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Chair

Mr. Greg Kerr

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC)): Okay, folks. We will get under way. It's that time of day.

Mark, welcome. Did you bring your credentials? It's nice to have another Nova Scotian here, right across that causeway.

We are continuing the statutory review of the Enhanced New Veterans Charter Act. We've had a good round of witnesses so far, and we're very pleased today to have representatives from the Royal Canadian Legion and from the NATO Veterans Organization of Canada.

You folks know the routine by now. We hear your comments, then we go around the table and ask some questions, and we go from there. We really appreciate your input into this. We know the challenges are there. We're looking for the advice you can offer. Thank you for coming.

I'll introduce you all, and then you guys can figure out who's going first, okay?

We know Gordon Moore, of course, Dominion president at Dominion Command. With him is my very good friend Brad White, Dominion secretary, Dominion Command.

You're well aware of how things work here, for sure.

From the NATO Veterans, we have Gordon Jenkins, who is president, from the head office. Also, there is Percy Price, acting director of advocacy, from the head office.

Welcome to you all. Each group has 10 minutes.

Mr. Gordon Moore (Dominion President, Dominion Command, Royal Canadian Legion): Mr. Chairman, good afternoon. It's a great pleasure to appear in front of your committee this afternoon. I'm pleased to be able to speak to you this afternoon on behalf of more than 320,000 members and their families.

The Royal Canadian Legion is well situated to address the impact and the effectiveness of the Canadian Forces Members and Veterans Re-establishment and Compensation Act, commonly known as the new Veterans Charter, as well as the Enhanced New Veterans Charter Act, as a result of Bill C-55.

The Royal Canadian Legion is the only veteran's organization that assists veterans and their families with representation to Veterans Affairs Canada and the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. We have been assisting veterans since 1926 through our legislative mandate in both the Pension Act and the new Veterans Charter. Our 23

professional service officers are located across the country and provide free assistance to veterans and their families with obtaining benefits and services from Veterans Affairs Canada. Please note that you do not have to be a Legion member to avail yourself of our services.

Our national service officer network provides representation starting with first applications to Veterans Affairs Canada through all three levels of the VRAB. Through the legislation, the Legion has access to service health records and departmental files to provide comprehensive yet independent representation at no cost. Last year our service officers prepared and represented disability claims on behalf of almost 3,000 veterans to VAC and also to VRAB. Over 75% of these veterans received benefits under the new Veterans Charter.

Additionally, we met with more than 12,000 veterans and their families from across the country regarding VAC benefits and services. There is no other veterans group with this kind of direct contact, interaction, provision of support, and feedback from veterans, their families, and also the caregivers. I believe we can speak confidently and with credibility regarding the effectiveness of the new Veterans Charter and the Enhanced New Veterans Charter Act. Our comments will address specifically the requirement for mandatory review, the obligation of the Government of Canada to our veterans and their families, specific deficiencies, and finally, the requirement for effective communication of the programs and services to support our injured veterans and their families.

Starting with the requirement for mandatory review, in 2006 the new Veterans Charter was adopted without a clause-by-clause review in parliamentary committee and in the Senate, because of a perceived urgent need to better look after younger veterans and their families and to facilitate their transition to civilian life. The government made a commitment to continuously review and evaluate the programs and services, and if necessary, to amend the legislation to address emerging needs or unanticipated consequences under the spirit of a living charter.

The Legion supported the introduction of the new Veterans Charter on the basis that it would be a living charter and improvements would be made when required. In 2011, almost five years later, the first real changes occurred with Bill C-55 and the implementation of the Enhanced New Veterans Charter Act. Despite these changes, there are still shortcomings in the programs of the new Veterans Charter, which are designed to assist veterans and their families with their transition to civilian life.

In Bill C-55, section 20.1 of the Enhanced New Veterans Charter Act, it states:

Within two years after the day on which this section comes into force, a comprehensive review of the provisions and operations of this Act must be undertaken by any committees of the Senate and of the House of Commons that are designated or established by the Senate and the House of Commons for that purpose.

While the government promised that the new Veterans Charter would be a living charter and that its ongoing improvement would be an enduring priority for the government, the first real change came after five years of addressing deficiencies, and significant deficiencies still remain. If it is a living charter, then the government must live up to its commitment.

We urge the government to institute a regular two-year charter review to demonstrate to veterans and their families the government's commitment and promise that it made to our veterans, and the obligation of the Government of Canada, which is at the heart of this discussion.

Turning to the moral obligation, the Legion is concerned that the government has forgotten the moral obligation to look after veterans and their families who have been injured as a result of their service to Canada. The government put them in harm's way; now the government has an obligation to look after them. This obligation on the part of the Government of Canada is stated clearly in the preamble to the Pension Act, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board Act and the War Veterans Allowance Act, but not in the new Veterans Charter.

This recognized obligation must be stated and reaffirmed in the new Veterans Charter. Our veterans need to know that when they are injured as a result of their military service, the government will provide the resources, tools, and care to ensure a successful transition to civilian life. It is as simple as that.

• (1535)

Effectiveness of the new Veterans Charter and enhanced new Veterans Charter... In 2013, the Veterans Ombudsman of Canada delivered a series of comprehensive reports on the effectiveness of the new Veterans Charter, which focused on the financial compensation, the complexity, and the limitations of the vocational rehabilitation programs for our injured veterans, and the care of their families.

Based on his findings, the Veterans Ombudsman called for urgent action to address the key shortcomings. Number one is the insufficiency of the economic financial support after age 65 to eligible totally and permanently incapacitated veterans. This is a small number of the most vulnerable of our veterans. It is unacceptable that veterans and their families, who have sacrificed for this country, live their lives with insufficient financial means.

Number two is the drop in income for veterans after release from the Canadian Armed Forces. The earnings loss benefit provides only 75% of the pre-release salary.

Number three, access for those severely impaired veterans who meet the eligibility criteria for a permanent impairment allowance and the supplement is complicated, and there are difficulties accessing these benefits.

Number four, it's unfair that the former part-time reserve force members who have been injured attributable to their service, receive a reduced earnings loss benefit.

Number five, the compensation for the pain and suffering related to a service-related injury or illness, the disability award, has not kept pace with the compensation provided to our disabled civilian workers who receive general damages from the courts. These same issues have been at the forefront of the Legion advocacy as mandated by the delegates at our Dominion conventions in 2008, 2010, and 2012.

Additionally, in May 2013, the veterans consultation group, which includes 20 veteran organizations, sent a letter to the then Minister of Veterans Affairs raising similar priorities. This deserves highlighting—20 veterans groups were unanimous in their position.

More recently in October 2013, the same veterans consultation group reinforced these priorities to the government. The group unanimously agreed that it was time for this government to have a heroic moment and do what is right for our veterans and their families. The veterans groups, the Veterans Ombudsman of Canada, the new Veterans Charter advisory group, and this very committee have all stated since 2006 that the government must resolve, as a matter of priority, the key financial deficiencies of the new Veterans Charter.

These are the same issues identified by the Veterans Ombudsman in his recent reports. There is consistency and agreement but there has been no action. Now is the time for action. Within this context, the Royal Canadian Legion continues to assess the top three issues requiring immediate resolution by the government. These are: number one, the earnings loss benefit must be improved to provide 100% of the pre-release income and be continued for life; number two, the maximum disability award must be increased and consistent with what is provided to injured civilian workers who received general damages in a law court; and number three, the current inequity with regards to ELB for class A and class B reserve force members for service-attributable injuries must cease.

Mr. Chairman, it's time to take action on these three key issues. At the same time, the Legion calls upon the government to expedite the review of the new Veterans Charter. We recognize the importance of a transparent and open review. It is important that veterans groups, veterans and their families, and subject matter experts have the opportunity to provide evidence to this review.

The Legion agrees with the deficiencies identified in the Veterans Ombudsman's report "Improving the New Veterans Charter". The reports are well researched, evidence-based, and informed by actuarial, independent analysis, and as such, should be used as the baseline for the parliamentary review.

This is a focused road map with achievable recommendations. The Veterans Ombudsman also uncovered a glaring gap that needs immediate action. There are approximately 400 veterans deemed totally and permanently incapacitated who are not in receipt of any allowances. This means the new Veterans Charter's permanent impairment allowance and supplement or the Pension Act's attendance allowance or exceptional incapacity allowance should apply to these veterans.

While they are in receipt of the earnings loss benefit, it is a monthly income that ends at the age 65. When these veterans, who have been injured attributable to their service reach 65, their income will substantially be reduced. This is an urgent problem as these are the most vulnerable, seriously disabled veterans who are at risk of living their retirement years in poverty. This is unacceptable and needs urgent action.

● (1540)

Finally, I want to address the issue of communication and accessibility. Why are we still having a conversation about which is better, the Pension Act or the new Veterans Charter? The new Veterans Charter was developed to meet the needs of the modern veteran. It's based on modern disability management principles and focuses on rehabilitation and successful transition.

I will state that the Legion has never completely endorsed the new Veterans Charter as it was presented in 2006. We've been steadfast in our advocacy for its change to better meet the lifelong needs of our veterans and their families. However, it's time to stop the rhetoric and focus on the issue. We have an obligation to understand the complexities and interrelationships, and inform about and explain the new Veterans Charter. Our veterans and their families deserve nothing less.

The new Veterans Charter and the Enhanced New Veterans Charter Act are comprehensive and complex. Our veterans and their families need to know what programs are available to assist them and how to access them: financial, rehabilitation, health services, and family care. The government needs to ensure the resources and programs are in place to meet their needs. The government needs to review the accessibility to these programs and ensure that front-line staff are available and knowledgeable in order to assist veterans and their families. This must not be a self-serve system.

The Legion was gravely concerned when General Rick Hillier, former Chief of the Defence Staff, in the CTV News network Remembrance Day telecast on November 11, 2013, stated as follows, regarding the new Veterans Charter: "That needs to be rewritten completely because it does not look after our veterans, particularly over a long period of time."

Further, he stated that the lump sum may seem to be significant, "but a 22-year-old soldier who has lost both of his legs and is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder is still going to be without his legs 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60 years from now". He said, "They're still going to be suffering somewhat from PTSD and they're going to need support throughout that time. And the veterans charter does not do it."

Most Canadians have this understanding of the new Veterans Charter as well. I would suggest that this understanding highlights

the ineffectiveness of the government's communication of the programs and services available in the new Veterans Charter for our injured veterans and their families.

Lastly, it highlights that it's time for this government to start communicating and to proactively reach out to all veterans across the country and ensure that they're aware of the financial compensation, rehabilitation programs, health care services, and family care programs that are available and how to access them.

It's also time for us to understand the new Veterans Charter and the Enhanced New Veterans Charter Act. This should be a priority. Our veterans need to know not only the weaknesses but also the strengths behind the legislation, the programs, and the services and benefits. We too can help our veterans and their families.

In summary, this review is about the effectiveness of the new Veterans Charter. The Office of the Veterans Ombudsman has conducted the most comprehensive research and analysis work undertaken on the new Veterans Charter. The analysis is done. It's thorough and unbiased. Mr. Parent personally tested his recommendations with most of the veterans organizations and stakeholders. It is consistent with recommendations since 2006.

Use this report as the blueprint for action. The path to improving the new Veterans Charter is clear. Let us not be focused on issues on the periphery. I urge you to stick to the critical core issues, as these impact the day-to-day lives of our veterans and their families. I encourage you not to delay but to expedite this review and take real action.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for the opportunity to speak.

● (1545)

The Chair: Thank you very much. You were very clear, Mr. Moore. We appreciate that.

Before I go to the next witnesses, I want to extend a welcome to all the veterans who are sitting with us today as visitors. We appreciate your interest in being here. Certainly, if you have your own personal comments at some point that you want to leave behind, send them to the clerk or send them to the parliamentary secretary, but certainly, anybody's comments are welcome because we take this very, very seriously.

I would point out as we go to the next one that for this presentation we only have it in English. We haven't had a chance to have it translated, so we'll do it verbally, and then everybody will receive the copy. That's the general rule, that we can't circulate it in only one language. We have it, but we will make—

What?

A voice: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Jenkins and Mr. Price, we appreciate you being here. I'm not sure which one of you...?

I shouldn't have been surprised. Please, you have the floor before we ask questions. Thanks for coming.

Mr. Gordon Jenkins (President, Head Office, NATO Veterans Organization of Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We only finished it an hour ago, Mr. Kerr. That's why it's not translated.

[*Translation*]

My roots are Franco-Ontarian, but I live in Nepean now, which is 100% English-speaking. I don't often have the opportunity to speak French. You can ask me your questions in French, but please speak very slowly.

[*English*]

It is a pleasure for the NATO Veterans Organization to be asked back again to address the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

I notice, as you did, Mr. Chairman, no fewer than six other veterans organizations around the room. I have a sign here reading "applause" for some point in my speech.

We urge all members of this committee to continue to work towards seeing improvements to the well-being and welfare of Canada's veterans. NATO veterans have all served this country in times of conflict and in times of peace and have done the nation's bidding. We have all proudly served. We now ask, in return for the sacrifice we made in the name of Canada and all Canadians, that this committee hear our concerns and influence the changes that we must see actually occur.

For far too long there have been significant and embarrassingly long disconnects between the policies emanating from the government and the harsh realities faced by the Canadian Armed Forces and our former service personnel, the veterans. Our veterans represent a legacy of service to Canada. Let us now see a legacy of respect and equality from a grateful nation towards our veterans, one that is moral, legal, social, and—the big one—financial.

Our colleagues of the Royal Canadian Legion have addressed the issues. They are all on our list; we support all of them. NATO vets have been asked by this committee to appear today, and if we wouldn't mind, to mention three items. We have three and a couple of further ones.

Those three items are care and support to the most seriously injured veterans, support for veterans' families, and improvement to the way Veterans Affairs Canada delivers programs under the Veterans Charter concerning services and benefits.

Those are the three areas. If any member would like to discuss these with me or Mr. Percy Price offline, we would be pleased to discuss them. Mr. Price is the NATO Veterans acting director of advocacy. For eight years he was an adjudicator with the Veterans

Review and Appeal Board and for 23 years was a Royal Canadian Legion veterans counsellor. He still does that work.

NATO Veterans' comments today are directed to the shortcomings of the new Veterans Charter that are known and experienced by our modern-day veterans. We cannot let these issues continue, as the well-being and welfare of our veterans is at risk. Each member of this committee has a responsibility to see that changes are made to the new Veterans Charter, and NATO Veterans of Canada stands ready to assist in providing advice and recommendations to you.

But remember that veterans will also hold the government accountable for inaction and partisan politics. The days are long over, as you've noticed, when veterans will suffer in silence along the lines that a good soldier never complains and just follows orders.

● (1550)

We, of all people, have earned the right to be vocal about the hardships we face at the hand of negligent policies and a lack of leadership in addressing these known shortcomings. As an elected official, I am certain you will all agree it is important to work closely with communities and local interests. These are the people who elected you and whom you represent.

There are 750,000 veterans out there. They all have families, and most of them vote.

I'll now turn it over to Mr. Price who will address the three issues that we were asked to address.

Mr. Percy Price (Acting Director of Advocacy, Head Office, NATO Veterans Organization of Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, I will deal with the seriously injured veterans. DND and VAC must ensure that all seriously injured veterans make application for pension claims and allowances before being discharged from the service, including the RCMP.

Seriously injured veterans must also include those individuals with PTSD. The severely injured veterans, upon discharge, and during their transition to civilian life, are at a very high risk to further injury and death. We highly recommend that Veterans Affairs Canada monitor their rehabilitation, mental health services, health care, and support for their families.

VAC must maintain regular personal contact with veterans and their dependants. It is recommended that Veterans Affairs Canada have a team of trained personnel to deal with issues for seriously disabled veterans, and PTSD. This team may save the lives of our veterans who are high risk, as witnessed in recent months with numerous recorded suicides. Veterans Affairs must give priority to all seriously injured veterans, including with PTSD, in all pension benefits and allowances.

As for support to veterans' families, Veterans Affairs Canada must keep a high level of communication with veterans and dependants to ensure that the well-being of all is carried out. Often, veterans experience difficulties with drugs, alcohol, psychological problems, and marital difficulties, with no advice. In view of this, it is recommended that Veterans Affairs Canada provide the appropriate counselling and lines of communication, with personal visits, to identify critical problem areas, with referrals to support groups. Veterans Affairs Canada must give priority for veterans to attend community colleges and universities, coupled with priority job placement and educational grants for deserving applicants. VAC often focuses on the actual veterans' issues, and not the extended family, which we think is very important.

Improvements to the way that VAC delivers programs under the Veterans Charter concerning services and benefits.... We at the NATO Veterans feel that it is imperative that VAC provide a higher standard of program and services to every veteran and their dependants. We have deep concerns with the recent VAC closures of district offices across Canada, and with the reduction of staff in the head office and also in the regional and district offices. This will affect the delivery of service, will overload the remaining staff, and will result in reduced productivity.

The Veterans Review and Appeal Board's proposal to conduct hearings by video and teleconference is indeed depriving the veterans of their rights to appear before a personal hearing for assessment and entitlement board hearings. The type of hearing should be at the discretion of the veteran.

In recent years, the veterans have indicated their unhappiness with the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, and often do not want to appear at hearings, as they feel that the members of the board are against them. To create a better rapport, we recommend that the chair of the VRAB, or his or her designate, attend the annual second career assistance network program, SCAN, which is conducted across Canada at Canadian Forces bases. This would facilitate a better understanding between the Veterans Review and Appeal Board and our veterans. Of course, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board chairman attends national conventions every two years with the Legion, and they also attend conferences with service officers across the country.

The NATO Veterans Organization of Canada firmly believes that Veterans Affairs Canada has the most outstanding and excellent benefits and services in the world. But what's most important to the veterans and their dependants is how these services and benefits are delivered to them. It is the responsibility and obligation of Veterans Affairs Canada and the government to deliver these benefits in a first-class manner.

They did not fail us; let us not fail them.

Thank you.

• (1555)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Price and Mr. Jenkins.

Mr. Gordon Jenkins: I just need to make my conclusions, sir.

The Chair: I knew you'd get the last word in, for some reason. Please go ahead.

Mr. Gordon Jenkins: I didn't go to Acadia for nothing, sir.

The new Veterans Charter was introduced in 2006. There's been one amendment, with three items to it. This was before NATO vets was even formed.

The new Veterans Charter was a four-year study by the Department of National Defence and the veterans affairs committee. Since its inception, the charter has been studied by many panels—I won't list them all—including Queen's University, the Claxton papers; this Parliamentary standing committee; and more recently, a number of excellent reports from the Veterans Ombudsman. Would you believe there are close to 200 recommendations out there that have been made for improvements to the charter? To date, very little of substance has been done to address these issues.

The most obvious discrepancy in the charter is the provision of proper financial support for those veterans with severe disabilities, particularly those in the lower ranks. Changes need to be made to the new Veterans Charter to ensure that veterans with severe disabilities receive compensation equivalent to that under the previous pension act. The most obvious discrepancies come from programs or benefits that were eliminated under the NVC.

Additionally, changes need to be made to address the lack of financial support for veterans, as has been mentioned by the president of the Legion, after the age of 65, when veterans may have the most need. All benefits should continue until the time of a veteran's death, and they should not be stopped once the veteran receives the Canada Pension Plan or Quebec Pension Plan. Like other Canadians, veterans earned the CPP or QPP.

The discriminatory policy that applies to reserve force personnel serving side by side with regular force, but who are compensated at a much lower scale for equivalent injuries, is a gross injustice that must be fixed. What's the difference if I lose my arm or he loses his arm. He's regular; I'm reserve. I get less. That is inexcusable.

Overall, to change the new Veterans Charter to accommodate veterans with severe disabilities and include those items outlined above would not be very costly, since only 4% of all new Veterans Charter veterans are considered seriously disabled.

One of the most important recommendations is that creating separate standards and pension categories for veterans with severe disabilities may ensure that the new Veterans Charter supports veterans who are most in need. The current feeling within the veterans community towards the government in general, and Veterans Affairs, is one of, to put it mildly, dissatisfaction about the lack of action to correct the many known—200—deficiencies that have been noted. These have all been documented by the office of the ombudsman. Timely implementation of these measures would go a long way to regaining the support of your veterans community and provide a starting point for a more positive relationship between all concerned parties.

Members of the standing committee, please, the time for talk and studies has long since passed. It is now time for positive action, as Gord said. The bottom line is that the time for action is now. The veterans cannot wait any longer.

Thank you.

• (1600)

The Chair:

Thank you, Mr. Jenkins.

Before we go to the committee members, now that you're well settled in here, I just want to point out that there was a question the other day from a member, who is not here today, about the time.

I want to point out, particularly, Mark, that the committee passed that each member will get six minutes. There seems to be some question as to the timing. As we go around I just want to point out the member has six minutes. If the witnesses are over, we'll allow the witness to have the extra time if necessary. But the questioner will go no further than six minutes, just so we're clear on that point, if you don't mind.

We'll start with, Mr. Stoffer, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Chairman, thank you very much.

To the Royal Canadian Legion and the NATO veterans group, thank you all very much for coming before our committee today and helping us assess how we move forward on the new Veterans Charter.

Before I start, sir, I just want to mention what an excellent tie Mr. Galipeau is wearing today. It's very classy. As he is a very classy gentleman I want to put that on the record very much.

My first question is for Gordon Moore. As you know, the Legion, and other groups, have been advocating for a long time not just on the charter but on other areas as well. I just wanted to put one thing in your preamble of the Legion and what they do. You talked about servicing veterans and their families. I assume you meant to say you also service RCMP members and their families as well. Is that correct?

• (1605)

Mr. Gordon Moore: Yes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Very good.

I know the RCMP has nothing to do with the charter but I know your organization, and other organizations, keep an eye on the RCMP as well. I just wanted to put that there.

Mr. Gordon Moore: Our mission statement for the Royal Canadian Legion mentions all serving members and the RCMP.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Yes, sir.

I have a couple of things for you, sir.

Mr. Jenkins mentioned the number of recommendations that your organization and a number of others made with the Gerontological Advisory Council a few years back. He noted the number of recommendations that have been put forward and how very few of them have actually been accepted. I'd just like your view, the Royal Canadian Legion's view, about why there has been a reluctance to accept some of these recommendations...the other ones that have been there. Also, I have another question and it's for both of you. I'll ask the Legion first and then, Mr. Jenkins, you can answer second.

In the Equitas lawsuit, the crown attorneys who were representing the Crown—and I'm paraphrasing them—stated under oath that there was no moral obligation for the crown to care for veterans. I'm paraphrasing more or less what they said. Basically that moral obligation applies only to the aboriginal community.

Obviously many veterans organizations across the country were quite concerned when they heard this. The judge hearing the case indicated that there was an obligation to care for those veterans in that regard. My question, which I've been asking quite repeatedly, is this. Does the government have a moral, legal, social, and financial responsibility to care for those they asked to put themselves in harm's way? I haven't gotten an answer on that question even though this is now the eighth time I've asked it. I'm wondering what the Royal Canadian Legion's view would be on that as well.

I thank you again, you and all the other veterans groups, and especially Mr. Richard Blackwolf, an aboriginal veteran who is here today, for being with all of us. I thank you.

Mr. Gordon Moore: Mr. Stoffer, the Royal Canadian Legion's view on the moral obligation is that the government has a moral obligation to look after our veterans and their families, right to their last moments.

The government of the day has put them into harm's way, whether it happened 20 years ago or whether it just happened recently with them being in Afghanistan. The government has to understand that you're the one who asked them to sign the dotted line; you're the one who paid to have them trained; you're the one who paid to send them overseas; and you're the one who said, yes, you're going to go and fight for democracy, in Afghanistan, or wherever they had to go. Yes, the government has that moral obligation and they will.

As I stated in my report, there are three acts that state that the government has the moral obligation. When the new Veterans Charter was written, the moral obligation was kept out. That's the only place. No one at the time caught that. That's very unfortunate because it was something that came across that it had to be put into place because we had men and women serving in Afghanistan, we had to make sure that we were prepared back here, and this is how they sold the bill. We had to be prepared back here when our soldiers returned. But we had to be ready in how we're going to look after them, on the short term and also in the long term.

Mr. Stoffer, they've been looking after them in the short term, but they haven't been doing a good job on the long term. The moral obligation has to be there all the way through.

Mr. Brad White (Dominion Secretary, Dominion Command, Royal Canadian Legion): A good example of moral obligation is the United Kingdom government signed, about two years ago, their social covenant with their military on how it was going to respond to their needs once they had been deployed and moved out and possibly injured and returned home. Perhaps what the Canadian government needs to do is to also have a social covenant with those who serve its country.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Mr. Chairman, I want to put on the record that one of the MPs who helped review the charter was the late Jack Stagg. I too missed that as well, so I'm responsible for that as well.

• (1610)

The Chair: Do you care to respond, in a reasonable short time?

Mr. Gordon Jenkins: I'll be very brief. I couldn't put it any better than these two gentlemen to my right. I would like my response to be exactly the same as Gord's and Brad's.

The Chair: Mr. Price, go ahead.

Mr. Percy Price: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm sure you're well aware of the fact that those veterans who served in Canada only, they're under section 21(2) of the Pension Act. In the act under section 21(1), where there's a special duty area, Afghanistan, there shall be no deduction in injuries or whatever. If it occurs in a special duty area or in the theatre of war, the government is solely responsible and obligated to provide pension for that veteran.

However, under the other section, in Canada—not those war time or special duty areas—that would be a different issue. Certainly in war time or special duty areas, the government is solely responsible.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that clarification.

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

Mr. Parm Gill (Brampton—Springdale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all the veterans in the room today for your service towards our country and also our witnesses, for appearing before the committee and helping us with this very important study.

Minister Fantino has asked our committee to conduct a comprehensive review of the new Veterans Charter as it evolved and as it's prescribed today.

Above and beyond the mandated review of the enactment, enhancement enacted by Bill C-55 in 2011, did your respective organizations call for a comprehensive review? Do you support the committee's comprehensive review of the charter as a whole?

Mr. Brad White: Going back to Mr. Stoffer's first question about what the recommendations were, if you look back all the way through, you've had the Gerontological Advisory Council, the New Veterans Charter Advisory Group. You've had this committee. You've had the Senate subcommittee. You've had input from all the various recommendations and organizations of veterans, as well as other medical people. You've had the ombudsman. We've had lots of recommendations put forward for enactment.

Do we support a full review of the new Veterans Charter? Yes, we do.

As comrade Gord said in his preamble, we'd like a review every two years. But in essence, the whole charter should be reviewed continuously, to make sure that the services provided to the veterans are in fact being provided to the veterans.

The reason we have difficulty, and we go back to the first question of Mr. Stoffer, is that there are lots of recommendations on the table right now. They've been there for quite a while. In 2011, when Bill C-55 came in, there was no movement to make this a living charter. The charter has to live. It has to breathe and it has to evolve. The circumstances we're putting our men and women of the Canadian Forces and the RCMP in—but the RCMP is not covered here—around the world is evolving, and we need to evolve that support for them as well, as we put those people in those circumstances.

Mr. Parm Gill: Mr. Jenkins or Mr. Price, do you have anything to add?

Mr. Gordon Jenkins: I think the time for intensive reviews is done. You've had reviews. You've had reports. Why have another one? Why not catch up on the ones already on the table because you have 200 now. What will come out of this committee? Another 10? Clean up the act first. Let's see some action. Enough with the reviews. Just stop the reviews. You can still have a review, once you get caught up on what you already have on the table. Then have one every two years.

Thank you.

Mr. Parm Gill: Thank you.

Can you tell us to what extent your organizations were involved in the consultation process for Bill C-55 if any?

Mr. Gordon Jenkins: In my speech I said that we have been around for four years, unlike ANAVETS, which has been around since 1890. So we're a new organization. We came in the middle of this. That might help a bit because we can see.... There is a saying *en anglais*, "you can't see the forest for the trees". We can see the forest and when we came in and we looked at it, we said, "My gosh...". As Brad has mentioned, listing off these reports and the recommendations, it's just incredible, and where do they go?

Did that answer your question? In other words, we were not involved. Three parties passed this new Veterans Charter, but we were not involved and we arrived in the middle, when there was a new Veterans Charter and we said, “Oh boy, wow, what’s wrong here? Look at the recommendations they have, it’s incredible”, and nothing is being done. Three of them in one amendment, if I’m not mistaken....

Thank you.

• (1615)

Mr. Brad White: Overall, I think you’re asking a question about Bill C-55 and the involvement of stakeholders—I don’t like that term—the organizations in the consultation process.

First off, I don’t think the consultation process has been adequate over the years. It needs to be improved, overall. There was a bit, but little consultation involved with Bill C-55.

Mr. Parm Gill: Were there any recommendations put forward by your organizations that were adopted in Bill C-55?

Mr. Gordon Moore: At this point, if I remember, going back to that period there were recommendations from the Royal Canadian Legion and other veterans organizations but they were ignored at that time. Veterans Affairs had their own agenda.

I will tell you that I went to a couple of the stakeholders’ meetings. Normally when you invite the stakeholders to a meeting you’re asking for positive input on where we can move forward. At no point were the stakeholders asked to help set the agenda and the topics that needed to be discussed for the betterment of the veterans.

The Chair: Thank you.

Yes?

Mr. Gordon Jenkins: I would like to support Gord on that one. NATO Veterans is on record to Veterans Affairs Canada, in our four years, asking that we please be consulted for the agenda for the stakeholders’ meeting.

We were never, ever, consulted or asked. We were issued an agenda and we were told to send one person, period.

The Chair: Okay, thank you very much.

We’ll now move to Mr. Eyking, our guest.

It’s good to have you here today. You have six minutes, please.

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

It’s great to be here and to see all the veterans here and to see their representatives here. It’s truly an honour.

It was mentioned quite a few times that there are quite a few benefits out there that are available, but it’s getting them delivered that’s the key. As well, front-line staff were also mentioned.

You people are well aware of the closures, and you’ve mentioned the closure of these offices. Cape Breton has been closed. In Cape Breton we had 11 staff there and over 4,000 veterans were using that office.

We had two rallies down there and over 5,000 citizens showed up. It was quite emotional. At that rally one of the veterans who was

organizing it stated that perhaps it was time for the Legion to stop doing all the services they’re doing, which the government should be doing.

With the closures of these offices, what kind of impact is it going to have on your legions that are trying to help the veterans who come into your branches? Also, what is your comment on some of the members of these legions saying that maybe it’s time they should stop trying to help these members?

Mr. Gordon Moore: Mr. Chairman, I hope and pray to God that no branch of the Royal Canadian Legion across this country would ever consider that. This organization was built by veterans for veterans. I’m a former serving member myself, but I never left Canada, so I fall under 21(2) of the act.

Having stated that, let me say that we of the Royal Canadian Legion and its 1,460 branches across the country will offer our support to all veterans and their families, whether they are aged 23 years or 105 years. We make sure that our branch service officers, who are volunteers just like me, are well-trained and have the knowledge to help a veteran and the veteran’s family through the process of getting to one of our provincial service officers, who are professionals.

They have the capability of going on the CSDN. Because of the act to incorporate the Legion, we have that capability. Of course, our Dominion service officers working out of Ottawa at Legion House have the same capability as well. They’re working with our veterans, as I mentioned in my report earlier.

We are urging our branches now through our provincial officers to get the branches well prepared for what is going to be happening. For example, in Sydney in Cape Breton the branch more than likely.... I’m not trying to make an assumption here, but I’m stating that we’re going to be asking the branches in those particular areas—Sydney, Thunder Bay, Saskatoon—to have an office there if we know for a fact that Veterans Affairs is going to have a case manager coming out to visit. For example, in Sydney they are already there to look after the case-managed clients whom they already have on board. If there are other veterans within Cape Breton who need to see someone, then we are asking them to please supply a place or an office where we can have a confidential interview and go through the process. That’s the process we’re going through.

• (1620)

Hon. Mark Eyking: Thank you.

Mr. Brad White: Just as an add-on, we’ve already seen a spike in the number of people who are coming forward looking for services. That’s happening now. Our national bureau is well over its head. We have put a service officer into Valcartier from Quebec Command. He’s inundated with people to serve.

The services we provide as an organization should be viewed as complementary. They should not be viewed as taking over the responsibility of the government.

Hon. Mark Eyking: My last question may be to you, Mr. White.

You alluded to the United Kingdom and some of the things they are doing, and such other countries as Australia and New Zealand—countries that are similar to us in situation.

I note that only one recommendation was accepted out of 200. That's not a very good average. But what are you looking for in this charter, or what really stands out about how veterans affairs in other countries are doing better than we are?

Mr. Brad White: If you see a comparison with what other like-minded nations do for their veterans, the services we provide our veterans are pretty good comparatively across the world. What we're trying to do is evolve the system as we have it right now into the new dynamic of the kinds of situations we put our personnel into.

Every country across the world is trying to change and transform their dynamic as well to meet the needs of the new veterans. We continue to do that. We honestly believe that the new Veterans Charter is a good document. It's a new system to look after people. But we believe there are gaps that could and should be fixed, that we are obligated to fix, so that we can continue to provide this service to our veterans.

But we have a pretty good system in this country and we have pretty good people, by and large, delivering that service, through Veterans Affairs as well.

The Chair: We're right at the bubble, Mr. Eyking. Thank you very much.

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

Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank the vice-chair for his kind words when he began.

I want to welcome the NATO Veterans Organization of Canada and also the Royal Canadian Legion and all the other groups that are here. I met many of you several times over the last eight years at a number of commemorative functions where we honour veterans. I myself belong to the friendliest Legion in the region, number 632. Of 308 members of Parliament, there's one who wears the Legion pin on every suit, and that's me.

Mr. Jenkins,

•(1625)

[Translation]

as a fellow Franco-Ontarian, welcome. That said,
[English]

you will understand that I will address Mr. Moore more than you because I haven't bought my membership in your association yet, so you know I have a conflict of interest.

At this table and elsewhere in the country, we hear many people talk about the Veterans Charter and the services provided by Veterans Affairs Canada. There are veterans' groups, advocacy groups, and individuals from all aspects of the veterans' community. We just heard a few minutes ago that, as imperfect as is the Department of Veterans Affairs, many countries are just trying to catch up to what we do for veterans.

In any event, many of these people who were involved in the process that led to the Veterans Charter had lengthy consultations with the government in office in 2005 and in years before when the charter was written. I wasn't here then. There may be people at this

table who were. Certainly, the government that I support was not in office at that time. I'm not going to make a lengthy statement because I want to leave more time for answers.

Mr. Moore, could you tell the committee what the Legion's involvement was in the consultation with the government of the day prior to 2005?

Mr. Gordon Moore: I'll let Brad answer that—

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Thank you, Mr. Moore.

Mr. Gordon Moore: —because I don't have the answer.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: He was there. He's the permanent guy.

Mr. Brad White: Yes, and I do have membership forms for each one of you if you want to join the organization, and you can also join online at www.legion.ca. That's my paid political announcement for all of you.

The Royal Canadian Legion, as well as other veterans' groups, as well as health professionals, the Canadian Forces, and Veterans Affairs were all involved. We were all involved, and I think it was the Canadian Forces and the Veterans Affairs advisory group that formulated basically the workings of the new Veterans Charter before it was presented. So all those groups were part of that consultation process at that time.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: I thank you very much, Mr. White.

Mr. Jenkins, what was the position of your organization before 2005 on this charter and on its development?

Mr. Gordon Jenkins: As I mentioned, Mr. Galipeau, we did not have an organization before 2005.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: It's a pretty simple answer.

Mr. Price wants to speak.

Mr. Percy Price: Yes, I'm sorry, but I was a member of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board for seven years, which was during that period, so indeed I had a conflict of interest and I wasn't involved.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Where does the NATO vets organization see itself in the future?

Mr. Gordon Jenkins: NATO Veterans primarily accept and welcome any veteran. Most of our membership is made up of post-Korean veterans up to and including Afghanistan veterans. You'll hear the term "traditional veterans", who are the World War II and Korean veterans. It's an artificial definition, but it's one that's used quite commonly. Then you'll hear "the modern-day veterans", who are from post-Korea up to and including Afghanistan.

•(1630)

Mr. Royal Galipeau: Thank you very much, Mr. Jenkins.

Does anyone else have any more comments?

I'm finished with statements and questions.

Mr. Brad White: Just to say that we tend to look at it holistically. A veteran is a veteran is a veteran, not just from a post- or pre-whatever. A veteran is a veteran is a veteran.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now move to Mr. Chicoine for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

I would also like to thank our witnesses for joining us today.

Let me go back to what you were saying about the fact that it is time to take action right away to improve the New Veterans Charter.

Since we are conducting a comprehensive study and we are going to produce a report in several months in the wake of which the minister will prepare a bill, would it not be desirable for the minister to start right away to improve the new charter given that everyone agrees with the ombudsman's recommendations?

Would it be in the minister's interests to start right now to improve the new charter based on the ombudsman's report, granted that it may involve other changes in a year after the comprehensive study?

Mr. Gordon Jenkins: I think the minister already has a list of recommendations and we cannot help but wonder why another series of recommendations is necessary.

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Basically, he could already be working on a bill to improve the charter using the ombudsman's work?

Mr. Gordon Jenkins: Yes, he has enough recommendations right now.

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Thank you.

Do our other witnesses feel the same?

Mr. Brad White: I am not francophone, but I am francophile. My wife is a Quebecker. I apologize, but I will speak in English to make sure I am using the right words.

[*English*]

We certainly believe that there are things that can be done now while this review is ongoing. Comrade Gordon has laid out three things that we believe can be done now, without having to push further in this review. All these things apply to probably the most serious at-risk personnel that we're looking at. So we're talking about the earnings loss benefit being improved, increasing the maximum disability award so it's consistent, and as well, trying to get rid of the discrepancies between class A and class B reserves and how we treat our reserves in comparison to our regular force.

[*Translation*]

We feel that those are the three elements that can be included in the legislation right now to improve it.

[*English*]

We believe we can do that.

Mr. Gordon Moore: I have just one thing I'd like to add.

I'm not sure if the committee is aware, but out of the 40,000-plus Canadian Armed Forces members who served in Afghanistan, 25% of that total force was reservists from right across the country, coming from small towns and hamlets in the provinces of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta, right across the country.

You train those reservists alongside regular force members and you take them to Afghanistan for six or seven months, and side by side they do the job day in, day out, and get injured and then you bring them home. You're telling me—and this is what the government of the day is telling me—that we cannot give them any more than this pittance so that they can stay alive. That is sad. Now is the time to act, as Brad mentioned.

As I said earlier, we've listened to study after study after study. We've listened to recommendations that were supposed to have been put into place, but never happened. Now is the time to act to make sure that our men and women who are injured, who need our support, and who need the financial capability to keep their families together and to look after their kids, because a lot of these people have small children who are at the elementary stage. I'll tell you, we have enough families across the country outside of the military who are having trouble meeting their day-to-day needs. We shouldn't let our serving members do that. We have to look after them now. Please do that.

• (1635)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Thank you.

However, we do not have a lot of information and recommendations to improve family services. For instance, at a press conference this week, we heard from women with husbands suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and they said that they felt completely helpless in dealing with this issue and that they did not receive any help.

What should we include in the charter to improve the lives of these women, who have to look after completely dysfunctional husbands and, in many cases, children as well?

[*English*]

Mr. Percy Price: Mr. Chair, and sir, I'm in touch with these widows and veterans with PTSD three or four times a week. In fact, recently I was in touch with a family that had a recent suicide in a certain province. The unfortunate part is that when DVA comes out to speak to the actual veteran, the spouse is never there and not really required. I think it is important that when a Veterans Affairs counsellor communicates with a veteran, in particular one with PTSD, that the spouse is there to get the full story. What's happening is that they're fading away from the spouse and the dependants. Oftentimes when we're in the business of pensions, as advocates or counsellors with DVA, we deal strictly with the veteran. That's where we're missing the boat. That's why these spouses or widows appeared this week.

I don't want to go into details, but I spoke to a recent widow. As a matter of fact her spouse's friend died about two weeks prior to that. He was a warrant officer and served with this last one who committed suicide. They served together in Afghanistan. Can you imagine how devastated that young 39-year-old sergeant must have felt? A red light should have come on somewhere with Veterans Affairs saying, "Uh oh, we have this one suicide. What about the effect of that on the others?" They're not communicating. DVA must communicate.

That's the problem. Because somebody lives not in Gagetown or Oromocto but over in the Miramichi or out in the bush, and it's too hard to get to—and they don't know where they live. Well I can tell you, gentlemen, marketing can find us better than DVA can find their veterans out in the wilderness. Something has to be done, and they must treat it as a priority.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Price, for very clear points.

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

Mr. Bryan Hayes (Sault Ste. Marie, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm sorry I don't have my Legion pin on. I am an associate member of the Legion as a result of my father's 36-year career in the Royal Canadian Air Force.

We just introduced new legislation, as a government, to Bill C-27 and that legislation is the hiring veterans act. It basically stipulates that qualified veterans should be moved to the top of the line for posted federal public service jobs as they become available.

Are you in agreement with that legislation? I'll ask one representative from each group. I don't need all four of you to speak because I'd like to get a couple of more questions in.

Mr. Brad White: Yes, I'll be quick.

Frankly it's not a new bill. I have a friend who served on UN missions, had a heart attack in Central America, came back, was released from the military, and was immediately hired in the public service through the priority hiring. The issue on priority hiring is people meeting the qualifications, and it's always been that issue. Not all releasing members of the Canadian Forces meet the qualifications to come into the public service, so they languish on the waiting list. There's also that the public service is reducing as well. Although the military has now been pushed to the top of that list, there's still a whole bunch of people.

As well, if you look, RCMP members are second class. They're in tier two, not tier one. So we're concerned about the RCMP not being included in tier one as well. So will they get the jobs, are the jobs there, is the public service going to continue to decline—there are a lot of people on that waiting list—and do the people have the right qualifications?

These young people coming out of the Canadian Forces today have life experiences that we can't imagine. They have technical training that we've never had before. They're smart people. They deserve to be employed somewhere, whether it's in the government or somewhere else. They deserve to have a chance to be employed and be moving forward. They're very smart young people.

• (1640)

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Mr. Price or Mr. Jenkins, just a brief comment, if you don't mind.

Mr. Gordon Jenkins: Okay, but would you repeat your question again for me?

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Mr. Price, were you aware of the question? Would you like to answer it, please?

Mr. Percy Price: Yes.

Indeed, if you go back post-war, that was one of the priorities of Veterans Affairs, employing veterans at AECL, Atomic Energy, or government people. But it might well be, as said by the Legion, that a person might not be qualified. That's why I recommended that indeed he or she be given priority to go to college or university, to be upgraded.

I certainly believe that if a veteran or RCMP is qualified in certain positions within the government—I don't like the idea of bumping civilians, but I think that veterans are special people; in particular, they fought in war or have been injured—he or she certainly should be given priority for employment, as I recommended in the presentation for the NATO Veterans.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Thank you.

I think the minister has done well in terms of introducing legislation that provides \$75,800 for veterans to get a university or college education. I think that was outstanding.

Mr. Price, again, you made a broad statement earlier that you believe there needs to be a higher standard of service delivery. I don't want to talk about the office closures, because we can debate that. You mentioned that in context at the same time.

What I'm looking for is specific recommendations for the criteria you are seeking, because that's a pretty broad statement. To define service standards, you really have to be pretty explicit in terms of exactly what you're looking for with service standards.

I do want to throw in that if you're not prepared to answer that in detail today, that's okay. Perhaps you could put something in writing afterwards that would clearly define what higher standards of service delivery you're actually looking for specifically, because that was a pretty broad statement. But I leave it to you to make a comment.

Mr. Percy Price: I hope I can understand what you mean by a "broad statement", sir, but I think I can.

For an example, last night I received a call from a veteran in Cape Breton. He has PTSD and other pension conditions. He made a submission on November 1 for a reassessment on his attendance allowance. He got a letter yesterday, which is about three or four months later, and he calls to say, "What's the delay?"

"Well, we're overloaded. We're too busy."

So there's something there. I've gone into the Gatineau office with a veteran and said, "What's going on here? How come he hasn't heard about this?"

"Well, sir, we're down in staff. We're overloaded. It's still in the basket."

It's been there for three months.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: So what specifically would you think would be a reasonable response time? That's where I was going when I said you made a broad statement. Now we're being specific. What would be a reasonable response time?

Mr. Percy Price: There's no reason that a response cannot be back to that veteran within 30 days.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Within 30 days? That would be what your anticipation would be?

Mr. Percy Price: Yes, and 90 days is far too long, sir.

This is becoming a general reality across the board. I have details of names, but I'm not going to breach that at all. If you want, sir, I can certainly provide you with more detailed information.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Thank you, I would appreciate that. That's good.

I have one more question I want to get across to Mr.—

The Chair: You have to all be quick.

You have 10 seconds.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Mr. White, why two years? Why not three years? Why not one year? Why not five years?

Who would do that study in two years? Would that be this committee again?

Mr. Brad White: Why not continually?

• (1645)

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Well, you said two years, so that's why I'm asking.

Mr. Brad White: We wrote two years, okay, but why not continually? Anybody who does a strategic review should be having an ongoing strategic review about what their programs—

Mr. Bryan Hayes: I would agree with that.

Mr. Brad White: —and services are. An ongoing review to make sure that we're meeting the needs of our veterans is required.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Thank you.

Thanks, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Hawn now, please, for six minutes.

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As a NATO veteran and a member of Legion 175 Kingsway in Edmonton, I welcome you all. I appreciate the work you have done and the work you are doing and the work I know you will do, and the rest of the veterans here.

In your sort of chapters 1 and 2 here in the Legion submission, I think you made some fair statements. There's a lot of talk about the lump sum versus the new Veterans Charter, and how a fairer evaluation should include all of the benefits that are accessible and should include an overview of additional benefits available under SISIP. Comparisons continue to be made between the disability award lump sum paid out and the monthly disability pension paid

out under the Pension Act, and these comparisons do not provide a fair overview of what is provided under the new Veterans Charter. I would agree with that.

There are a host of benefits under the new Veterans Charter. To me the issue has always been access and burden of proof, that we make folks jump through too many hoops to get to it. To me that issue is burden of proof. We set the burden of proof too high. I haven't heard anybody here today say it, but there's an insurance company mentality within VAC that says you'd better prove beyond a show of a doubt that you need the benefit, and I understand why they do that.

The other issue to me has always been transfer of information—call it communication—between DND and Veterans Affairs. Because of the Privacy Act getting in the middle, they can't just transfer information back and forth. If we could lower that burden of proof—and there's no magic number—to something more reasonable and get the Privacy Act out of the way of communicating, how far would that go in a philosophical way to helping the problem? I know you can't give a definitive answer.

Mr. Gordon Moore: When the Canadian Armed Forces knows that an individual is going to be leaving within a period of time, that is when Veterans Affairs should be brought into the picture. From that point on—let's say he has a physical injury and he's also suffering from PTSD—Veterans Affairs should be involved right through to the very end when that individual is healthy and able to contribute again to society. At that time, Veterans Affairs should pull back but also stay in contact with the family for at least the next two to three years to make sure that everything is going “according to Hoyle”.

Mr. Brad White: The chair will probably recognize that we've said this before, but the transition process of the individual from being a member of the Canadian Forces to being a client of Veterans Affairs is probably one of the trickiest transition processes of all, particularly if that individual is suffering from a physical or mental disability or injury that they have to deal with. The individual has to be held very closely. They have to be watched closely, and—you're right—they need accessibility to the programs that are there. But there's also the issue of harmonization among programs that the Department of National Defence offers under SISIP and what is being offered by Veterans Affairs under the new Veterans Charter and the Pension Act.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: You're saying these things are complementary, but they need to be harmonized.

Mr. Brad White: They need to be harmonized very much, because right now there are differences in some cases.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Okay.

I just want to correct something you said, Mr. Moore. When a class C reservist is on duty in Afghanistan and he gets injured in that theatre, he's treated the same way as a regular force member.

Mr. Gordon Moore: He's treated the same way?

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Yes.

Mr. Gordon Moore: They make sure he's coming back and he's able to.... But once they get him back to Canada, and for instance, he leaves the hospital here in Ottawa and they're sending him home, that's where the ball drops.

Of course, he's not treated the same way a regular force member is. If you take a look under Bill C-55, a private, for example, is guaranteed a minimum \$40,000 taxable. For a reservist, it's \$24,000. That's the inequity we're talking about. We want to make sure they're both treated the same, because they've done the same job.

•(1650)

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I agree with that.

You have chapter 1 and chapter 2, and you hope that this is chapter 3. It needs to be a continuous process. We need to adapt. Circumstances change and demographics have changed drastically.

Mr. White, I'll go back to you for a second. We talked about who should do a review and so on, and whether it should be this committee. If we were to do that on a continuous basis, this committee would not be able to do anything else. Who would you see doing that review?

Anybody can answer that.

Mr. Brad White: First, what we provided you with here is something that we drafted up for our members. This is what we sent out to our members through *Legion Magazine* to make sure they were educated about what was involved with the new Veterans Charter, because we saw too many times that people did not understand what the charter was. We wanted our members to understand.

This material's dated. I mean, chapter 1 is way back when, when we first started the game here, and it hasn't been updated since then.

In the issue of a review type of process, I agree that it's probably not the committee that has to conduct that review. It certainly has to be a consultation process with the department, probably with the involvement of both DND and VAC with representatives from groups, from the medical authorities, and all the specialists that are treating and using people these days. They need to come together, as used to happen with the New Veterans Charter Advisory Group. That put forward a lot of those recommendations that are there now. If you have that type of a consultation process, review process, continually ongoing, then—

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Maybe under the sponsorship, if you will, of VAC, but bringing in the various—

Mr. Brad White: Very much so.

The Chair: Okay, thank you. We're well over six minutes. We're intrigued but we're out of time, unfortunately.

So I'll go now to Mr. Rafferty for six minutes.

Mr. John Rafferty (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for being here.

Thank you guests and veterans for being here.

I was very pleased with everything you've had to say today and the points you brought forth—in particular, support for families. I do have some questions about that, but I may not get to them.

I also have concerns about communication. We have seen some things change and you say—in particular, Mr. Moore—the government needs to review the accessibility to these programs and ensure front-line staff are available and knowledgeable to assist veterans and their families. This must not be a self-serve system.

I held some town hall meetings. Peter Stoffer was with me a few weeks ago in Thunder Bay, and of course you know an office has closed there. A woman stood up who was from one of the Legion branches in Thunder Bay and said she came because she just received a phone call from Service Canada asking her to give money to a veteran. That's one thing.

Then she went on to say that George, a Second World War veteran—an unrelated case—tried to sort his way through the website, which he couldn't. He eventually called the 800 number and he got through after some waiting. He needed help with some paperwork being filled out. He went to the Service Canada office, as the 800 number person told him to, and he got there and they simply said they don't do that there. They sent him to the Legion.

The woman from the Legion was saying they're volunteers; they do the best they can. Many Legions across the country are struggling and so they can't do it.

I just want to point out that the minister himself is acutely aware of what's happening here. In the report on plans and priorities, 2014-15, the minister says:

The primary risk being mitigated by the Department is that the modernization of VAC's service delivery model will not be achieved as expected, and will not meet the needs of Veterans, Canadian Armed Forces members, and their families.

He goes on to say:

...there is a risk that quality service delivery could be affected due to VAC's increasing reliance on partners and service providers in the federal, provincial and municipal governments as well as private sector.

As I read this, and as I recounted the couple of cases to you, it occurs to me that in the charter it does say that veterans have a right to be treated with respect, dignity, fairness, and courtesy. I wonder if any or either of you would like to make a comment on either what I just said or where you see this heading and how the Veterans Charter is in fact being contravened, in my opinion.

Mr. Gordon Jenkins: I think a common theme that we've heard this afternoon is one of communications, the breakdown of communications, and the complexity of the communications. You alluded to that, but there's a third area, and that's the regulations, the forms, the 18-page forms. DND can interpret a regulation differently from Veterans Affairs. The complexity of it, asking an 80-year-old or 90-year-old to get on the web page and find information.... I think the big challenge is how we improve—what you're getting at—communications. It's not just communications with the veteran but the veteran and his family.

Now, I was in a special duty area. I left my wife for a year and when I came back I converted to the public service. During that whole year, there was no communication with my wife whatsoever by the Canadian Forces. When I became a veteran, as Brad mentioned, the transfer over from DND to Veterans Affairs had to be the most complex, convoluted, step-by-step procedure: phone this office, fill out that form. You just wouldn't believe it.

So I guess what you're looking at, and Percy has alluded to it too, is communications with the veteran and the veteran's family. I believe the Veterans Bill of Rights states that the family has to be present anyway, so please, listen to that. Listen about the communications. It is breaking down. It's getting more complex, and when I speak to the ombudsman, he tells me that most of the complaints and most of the demands for services are already covered. Veterans just haven't been able to find them in all the regulations.

• (1655)

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

I know Mr. Price would like to say something, but perhaps you would like to say something from the Legion also.

Mr. Gordon Moore: Thank you. At some time I'd like to meet the lady you mentioned from Thunder Bay and thank her personally for looking after that veteran.

As I mentioned earlier, because of the office closures, and Thunder Bay was one of those offices, we're reaching out to our branches to ask them now, until such time as the government is able to come through with the staff and the right amount of money—if that will ever happen—to make sure that our veterans' needs are looked after.

This is why, as I said well over an hour ago, the Royal Canadian Legion was formed in 1926 by veterans for veterans. As an organization, as we move into the 21st century, we're getting more vocal in what we do and how we do it. We are making sure that our branches are fully aware of the issues around veterans and why they should be filling out the forms. I believe that if Veterans Affairs can't do their job, we have paid professional service officers across this country. We're going to overwork them, there's no question, and the burnout is going to be high, but we are going to be able to be there for them. But Veterans Affairs has to step to the table at some point in time and make sure that they have enough staff to look after our veterans and their families. The big key here is the families. Make sure that the families are involved in every issue with veterans.

The Chair: Mr. Price.

Mr. Percy Price: Thank you. At this given time, a veteran receives one letter a year. It's called QOL, quality of life, and it asks questions. Has your disability deteriorated? What's your family doing? How are they doing?

But do you know something? Those veterans never send them back, and I say that if Veterans Affairs do not hear a reply within 60 days, a red light should come on and something should be done.

You asked, sir, what will happen if VAC slackens off with the delivery service and communication with our veterans; it's going to be chaos. It's going to be disastrous, and I'm happy to hear from the Dominion president that the Legion's service officers across the country will step in and take up some of the slack. But he still expects VAC to do what they're responsible for and obligated to do for our veterans.

Thank you.

• (1700)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Lizon.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses and welcome. Thank you for your service, veterans, guests. Thank you for your service and welcome here.

On the same note on the service delivery, I understand, Mr. Jenkins, that you are concerned about old people being unaware, but some do and some don't. Some need help and some do get help. The same applies to people who have to travel to the office. Some, if they don't have a family, if they don't have anybody, even if the office was open, they couldn't travel there anyway. Therefore, every situation is individual and they should be looked at individually.

The way we communicate today is much different from when I grew up, even. In most cases when I wanted to talk to someone I had to walk. Now everybody has devices and gadgets all over the place. Therefore, I think a time of adjustment has to kick in. People will adjust to a new way of communicating, a new way of doing things. However, for those who are unable to do it, I agree that they do need help and that help should come. That's why we're here. We are here to serve veterans who are not here and that's why we're doing this review.

I would like to ask the Royal Canadian Legion, to switch gears a little bit, about the services the Legion provides for families. What changes in the charter should be made to serve veterans' families best?

Mr. Brad White: May I sum up a whole bunch of things? They are communications, outreach, and accessibility. If we can tackle those three issues, then we can tackle the other problems we have with the new Veterans Charter.

When you're talking about what kind of outreach we do for families, I'll get to that, but first off and so that you know, we have sent a letter to every reserve unit across this country informing them of what services are available from the Royal Canadian Legion as far as benevolence and benefits are concerned. We've offered them a briefing on what we can do for them and we're reaching out to all those people to make sure they understand what the system is.

We're also going to all of the SCAN seminars that we can, to make sure that those people retiring, either medically or as regular retirement from the Canadian forces, are aware of what some of the benefits that they have are.

As an example of what we provide to families, in Edmonton, and maybe Mr. Hawn will know this, but through the Military Family Resource Centre at the base in Edmonton, the Royal Canadian Legion sponsored a program that was called children of parents with trauma. It is the family that's important here. We've raised that issue a couple of times. They're the ones who are staying home. They're the ones suffering when the individual comes home because the individual is suffering. In many cases it's the family member who actually brings the member forward to get the assistance because they've had enough of living through the problems that are being created in the home because somebody is suffering from an OSI or has a physical injury.

Through the programs that we're starting up we're sponsoring as much as we can in the military family resource systems, so they understand what the information is that's available for them. This program was trialed up in Edmonton at the base and is now in Galetown as well. We're opening up the doors so we can actually assist families and see what they need.

As well, we have access to our poppy funds. Our poppy funds are accessible for serving members and their families to make sure they get the assistance they need. Of course, they go through the process of due diligence to make sure that the requirement is there and we can assist families in their time of need.

Those are some of the things that we have on the books right now.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Would anybody like to add anything to that, on the recommendations for the Veterans Charter to best serve military families?

Mr. Percy Price: I believe that the Legion has hit the nail on the head. Communications is the one, and indeed, dealing directly with the spouse of that veteran and dealing with the dependants, because that's where it's missing right now, whether it's because of staff within DVA, the lessening of members. They do a good job, but if they're overloaded. We can't blame the staff within the district offices or regional offices, or whatever. Again, if they're overloaded, they can't do their job, and the veteran will suffer.

As for dealing directly with the veteran, whether it's out in the boondocks or in a city, it has to be corrected, and corrected immediately. We have a tendency to deal with the higher part and we often forget about the grassroots. It's the makeup of us.

It appears to me that now the department has not totally...but if you read the recent *Legion Magazine*, which I highly respect, I think it says that the veterans are poorly served. This is an attendant document, and when you see 40% of veterans being poorly served,

that is scary. I hope that the minister has a copy of this on his desk, and every member of Parliament. They should read it before they go to bed and read it when they get up. When I read it, I couldn't sleep all night because it's scary.

Our veterans are very important.

Thank you.

● (1705)

The Chair: You have three seconds left, but I'll say thank you for your input.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: I could make a quick comment.

The Chair: You can't because one of the witnesses would like to comment further, I believe.

Mr. Gordon Jenkins: Of course, if we go back to the last meeting, you asked the same question. I bet if you look down at your notepads—and I guess we're coming to the end right now—you'll find a common theme from this end of the table, and interestingly enough, from the questions from your end. You've heard the word—I bet it's on your pad—"communications", a little note. You've heard "families", and more interest in the families. You'll have heard about the overload at Veterans Affairs. You'll hear of the Legion literally stepping in to help, and you'll have heard of the complexity and how all these problems, if you list them down, are all connected. They're all connected.

Hopefully, that's a summary from our end. I don't know if the Legion has any closing....

A voice: That's good.

The Chair: No? Okay.

By the way, you're right, communication is something we've talked about quite a bit in recent weeks and we'll be talking more about it. Speaking of which, if you have further comments or views that you'd like to express or send along, please feel free to send them along in writing, because certainly we'd include them in our consideration as well.

Mr. Gordon Jenkins: We appreciate that offer to elaborate on a broad question and help narrow it down. That's a very positive approach.

The Chair: They all have their hands up. You are all wound up here today.

I just want to say that anything that comes in should come to the clerk, please.

We're not going to let Mr. Jenkins have the last word. I see Mr. Price and Mr. Moore, please.

Mr. Percy Price: Mr. Chair, I'm 75, and I might go back and work for nothing for the department, if that would be satisfactory. So make sure that's recorded, please. Thank you.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: We appreciate that.

Mr. Moore, did you want to comment?

Mr. Gordon Moore: Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, as I said in the very last paragraph of my brief, I encourage you not to delay but to expedite this review and take the real action that's needed for our veterans and their families, because the time is now. The need is there now.

I ask you, from the bottom of my heart, and the 320,000 members of the Royal Canadian Legion, please look after our veterans and their families.

Thank you.

The Chair: I want to thank the witnesses very, very much for their contributions. I know we'll have further dialogue down the road because we need the advice and we appreciate it. Thank you very much today.

We will suspend briefly because we have some business items we have to deal with. Thank you.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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