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Chair

Mr. Greg Kerr

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC)): Okay, folks. We'll get this meeting under way. I want to remind everybody that we're continuing our study on the review of the enhanced new Veterans Charter. We have welcomed several witnesses and will continue to do so in this process.

Today we are very pleased to have with us Tim Laidler, executive director of the Veterans Transition Network, and also, of course, Ron Griffis, who has been here a few times from the Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping.

Welcome, both of you.

I think it has been explained that we're going to hear from both of you and then we're going to do the rounds of questions. We have 10 minutes for each of you for your introductory comments.

Have you decided which one of you will go first?

Ron, it's good to see you. Please begin.

Mr. Ronald Griffis (National President, Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping): Thank you.

Veterans, honoured guests, and honourable members of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, I bring you greetings from Canada's pre-eminent peacekeeping veterans organization, the Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping. Thank you for inviting our organization to appear before this honourable committee.

My comments to this honourable committee are a synopsis of suggestions and information that I have received as a result of seeking guidance and input from our members and their families located within our 28 chapters across Canada.

I would like to also point out that I was a member of the original New Veterans Charter Advisory Group under the chair of Muriel Westmorland. Our final report, "Honouring Our Commitment to Veterans and Families, The Living Charter in Action", was submitted to the government on June 15, 2009. To date, very little progress has been accomplished after the submission of this excellent report.

We are fully aware that Veterans Ombudsman Guy Parent has already appeared before this honourable committee. In principle, we support the testimony and presentation by our Veterans Ombudsman. He touched all the required bases.

We also support a letter and opinion dated November 15, 2013, that was sent to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, the Honourable Julian Fantino, as put forth by the Veterans Consultation Group, a group of 20 veterans organizations that meet on a regular basis to discuss matters of mutual interest pertaining to veterans and their families. Our organization participated in preparing the findings, as mentioned in this letter. A copy of this letter is attached to my presentation.

Item one in this letter indicates that the earnings loss benefit, ELB, must be improved to provide 100% of pre-release income, to continue for life, and include increases for projected career earnings for the Canadian Armed Forces members, for example, indexed.

Item two indicates that the maximum disability award must be increased consistent with what is provided to injured civilian workers who received general damages in law court.

Item three describes the current inequity with respect to the earnings loss benefit for class A and class B—that's less than 90 days—reservists for service attributable injuries. That must cease.

Another item that was emphasized in the report presented by Ms. Westmorland was families, in particular, caregivers, wives, or spouses. It is particularly embarrassing that the government completely ignored this part of a veteran's life. Without question, the caregiver, spouse, and/or wife has been treated with disrespect and forgotten, to say the least.

Many partners of armed forces veterans have given up countless opportunities with respect to education and employment to be a military spouse. Their spiritual growth and their ability to be gainfully employed with opportunities for meaningful advancement in a field of their choice and/or to participate in higher education are hampered by their loyalty to their spouse.

An extremely interesting and revealing book, *Hurry Up and Wait: An Inside Look at Life as a Canadian Military Wife*, written by Dianne Collier and published by Creative Bound books in Carp, Ontario, provides an in-depth and very realistic look at military life as a spouse, and of course by extension, as the spouse of a retired veteran.

Without question, it is accepted in today's Canadian economy that to have a successful financial household requires two people—husband and spouse or husband and wife—working outside the home and participating in meaningful employment. If a veteran is on one of the many programs sponsored by Veterans Affairs Canada and a spouse is the main stay-at-home caregiver, there is absolutely no way that the spouse, or for that matter, the veteran, can participate in programs that will support and enhance future financial responsibilities as well as save for retirement.

The Veterans Ombudsman's report is quite clear on the pitfalls of becoming injured while serving Canada, and if the spouse is a main caregiver, it is respectfully suggested that they are destined to live a life under or at the accepted level of poverty in Canada.

• (1535)

Spouses of Canadian Forces members are treated like second-class citizens in that, being loyal to their spouse who was a serving Canadian Forces member, they are prohibited, by reason of their geographical location, from earning a decent living or securing an advanced education. If the spouse of the Canadian Forces member were permitted to obtain a higher education, they would be able to secure employment that would permit them to move along with their spouse and to transfer that education and employment to the new postings.

Many occupations are transferable: accountant, nurse, police officer, social worker, dental professional, administrator, and psychology and business persons and the like. If a veteran or severely injured Canadian Forces member is to retire or live a life as a contributing member of a community, they must be able to see a light at the end of the tunnel that is not a flickering candle.

I respectfully suggest that now is the time to make changes to the new Veterans Charter. In the past, several well-meaning and respected expert advisory groups have submitted well over 200 suggestions on how to improve the new Veterans Charter. With all due respect, there's been little movement from the government. Please make the necessary suggested improvements to the new Veterans Charter and give the veterans of Canada the proper care, support, and compensation they deserve and are entitled to.

Among the persons I contacted with respect to seeking advice on this particular appearance were Gloria and Ed Blizzard of Wilmot, Nova Scotia. They fall into the exact category that I have just referred to. Mr. Blizzard is not very well. When he passes away, Mrs. Blizzard, if she's still remaining, will experience difficulties. Their case is just one among the many, many, many cases of veterans who will experience difficulty.

With that submission, I respectfully submit this particular report. Thank you very much for your attendance.

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

I should point out that we didn't have either report at the time to be able to circulate them. We will get the reports and have them translated, and all members of the committee will receive copies. We're only getting it verbally today. I just wanted to point that out to people. Thank you very much.

Mr. Laidler, please.

Mr. Tim Laidler (Executive Director, Veterans Transition Network): Thank you, everyone, for having me here.

I appreciate that the government is taking the time to review the new Veterans Charter. In my position as the executive director of the Veterans Transition Network, as a veteran myself who served in Afghanistan, and somebody who's gone through some of the operational stress injuries and come out the other side of the system, there are definitely some improvements that could be made along the way.

That being said, I also want to highlight some of the success stories and encourage some of the good parts of the new Veterans Charter that should be maintained. I hope the entire legislation is not completely thrown out, because our program did start in 1997 and as our clinicians can attest, and they've asked me to mention here today, there were a lot of complaints about the Pension Act as well. I just want to make that clear from the outset.

To best inform the committee, I want to talk a little bit about myself and where I'm coming from, and my experiences and the veterans whom I do speak on behalf of, who've been through my program.

I deployed to Afghanistan in 2008. I was 22 years old and my job was to guard supply convoys through Kandahar City to the forward operating bases in the region. It was one of the more stressful and dangerous jobs, obviously.

However, I can say without a doubt that when I was in Afghanistan, there were no feelings of fear or trepidation about taking on these missions. There was no requirement for an officer to order me or my colleagues to do this mission. We were young and gung-ho, and we wanted to go and take that risk. That's what we had trained for; that's why we joined the Canadian Forces. This was an asset to us and I think it's what made us effective on the battlefield, our willingness to take those risks, to engage the enemy.

The one story I reference for myself is a time we had to recover a crashed aerial vehicle that had gone down in the middle of nowhere and it required us to drive through a minefield. It was an old Russian minefield. There were numerous exploded Afghan vehicles all around this path through the minefield which they had pretty much created by guessing and testing. We were very well aware that anytime there was a big rainfall it would move the mines around. I was in the lead vehicle and there was a really good chance we were going to hit a mine on that mission, but not once did I stop to think that I could possibly die.

I bring this up just to highlight the level of emotional suppression that's required to be effective in the military. This is something that is also common in other trades and populations in Canada. If you think of police forces or high finance, some of these super stressful situations require people to change the way their body has evolved to react emotionally.

Now when we bring somebody who's gone through that experience back here to Canada, putting a label of post-traumatic stress disorder onto that person is not sufficient. It doesn't nearly capture the complexity of the issue the person's going through. The majority of the veterans—we've now had over 400 come through our program—are in this category of dealing with this sort of new way of dealing with emotional expression, changing from the way they were successful in places like Afghanistan, and how they're going to now be successful here in Canada.

The way this relates to the new Veterans Charter is that one of the requirements coming into a lot of the benefits is that somebody obtained a PTSD diagnosis or they have a medical release from the military. One of the recommendations I'll make at the end has to do with addressing this issue, because it's real when we look at the statistics that currently only 14% of veterans, of those who actually served in the forces, come to Veterans Affairs for services. The majority of people coming through our program have never gone to the government for services. We've all heard a lot about the stigma issues, especially with mental health, as being one of the contributing factors. There's also the issue that it's bureaucratically difficult to get your claims processed.

Again, I think there are some very positive strong points, like the earnings loss benefit that does allow people to get funded to go back to school, and the up to \$75,000 they can get for that retraining. That's an amazing program. It's just difficult to access for somebody who's trepidatious about coming forward for help, aware there is a lot of anger in the community, and that there are never enough services for them. That also causes a barrier that there is this image that the government is not doing enough.

To take a step back into the Veterans Transition Network, the organization that I run, we deliver a 10-day program that helps these men and women who are in that in-between place. They haven't got the full diagnosis for post-traumatic stress disorder or depression, or one of the other mental health issues, and therefore, they do not often qualify for counselling or the other programs. They will come to our program first and they will get a chance to check in with themselves.

It's group-based, peer to peer. They'll get a sense of where they are, and to see how their peers are doing with it. Many of them do go on to access other services. The peer reviewed research we present every year at CIMVHR shows that our program does have a positive impact on their PTSD and depression scores. We are now evaluating quality of life as well.

● (1540)

Just as I talk about it, I want to take a moment to thank this committee, because it was this committee that helped us get federal funding in 2012. I had the privilege of presenting here in December 2011, and 11 months later we were a federally funded national organization. This committee should take credit for that, and it shows that working within the system does produce results.

This is where I come to my final points on the recommendations.

The one I've alluded to is to find some way to overcome the requirement for veterans to have a mental health or physical disorder in order to access benefits. The one area I've heard much talk about among our community is a Canadian GI bill, something that would

target those veterans who are most vulnerable to issues like post-traumatic stress or other mental health issues, those who served in combat in places like Afghanistan or Bosnia when it was really difficult. We know statistically that they are predisposed to have issues around mental health and to have social issues about getting back into the workforce.

If we could get some sort of GI bill like the Americans have that qualify those people for schooling and re-education, regardless of whether they have an injury or not, that would go a long way to reintegrating our population of veterans, catching them early on before they are five, six, or ten years out and have been dealing with problems and they're finally at a point where it's a crisis and they need an intervention from the medical community.

The last point I'll make is around the issues with the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. This is a very psychologically distressing experience for many veterans, and often when they come into our program we have to spend time processing some of their feelings around it. It often isn't the content; it's just the way they're handled. They feel like they're asking for a handout, like they're actually fighting and sort of begging for their rights. This runs counter to the military ethos of self-sufficiency and competency. If something could be done to address that issue, I think it would be a huge help. I would suggest removing that from the system altogether and allowing the veterans to go to the court to resolve their disputes that way.

That's my presentation. Thank you very much.

● (1545)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Laidler. We appreciate it.

Before we go to our committee, I want to say welcome to all the veterans and guests who have joined us today. We appreciate your being here and participating.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Point of order, chair.

The Chair: Mr. Karygiannis.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Which one of the government members is filling in? I count seven.

The Chair: Yes, one doesn't have a voting privilege.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Who would that be?

The Chair: It would be Mr. Chisu.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: He's just staying out of interest.

This doesn't come out of your time, by the way, Mr. Chicoine. You have seven minutes, please.

[Translation]

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

[English]

The Chair: Terribly sorry, six minutes.

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Six minutes, okay.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Point of order, Chair.

I asked a legitimate question. If Mr. Galipeau has a problem with it, I'd appreciate not hearing his comments. My question was I just wanted to clarify which one of the members had voting rights.

Now, if Mr. Chisu took it upon himself to leave, and Mr. Galipeau wants to make comments, well, that's really not appreciated.

The Chair: Rather than interfere with the witnesses any further, we will allow the committee to start asking questions.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Chicoine, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Thanks again, Mr. Chair.

Above all, I want to thank the witnesses for joining us and for participating in our review of the Enhanced New Veterans Charter Act. Your presence is greatly appreciated.

Mr. Laidler, you introduced a program through the Veterans Transition Network. People are saying that the program is very effective. Thank you for all of the efforts you have invested in this area. I hope you will continue your good work.

Unless I am mistaken, your group developed this program in cooperation with the Wounded Warriors and True Patriot Love organizations to provide veterans—especially those from Ontario, British Columbia and the Maritimes—with access to resources. However, it appears that the program is not available in Quebec.

I would like you to tell us what steps we need to take and what resources—financial or other—you would require to make that excellent program accessible from coast to coast to coast, including in Quebec. I think it's unfortunate that the program is currently unavailable.

[English]

Mr. Tim Laidler: Thank you for the question about the funding for the program and its ability to expand into Quebec.

You are correct. We started with funding from the Royal Canadian Legion in B.C., and then we expanded nationally with help from the Dominion Command of the Royal Canadian Legion, represented here today, with \$500,000 that coincided with the federal government's funding. From that, Wounded Warriors and True Patriot Love have also sponsored the funding for our programming, capturing that percentage of veterans who fall through the gaps between their services and DND and VAC.

I'm excited to say today that True Patriot Love gave us an extra \$50,000 last year to build our clinical capacity in French so we could deliver our programs in Quebec completely in French. We plan to run two training programs in Quebec this year. Provided the outcome is positive, that the clinicians are able to meet our high threshold of quality, they will be delivering programs by the end of the year in Quebec in French.

I'd also like to say that we will be training women clinicians at that time to deliver this program, to run an all-women's program, because we do gender specific counselling.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Thank you for those clarifications.

Do you need additional funding such as for translating the website, which is currently available only in English? Do you need additional resources, or are you okay for now?

[English]

Mr. Tim Laidler: Yes, I think the additional funding from True Patriot Love will meet the need to deliver it in French. The ongoing funding requirement and the agreement we have with the government is that they will pay per client. We will need the ongoing support. All indications are positive that will continue for Veterans Affairs. We are also working with the Department of National Defence to see if we can integrate our program into the services they offer military personnel.

● (1550)

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Thank you for the clarifications, Mr. Laidler.

I have some questions for Mr. Griffis. Thank you for joining us.

Your organization represents members of the Canadian Forces who have participated in peacekeeping missions. A vital component of those deployments was the presence of many reservists. My questions will focus on how reservists are treated.

Do you think it is unfair that the earnings loss benefit is \$2,700 for everyone? Shouldn't that benefit be based on the real earnings instead?

[English]

Mr. Ronald Griffis: If I understand the question correctly, sir, we think that the earnings loss benefit and the permanent impairment allowance should be awarded to the vet, to the reservist, to the same extent as they are awarded to the full-time member of the armed forces.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: So it is somewhat unfair that the amount is set at \$2,700. That is unjust compared with how much regular force veterans receive, as their amount is based on their earnings. Did I understand correctly?

[English]

Mr. Ronald Griffis: Yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Many category A and B reservists do not know that they are eligible for provincial disability and earning loss benefit programs. Those programs provide benefits that often fluctuate between 80% and 90% of the earnings, which is 5% to 10% more than what is provided through the Service Income Security Insurance Plan and the earnings loss benefit.

Should the new charter at least grant the equivalent of what is provided to all other workers?

[English]

Mr. Ronald Griffis: I understand that the provincial members are entitled to make an application under the benefits that are authorized by a province.

By the same token, the earnings loss benefit, with respect to the reservist finding out about it and the lack of information, we have brought it to the attention of Veterans Affairs Canada on a regular basis, and as recently as last week, that they need to communicate to a greater degree to advise veterans of what is available for them. Right now there are veterans who are 67, 68, 70 years of age who come to us and say they want to make a claim, and can we tell them if this is going to be available, and can we tell them if they will be successful. We assist them in filling out the various forms and explain to them everything they can possibly seek an award for. Veterans Affairs has agreed with us on several occasions that their communication skills need to be addressed.

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

We'll now go to Mr. O'Toole, for six minutes, please.

Mr. Erin O'Toole (Durham, CPC): Mr. Chair, it's really good and it's an honour for me to be back on the committee. As a veteran and as an MP, it's good to be here.

I've heard the terms "gung-ho" and "hurry up and wait" used. I heard both terms a lot when I was in the CF. "Hurry up and wait" applies both to serving members and spouses. I remember that term well.

I'm going to concentrate more on Mr. Griffis. I have a couple of questions.

Tim, I've known you for some time. Certainly, I think the program that you help grow and run under Dr. Westwood is really world-class. I think the more people—whether they are advocates in the Legion or True Patriot Love, or within VAC—see the impact it has, the better. I'm encouraged to hear about your expansion of services in French, which I think is critical. As well, your comments are welcome.

Mr. Griffis, I want to compliment you on your caregiver portion. Part of the reason I was involved in starting the True Patriot Love Foundation with a group of other people, was after Rick Hillier started the Military Families Fund and the challenges and the stresses on the family started being brought into the wider discussion. That is something that successive governments over the last 50 years haven't addressed properly, so thank you for your advocacy on that point. Canadians now understand it a lot more. That was something which True Patriot Love focused on specifically as the first major donor to the Military Families Fund.

My question is on the max injury award. I find, as both a veteran and a lawyer, there's a lot of confusion with this comparison to civil courts.

In a civil court a damage assessment is essentially a one-time payment. The government is looking at the lump sum right now, and is that appropriate, does that address it. The comparison to civil courts leaves out the fact that veterans will receive education and training assistance, the veterans independence program supports within their own home, often, depending on their status, a move post-CF, long-term lifetime assistance with home-based modification needs, health.... None of those are available in a civil court context for a negligence suit.

Do you think that the benefits, and the cost of those benefits, should be part of the discussion of a lump sum? They don't exist for someone in a civil court.

• (1555)

Mr. Ronald Griffis: I'm under the impression that in civil court they would have an actuary come forward and point out that the young person, or the person who was injured, over the course of their life would receive x amount of dollars, would receive the cost of living, various expenses.

In the various cases that you mention, I agree with you; I agree with you on some aspects of what you're saying. Some veterans really appreciate the lump sum award, and some veterans require the Pension Act. There has to be consideration with respect to that.

I'm aware recently that it seems to be the older veterans are the veterans that are coming forward and seeking benefits. I know that the older veterans are in favour of the lump sum award, to the extent that when they receive a lump sum award and they're also receiving a pension, they have requested that I contact VAC and they say, "Please put the money from my pension"—\$100 extra a month or whatever—"into a lump sum and give it to me; I don't want the pension increase."

It is interesting from that point of view, but I also take into consideration the young veteran, such as Major Campbell, and Corporal Kerr, who is an excellent example out of Sudbury, who are going to require extensive consideration with respect to their futures. You have an excellent point there with respect to it. It's going to take some clever thinking on how to get around that and how to address it so that it's very fair. Once again, I appreciate an actuary will come in and do something of that nature. It's a very sensitive subject, I think.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: Thank you.

I'm not sure how long you've been in a leadership role with the UN peacekeepers, but I appreciate the work that your 28 branches have done. Were they in a position to comment after our government made changes the first time to the new Veterans Charter?

Mr. Ronald Griffis: Yes.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: As you know, the new Veterans Charter was passed by the previous Liberal government, but the permanent impairment allowance, PIA, and supplement were additions to address the most serious cases among veterans. Did your group have a position on those changes?

Mr. Ronald Griffis: Yes, they did. The position was that the criteria for the veteran to take that particular one of the three categories for the PIA are very hard to obtain. In some cases, it might even be as high as 98% incapacitated with respect to that. That particular designation is extremely hard to come by.

It is appreciated, but by the same token, there are various categories that VAC puts you in with respect to the degree, in their opinion, of your impairment. Whether it be a hearing aid or whether it be loss of limbs, you come up according to their schedule, which is available.

• (1600)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. O'Toole. Time passes quickly.

Mr. Karygiannis, you have six minutes, please.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Thank you.

I really appreciate you folks being here.

Mr. Griffiths, there are some older vets who will say that the lump sum is something they would appreciate. I have spoken to some of them, and they've said, "I don't know how much time I have left. If I'm going to get \$30,000 or \$40,000, I'd like to get it now and be able to do whatever I need to do with it."

However, there are the younger vets, like Mr. Laidler, who have just come out of the forces. If they're diagnosed with a severe stress disorder, or they've lost a couple of limbs, and all of a sudden we sort of... It's been referred to by some veterans as the "meat chart". We give them a lump sum of \$200,000 or \$300,000.

I don't think anybody has received more than \$300,000, Mr. Laidler, although I could be mistaken, but \$300,000. If you were a corporal, you'd get about \$60,000, correct?

Mr. Tim Laidler: For the lump sum payment?

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: No, no, if you're in the military, \$60,000.

Mr. Tim Laidler: Yes, about that.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: That would be for five years of pay. After five years, if you started at 28 or 29, you'd reach 34 or 35 with nothing left. Of course, you can invest that, but with \$300,000, I don't think that can give you enough money for you to be able to... At 10% return, you'd get, I don't know, \$30,000, or less than that.

I'm just wondering if you can tell us, in your mind, if the lump sum award is something that is favoured, is something that should be continued, or is something that maybe we should look at abolishing.

Mr. Ronald Griffiths: Let me deal with the last part first.

I respectfully suggest that the lump sum should not be abolished. There are veterans who are very senior in age who are now recognizing that it's available to them. Veterans who are 80 years old are coming forward.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: I appreciate that, as I stated, but I'm talking about the younger vets.

Mr. Ronald Griffiths: Once again, it's a sensitive issue. I don't think one particular aspect of it will suit all. I think it has to be on a case-by-case basis and examined very carefully.

If there is a young man who is going to aspire to higher things, he is going to need the assistance. He is going to need a pension. Perhaps if he is going to be successful in later life...

There is a veteran from Afghanistan whose name, I believe, is Moncur. He's from Windsor, Ontario. His difficulty, or one of his difficulties, is that he was shot in the head by friendly fire and he now has memory loss. He will need both if he wants to continue to go school and perhaps open up a business. I think he will need both.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: What you're suggesting, then, is that we should look at a combination of a lump sum maybe for the older vets and a monthly pension for the younger vets. Would I be summarizing that right?

Mr. Ronald Griffiths: I would say it's somewhere in that area, but I think on a case-by-case basis it should be looked at very carefully.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Mr. Laidler, I'll turn to you now, because you're a younger vet. You probably weren't in Afghanistan at the time my cousin Christos Karigiannis got blown away. I think it was just a little bit before you were there.

Have you come across younger vets in your age group who are in support of the lump sum, or are the majority of them in support of getting some sort of a pension as well as some of the benefits that the NVC has, such as going back to school?

I mean, this is not brand new. This is something that existed. If you go to the older vets, to the people who were returning after World War II, and if you talk with the engineering faculty, they will say to you that they were all in Ajax. There were about 15,000 to 20,000 of them.

Would you say that the majority of the younger vets are looking for the lump sum or for something that would be there with them for the rest of their lives?

Mr. Tim Laidler: It really is a key question that needs to be answered, and unfortunately, I don't have the perfect solution. It's split, as I said. Some veterans, like me, would love to take a lump sum and start a company. For some veterans who are also struggling, it's the worst thing for them to get this much money. They end up going on a bunch of vacations, buying a truck, and then they've spent it.

I agree that it's a case-by-case approach. I definitely think that the broadest comment I can make whenever this discussion comes up among my colleagues is just mass confusion. Nobody really knows exactly what they're entitled to and they make comparisons—

• (1605)

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: If I were to come to you for advice, and say, "I'm your age and I'm confused," what would you tell me to do?

Mr. Tim Laidler: I'd definitely encourage you to start by going to the Royal Canadian Legion and speaking to one of the service officers. Filling out a one-page form allows them to be your advocate and to start getting you the benefits—

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Actually, it's a three-page form.

Mr. Tim Laidler: I've signed a one-page form with the Legion and it worked out well.

There's surprise among many of the veterans when they start getting their lump sum payments.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Let me come back to a pointed question. I'm coming to you, I'm your age, I've lost my limbs.

Now, Mr. Galipeau, we can only think and dream about it.

I'm coming to you and I'm saying, "Look, I've lost my limbs and I'm looking to get a lump sum or a monthly payment." The fellow in Alberta, Major something, lost a couple of limbs and his private parts. What would you advise him to do?

Mr. Tim Laidler: If it's a permanent disability, there are definitely advantages to having a pension. If the person's able-bodied and in treatment and stabilized with some sort of mental health issue, I think a lump sum payment is a great idea if they're going to invest in going to school, starting a company, buying a house. These are things we see.

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

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: I still have 20 seconds.

The Chair: No you don't.

Mr. Hayes, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Bryan Hayes (Sault Ste. Marie, CPC): These questions are for Mr. Laidler.

Welcome. Thank you for your service. It's very much appreciated.

You mentioned your program has been federally funded since 2012, and you thanked the committee for that. I want to get a better sense of how much funding you have, all told. Then based on that, obviously when we fund things we like to look at criteria and success rates.

Specific to transition, as your name suggests that's the focus of the program, I want you to share with us the number of people who go through the program, the success rate, or how you determine what the success criteria are.

Mr. Tim Laidler: Historically, in 1997 there was a lot of talk about post-traumatic stress disorder, so that's how they started the program, by evaluating whether this program was going to affect somebody's PTSD symptoms. Closely linked to that are the depression symptoms and their self-esteem rating. Historically, three measures were used to determine the success of the program.

Statistically, the decrease in depression and PTSD symptoms that took place during the program's development was very significant. In the last two years, by working closely with some of the researchers across Canada at the CIMVHR conference, we've started to move away from post-traumatic stress as being the only indicator, as we see it as just one of the issues that military people deal with when they're leaving the forces.

We've actually, I would say, seen tunnel vision around post-traumatic stress, to a certain extent. That's why we've moved to a more inclusive survey called the OQ-45. It's a standard program evaluation survey being used by Veterans Affairs. David Ross has been the champion of this survey. They have the funding there to do it. We've been using that. It measures not only somebody's general mental health, but also their relationship with their family, their satisfaction with their careers. Again, we've been doing those for the group, right after the group, three, six, and twelve months following, and they've all been very successful. I can say there have been clinically and statistically significant increases in the case of the OQ-45.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Can you give me the funding split for 2013?

Mr. Tim Laidler: As for the funding structure, we want to have 100 veterans go through our program in 2014. We've been expanding the program. It costs us \$15,000 per veteran. Veterans Affairs will pay for any veteran who is their client, who meets a very

inclusive criteria, I'd say, to come through our program funded that way.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Again, I want to understand the whole concept of transition. On the website, it mentions transition to aftercare service, and then there's—I guess this could be classified as transition—re-equipping individuals with the tools they need to move forward to achieving what it is they want to pursue.

What is the definition of transition to be able to say that yes, this was a successful transition?

Mr. Tim Laidler: There was a study done by Dr. Tim Black, our clinical director, trying to define exactly that: what is transition. It comes from a socially constructed paradigm that successful transition is what an individual defines it by.

Somebody may move from our program, not get a career, sit on their pension from VAC or otherwise, but be the soccer coach for their son's team and say, "I've made a great transition. I'm back to being a father." Somebody else might say, "I need to get back to the workforce. I need to be making \$100,000 a year. That's a successful transition for me."

We work collaboratively with the veterans to identify their barriers. I'd say that for the majority of the younger veterans getting back into the workforce is what they are looking for, and not just a job, but a meaningful job.

• (1610)

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Do individuals who have gone through the program have an opportunity to come back and be mentors at all?

Mr. Tim Laidler: That's right. We have what's called a paraprofessional role. Graduates of the program are invited to come back and help their colleagues through.

When I went through the program myself for the first time there was a veteran from the Bosnian era there who had been in the Medak Pocket. We were taught in the Second Battalion PPCLI that these people were revered as some of the fiercest and craziest, and to avoid them. Having him in the room and saying, "This is good stuff what they are doing here," really helped me get the permission to start looking into my own stuff.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: You made one other comment earlier in your presentation where you said that they fall through the "gaps between their services and DND and VAC".

How do we as a Veterans Affairs community prevent this falling through the cracks? What is it we can do to assist so that doesn't happen? How can we make things better?

Mr. Tim Laidler: I think this really comes down to the outreach, because most military people leave the forces and don't come back for services. I know many of them who have come through our program were people we found isolated in basements or withdrawn from the community. The only way we made contact with them is they happened to be a member of the Legion, or one of our graduates knew them from basic training, and said, "I wonder how that guy's doing. I'm going to check on him and see if he's struggling." They've gone and knocked on his door, and ended up pulling him out, and saying that he has to go talk to this clinician at UBC, and introduced him to Marv Westwood or someone.

But 75% of our referrals still come in that way, this almost recruiting style of getting people to come forward for help. To charge a Veteran Affairs bureaucrat to try to do that is pretty unfair because they won't be welcomed.

I think the key is in the peer-to-peer system. Partnering with third party organizations like the Royal Canadian Legion and others that are here is a key to getting that gap closed.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We now go to Mr. Rafferty, for six minutes, please.

Mr. John Rafferty (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, NDP): Thank you very much, both of you, for being here.

Mr. Griffis, I'll begin with you, if I may. You said a lot of very interesting things on indexed pensions and so on, but the one thing I'd like to focus on is your comment about no support or very little support for caregivers and spouses.

You started to tell a story about Mrs. Blizzard, but in your presentation you really didn't have enough time. I wonder if you would like to expand on Mrs. Blizzard and that particular case to give us all a clearer understanding of what you were talking about.

Mr. Ronald Griffis: Mr. Blizzard was air force. He has had several operations with respect to cancer. He's also a diabetic. They had to sell their home. They moved into other accommodations, very nice accommodations, but they moved into other accommodations.

Mrs. Blizzard supported him throughout his whole life. They have a wonderful family, and things are going along great for them, but with Mr. Blizzard experiencing several bouts of cancer, she's concerned. Her education is one year of community college, and she's older. She's concerned that it's going to happen once again, and that if Mr. Blizzard passes away before she does, then she'll be in a difficult situation. She wishes that be brought to the attention of the committee. If she had an opportunity in an earlier time to go to school, whether it be community college, university, or special courses, they wouldn't be in the boat they are in right now.

By reason of my age and my colleagues', it's reasonable we talk about that particular aspect frequently, because we lose members not by their moving away, but by their departing the scene. They pass away. They die. That's a difficult situation. In the vast majority of cases it's the male who passes away, and the spouse is left.

One of the spouses we have, her husband was on the aircraft that was shot down on August 9, 1974. She made things go for her life

and for her children. She had the ability to do that, whereas Mrs. Blizzard did not have the ability to do that.

• (1615)

Mr. John Rafferty: Thank you for expanding on that.

Mr. Laidler, you mentioned a number of times—and this wasn't the original question I was going to ask you—the support you get from the Legion. Legions, of course, are wonderful support mechanisms, but Legions are not all created equal, and many Legions are struggling throughout Canada. They're struggling with membership, with being downloaded, quite frankly, by government.

I can relate a very quick story before I ask you the question. I had some veterans town halls in my riding during this past week when we were back in the constituency. From Branch 5, one of the women said she went there that night because she wanted to tell us what had happened to her the previous day. She got a call from Veterans Affairs in Brandon asking if her Legion could give this veteran, who happened to be a Thunder Bay veteran, some money. Something wasn't right.

Is that a concern of yours? I know we all speak very highly of the Legion and the work they do, but is it a concern that perhaps Legions are not receiving the kind of support they need to do the work they want to do?

Mr. Tim Laidler: I know the Legion is definitely very concerned about that. We've talked about succession planning and making sure we get federally funded to relieve the burden from the Legions themselves. They have the organizational structure that sees the poppy fund not being able to be used for any sort of infrastructure. Zero per cent goes to their administration. They bring in almost \$16 million a year during that poppy drive, and those funds support programs like ours, which is fantastic, but also comes at the cost of, you're right, the branches themselves. They're often struggling. As for the support that comes to us, I think the money that would go to that veteran, it's not an option for them to use that to pay their property tax, or to repair their roof. That money is allocated for the veterans, no matter what. We have been working with the Legion, though, to try to find ways to engage the younger generation veteran.

Mr. John Rafferty: Thank you, Mr. Laidler.

You talked about the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, and quite frankly I haven't heard anything good about it from anybody. We have about a minute here. I wonder if you'd like to expand your thoughts on that.

Mr. Tim Laidler: I think they made sense to meet the demand in World War II. I don't think they're making sense now. Just get rid of them, save the money on the positions, and find a different way to decide the compensation for veterans. That's why I've said perhaps the courts are the answer, but the lawyers in the room will know better than I whether that's a viable option or not.

Mr. John Rafferty: If I do have 20 seconds left, both of you have identified communication as being one of the big problems here, and I hope that everyone in the room is taking note of that particular comment, because both of you have mentioned that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Hawn, please, you have six minutes.

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you both for being here.

Mr. Griffis, you talked about the schedule. If I understood properly, you mentioned some of the difficulty of the schedule identifying the level of incapacity, and so on. Do you have some specific suggestions? I'm not asking you for them off the top of your head, but would you be able to supply some suggestions to the committee about how you think that schedule could be revamped to make it more meaningful?

Mr. Ronald Griffis: I'm well aware that in Veterans Affairs and in the adjudication division of Veterans Affairs, they have some very good, very intelligent people. I think if they looked at it a little more closely—and there are certain times of the day when decision-making is a really good thing, and there are certain times of the day when decision-making is not a good thing. Perhaps if they looked at the case more than once, they might come up with a different answer, an answer that is going to be successful.

For instance, I don't know the criteria, the percentage with respect to the incapacitation that results in \$543 or \$1,088 or \$1,631. I don't know how they do that. I know they have a schedule, but when they look at that schedule, what are they doing?

Hon. Laurie Hawn: To me, you're either severely incapacitated, or you're not. I'm not sure we need three amounts. I think perhaps we need one amount. You are or you're not, but that might be just me.

•(1620)

Mr. Ronald Griffis: For instance, the other gentleman mentioned Alberta. In Alberta there's Major Campbell, and also Major Henwood in Calgary. They both lost limbs. They were very seriously injured, very seriously.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: The topic of the lump sum comes up, as it always does, and the intimation is that it's the lump sum and nothing else. But if you are severely injured and you get the maximum lump sum, which is \$301,275 at the moment, if it's service related you're also going to get \$275,000 from SISIP, the service income security insurance plan. That's an insurance plan you pay into, and I appreciate that, but it is another lump sum you get.

Also, if you're that seriously injured, you are going to get what in effect are pensions, earnings loss benefit, the PIA, permanent incapacity allowance, and the PIAS, permanent incapacity allowance supplement. I suggest that maybe whenever this was done we should have used the word "pension" in there somewhere instead of what it's called. That might make it a little bit more clear to people that it is in fact a pension. Some go to age 65; some go for life.

Is that a fair statement?

Mr. Ronald Griffis: I agree with you. I've been asking VAC to change that word to "pension", so thank you very much. I don't know how many times we've said that. Of course we're asking that it

continue for life, but the selling of the ELB would be easier sell if you said "pension".

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Exactly.

Tim, you mentioned in response to Mr. Karygiannis that you would go to the Legion, that you would do this, get the advice, and so on. Why not go to a VAC office if there's a VAC office there?

Mr. Tim Laidler: I prefer not to travel. I do things electronically, but—

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Okay, but if you're in a location with a VAC office, would you pick the Legion or the VAC office?

Mr. Tim Laidler: The Legion.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Why do you say that?

Mr. Tim Laidler: The person who I deal with was a fellow veteran in Afghanistan. He knows the system inside out. I have the feeling that he's going to be an advocate for me, and it's a lot less paperwork.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: You are who you are, and you represent a lot of other folks by circumstance, and so on. Do you think that with all the talk about the VAC offices closing, guys would probably go to the Legion anyway? Is that what you're saying?

Mr. Tim Laidler: Yes, essentially, and to be able to just scan it and send it over to the Legion, not have to use a fax machine to communicate with VAC, all these sorts of things are significant factors.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Okay, that's interesting.

You talked about PTSD. Are you familiar with Willy MacDonald, master warrant officer?

Mr. Tim Laidler: No.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: He is a medal of valour winner, read like a VC, but that's another story. He started a program, which I think is called, It's Okay to be Okay.

I've been around this a fair bit. We get people back from Afghanistan. We wrap our arms around them, and we want them to tell us how bad they feel. Sometimes they don't feel bad. Sometimes they're just fine, but they're told, "No, no, no. You did terrible things. You saw terrible things. You must feel bad." I've talked to guys who have been in that situation. They say, "They're trying to talk me into PTSD." After a while they say there must be something wrong with them because they don't feel bad.

Do you have any insight into that? Willy started a program to tell guys that it's okay, they don't have to have PTSD just because they went there.

Mr. Tim Laidler: That's why we haven't made it a requirement. We don't talk about it except in a psycho-educational manner in our program, to say that they can be totally switched on, okay, high functioning in a career, and get some extra support if they need it with us. Many don't. You're right. Many go on. That's what we have to be careful of, branding the Canadian soldier as a pity case. It's detrimental when we're trying to apply for jobs.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Exactly, and I hear from soldiers who say, “I’m having trouble getting an interview because they think I’m damaged just because I’m a soldier.” Some of the well-meaning stuff that’s out there in fact is counterproductive.

A perfect example of that is Corporal Kirkland. I’m not sure if you’re familiar with his case. He took the lump sum, and I guess he got other stuff, but I’m not sure of that. He’s now a very successful real estate person in Brandon. I think he’s kind of a poster child for getting back on your feet, getting back into business, getting on with life on your own terms.

I think most vets, especially the younger ones, would probably feel the same way. Would you agree with that?

Mr. Tim Laidler: Absolutely. When I returned, I went back to UBC and completed a masters in counselling psychology while doing all this. I’ve been able to create the Veterans Transition Network and raise this money.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Galipeau, for six minutes please.

Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

It’s with some emotion that I welcome you both.

Mr. Laidler, I voted on the Afghanistan motions that probably sent you there. Thank you for coming back.

Mr. Griffiths, I just have one question for you. What’s the best time of the day to make decisions?

• (1625)

Mr. Ronald Griffiths: It’s the morning.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Thank you. You will forgive me for making this decision this afternoon to ask him questions.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Laidler, if memory serves me right, when you last appeared before this committee, the Veterans Transition Network was planning to expand its scope to include all of Canada. The Department of Veterans Affairs helped fund that initiative.

Could you tell us about the growth and the implementation of that national program?

[*English*]

Mr. Tim Laidler: When I was here two years ago, we were only running about four programs a year. This year we’re on track to run fourteen, so it has grown threefold. We were successful in securing the seed capital from the private sector with organizations like True Patriot Love, Wounded Warriors, and the Royal Canadian Legion, and now have ongoing funding with the federal government. It is a success story.

I’ll just say that we see veterans coming through now and opening up for the first time. Different parts of the country have asked why this wasn’t here before. The truth of the matter is that, as Canadians, we didn’t know.

This is an innovation that came out of one our top universities. I think it’s something that we should be proud of, but it’s not

something which, as Canadians, we should be mad at ourselves for not having done before. As you said, I think Canada has been very cautious about what conflicts it engages in. As a consequence of this, we’re not like the Americans, who have an institutionalized system for their veterans. This is something that comes up and is new for Canadians, and we’ve innovated as best we can, I think.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: I have three other short questions.

Has the Royal Canadian Legion promoted this initiative across the country?

Mr. Tim Laidler: Absolutely.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Tell me about the demand for the program. Have you been able to meet the demand?

Mr. Tim Laidler: The demand has been.... It exists. It’s difficult to get the individuals to come forward. Most veterans we meet with will say, “I know three buddies who really need this program, but I’m okay”, and after a little work, they tend to come into the program themselves.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: On this, my last question, you can burn the clock answering it if you want.

Where do you see the future of the Veterans Transitions Network heading?

Mr. Tim Laidler: I see it in two ways. We want to get to a program that’s running 25 programs across the country, for both men and women and in both official languages. Our goal is to hit at least 2,000 veterans to go through our program.

A spinoff of this has been a pickup from Movember. The same professors who created our program were funded by the Movember movement for \$2.7 million to create the same program for the general population. They saw the significant impacts we were having. They saw that it wasn’t just about combat trauma and stress, but actually about general social issues that we were helping to fix. It now has become something which hopefully, the Canadian public will start to benefit from.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: I’m sure your parents are very proud of the work you’re doing.

Mr. Tim Laidler: Thank you.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: I thank you for what you’ve done. I thank you for what you’re doing on behalf of veterans today.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Mr. Tim Laidler: Thanks.

I just want to respond to the comment about going to Afghanistan, because I know you voted to send me there, but I volunteered and I went willingly.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: He’s not only in service, but he is selflessly in service.

The Chair: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Galipeau.

You're well under your time if you have any other questions.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: I'll share it with Mr. O'Toole.

The Chair: Okay.

You have a little over a minute.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: Thank you to my learned colleague.

I thought I wasn't going to ask you a question, Mr. Laidler, but could you share with the committee your thoughts—

Mr. Royal Galipeau: This is an afternoon decision now. Be careful.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: Yes, it is an afternoon decision.

Could you share with us your thoughts on how your program, the VTN—it was VTP, but now that it's national, it's VTN—is one of several ways that mental health or OSI issues can be addressed?

Do you find that some veterans work well in a typical counselling session, like this clinical psychologist area, but that others take to a program like yours because of the peer support or because of the return element, the going back into your environment? I'd love your comments. Is it fair to say that there is no one solution for veterans, that we need a few services, including a new program like yours?

• (1630)

Mr. Tim Laidler: Absolutely. Our program is not the silver bullet. It's not the one program. We'd be foolish to think that for somebody who's seriously suffering from a mental issue and coming through our program, which is ten days broken up over three months. It will definitely help them, but it will not cure their post-traumatic stress. Many of them will go on to see individual therapists and continue that work, again, provided by the government, if they are clients of Veterans Affairs and whatnot.

Another great service, in light of the recent suicides, is the 1-800 hotline. We've had participants coming through our program and getting to a point where they were starting to feel suicidal. They called that number and actually were talked down by the counsellor on the line. Then they were able to call one of our clinicians and we were able to intervene. That's just one example of many. It definitely saved a life in that case.

We're not the panacea, but we're helping to give people a boost, whether they're coming into counselling for the first time, or they've been doing it for years, or they're somewhere in the middle.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Madame Moore, for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Earlier, we talked about people who have sort of fallen between the cracks. Today, I want to tell you about two cases where individuals found themselves in limbo, so to speak.

The first case is that of Éric Aubé, one of my friends, who recently contacted me to tell me his story. Éric and I served together as warrant officers with the 52nd Field Ambulance. He told me that he

had participated in Operation Cavalier in 1992 and that, although he was held hostage for 22 days, everything went well and he was safe and sound. However, after he was injured for the first time in 24 years of service, he was shown the door. Éric hurt himself while going through the obstacle course.

This story illustrates the issues reservists face when they injure themselves in training. As they are not on a mission, they are not considered to be regular force members. They often receive no compensation, or are given compensation that does not take into account their job outside the armed forces.

Let's take the example of a police officer who, when available, works in the reserve force. Let's say they suffer a permanent injury during training that prevents them from working not only as a military member in the reserve force, but also as a police officer. They lose both sources of income, and receive no compensation from their civilian job. They lose an income that can be fairly significant. It is not uncommon for individuals to serve in the reserve force even if they earn one third of their civilian income, simply because they like serving. Those people are penalized if they injure themselves while on reserve duty, since they are not compensated for the loss of their civilian income.

The second case I would like to tell you about and get your comments on took place while I was an officer cadet. We had a twin course provided in English. Although both groups were competitive, no one wanted anyone from the other group to get hurt. Unfortunately, one day during a training session, a young man who was barely 20 years old and had been in the armed forces for only 4 weeks, jumped over a wall and fell head first. He became a paraplegic. That young officer cadet probably would have earned a substantial income after a certain number of years. After that accident, he was unlikely to be gainfully employed over the next 45 years, even if he received rehabilitation services. What kind of compensation could be provided to that officer cadet who was probably earning the same wages as I was, \$1,300 a month? That humble income we were receiving was barely above the poverty line at the time.

I would like to hear your comments on those two cases and to see whether something should be done to remedy those kinds of issues, which are fairly frequent.

[*English*]

Mr. Ronald Griffis: I appreciate your point of view with respect to what you have said. I respectfully suggest that they should have received compensation. There should be special allowances for items of that nature.

I gather from your comments that you're talking about RMC or CMR. My son is a graduate of RMC. He presently is a recipient of a Veterans Affairs pension for PTSD. My granddaughter is a second-year student at RMC. If she is injured in the obstacle course—and perhaps that's what you're referring to, where the gentleman received the injury, indicating that he was now a paraplegic—I feel that there should be some compensation.

These people signed up. They did not sign up to become injured. They did not sign up to become poverty-stricken the rest of their lives. It's certainly a sad set of circumstances.

I respectfully suggest there should be some allowances for matters of that nature, as opposed to being a recipient of the disability section of the Canadian pension plan, or things of that nature. There should be some compensation.

• (1635)

Mr. Tim Laidler: I think I can make my comments, in particular, from my first-hand experience as a reservist.

There definitely are differences between the regular force and the reserve force, especially when it comes to transitioning out of the military.

The regular force members will have full-time pay. If they are injured, they will continue to get that full-time pay. In the reserve force, if you're injured, there's an ability to have a class C contract extended for a certain amount of time while you're getting treatment, but many don't get into that program, and they're stuck looking for those finances, looking for the other money to come in.

It definitely is an issue that needs to be looked at a second time. It's just the different needs between the two populations.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Moore: Do you think it is unfair for an individual who wants to serve in the reserve force to have to think about the fact that an injury suffered during training can put an end to not only their military career, but also their civilian career? Reserve recruitment will be hampered if people think that, should they get injured, they will not be compensated for the civilian job they are likely to lose. For instance, if an aeronautical engineer suffered an injury during training that prevented them from doing their job, they would not be compensated.

[English]

The Chair: Could you get to the question, please. The time is up.

Ms. Christine Moore: It's done.

The Chair: You can ask a quick question if you want to.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Moore: I asked my question already. I just wanted to see whether the witnesses agreed that there was an issue in this area.

[English]

The Chair: You've basically answered that, I think.

Are we okay?

Mr. Ronald Griffiths: I agreed there was a problem.

The Chair: Okay, thank you very much.

Now to Mr. Lizon, for six minutes, please.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC): Welcome, witnesses. I thank you and all the veterans present for your service.

My first question is for Mr. Laidler.

What is your current relationship with Veterans Affairs Canada, and on the other side, what can Veterans Affairs do to support providing front-line programs for your organization?

Mr. Tim Laidler: Currently we're an official service provider to Veterans Affairs Canada. They'll pay us per client that we put through our program.

As I mentioned, we are on the track to expand. Regarding a previous question about what financial supports we could use, we are looking for more money to expand. We've made applications to the private sector. Again, that is the last piece we need this year, approximately \$500,000.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Where do you think changes can or should be made to better provide support for all those who need support?

Mr. Tim Laidler: We talked about communications and outreach. As a nation, that is the biggest gap we have that needs to be addressed. It's not something the government can do alone. It has to talk about changing attitudes and stigma in the workforce and all sorts of places. It's a big task to get it up so that it's okay to step forward and get services and support.

More specifically, though, I will comment about the earnings loss benefit versus a pension. Something I have noticed is that some veterans are finding that the earnings loss benefit is a de-incentivizing risk, because as soon as they go back into the workforce and start to have a career again, the earnings loss benefit dissipates as they are being rehabilitated. For some people the thought of doing that is so scary it holds them back a little bit.

I don't know if there could be a tweak made to that program that perhaps would segment it. Perhaps they could get the ELB for a set year, and then re-evaluate after a year or six months or something, so that it gives people an opportunity to test their value in the private sector for a while.

• (1640)

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Both of you gentlemen mentioned the problem with communication and the fact that veterans who come to you don't know or cannot get the proper information. On the other hand, this committee has done some studies. We've heard from both DND and from Veterans Affairs Canada about what they do to provide the proper information. For example, on DND's side, before someone is released there are information sessions provided.

Where is the gap? Why does it get to where both sides do whatever they can, and there is still a gap somewhere and people don't know what they're entitled to?

Mr. Ronald Griffis: I would suggest the gap is there because in normal cases, when the veteran retires, they're not interested in learning everything that's available to them. They're getting out after 25 or 35 years, and they're focusing on being released. They probably have a job lined up somewhere, whether it be in their field from the military or some other field, and they're not interested until it becomes an issue further on in life.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Mr. Griffis, what would you recommend in terms of changes that should be implemented to benefit your membership the most?

Mr. Ronald Griffis: I've asked Veterans Affairs Canada to use us as an advocate to distribute the information. We do it now. We're not looking for compensation of any kind. There are other organizations. There is the NATO Veterans Organization, ANAVETS, and the Legion. They can use the organizations to sell what they have to sell, to put out the information, as opposed to a backgrounder, if they ask the various associations to assist them in distributing the information.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: In one part of your presentation, you remarked that spouses are disrespected and in another part you mentioned they are treated like second-class citizens. Could you shed some light on that? What exactly do you mean?

Mr. Ronald Griffis: When a soldier is deployed it appears—and I could be wrong on this, but I don't think I am—that the army doesn't really care. It may have changed in the last day or so, but if a soldier is deployed, he is told where to be on a certain date, time, and place, and away you go. The soldier or air person maybe goes home and says to the spouse, "I'm going to country X for six months or a year." They'll set up some type of vacation or something like that for him, but at the end of the day, they are just told that is where they're going, and that's what they're going to do.

Then when the spouse receives a bit of difficulty, for instance, one of their children plays sports and breaks an arm. That's a team effort. It's a husband and wife effort to look after an emergency situation like that, but it's not a team effort any more. The spouse takes the child to the hospital, or they go by ambulance, and things are

repaired. When the spouse has a problem with the house, whether it's a PMQ or their own house, it's incumbent upon the spouse to look after the difficulty, whether it's plumbing, electrical, or the wind blew some tiles off the roof.

Nowadays there are very limited accesses for spouses to go to and say they need help. As I said, they are just not used. They are forgotten.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That does wrap up Mr. Lizon's time, and we have ended the questions.

I would ask something on behalf of the committee. We're not going to get into it today, but we really would appreciate any comment you send along regarding an ongoing issue that obviously is still with us after several years, and that is the transition, DND to Veterans Affairs. We understand there are still some difficulties in the transition, and we get the sense today that there's probably a lot more that could be done in that area. If you would send along any thoughts you might have, we would appreciate it and will include that with the information.

I want to thank you very much on behalf of the committee. We appreciate your presentations. They are very helpful.

We are going to deal with a motion in a minute, but we'll say farewell and thank you to our witnesses, and then suspend for a moment.

- _____ (Pause) _____
- _____
- (1650)

The Chair: I understand, Mr. O'Toole, that you want to make a motion.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: I move that we go in camera, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Okay. We have to make it official, yes.

(Motion agreed to)

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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