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**Chair**

**Mr. Greg Kerr**



## Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Thursday, May 31, 2012

•(1530)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC)):** I call the meeting to order.

Now that our guest has arrived, we can start.

We have a quorum, and everybody is in place. I am certainly pleased that for our continuing study of transformation initiatives, Ombudsman Guy Parent is here. With him is Gary Walbourne. Guy will introduce him properly. Also from the department—almost Guy's counterpart in the punching circles—is Keith Hillier.

Both of you are veterans before this committee in your own right, and we're very pleased to have you here today. You certainly know the routine. We'll have the comments first and then there will be questions from the committee, so there's no surprise there.

If we're all ready to go, then, Mr. Parent, are you prepared to start?

**Mr. Guy Parent (Veterans Ombudsman, Chief Warrant Officer (Retired), Office of the Veterans Ombudsman):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee.

First of all, Gary Walbourne is the director general of operations and also the deputy ombudsman. He accompanies me any place where there are going to be some hard questions.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Guy Parent:** It's a pleasure to be here today to contribute to the important work that your committee does to ensure that Canada faithfully repays the debt owed to our veterans of the Canadian Forces and the RCMP. They have served with unlimited liability, and we should repay them with fairness.

Although the process of transformation in Veterans Affairs Canada began in 2009, it is only in the last few months that my office has had some visibility in the process. My special advisor regularly attends the field operations advisory committee meetings and thus keeps me informed of upcoming changes.

I would highlight two key challenges when discussing Veterans Affairs Canada transformation. The first is that many changes, although approved, have not yet been implemented. This means that neither the department nor my office is yet in a position to speak to the effects of some of these changes. The second is that activities related to the transformation agenda, particularly in the human resources domain, are taking place at the same time as changes related to the recently announced budget reduction. This overlap

may make it more difficult for the department to relate effects directly back to transformation activities.

[Translation]

Overall, my office is encouraged by the proposed changes under the Transformation agenda. The importance of streamlining processes and reducing barriers of access for our veterans cannot be overstated. What is important to remember, however, is that Transformation must be focused on the end result—streamlining services and processes to meet the needs of veterans, their families and representatives. Transformation should not be an exercise focused solely on streamlining infrastructure or counting assets.

I have reviewed the transcripts of the testimonies preceding mine and with your indulgence, I would like to address the issue of Transformation in line with the five themes that Veterans Affairs Canada has identified: reducing complexity, overhauling service delivery, strengthening partnerships, sustaining the New Veterans Charter and aligning with veteran demographics.

[English]

Let me now address the transformation themes.

Reducing complexity—how do we get to a point where complexity of access to programs causes unfairness? Brigadier-General (retired) Larry Gollner, who was a member of my advisory committee, puts it this way:

...the answer lays with understanding that whenever public money and/or benefits are available for distribution an accounting system is set up. A system which grows constantly becoming increasingly complex so that eventually it reaches the optimum bureaucratic level of satisfaction. That is when more money is spent managing the system than is spent providing benefit to those the system is meant to serve.

Many veterans perceive this to be true. Transformation must therefore focus on the needs of veterans and their families rather than on the administrative needs of the department. Some of the recent changes announced by the department, such as the upfront payments now being made for grounds maintenance and housekeeping services under the veterans independence program, are good first steps, but the department's responsibility does not cease with system change. Follow-up and continuous improvement must be part of transformation.

•(1535)

[Translation]

My office has also done work in this area. In February 2012, we released a report concerning reasons for decisions, which provided recommendations to the department to assist with their written correspondence. In addition, the Office has developed tools such as the Benefits Navigator to help unravel the complexity surrounding programs and benefits. I understand that the Benefits Navigator is now available to all Veterans Affairs Canada staff, and I have been assured by the minister that by the end of the year, it will be publicly available to all veterans through the Veterans Affairs Canada website.

[English]

On overhauling service delivery, testimony presented to the committee thus far has focused on mechanical aspects of the department's planned changes. What is yet to be addressed is how the overall effects of these initiatives are going to change the culture within the department. These cultural changes will need to be clearly communicated, not only internally to departmental staff who are working in a changing environment but also to the veterans community. Employees and clients need to understand and appreciate the efforts being undertaken on their behalf, and staff must embrace these changes and communicate them effectively to veterans.

Veterans Affairs Canada is the agent responsible for paying the debt Canada owes to our injured veterans. It is not a social services program. I believe that the presumptive philosophy that military service affects a veteran's health and wellness should be inherent in the department's culture.

Strengthening partnerships is more than just having a department that works with the Canadian Forces and the RCMP, veterans groups, and other stakeholders. To be truly transformational, veterans must perceive that their interests are seen to be represented at all levels.

[Translation]

There remains a lack of understanding of veterans benefits and services amongst many veterans. This is a symptom of decades of reactive communications whereby veterans had to self-identify before engaging with the department. Veterans Affairs Canada must be more proactive when reaching out to veterans and must ensure that the communication tools they use meet the varied needs of their clients.

[English]

Transparency is the key to successful partnerships in a transformational environment. Providing all stakeholders with the necessary information to have informed debate strengthens the system. This is one of the key reasons the office looks forward to the benefits navigator going public. Being proactive in seeking out veterans before they have a need creates positive relationships.

I have spoken in the past about the creation of a national veteran's identification card to facilitate communication and the provision of services to veterans.

As the *raison d'être* of Veterans Affairs Canada is to serve veterans, meaningful transformation cannot occur without the engagement and full participation of veterans. Delivering benefits and administering programs for injured veterans requires engagement from many governments and from many government organizations and veterans groups. The department, through its transformation initiative, must strive to ensure that the efforts of many are harmonized and coordinated to simplify access and to avoid duplication.

[Translation]

I would now like to address the New Veterans Charter. That charter introduced a new concept, shifting the emphasis from benefits dependency to a transition to a civilian life where the physical, psychological and social barriers are addressed. Having viable options is the key to a successful transition.

To this date, the New Veterans Charter has not been well understood by many. The department should do more to proactively educate the veterans' community about the full spectrum of benefits available so that one can believe that there will be better options for the future than remaining in the present.

[English]

This committee had directed that the changes to the enhanced new Veterans Charter be reviewed in 2013. In that light, my team, in consultation with stakeholders, is preparing a complete review and analysis of the new Veterans Charter that will be presented to the government in due time. It does not mean that I will be waiting for that time to pursue change. The new Veterans Charter is a living document. When I see an unfair practice, such as the discrepancy with the earnings loss benefit minimum salary for reservists, I will actively pursue that change, concurrent with conducting the review.

Next is aligning with veterans demographics. The department's transformation initiative currently centres on demographic projections that indicate that the number of Veterans Affairs Canada clients is going to decrease. There are currently over 500,000 veterans who are not yet clients of Veterans Affairs Canada. The department's own life-after-service studies show that two-thirds of Canadian Forces former regular force personnel released between 1998 and 2007 are not receiving benefits. However, 54% of those report at least one physical health condition; 13% report at least one mental health condition; and many report chronic health conditions they attribute to their service. These statistics indicate that there is a potential unknown liability associated with the unmet needs of veterans who are not aware of existing programs.

We need to keep in mind that the number of veterans is but one indicator of workload. Demographics alone do not capture the full extent of future requirements. I would contend that the complexity of managing the case of a modern-day veteran who suffers from PTSD and has a family is much more intensive than that of an older, traditional veteran who suffers from the early stages of Alzheimer's or dementia. Significant case management resources are required in both cases to meet the needs of these individual veterans. Future needs are likely to be more demanding, especially when one considers that three decades of high operational tempo for the Canadian Forces have only now started to show their effects.

• (1540)

This is why I'm concerned that between current unmet needs and potential future needs, the assumption that the department's work intensity and client numbers are going to drop is somewhat questionable.

[Translation]

Finally, I believe that it is critical throughout the Transformation process that Veterans Affairs Canada have the means to measure whether changes are having the intended impact and what degree of success has been achieved from the perspective of both the veteran and the administrator. The tools must be in place to measure both the quantitative as well as the qualitative effects of Transformation. The department should be proactive in establishing sound mechanisms to measure effectiveness and wherever and whenever it is possible, the department needs to engage with veterans.

[English]

My office is currently engaged with the department to recommend some best practices in the area of performance measurement. For our part, the office has put in place mechanisms within our personal complaints tracking system to detect and highlight complaints related to service delivery and changes in turnaround times or access to services. We will continue to proactively monitor media reports and solicit feedback from veterans groups in order to quickly identify any areas of concern.

Let me conclude by restating the importance of having a transformation agenda that is focused on improving service to veterans, their families, and their representatives. Transformation should not be an exercise focused solely on streamlining infrastructure or assets. Transformation is about people, and the department must ensure that improving service to veterans remains at the centre of these changes.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention. We now stand ready to answer any questions.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Parent. I appreciate that.

Mr. Hillier, I understand you have a few comments before we go to questions

**Mr. Keith Hillier (Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Thank you, Chair.

Good afternoon.

[Translation]

It is a pleasure to be here with you this afternoon.

[English]

It's a pleasure to be here with Mr. Parent, the veterans ombudsman, to support this committee's study on transformation at Veterans Affairs Canada.

I thank the ombudsman for his remarks. While it is true that the OVO and VAC serve very different functions, at the core both organizations exist to serve Canadian veterans and their families. We have seen in the past that the ombudsman plays an important role in serving veterans.

As the department undergoes its current process of transformation, Mr. Parent and his team will continue to provide valuable insight. I look forward to the shared work our organizations will undertake in the coming years. I will begin by providing an overview of what we have been able to accomplish since the transformation process began in 2011. By cutting red tape, we are reducing the complexity of navigating departmental processes. An example that my colleagues have discussed is the re-engineering of the treatment benefits program. Today, approximately 77% of the subsequent pre-authorization requirements have been removed. This means that veterans will not need to repeatedly contact the department to receive a pre-authorization for benefits that had been authorized on a previous occasion.

We have also begun to overhaul our model of service delivery. A prime example of this is the additional delegated authorities we've provided to our front-line staff who work directly with veterans. By reducing the number of decisions that have to be approved at regional and head offices, we have made access to rehabilitation, health, and treatment benefits faster and easier.

We have developed an excellent case management tool that allows our staff to better manage their workload. Our case managers provide a holistic case-planning approach and have been granted more decision-making authority, which increases the speed of our service delivery.

These are only some examples of the work we've done, and I'm happy to report that our efforts are already starting to show concrete results. At the national client contact network, VAC's call centre, we are experiencing decreases in client wait-times, reductions in abandoned calls, and an overall increase in the consistency of our services.

In addition to the tools that we've provided to our staff, we have also taken steps to improve our programs. Since I am presenting with the ombudsman today, I would be remiss if I did not mention our department's initiative of providing decision letters in plain language, something that Mr. Parent and his staff accurately identified as a gap in our service.

Another example of a program improvement is the change to the veterans independence program. By changing the VIP from a contribution to an upfront payment, veterans and their families will face a significant reduction in the amount of paperwork they need to fill out. This is the sort of bureaucratic red tape we've committed to removing from the system.

I'll close by discussing the veterans we serve.

We understand that this transformation is an ongoing process, driven by an historic shift in the demographics of the veteran population. In the coming years, we expect the total number of veteran clients to decrease, while the complexity of the modern-day veterans' needs and expectations will increase.

It is this shift toward modern-day veterans that has prompted us to improve the service delivery channels we offer. We want to be in a position to provide services by the Internet, by telephone, or in person. Our commitment is to provide the best quality services and benefits to veterans and their families. We will accomplish this by ensuring that we have the right people in the right places with the right skills to get the job done. Naturally, some of our offices are going to get smaller while some offices are going to get larger. Over time, our front-line staff will be positioned where the needs are greatest, which will be determined by veteran demographics.

I thank the members of the committee and the ombudsman for their time and attention, and welcome any questions that you may have.

•(1545)

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

We'll go to Mr. Stoffer.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and my thanks to you gentlemen for coming today.

Mr. Parent, a while back you issued a report and a discussion on reservists and regular force personnel. In Afghanistan, if you had a regular force person and a reservist, and they both suffered the same injury, their payments or pension benefits might be different when they came back. Your report was pretty straightforward. I wonder if you had any response from the department on this part of your report.

**Mr. Guy Parent:** Thank you for the question.

I believe you are talking about the annual report...?

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** Yes.

**Mr. Guy Parent:** Okay. I think the distinction to be made there, and in fact a clarification, is that a reservist injured while on duty in Afghanistan on that type of deployment is entitled to the same benefits as a regular force soldier. What concerns us is the people who fall into the other classes of reserves—the class B under 180 days, and the class A. In the interests of fairness, regardless of what the service contract is, somebody who actually gets injured in the service of his country deserves the same recognition and the same benefits.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** Have you had a response back on that from the minister or the department?

**Mr. Guy Parent:** Not necessarily. What has happened in that context... We've actually had the meetings with, first of all, Veterans Affairs Canada, which said that it was the responsibility of DND. We subsequently met with the chief of military personnel in DND, who said it was a Veterans Affairs Canada matter. So no, it still stands where it is, and we're still pushing the issue of treating a reservist the same as a regular force soldier in the context of suffering injuries and earning benefits.

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

This question can be for either side, if you wish. When a military person no longer meets universality of deployment, they are generally medically released, whereas in the RCMP they do everything they can in order to employ that person within the RCMP. Should the rules change? Or should there be a better sort of aspect to ensure that men and women who wish to stay in the service—maybe in an administrative role or something of that nature—indeed get an opportunity to stay and to wear the uniform, although in a different capacity?

As you know, many of them leave the service because of a medical problem. Many of them have quite the challenges in dealing with that. I know that, in the public service priority hiring, DND has done most of the hiring, and DVA has done a very little bit. The rest of the public service has failed miserably when it comes to hiring veterans or military personnel.

But is there not a possible way, Mr. Hillier or Mr. Parent, that more members of the military who are injured can stay within some capacity of DND in the future?

•(1550)

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** Well, maybe I'll start with regard to the universality of service. As to whether someone should stay in DND, I would really defer that question to them.

On your broader question related to the public service, you are correct. DND certainly has hired significant numbers and Veterans Affairs has hired some. But there is continuing work going on and there are continuing discussions going on with the Public Service Commission in looking at ways that we could do even better across the public service in this particular regard.

But I think that one of the things we must remember, Mr. Chair, is that many of the people who leave the Canadian Forces aren't necessarily interested in a job in a government department. That's why we have moved ahead with our partnership with Helmets to Hardhats, for example, so that we can provide a diversity of options to individuals, and that's why we have career transition and other programs.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** Mr. Hillier, I was wondering if you can tell me this. On the phone calls that are going on where somebody calls a 1-866 number and you can get back or you can get Service Canada, can you explain how Quantum, the private company, fits into this?

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** Sure.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** Because I'm rather puzzled as to why Quantum would answer the phone and say they are the Department of Veterans Affairs when they answer the phone. How does that actually work?

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** Well, I think I need to first explain to you why we're doing it.

First of all, what we want to do is for very routine questions—people who may want an information kit or a brochure or something—we don't want to use the valuable time of our skilled and trained employees to handle those routine questions. So when a veteran calls the number, they basically have an option that says, "If you're a client of Veterans Affairs Canada, if you're a veteran, or if you are a family member, push one, and if you're looking for general information around veterans' issues, push two". That goes to Service Canada.

We have a contract with Service Canada to handle those calls. We have been working with Service Canada for many years. When we've had various issues with new programs or what have you, and also to allow for surge capacity to be able to handle our calls, we've often used Service Canada in the past. So this is not new.

Service Canada has a number of government employees and a number of contract employees. I believe it was in the year 2008 that Service Canada entered into this contract with the company you refer to. These employees are trained to the standards that we set. We've actually had our managers over in the centre, making sure that the veterans are getting the service they need.

Quite simply, what we want to do is that we want to leave our staff, who are well trained in veterans issues, to handle the approximately 800,000 phone calls we receive in a year, and in so doing, have some of the more general non-client-related.... For example, Service Canada does not access the private information of a veteran. They do not have access to the database.

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

Ms. Adams, for five minutes.

**Ms. Eve Adams (Mississauga—Brampton South, CPC):** Thank you very much for appearing here before us again, Monsieur Parent, Mr. Hillier, and Mr. Walbourne. My first question is for Monsieur Parent.

In your December 2011 report, you recommended to the minister more plain language and more clearly identifiable information in the disability benefit assessment letters. In fact, that recommendation was welcomed by the minister, and significant changes have been undertaken. We refer to this as the plain language initiative, where a document that is sent out to the veteran clearly, in plain language, communicates exactly how a decision has been derived, what information was relied upon, and how someone might go about appealing that decision.

Could you provide me with some feedback, please, on your assessment of these new initiatives?

• (1555)

**Mr. Guy Parent:** Yes, we were instrumental in moving the department to simplify its correspondence. Even recently, in the report that we released, "Reasons for Decisions", we indicated that it's not only the language but also the content that's important. I'm glad to report that there is some improvement in the process, but we are still looking at what will be the overall effect.

What's important to realize here is not only the simplicity, that people understand, but also that the principles of natural justice are respected. That's our concern, as well. The report contained a

reflection of what information should be contained in the letter, and what is necessary for people to carry on with the process or to simply stop where they are.

Yes, there's a definite improvement. We're happy with the efforts that are being made in the decision letters now. There is a move forward in that, and we're happy with it.

**Ms. Eve Adams:** Thank you very much, Monsieur Parent.

Mr. Hillier, in terms of red tape reduction at the ministry and the type of red tape our veterans are facing, could you provide us with some information about what the ministry is doing to reduce the red tape that our veterans face, in particular with the VIP, the veterans independence program?

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** The VIP is certainly one of the largest efforts. Through this initiative we will eliminate 2.5 million transactions annually. That's 2.5 million instances where veterans were submitting receipts to be authorized for payment. It will make life much simpler for the veterans. As the minister announced in the spring, we are working to start in the fall to phase this in for Canada's veterans.

Certainly, from visiting with some veterans and talking with some veterans organizations, the general consensus is that this is a good thing. It's not the only thing; there are other items we're working on that I'm sure, in due course, the minister will be announcing.

As my colleague Mr. Parent, has noted, it's about continuous improvement. It's not about doing something and saying that we're there.

**Ms. Eve Adams:** We can't rest on our laurels, but my goodness, 2.5 million instances where veterans no longer need to take the time—to waste time, really—filling out cumbersome paperwork, which then expends valuable taxpayer-funded resources in the government to review and audit it. It's completely pointless and needless.

We certainly don't believe that veterans need to suffer under some sort of nanny state. We believe veterans can be trusted to spend their money wisely, that they're entitled to the money under the program, and that it simply can be provided to them.

Are there other red tape initiatives that you're looking at currently?

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** Yes, we are looking at a number of things. I won't go any further this afternoon. I'm sure that once we finalize things, the minister will announce in due course further streamlining and further red tape initiatives, which staff are working on as we speak.

**Ms. Eve Adams:** Perhaps, under the transformation initiatives, you could identify some of the wait-time reductions that have been achieved.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** Well, with the wait-time reductions—and I'll tell you a little bit of a story of when I visited bases, and when I visit bases now, the changing—if it doesn't make a difference to the veteran, it's really not important.

On disability awards and disability pensions, a couple of years ago I would have come here and said “Gee, we’re trying to hit 24 weeks, and we have a bit of a backlog”. Our service standard is 16 weeks. As of March 31 this year, we were hitting 40 weeks 80% of the time and 12 weeks 70.5% of the time. We were fast moving towards having cut the wait time in half. Approval for entry into a rehab program has been cut from four weeks to two weeks.

The one thing I would really highlight—I noted in my speech—is that fact of not having to get re-authorizations. It’s not about how long you have to wait anymore; it’s about the fact that you don’t have to do it anymore. That makes things very....

How do I know it’s working? When I visited Canadian Forces bases and wings, I would often get complaints that it takes forever to get a decision on a disability award. Now some people are coming up to me saying, “Hey, this is great. It took me only so long to get my decision.” That, to me, is the real test.

• (1600)

**Ms. Eve Adams:** And, our veterans are saved the indignity of having to apply for it over and over again. Once they’re approved, they’re approved.

**The Chair:** Okay, your time is up.

We’ll move on, please.

Mr. Casey, you have five minutes.

**Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Gentlemen, shortly after it was announced that the payments under the veterans independence program would be changed to lump sum, upfront payments as opposed to approval of expenses, I asked the Minister of Veterans Affairs in the House of Commons whether those upfront, one-time payments would be taxable, and he didn’t answer my question. So, I wrote him a letter, which he hasn’t answered. Do any of you know the answer?

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** The previous payments were not taxable, and it would be my expectation that this payment would not be taxable either.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** It’s your expectation. I mean, that’s the best you can do?

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** It’s my understanding that the previous amounts were not taxable. My understanding is that the new system will not be taxable.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Okay. Thank you, Mr. Hillier.

Mr. Parent, do you have any reason to hold a different—or qualified—opinion to what you just heard?

**Mr. Guy Parent:** No, I would certainly support the idea of a non-taxable payment, since, in its present form, it is non-taxable. I can’t see how just making it a lump sum, instead of a series of payments, would introduce a tax addition.

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

Mr. Parent, you indicated in your opening remarks that you are about to engage in a detailed examination of the new Veterans Charter, as part of the next round of continuing to give effect to this

living document. You indicate that this committee has directed that the changes be reviewed in 2013.

Sir, you’re probably aware of this, but right now we’re studying the transformation agenda. Our next study will be on the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. Given the work plan for the committee, would your recommendation be that following our look at the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, we should then be examining the next round of changes or enhancements to the new Veterans Charter, given the timeline that you’ve laid out?

**Mr. Guy Parent:** Thank you, that’s a very good question.

As you probably are aware, we were instrumental in getting this clause in the enhanced new Veterans Charter reviewed in two years. What’s important is that the new Veterans Charter, which was supposed to be a living document, was on life support for six years and then finally resuscitated at the end. We don’t want it to get lost, we want it to be alive.

What we’re doing is preparing, by providing some information, a basic foundation document that all people who are engaged in discussions about the new Veterans Charter can go to and speak from a common platform. That’s what our team is engaged in right now—we look at recommendations from other groups and what some of the views of different organizations are, and put it all together. In fact, organizations have a tendency to pick and choose what they like and don’t like, and to push that aspect, sometimes shadowing some of the good parts or some of the things that are also important.

Our intent is to be ready to do our part, whenever the committee decides to do the review, and in the process to also inform other organizations.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Mr. Parent, last week I had the pleasure of meeting the board of directors and reviewing the report prepared by the Equitas Society, which, as you know, feels there are many cases where soldiers and veterans under the new Veterans Charter are treated worse than people under provincial workers’ compensation systems. Will that analysis form part of your review, and should it form part of ours?

• (1605)

**Mr. Guy Parent:** Thank you.

Mr. Chair, that’s a good question. Certainly, I would expect that any work being done by any organization toward improvement of the new Veterans Charter should be reviewed by the committee. As far as organizations are concerned, we will be following up on all reports that people have produced, so our approach will certainly be that anything that is published on anything that has to do with the new Veterans Charter will be looked at.

As you’re also aware, because of our independence we do not support any specific organization, but we listen to them all. I think I’ve said that publicly before. We’re there to be the ear for the veterans, and we listen to them all. We pick up any point that is of value to add to our work, anything that is founded evidence, not rumours or assumptions.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

You can certainly have one quick question.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Mr. Hillier, at the last meeting I tried to get this committee to look at the changes that are coming through under Bill C-38 to the statute that deals with veterans pensions. Are you able to explain what they are?

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** I'm not familiar with all the provisions. I believe what you're referring to is the omnibus bill. From my side of the business, on the service delivery side, I'm not involved in the drafting or preparation of the legislation. I couldn't be an expert witness in that area.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Right.

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

Now to Mr. Chisu for five minutes.

**Mr. Corneliu Chisu (Pickering—Scarborough East, CPC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Thank you very much, Mr. Parent, Mr. Hillier, and Mr. Walbourne for appearing in front of the committee.

I have questions for you, Mr. Parent and Mr. Hillier. I will be very brief and quick.

What is the trend in your case services, Mr. Parent? How much information do you get from veterans, from members, or from the forces? What has the trend been in the last five years? I am a veteran, so I simply set the stage. I retired in 2009, and I've never heard about your service.

**Mr. Guy Parent:** Thank you for the question.

What's important to realize is that we do keep track of all the complaints we receive, and this provides the basis for systemic issue review. In general, we get about 9,000 calls or contacts a year. We categorize them. At this point in time, most of the ones that we get are related to health care—health care provision, health care travel, that sort of thing.

**Mr. Corneliu Chisu:** Are these increasing or decreasing? What is the trend?

**Mr. Guy Parent:** The categories haven't changed at all. Health care remains the top one. The application for benefits remains the second, and the third one is other jurisdictions. That remains pretty well constant.

**Mr. Corneliu Chisu:** Do you receive these from the regular force, or do you have—

**Mr. Guy Parent:** From both serving and veterans, and people who are retired from the forces and the RCMP, yes.

**Mr. Corneliu Chisu:** How do you promote? How do you go out to the units to tell them what you're doing and what your role is?

**Mr. Guy Parent:** We have an outreach campaign. In fact, this year saw me starting in Quebec City, to the Maritimes, Northern Ontario, out in B.C., and then to Saskatchewan, where I met also with the RCMP units out there. Our outreach campaign includes having some town hall meetings with veterans and their families, and meeting with local organizations of veterans, elected officials like mayors and ministers of the province, if that's possible, to promote the healthy veterans. It's a program that we pursue every year from

here on in. The theme is different. The one for the current year is to educate them on my role and to educate them on what our team can do for them.

I also think it's important to realize that when an organization does outreach, it's a dialogue. It's a feedback process. We also track what the concerns are. We bring them back, and then we inform Veterans Affairs Canada. We also make a point of visiting their office, and whenever the session is over, we report to them what it is that we found.

**Mr. Corneliu Chisu:** Thank you.

Mr. Hillier, how many cases do you have yearly? You mentioned there is a downward trend in veterans issues. Can you explain to me how many cases you have yearly, or what the trend of the cases is?

• (1610)

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** Mr. Chair, generally we are seeing a downward trend because of the mortality of war-era veterans. We are seeing modern-day veterans coming in. We are seeing that the rate of mortality of war-era veterans is exceeding the rate of intake of modern-day veterans at this time. I just want to note—and I know Mr. Parent noted this—that we actually look at these things quarterly. We do have projections for numbers of years, but every quarter, we actually look at where we are and where we're going.

I think what's important, Mr. Chair, is that we have in excess of 200,000 people today who have received or are in receipt of a benefit or a service from Veterans Affairs. I think one of the key indicators we look at is those whose cases are being managed. These are people with serious injuries that may require rehabilitation that is both social and vocational. These are people who may have a multiplicity of physical and mental injuries. Our general caseload is around 7,000.

So when you start off with 200,000 in the system, and you take out caregivers and so on, so that you are looking at the ones whose cases are actively being managed, it ranges between 7,000 or 7,100. It fluctuates because there are people who come into the program, and happily, there are people who leave the program. They are rehabilitated. They're reintegrated back into society. We're seeing the number at around 7,000. I might add that the number of 7,000 includes both post-Korea veterans and war-era veterans.

**Mr. Corneliu Chisu:** I have another question if I might. I'll be very brief. You were mentioning the public service, and you mentioned hiring in the public service. There was a trend at DND and Veterans Affairs to hire retired members of the CF. But there is now no age limit on how long you can serve in the public service. However, in the army at 60, on your birthday, you are out.

So what kind of measures can be taken so these qualified veterans can apply for the internally advertised public service positions, such as those at Foreign Affairs or CIDA, if you are going into a war area when you have the qualifications?

I just want to mention to you very briefly that Helmets to Hardhats is a program. But many of our retired Canadian Forces people are working in the Bruce Nuclear and Pickering Nuclear plants, and that is also a public service.

Could you please answer? Thank you.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** I can just make a comment with regard, Mr. Chair, to the issue of people in the Canadian Forces being able to apply for jobs in government. I can tell you that at Veterans Affairs, all of our competitions are open to members of the Canadian Forces. In personnel or human resources speak, it's also an asset qualification that we use, and certainly we would encourage more departments of government to ensure that their competitions are open.

I guess finally you make a good point. Members of the Canadian Forces generally are extremely well trained in whatever their profession may be in the Canadian Forces, and many of the people leaving Canadian Forces do not need our transition services. As a matter of fact, many already have jobs in the private sector or in other sectors of government or in commissions or agencies because their skills are well recognized in Canadian society. Many people take off the uniform on a Friday and go to work on a Monday.

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

Now it's Ms. Mathysen for five minutes.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here. It's always a pleasure to see all of you, and we welcome the input from the veterans ombudsman. It's very helpful in terms of what we're doing.

Mr. Parent, you have said in your brief, and I'm just going to quickly quote from it, that as of 1998 to 2007, 54% of released personnel reported physical health conditions, 13% mental health conditions, and many have chronic health conditions, and yet these individuals are not necessarily being looked after by VAC. You also said that the reality is that current needs are unmet, and you expressed concern about the department's ability to meet not just current needs but the future needs, given the fact that there are so many service personnel out there who have retired or who haven't been released, and they're not accessing the system yet.

I wonder, are you concerned about the loss of personnel in Veterans Affairs? Very clearly, we don't know, as you said, what the impact of budget reduction and staff reduction is going to be.

Secondly, do you think perhaps that veterans' homelessness, the kind of homelessness we're seeing in so many other communities, is a symptom of that unreported or unconnected group of retired or released personnel?

Finally, how does VAC get out in front of this? Clearly you've raised a red flag here. What does VAC need to do to get out in front of what seems to be a considerable and quite frightening problem that our country and our veterans are going to face?

•(1615)

**Mr. Guy Parent:** Thank you.

That's a very good question. I'm going to try to hit all the answers, but certainly I think I'll start off with saying that our concern—I've

expressed this, I believe, to the committee before—is with the fact that a lot of people are suffering in silence. Some of them do this because they're proud. Some of them because they don't know what's available for them. Basically, I think that point in my address speaks to that. There are a lot of people out there, and the statistics come from the study that was actually done by Veterans Affairs Canada and DND, in a life after service study.

Basically, I think that's what the important thing is.

In the past, people had to self identify, and there was no advertising done about VAC programs, so people suffered in silence, not knowing that something's happening to them. Also, as I mentioned before in front of this committee, we have people now who are serving in uniform both in the CF and the RCMP who are suffering in silence because they don't want to lose their careers. There will be unmet needs there as well that will flow over to Veterans Affairs Canada when they fully retire.

Also, in regard to your question related to homelessness, homelessness, of course, is only a factor. There are other things associated with it, like dependencies and those sorts of things. The thing is that what's important there are again the communications and the strategy at Veterans Affairs Canada. We have been pushing for a national strategy on homelessness, and I think it's an important thing to do, and we're certainly pushing Veterans Affairs Canada to come up with that.

Basically, I think that covers pretty well the aspects that you've asked about. Again, I think communication is by far one of the key elements in all of this. Veterans have to come forward and communicate with the department, but the department also has to be straightforward with the veteran community and advertise what it is that's available for them.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Thank you.

I want to follow up briefly on Mr. Casey's question. He asked if there had been any investigation of the impact of Bill C-38, because we know that it is going to profoundly impact the entire social safety net of Canada. Would it not make sense, or is it not prudent, to look at that bill and estimate or think about what the impact is going to be on veterans?

**The Chair:** You have to tie that into transformation, because that is definitely off topic. The question is about transformation. You're talking about a specific bill. Your question is about transformation in what way?

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Bill C-38 is going to have a profound impact in terms of money and personnel. They're looking to have these savings. How will that impact transformation? Doesn't it make sense to look at this and say that we see a potential problem or that this has significance when it comes to what we want to do?

•(1620)

**The Chair:** Mr. Hillier, give a brief answer, please.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** Certainly we have examined the impacts of the budget. The budget is consistent with the transformation of what we've been doing. It's about eliminating some of the red tape and inefficiencies in the system. In fact, the provisions of the budget that relate to Veterans Affairs Canada, including those that have staff reductions, are consistent with our transformation agenda.

We at Veterans Affairs Canada would argue that we're actually out ahead of the system. We've started doing the re-engineering and the types of things some other departments are just starting to move to.

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

Go ahead, Mr. Lobb.

**Ms. Eve Adams:** Actually, Mr. Lobb is going to share his time with me.

Mr. Hillier, is it correct that budget 2012 is actually a win for our veterans, and that there are no reductions to the benefits extended to our nation's veterans?

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** That is correct. Certainly, the big win has to do with the VIP, which we've talked about. Also, it's giving us other opportunities for streamlining.

If you go to the budget documents, you will see that the smallest percentage decrease of any government department is at 1.1%. Those are in the budget documents. As a result of that, and as I've testified in front of this committee before, there are no reductions in the services and benefits to veterans or to the programs, given the fact that we had a very small decrease of 1.1%.

**Ms. Eve Adams:** In fact, at this committee, the NDP would not vote to support \$3.6 billion in expenditures for our veterans. Previously, under a Liberal government—

**The Chair:** We're now straying off transformation again. What's in the air here?

**Ms. Eve Adams:** I will pass my time to Mr. Lobb. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Mr. Lobb, please.

**Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC):** Thank you.

Mr. Hillier, what is the number of new veterans getting into your system every year, now that the mission in Afghanistan is well on its way to being wound down? What is the number of new clients you're receiving now? Is the number starting to taper off, or are we still experiencing an increase in the number of new veterans entering into Veterans Affairs?

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** We have forecast that we will continue to see increases in the number of individuals coming in.

I want to make sure I give you the correct numbers. There is a bit of a myth out there as it relates to Afghanistan, in my view. Others may disagree, Mr. Chair. Generally speaking, about 35,000 men and women served in Afghanistan, and that would be somewhere in the vicinity of 55,000 to 56,000 deployments, I would say.

There is this myth, and maybe it's driven a little by the media, that if you served in Afghanistan there must be something wrong with you. The vast majority of men and women who've come back from

Afghanistan have not been injured and are not injured. I want to give you some numbers here.

I'm going back to our December quarterly report. Of the 35,000 men and women who have served, 4,181 are clients of Veterans Affairs as a result of their service in Afghanistan. That's not to say there will not be issues of late-onset PTSD, and as my colleague Mr. Parent has noted, some may be suffering in silence, but I just want to put that in perspective. When you look at the numbers, as you project, yes, hundreds of thousands have served. But when you relate it just to the Second World War, one million Canadians served in the Second World War, and the legacy this left in terms of the needs to be met lasted over generations, I would say.

I want to give you the perspective in terms of the numbers because there is a sense out there.... Some Afghanistan veterans have said to me they're a little concerned that people look at them and ask if they're okay because they've served in Afghanistan. There is a certain stigma, and I think we have to be very careful we don't oversell that.

The other thing I think is important is that many of the cases we have are challenging, but I want to give you another statistic, just to put things in perspective. If you look at people who are seriously injured, who are at 78% or above, the numbers who are currently in the system receiving or eligible for earnings loss is about 800. When I look at Afghanistan using that same criteria, those who were seriously injured number about 450. So I'm not saying these individuals are not important. They're extremely important and certainly the more severe your disability, your illness, or your injury, the greater support you need and must get from Veterans Affairs. Everybody is injured, and most of the disability awards we pay out are for fewer than 25%. That's not to say that this isn't important.

•(1625)

**The Chair:** We are over time, so could you have one brief question and a brief answer, please?

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** I think I'll just leave it at that.

**The Chair:** No, you're welcome to—

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** The point I was trying to make with that—and it was a good, lengthy answer—with the demographics there is a tremendous opportunity within the confines of the budget of Veterans Affairs, which is over \$3 billion a year, to provide unique and innovative services to our modern-day veterans. There is a huge opportunity like no other time in our history to provide these unique opportunities. With the demographics and the changing face of our veterans, we're into a period where it is rational and appropriate to embark on a transformation agenda because there are tremendous opportunities to serve our clients.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** Yes, we must get it right for the veterans.

Transformation is not about what we're doing today or tomorrow. It's about laying out a framework for modern-day veterans, not unlike what was laid out for war-era veterans. So we're laying the groundwork for transformation for the next 10 to 15 years, and that's why it's a big project. It's going to take some time to get there, but it's important to get it right.

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

Mr. Storseth.

**Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Mr. Parent, for the work that you do on behalf of Canadian Forces veterans and Canadians as a whole. Mr. Hillier, it's good to see you again. You, too, Mr. Walbourne.

Mr. Hillier, you were discussing your visits to Canadian Forces bases. I think it's excellent that you take that initiative. How often would you do site visits like that in a year?

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** I couldn't tell you off the top of my head, but last year we probably did about 20. I think the important part is that we did it with the Canadian Forces. Standing next to me, my deputy, or one of my ADM colleagues was the chief of military personnel or the deputy chief of personnel. So we could stand up there and we could talk. We gave a bit of a presentation, but the big part of it was the town-hall discussion—not unlike what Mr. Parent has. Some of our groups were as small as 50 in some places. At Petawawa the place was full—there were hundreds in the main hall at Petawawa. That gave us the chance to talk to veterans and for veterans to talk to us.

I've also gone to the training college of the chief warrant officers. These are key players. For the last two years, I've gone there and I've done a town hall with chief warrant officers, who are extremely influential with the men and women serving. I said to them, "Look, if any of your men or women are ill or injured, be sure to call us."

If we get that message out, it is a great help. Even if they only suspect they're injured, and even if the men or women don't want to talk with Veterans Affairs, we ask them to call. We have peer support coordinators all over the country. They may not be ready to talk to a bureaucrat or a case manager, but they might be interested in talking to somebody who served and can appreciate their situation. If such and such happened in such and such a place, we have people who might be able to relate to that, to understand.

• (1630)

**Mr. Brian Storseth:** I think you should be commended for this. I have heard of members of Veterans Affairs coming to some of my bases. It's been very well received. Part of the problem in the past was that men and women in the Canadian Forces perceived a barrier at Veterans Affairs. I think it's very important that they know of this open-door policy. I would even suggest that you inform the Royal Military College of this, so they know about these possibilities at an early stage of their careers.

I'd like to talk to you about the transition from the service to civilian life, when they're engaged with the VA caseworker. What are some of the practices we're using for that period? This can be a confusing time for serving members. Talk to me a little bit about some of the advocacy organizations that are there for members to use but that may not necessarily be within DND or VA.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** There are basically two processes: one for those who are medically released, and another for those who are releasing maybe because they're retiring or taking a job elsewhere.

**Mr. Brian Storseth:** Let's focus on medical release.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** For medical release, we have a casualty notification process. If a veteran is injured overseas or in Canada, we have an automatic notification of that injury. We automatically get that out to our caseworker in whatever city it may be. In the early days, the lead is with the case manager from the Canadian Forces, because the member is still serving. But we introduce our case manager as well, so it's a bit of a dual. One might call it an overlap, but I think it's important for trust. As the member gets closer to releasing, the level of input between the Canadian Forces caseworker and the Veteran Affairs caseworker changes. We try to make it as smooth a transition as possible.

**Mr. Brian Storseth:** They're there to facilitate that transition.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** They're there to facilitate. They're there for the veteran. They're there to have those discussions about rehabilitation, what programs.... Also, it's really important to note that the veteran can bring family members to these discussions, or a trusted friend, whoever the veteran might want to be part of those discussions. But we try to make it as hassle-free as possible for the veteran moving from the Canadian Forces medical system.

It's one of the challenges that we have to work with and facilitate, because for many years they've been used to a Canadian Forces health system. The day they take off their uniform and are released, they're now part of the health system of the province they'll be living in. In some cases, Veterans Affairs has to top up because some of the benefits that the releasing member may need may not be as widely available in the general population—things such as a drug formulary, and various types of treatments and benefits that the veteran would need.

It's really a matter of the case manager working with the veteran and with the veteran's family.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Hillier. That will end round one. Round two will be four minutes.

Mr. Stoffer briefly, and then Mr. Chicoine.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** This is for confirmation again.

With the transfer of Ste. Anne's Hospital, there will be approximately 1,300 federal DVA jobs that will be gone from Ste. Anne's alone. Then from DVA's own information, an additional 804 jobs are to be reduced over the period of three years. That's a reduction of 2,100 jobs out of a department of approximately 4,100 to 4,200, representing a 45% personnel cut, which in personnel is a bit more than 1.1%. The government on that alone will be saving a tremendous amount of money in that one department.

My question to you is, with the transfer of Ste. Anne's and with many modern-day veterans, including some World War II veterans who cannot access things like the Camp Hill hospital, the Colonel Belcher, or the Perley, etc., what is the federal government's plan, through DVA, to offer long-term health care for modern-day veterans?

• (1635)

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** I guess there are a couple of things.

First of all, Mr. Stoffer, I don't believe it's 1,300, but I won't argue with you over that.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** That's their own figures.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** Well, it's around 900 FTEs, but there are casual and part-time individuals and what have you. I want to remind you that the work is going with those. We're not trying to run the hospital with fewer people. The hospital will be transferred—

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** That's not what I'm arguing.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** Okay.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** The transfer is happening, it's simply that those jobs will no longer be under the federal government.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** That's correct.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** They'll now be completely different. So there's a removal of those jobs, plus the 804 that your own department has identified.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** That's correct.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** Approximately 2,100 jobs, we have been told, will be removed from DVA, leaving approximately 2,000 people, unless you hire more in the future. We don't know. So what I'm saying is that there's a 45% personnel cut.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** Yes, but I would reiterate, Mr. Chair, that we are also reducing the workload by an equivalent amount. We are not asking the approximately 2,000 people who will be staying to do the work of 4,000 people. We're actually reducing the work.

As it relates to Ste. Anne's, that responsibility goes and so do the employees. And in many of the transformations and also in terms of the budget reductions, it's about doing work very differently. It's about using technology, using alternative service provisions, so I want to be very clear. We're not asking 2,000 people to do the work of 4,000.

Regarding your question on long-term care and the current eligibility, you suggested that modern-day veterans do not have the same eligibility to contract beds as war-era veterans. As I've testified at this table before, modern-day veterans have access to a community bed with respect to any injuries they would have sustained in terms of their service to Canada. There is no change to what I've testified previously on that front.

**The Chair:** Mr. Chicoine, you now have less than a minute to ask one question.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP):** Thank you.

While we are on that topic, Mr. Parent, do you have any concerns regarding the Ste. Anne's Hospital transfer of responsibilities?

**Mr. Guy Parent:** That is a good question. Equity is always paramount in our view. When we examine any program or project that concerns veterans, we look at it from the equity perspective in particular. Can we guarantee that the veterans or patients who are in Ste. Anne's Hospital will continue to receive the same quality of care as they are entitled to now? Will those who have a right to hospital care continue to have access to it without any problem?

Another thing that concerns us regarding the hospital is the fact that it is also a centre of expertise on post-traumatic stress syndrome. We would like to be sure that the coordination of Canadian clinics will be done from Ste. Anne's Hospital. It is important to us to ensure that we will not be losing their expertise on that.

[*English*]

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

We'll go to Mr. Harris now for four minutes, please.

**Mr. Richard Harris (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Gentlemen, I want to thank you for coming today. We sure appreciate your input.

It's unfortunate that some people at our committee around our table seem to think that the word “streamlining” is somehow a nasty word. I think even some of my colleagues would admit that bureaucracies—I speak of departments, not the people, but the departments—the longer they've been around, the more likely they are to acquire money-losing symptoms, such as waste, duplication, and redundancy. And like a business that's entering some challenging times and has to streamline the business to make it through, every department in the government is faced with the same challenge.

I would suggest that Department of Veterans Affairs, given a number of 1.1% to streamline their budget by, was easily able to find it by eliminating waste, duplication, and redundancy. They coupled that with newer, better, and more efficient ways of offering the services. You were indeed able to get those reductions without touching one single service you are offering your clients.

Mr. Parent, you had a very good closing conclusion. You said, “Transformation is about people, and the department must ensure that improving service to veterans remains at the centre of these changes”.

Mr. Hillier, shortly after that you said, “Our commitment is to provide the best quality services and benefits to veterans and their families.”

That is complementary to what you said, Mr. Parent.

Mr. Hillier, you also said, “We will accomplish this by ensuring that we have the right people in the right places with the...skills to get the job done.” That's exactly what streamlining is all about.

I need to get you to just maybe explain this once more, so that it's very clear. When you looked at streamlining your department, you had to be keeping in mind that your mandate and your goal was to offer better quality service to everyone who needed it in Veterans Affairs. Maybe you can explain that a little bit so that we really get that message driven in.

• (1640)

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** Mr. Chairman, throughout the transformation process, we're looking at the initiatives we're taking through the eyes of a veteran. What is this going to do for a veteran? As I noted earlier in my testimony, if it doesn't make a difference to a veteran or his or her family, then why are we doing it? It's just bureaucracy kind of running around.

What we did was look at some business re-engineering processes. The methodology we use is called the Hammer methodology, which is well accepted for business re-engineering. It's not driven by people like me, because quite frankly, I don't know the work. It's driven by the workers, the people who work with veterans every day—case managers, doctors, nurses, and file clerks. We use that methodology, which has been very successfully used in other government departments around town and in the private sector.

What we do is lay out our business process and ask what we are putting the veteran through. How many times are we asking the veteran for the same document? How many forms are we asking a veteran to fill out? Do we need all these forms? Can we just get the information once? Can the veteran use his or her service number as opposed to some Veterans Affairs number?

When you do that, you actually find, as has been mentioned, that a lot of interesting process builds up in a system that's been around for many years. What you do is extract the duplication, the overlap, and the waste.

From my standpoint, transformation is not about reducing jobs. It's about improving services to veterans. As a result of that, there will be some job losses, because there are things people used to do at Veterans Affairs that computer systems do. In some offices, we were spending a lot of time printing off letters, signing them, and sending them out. That's not how we do business anymore. How we do business is that we send a data file to PWGSC, Public Works, and they actually mass print tens of thousands of letters for us in minutes.

Sadly, there are HR consequences. The reality is that, as we go through this period when we will be reducing 800 jobs, over 1,000 people in the department will be eligible for retirement on full pensions or reduced pensions. Through good human resources management, we think we can make this as painless as possible.

In addition to people retiring, we probably lose about 100 people in the department every year. We're looking at the efficiency, the balance. Certainly, Canadians expect veterans to be well taken care of, but they actually expect value for their tax money. We have a responsibility to our staff to treat them in a fair and humane way as we go through this process.

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

I think we are back to Mr. Chicoine, this time for four minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Gentlemen, I want to take the time to thank you for having come here to share your expertise with us.

I would like to go back to the health care issue. Mr. Parent, you mentioned that veterans who come to see you most frequently raise issues regarding access to health care. Is that indeed the main reason why veterans come to see you?

• (1645)

**Mr. Guy Parent:** They come to talk about access, and the quality of health care and the cost of travelling to access it. So the overall administration of programs is involved.

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** Is there a standardization issue from one province to the other? Is the care the same everywhere? Is this a specific problem in one province rather than another?

**Mr. Guy Parent:** Let's just say that there are a lot of differences from one province to another. The provinces do not all have the same health care network nor the same administrative structures. This does cause problems for some veterans.

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** One case made the headlines. I don't know all the details. It concerned the use of personal information. One veteran sued the department for the use they made of his information. I did not really follow the whole story closely. Have you received a lot of complaints concerning the use of personal information?

**Mr. Guy Parent:** No, but that is a good question. Our first level of intervention consists mainly in providing information and helping to guide people to where they need to go to have their complaints resolved.

As for access to private information, if that is an issue, we refer complaints to the commissioner. That office deals with that. We send veterans in the right direction, and we do follow-up to ensure that the problem was resolved.

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** With the transformations that are going on, is there a risk that that issue might get even worse?

**Mr. Guy Parent:** The mechanisms put in place by the department seem to be a step in the right direction.

After what happened publicly, we reviewed the processes we use to make sure that the members of our team respect standards regarding access to private information.

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** In another connection, it seems to me that I read in one of your reports that it might be advisable to publish the decisions of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. Is that the case? Would there be benefits to doing that?

**Mr. Guy Parent:** Another good question. A few weeks ago, we issued a report on the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. Even the decisions of the Superior Court are published on its website. I would go so far as to say that the majority of quasi-judicial tribunals in Canada do the same thing. That is one of the recommendations in our report. It would really help veterans. Then they could know, before they took legal action or filed an appeal, what their chances of success were. It is a necessary tool that should be made available.

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** Indeed, they could consult those. If they saw a negative decision, they might decide to not bother, or vice-versa. Perhaps more veterans could then try to get their rights upheld.

**Mr. Guy Parent:** It would give them a starting point. They could compare their case to others where a decision has been handed down.

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** Thank you.

[English]

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

Mr. Lizon, for four minutes, please.

**Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to join my colleagues in thanking you gentlemen for appearing this afternoon before the committee, and I thank you and congratulate you on the great work you do for our deserving veterans.

Mr. Chair, if I may, I would like to direct the first question to Mr. Parent, and maybe Mr. Hillier would comment.

In your presentation, you used a quote from a member of your advisory committee, Mr. Gollner. I am not going to read the quote because you know what I'm talking about. In your opinion, would you say that the current transformation the department is doing addresses the issue that's contained in the quote? Or do you have some other view that something else should be done in that respect?

• (1650)

**Mr. Guy Parent:** No. Thank you. It's a very good question, Mr. Chair.

In fact, I think it goes back to what Mr. Harris was saying before. Eventually over the years the programs become complex. The administration of the programs become so complex that changes are made to facilitate the administration of the program. In the end, we spend more money on administering than we're spending on people. This has to do a lot with the streamlining aspect of the transformation. The department, in looking at it in that perspective, is going in the right direction.

**Mr. Keith Hillier:** Mr. Chair, I would agree that as we got into the re-engineering—and we're still doing it, it's not done—we did find things of unnecessary complexity in the system, multiple control points. There has to be balancing. When you have a budget of \$3.6 billion, there has to be adequate financial control to make sure that the money is going where it should be. You can go a little bit overboard over time and find that you have someone doing the work, then you have a checker, and then you have a checker checking the checker.

It's not that people made bad decisions. They made informed decisions at a point in time, Mr. Chair, but now with new technology and so on, there are ways that we can achieve the same controls without the same amount of human oversight.

**Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon:** Thank you very much.

I'll continue, Mr. Parent, on your presentation on sustaining the new Veterans Charter. You mentioned the department should do more to proactively educate the veteran community about the full spectrum of benefits available so that one can believe that there will be better options in the future than remaining in the present.

Now, do you have any specific recommendations? We have heard in our travel and doing our committee work that there is a problem with the information, the right information, getting to veterans. We understand there is a lot of work in this respect done by the Department of National Defence and Veterans Affairs. What else should be done to get that information to veterans?

I will ask Mr. Hillier, of course, to comment on this as well.

**Mr. Guy Parent:** Thank you. It's another good question.

Obviously, over the years the program was never well explained. It's a new concept to go from dependency to transition without barriers to psycho-social and medical.... It's a new concept and very hard to understand. People have had a tendency over the years to pick one aspect of the program and to argue that particular aspect without looking at the full spectrum. This was from not understanding the program. Communications were weak from the start, and communications need even now to improve so that people understand what it's all about from start to finish.

Another confusing thing about the new Veterans Charter is that there are programs that are available on both sides of the fence, from DND and from Veterans Affairs Canada. In a lot of cases there is no harmonization of those programs. Very often, there's confusion as to which program should be beneficial to the individuals. Should it start before he leaves the forces? Or should it start after he becomes a veteran? All these confusing aspects of the program are also leading to misinformation for the veteran.

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

That is the time. I know we have a little business. I want to just explain where we're going in a minute. I do want to thank our witnesses very much. It was very informative. I appreciate it. You get along great, and everything worked very well. Thank you very much for being with us.

Having said that, we're just going to do a little business, then we'll try to wrap up. Say a quick goodbye, then we're going to deal with a little business here, please.

- \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- (1655)

**The Chair:** For the next two weeks, by the way, we have witnesses set up. We're looking at maybe not having meetings the last week, unless we really push it. I want you to think about that for next week. Certainly the last Thursday before we wrap up, we don't want to have a meeting.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** Do you know what day we're going to rise?

**The Chair:** No, I don't. All I'm saying is that it may or may not be the Thursday. I wouldn't want to count on it is all I'm saying.

Mr. Storseth, I think you had your hand up.

**Mr. Brian Storseth:** Mr. Chair, I'd like to inform the committee of a motion that I'd like to put forward. The motion reads:

That the Committee recognize and commend the recent decision by the Government of Canada, particularly the Ministers of National Defence and Veterans Affairs to not appeal the Federal Court's May 1, 2012 decision regarding the offset of Pension Act disability benefits from the Service Income Security Insurance Plan (SISIP); and that the Committee commend the Government for demonstrating its continued commitment to serving members and veterans by also taking action to harmonize disability benefits at Veterans Affairs to reflect the planned changes to SISIP; and that this be reported to the house.

Mr. Chairman, I'd like to seek unanimous approval from the committee to move forward with this motion.

**The Chair:** There's a notice of motion. Is there unanimous approval?

**Mr. Brian Storseth:** It's my understanding that if we have unanimous consent, we could pass this motion right now.

**The Chair:** Okay, hands up.

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** The motion is moved.

Mr. Lobb, you had your hand up.

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** Mr. Chair, as per custom on the veterans affairs committee, I move that we now go in camera to discuss this issue further.

**The Chair:** That's non-debatable.

(Motion agreed to)

**The Chair:** We'll go in camera, so would all those who are not attached to the committee or to the members, please excuse themselves from the room.

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*







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