr. Rob Clarke: Yes.

Ms. Lindee Lenox: Yes, absolutely. As long as they're an eligible veteran and fit the criteria, we'll ship a headstone to Canada and it can be placed at a cemetery up there, or they can come back to the States and be buried in a national cemetery.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

There's one more slot for the Conservative Party. Does anybody else have any questions? All right, then, I'll move on to the New Democratic Party.

Mr. Stoffer.

• (1635)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I have a question for you on your national ceremonial sites. Do you have security around the pocket of those sites?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: No. Our national cemeteries are open during daylight. They're not secured at night. The hours are posted, and we don't want people on the cemetery grounds at night. And the only security we have is that normally we will have an agreement with a local law enforcement agency, depending on the location. If they're near a military post or installation, then the military police may cruise through there at night. But no, guards are not on duty 24 hours a day.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Do you handle any requests for burials at sea? I notice you have a lot of terrestrial gravesites, but I would assume a lot of naval personnel would like to be buried at sea. Do you assist them in that as well?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: We don't assist in that. If they elect burial at sea and they do that, then they would be eligible for a memorial headstone or marker to be placed in one of our national cemeteries. It would say "in memory of" whoever that person is. We still recognize them with a marker in one of our cemeteries.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: My last question for you is this. If someone is killed in Iraq or Afghanistan today, would their entire funeral costs be covered by the United States? If their remains are sent home,

there's the repatriation ceremony part, but is the funeral cost—and not just the headstone and burial, but all the funeral home expenses—covered by the United States?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: I do not have an answer to that question. They're still on active duty, so the military may be picking up those expenses. I suspect it is, but I can't tell you that for sure. I can certainly get that answer for you, if you'd like.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I appreciate that, and thank you very much for your time today.

The Chair: Thank you.

It looks as if our final questioner will be Mr. Andrews.

Mr. Scott Andrews: Thank you.

I have a question on the markers you referred to. You said you would ship a marker to whoever requests it. Is that all done centrally? Obviously you want to have the same-looking marker as you have on your slide 8. Is that something that's centrally located, for the inscription and all that?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: We have contractors across the United States who work in marble, granite, and in bronze. My office manages those contracts. Wherever the contractors are, they will manufacture it and ship it. In some instances when it's a national cemetery, we have specialized contracts where we will have one contractor deliver blank markers to the cemetery and then we'll have another contractor to come in and inscribe it at the cemetery. We have different types of contracts.

Each national cemetery and state veterans cemetery orders its own headstones. They have an automated system. It's part of the VA's IT system. There is a specific inscription format. It's standardized. There's usually room at the bottom, after they have all their military information, where they can enter some term of endearment—"beloved father" and that kind of thing. For those who are going to private cemeteries, it's the same format as for the nationals and what not, but because those are individual orders, it's a very specific contracting method. They're produced and shipped from the contractors, and so it's a production line kind of thing for the private cemeteries.

Mr. Scott Andrews: I have one final question that goes back to how you can improve in making people aware of this. Are the funeral homes and those people who look after them aware of this? Do they promote it if they know someone is a veteran? How active are the actual funeral homes and people who do that in promoting to veterans that they can get a headstone and that kind of stuff? Do they resist that because it may cut into some of their profits?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: We rely very heavily on the funeral homes, because they are the ones who are meeting with the families. One of the standard questions is whether the person is a veteran. If they have integrity, then they will advise the family of what benefits are available to them through the VA if the person is a veteran. Most of them do, as far as we know, and we work closely with them. We rely on them. They understand our procedures and know who to call and how to make things happen quickly. They really are our partners.

• (1640)

Mr. Scott Andrews: Are there some issues there? You used the words “if they have integrity”.

Ms. Lindee Lenox: We're not going to know if there's a funeral home out there that is not providing that information. It's probably not ever going to come to our attention. I just say that because I expect a business that has integrity would let people know. I don't have any specific instances.

Mr. Scott Andrews: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Andrews.

I just have one question about the broader VA services, Ms. Lenox. A couple of times it was brought up that veterans don't know about benefits that they are eligible for, and that, by the way, is not uncommon here in Canada as well. What kind of outreach does the VA do in the United States to try to get the word out, not only for the memorial services but for the broader spectrum of the suite of services you have that are available to them?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: I can't speak too broadly about what the other administrations do, but I can speak about it a little bit. We certainly have a very robust Internet site that I invite you all to visit if you have the opportunity. Just type in “Department of Veterans Affairs” and it will take you there. That's got just phenomenal information on all of the benefits. It's got links all over the place, and anyone who goes there is going to be able to find out what they need to know. So we promote that very broadly. It's on all of our literature that we hand out and we speak about it.

We do a lot of events where we go out and speak. Of course we do our Memorial Day and our Veterans Day events and things like that where we're speaking to the public. But we also go out and speak to veterans service organizations, like the Vietnam Veterans of America. They have conferences, they have meetings, they have all those kind of things. We go out and speak to groups such as the AARP, the American Association of Retired Persons, or whatever that acronym stands for these days. We try to speak to those kinds of groups. We will go anywhere we're invited to go or anywhere we think we can reach a population that might benefit from our services.

There are also mailings that go out. I believe that VBA sends out mailings to veterans. There are a lot of things we do, but there's a whole lot more that we can do.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Now I want to give you an opportunity to make some closing remarks.

Ms. Lindee Lenox: I just want to say thank you very much for asking the questions and for being interested in our programs. Those of us within the National Cemetery Administration are really passionate about our work. We're proud of it. Every single person who works for the National Cemetery Administration really feels like their job is a calling, and I think that's something that is very

special about our organization. But VA overall is.... I've worked here since 2001, and it's just a phenomenal organization. It is an organization whose mission it is to help people and do to good things, and we do a great job of it. I'm proud to be able to talk about it and I'm pleased to be able to share this information.

The Chair: Since you've divulged that you have been at VA since 2001 and you said you're 37 years working for the government, that means you're a veteran—if I do a little bit of math—of at least 29 years in the United States military. Is that correct?

Ms. Lindee Lenox: No. I'm a Vietnam era veteran. I served for two years during the Vietnam era. I served in what used to be the Women's Army Corp. It doesn't exist any longer. But I worked for the Department of the Army as a civilian for ten years. I worked for the Department of Labour for 12 years. I worked for the Internal Revenue Service. I've moved around a little bit.

The Chair: Thank you very much. And really, the thanks are ours for investing your time as one of our guests of this committee. Also, we'd like to express our friendship to the United States of America as well. Having a good neighbour to the south of us is important to all of us.

Thank you.

• (1645)

Ms. Lindee Lenox: Thank you.

The Chair: Unless there is some other business, that will conclude our meeting for today. Is there any other business?

Hon. Judy Sgro: It would have been helpful today if we had known more about what we have, so that when she's indicating they have 12 new cemeteries getting built, we would be able to say, well, we only have four, or whatever. Just a bit of a comparison chart would have been helpful.

The Chair: So your suggestion is that for these next three witnesses that we have from specific departments of the VA services of the United States, we have some background like that of what we have?

Hon. Judy Sgro: Yes, exactly, if the object of the study is to compare what we're doing in Canada versus some of these other countries. Otherwise we're going to forget some of the things that we've heard today.

The Chair: It's going to be the research staff's job to bring that into a report. But I understand, as far as the ability to question....

Mr. Kerr.

Mr. Greg Kerr: Yes, I totally agree. I think it would be very helpful. I would also like to ask if we could get the briefing notes at least 24 hours in advance, if possible.

The Chair: Okay, when did you receive the briefing notes? Did you receive them today?

Mr. Greg Kerr: Yes, but it makes it a little hard, if we're involved in something else, to actually spend some time on this.

The Chair: Okay.

Is it possible to get briefing notes 24 hours beforehand?

Mr. Michel Rossignol (Committee Researcher): It depends on when the meeting is confirmed. Sometimes the subject of the meeting and the witnesses are not confirmed until a day or two before the actual meeting, and it takes time to write the briefing notes and time to have them translated. Then production takes time. I will try to get them out as quickly as possible. I always try to do that, but sometimes it's not possible.

Mr. Greg Kerr: I understand that there may be challenges. I just feel that we collectively, in all parties, need to be adequately prepared to ask appropriate questions. We get pretty top quality witnesses, and it's a good idea to make sure we ask all the appropriate questions we should. So I would encourage that wherever possible, please.

The Chair: Okay, Mr. Kerr.

Is there any other conversation on this?

Yes, Mr. Andrews.

Mr. Scott Andrews: On a separate issue, we're scheduled to go to Ste. Anne's on April 1, correct?

The Chair: That's correct.

Mr. Scott Andrews: I wonder if you could give some consideration to changing that date. Both Mr. Stoffer and I will be in P.E.I. with the fisheries committee that week and we'd miss the opportunity to take that in. I don't know if you could take that under advisement to see if you could accommodate Mr. Stoffer and me.

The Chair: I'll take that under advisement, but trying to debate that right now would probably be redundant, considering that many

of the people here are like me, in that their staff actually control their schedules. So why don't we allow the clerk to communicate with all the members' offices and see if there might be an alternative date that would work better. It's always the case with these things that it's tough to get 100% participation, but I will do what I can because it's my job to serve the committee.

Mr. Kerr.

Mr. Greg Kerr: I was also asked to fill in for someone on that committee and go on that particular trip because the biggest lobster area happens to be down our way.

But what I was going to ask is, how many arrangements have been made with the hospital? If they're really locked in, it's very difficult to change.

The Chair: Yes, and that's exactly what I was saying. But I will take it under advisement, as Madam Sgro so wisely says, and we'll do our best. If we can't, then we'll try to bring back a good report to you.

Mr. Greg Kerr: You're a most reasonable chair.

The Chair: On the other aspect, we do have the next few meetings locked in, so that will give the research staff a little bit more time.

However, I would ask that you be patient just a bit, because Madam Sgro has asked, and we all agreed, to make sure that we add a different dimension to this study and have this research parallel with our services—which I don't think you had in mind at the time you were writing your briefing notes. So we'll do our best to have that a minimum of 24 hours beforehand.

If there's no further business, the meeting is adjourned.

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