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CANADA

## **Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, May 26, 2015**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Royal Galipeau**



## Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Tuesday, May 26, 2015

•(0845)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC)):** Good morning. Welcome to the 50th meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[Translation]

This morning, we are beginning our study of division 17 of Bill C-59, An Act to implement certain provisions of the budget tabled in Parliament on April 21, 2015 and other measures.

[English]

To have a compelling start to this study, we will have the pleasure of hearing from two respected officials from the Department of Veterans Affairs during the first hour of this meeting: Michel Doiron, assistant deputy minister, service delivery, and Bernard Butler, associate assistant deputy minister, policy, communications and commemoration.

[Translation]

This half of our meeting will end at 9:45 a.m., at which point, we'll take a quick break. Then we will hear from Guy Parent, Veterans Ombudsman, joined by Sharon Squire, Deputy Ombudsman, Executive Director of Operations; as well as from Brian Forbes, Chairman of the National Council of Veteran Associations in Canada.

[English]

Each stakeholder will make a seven-minute presentation. Normally it's 10 minutes, but we have more witnesses now, so we're going to squeeze you in. Members will then have an opportunity to ask witnesses questions.

[Translation]

Mr. Doiron, you may go ahead.

**Mr. Michel D. Doiron (Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Thank you kindly, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Good morning, Chair, members, *mesdames et messieurs*.

As the chair said, my name is Michel Doiron and I am the assistant deputy minister for service delivery at Veterans Affairs. With me today is my colleague Bernard Butler, the acting assistant deputy minister of policy, communications, and commemoration.

I wish to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on an issue of importance and great interest to veterans and their families, and that is those elements of the government's response to your committee's report of June 2014, titled "The New Veterans Charter: Moving Forward", that are contained in economic action plan 2015, or Bill C-59. The legislation, if passed, will amend the Canadian Forces Members and Veterans Re-establishment and Compensation Act, commonly known as the new Veterans Charter, to address a number of the concerns and gaps that have been identified.

There are essentially five legislative amendments/provisions contained within the bill.

The first provision introduces a purpose clause "to recognize and fulfil the obligation of the people and Government of Canada to show just and due appreciation to members and veterans for their service to Canada" and further provides that the "Act shall be liberally interpreted so that the recognized obligation may be fulfilled".

The second significant provision enhances Veterans Affairs Canada's ability to support transition to civilian life. It authorizes Veterans Affairs Canada to provide information and guidance to Canadian Armed Forces members and veterans on the benefits and services that may be available to them in order to help them transition and to make decisions on applications for benefits and services prior to release.

There are three additional amendments that effectively create new benefits for veterans. These new benefits will strengthen the government's support provided to seriously disabled veterans and their families through the new Veterans Charter.

The first benefit, known as the retirement income security benefit, RISB, would provide moderately to severely disabled veterans—those who need it most—with continued assistance in the form of a monthly income support payment beginning at the age of 65.

The second benefit, the family caregiver relief benefit, would provide eligible veterans with a tax-free annual grant of \$7,238 so that their informal caregivers, often their spouses or other devoted family members, will have flexibility or relief when they need it while also ensuring that veterans' care needs are met.

The third benefit, the critical injury benefit, or CIB, would provide a \$70,000 tax-free award to support the most severely injured and ill Canadian Armed Forces members and veterans.

These new benefits will complement the existing suite of services and benefits available through the new Veterans Charter and add depth to the supports available both to those injured in service to their country and to their families from the Government of Canada.

As announced in the budget, additional staff will also address delays in service delivery, especially for the most seriously disabled and their families. We will hire more than 100 permanent case managers for improved one-on-one services. More than 100 new disability adjudication staff, temporary and permanent, will improve the processing time for veterans who submit an application for a disability benefit application. This is part of the department's commitment to service excellence.

• (0850)

[Translation]

Thank you for listening.

[English]

I will now open the floor, Mr. Chair, to any questions the committee may have for Bernard or for me.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Mr. Chicoine, it is your turn.

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd also like to thank the witnesses for joining us today and answering questions.

Right off the bat, Mr. Butler, I'd like you to tell us what the new retirement income security benefit will entail. Will it encompass all of the amounts veterans are entitled to, meaning the earnings loss benefit as well as the permanent impairment allowance? Will the 70% formula apply to all the amounts that the veteran was entitled to before turning 65?

**Mr. Bernard Butler (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Policy, Communications and Commemoration, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Thank you for the question.

[English]

Mr. Chair, the benefit will be based on 70% of two income streams that the veteran would be receiving just before age 65. Those two income streams would be, one, the earnings loss benefit, so it presupposes that the veteran is quite disabled and has been on an extended earnings loss benefit up to that age. It will also be calculated on the basis of the permanent impairment allowance, and the permanent impairment allowance supplement.

What the benefit will ensure is that a veteran reaching age 65 will be guaranteed a minimum income from Veterans Affairs Canada of 70% of those benefits, less other income supports from prescribed sources. In other words, it's essentially an income support measure to ensure that the overall family income does not drop below a minimum of 70% of those identified benefits that are referred to: earnings loss benefit, permanent impairment allowance, and permanent impairment allowance supplement.

[Translation]

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** Okay.

If I understand correctly, then, certain amounts are being deducted. I'd like you to specify exactly which amounts are being deducted from the calculation you described.

[English]

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** These would be the amounts of income from other sources. An example would be if the veteran is eligible for superannuation benefits based on his or her military service, for instance, amounts that the veteran would be receiving through Canada pension plan, those types of income supports.

The whole intention of the retirement income security benefit is to ensure that there is a minimum level of income the family does not fall below. That's why in the calculation of it there will be consideration of income sources other than just those that are provided through Veterans Affairs Canada programming.

• (0855)

[Translation]

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

As I understand it, the new benefit will be transferable to the spouse of the deceased veteran.

Will the amount transferred to the spouse be exactly the same? For instance, if the veteran dies at the age of 66, will his or her spouse receive exactly the same amount that the veteran had been receiving until his or her death, or will the amount be lower? My understanding was that the spouse would receive 50%. So I'd like you to clarify how much of the amount will be transferable to the surviving spouse.

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** Thank you for the question.

[English]

Mr. Chair, a surviving spouse would have eligibility in two circumstances. In a situation where a member or a veteran dies from a service-related illness, the surviving spouse would be eligible for this benefit at the same amount that the veteran would have been eligible to receive, in other words, at 70%. However, in the case where a member or a veteran dies not from service-related disease or disability and would be eligible for the retirement income security benefit, the survivor in those circumstances would be eligible for the benefit calculated at the rate of 50% of the amount that the veteran would have been eligible for.

Again, there are two circumstances. One is where the survivor is eligible in her own right because her spouse died of a service-related disability and she would be eligible for this benefit at 70%, the same basis as the veteran would be. If, however, the veteran, who would otherwise have been eligible for the benefit, passes away due to non service-related issues, then in those circumstances, the spouse would be eligible at 50% of the amount the veteran would have been entitled to receive.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Mr. Lemieux, please go ahead.

[English]

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC):** Thank you to our guests for being here to talk about this important legislation. I'm very happy it's included in the budget implementation act. I'm glad we have it here in front of the committee so that we're able to discuss the different aspects of it.

The first question I'd like to ask has to do with the purpose clause. You mentioned it in your opening remarks. I think it would be of interest to all members. I think the terminology that's been used in the purpose clause is terminology that all MPs have been seeking. I'm wondering if you could elaborate on that a bit.

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** Thank you for the question.

Mr. Chair, the purpose clause reflects the objective of ensuring, as per the direction of this committee in its report going back to June 2014, that there be some formal statement of recognition of the obligation of the government and the people of Canada to Canada's veterans and their families. Interestingly enough, historically there was a very similar clause contained in the pension legislation, as an example, but when the new Veterans Charter was introduced in 2006, it was omitted. The committee had pointed out that this was a gap, that there was no formal statement in the new Veterans Charter to reflect that obligation.

The purpose clause has two elements. One is to state that there is a recognized obligation to support veterans and their families. The second element is quite important, to the extent that it says that the act shall be liberally construed so that the recognized obligation may be fulfilled. That's a very clear direction to both government administrators and presumably the courts, that if they are faced with interpreting any aspects of the legislation, they should ensure that a very liberal interpretation is applied in order to fulfill the obligation reflected in the statute.

• (0900)

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** Thank you very much. Actually, Chair, I'd like to read the paragraph quickly, because I think there are people who might be listening to this committee but who don't have the legislation in front of them.

The purpose clause, as I read it in the legislation, is as follows:

The purpose of this Act is to recognize and fulfil the obligation of the people and Government of Canada to show just and due appreciation to members and veterans for their service to Canada. This obligation includes providing services, assistance and compensation to members and veterans who have been injured or have died as a result of military service and extends to their spouses or common-law partners or survivors and orphans. This Act shall be liberally interpreted so that the recognized obligation may be fulfilled.

Thank you for your indulgence. I just wanted to have that on the record. I think that supports the explanation we just received.

I would also like to ask a question about the caregiver amount. I think this is an important initiative for the spouses or family members of veterans who in fact care for them. Even though the veteran may be receiving home care through Veterans Affairs, this is an additional benefit to family members. I'm wondering if you could perhaps explain—I believe the amount is a little over \$7,000, tax-free—who that amount is paid to. Is it paid to the veteran, or is it paid to a specific family member?

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** Thank you for the question. The benefit to the family caregiver, or relief benefit, is payable to the veteran. It will be payable in the form of a grant. It's a \$7,200 tax-free benefit that will be paid. The intent of the benefit is to ensure that there is additional support to the veteran and to those providing care in the home on an informal basis, who need to have some relief, if you will, from that very intensive caregiving model, and at the same time to ensure that the veteran's care needs are in fact being met.

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** Does a veteran have to apply for it? For example, if one of their family caregivers is planning some time away to recharge, do they need to fill out an application form to say they'd now like to apply for this caregiver amount?

**Mr. Michel D. Doiron:** If the veteran is case-managed, he or she does not have to fill out an application. The case manager will do that for the veteran. If they're not case-managed, there is a document that will have to be filled out.

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** Are there receipts that have to be submitted? For example, if the family member decides that plan A is best to recharge their energy and refresh them to come back into a situation of looking after their loved one, while someone else might decide it's plan B or plan C, is the department involved in any type of approval process, or is it entirely up to the veteran and their family caregivers how they use that money to rejuvenate?

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** Essentially, the way the benefit is going to be designed, we're very concerned, as per observations of this committee over time and of our stakeholders and veterans organizations, to try to come up with models that are as flexible as possible while at the same time ensuring that the accountabilities under the Financial Administration Act are respected and honoured.

In this context the focus will be on determining the eligibility of the veteran because of their care needs and because they meet the central qualifications set out in the proposed legislation. The idea will be simply to pay that grant to them and at the end of the year there could always be a request to have some measure of accounting, but that will not be where the focus will be.

The idea will be to try to—

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Valeriote.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Doiron and Mr. Butler, for attending today.

It's amazing how Mr. Lemieux's questions just draw out the cynicism and the absolute doubting Thomas that exists, because I've seen this window dressing before when he purposely emphasizes the statement of the obligation that shall be "liberally interpreted" so as to recognize the obligation that must be fulfilled. I say that because over the time that I've been here, I've seen anything but. I've seen an Auditor General's report that talks about how many people are denied and how many of those people appeal with a 60% success rate. It's just fascinating the struggle that our veterans go through.

Let me take it to the legislation to tell you why I'm even more cynical. I look at the CIB, the \$70,000 payment that's going to be available to certain veterans who suffer "a sudden and single incident that occurred after March 31, 2006"—I'm not worried about the date so much—"a sudden and single incident" with "severe interference in their quality of life".

I've asked you folks and I've asked others and I've been told, "Well, that is not likely to include people suffering from PTSD because PTSD arises later." Unless through the miracle of medical reports that can attribute that to a sudden and single incident, those folks are out of luck, and the answer is, "Well, they have other benefits available to them." Well, so do those people who suffer "a sudden and single incident." You further marginalize those who suffer from PTSD. That is the hidden injury.

So tell me, what benefit is that to those suffering from PTSD?

● (0905)

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** Thank you very much for the question.

Mr. Chair, the critical injury benefit is again to be viewed as a benefit separate and distinct from the disability award. The committee full well knows that under the disability award program, compensation benefits are paid for disease or disability that is service related once it has stabilized. Most cases of post-traumatic stress disorder, as an example, become apparent oftentimes long after the fact. In those cases, once they are identified, once they're diagnosed, once they have stabilized, then compensation is payable on that basis in respect of PTSD and a range of mental health issues. So the—

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** Right. But you could go back and say, "Your quality of life has been severely interfered with. We are going to give you \$70,000 because you deserve what those others deserve."

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** Again, the important consideration is that, in fact, the disability award payments do just that. What this critical injury benefit is about—and it's to be distinguished from the disability award—is it was designed to ensure that those veterans who suffer these sudden and traumatic injuries.... Oftentimes it may be on the battlefield as such. It could be in the circumstance of a garrison injury or the crash of a helicopter. It's to compensate for disability that arises for the pain and suffering before the disability has stabilized, which is not to say.... If I might just add, the way it's been designed—and you're not wrong; it may well be that the preponderance of those who are awarded the benefit may indeed suffer from physical injury, but it has been designed in such a way that it would not necessarily preclude a mental health effect that meets the criteria. In other words, you are so traumatized by the event that it requires you to go into a state of care.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** Mr. Butler, you've used enough "mays" that make it ambiguous. It tells me the government's further marginalized PTSD victims because they don't get an automatic \$70,000 payment. Having said that, let me go to the second point that draws out my cynicism.

There is a \$7,238 per year payment, tax-free, for a caregiver relief benefit. That amounts to \$139 a week. I know there are people, in fact, there are some out there that we've seen having to chase former ministers around—Jenny Migneault, who's given up her job, and

others like her who've given up a lot of their lifestyle and their income earning potential because they have a spouse or a partner—

**The Chair:** Mr. Valeriote, do you wish an answer for this?

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** Tell me what \$139 a week buys them.

**The Chair:** He doesn't have to answer.

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** I'll quickly point out, Mr. Chair, in response to the question, that this benefit was designed to provide relief based on an assumption of need of 30 days in a given year. That's how the amount was calculated. This, I should point out, was not intended to be an income replacement for those providing care. It's a different program concept. This is based on the 30-day requirement for support for relief over the course of a year.

● (0910)

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** Okay.

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

Mr. Hawn.

**Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to our witnesses.

I want to follow up on that a little. I think we're confusing the purpose of these benefits. Every benefit doesn't necessarily apply to every veteran. Every benefit, especially these new ones, is designed for specific circumstances and to close gaps this committee, among others, identified. It's not that this applies to everything. We can be cynical if we want, but the simple fact is we have closed a number of gaps.

The critical injury benefit is not intended to compensate for the long term, because we have the disability award for that, but it is intended to compensate for the short term for those people it applies to. So it does fill a gap. It's the same thing with the caregiver benefit. It is not designed to be an income replacement, because the veteran is already getting full-time care by whatever mechanism. It is simply designed to compensate, not on an income replacement basis, and give some relief to the family caregiver.

I don't want to put you in too much of a spot, but is it fair to say that the purpose of all these benefits is very specific? It came from this committee. My opinion is we can always do more and we always will try to do more, but these benefits have been designed and are going to fit the purpose identified by the gaps identified by this committee.

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** Thank you for the question.

Mr. Chair, if I go back to the ACVA report, the committee was very clear in identifying that the most seriously injured were those that should be accorded priority in the move forward in terms of veterans programming in support of veterans. You're absolutely right. These benefits have been designed to try to address that gap, to try to meet the need of those who are most seriously injured as a result of their service, and to provide some related support to family members.

**Hon. Laurie Hawn:** I want to switch gears here and talk about the extra case managers and benefit adjudicators. Do you have any sense of timing of that in terms of the rate of those folks coming online?

**Mr. Michel D. Doiron:** Yes, thank you for the question, Mr. Chair.

We already have gone out with the requests. We have 600 applicants on the case manager side and 600 applicants—and I'm generalizing the number, rounding off—for our CSAs and adjudicators. Once the bill is approved, we're hoping to start to bring in some case managers as early as July and the same thing with the adjudicators. We're in the final parts of the interviews for case managers. This is over a number of years for the case managers. As the demand increases, or the number of case-managed veterans increases, we will bring in the case managers to meet that and to meet no more than one in thirty.

**Hon. Laurie Hawn:** Obviously, they're going to be targeted to locations and situations.

**Mr. Michel D. Doiron:** The case managers will be targeted across the country in our offices or in IPSCs, some of our integrated personnel units. For the adjudicators, there will be some in Charlottetown, but there will also be some here in Ottawa to be embedded. There are 23 resources that will be embedded with our CAF partners to accelerate and eliminate the backlog.

**Hon. Laurie Hawn:** Are we pushing the decision-making down to the case manager level in more simple situations?

**Mr. Michel D. Doiron:** Yes. We've already started to do that in reviewing our eligibility criteria. Some of the stuff has already been pushed down to the field for accelerated decision-making.

**Hon. Laurie Hawn:** Okay.

I want to talk about the purpose clause for a bit. That's been a sticking point, because it was, as you said, omitted for whatever reason when the legislation came into effect in 2006. But in de facto terms, has not every government of every stripe since 1917 tried to live up to that clause, whether written or not? In my view, every government—Liberal, Conservative, it doesn't matter—has tried to do the best they can.

I mean, the clause is nice. If it gives people comfort, that's great; it makes it more clear, more specific. But de facto, have governments not been trying to live up to that forever, basically?

• (0915)

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** I think that's a rather broad question to ask of a witness from Veterans Affairs. I would certainly say, in terms of how the Department of Veterans Affairs endeavours to apply the legislation, that we certainly endeavour to do that really all the time in adjudication of benefits and eligibility for services and so on.

I think you're right to that extent: this has always been the approach of Veterans Affairs. This simply very clearly codifies what that responsibility is.

**Hon. Laurie Hawn:** Thanks.

I'd like to go back to eligibility for a second. It came up around the caregiver benefit. We addressed it generally, but can you be a bit more specific on eligibility? That's always an issue. One of my issues has always been lowering the burden of proof, easing the access to benefits.

Can you discuss the eligibility for that particular benefit?

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** Yes. Thank you.

If you refer to the legislation itself, it basically says that if the veteran has a disability award, and as a result of the disability for which that disability award was approved they require ongoing care, in other words, there has to be a link between the disability award and the need for care, and if a person who is 18 years of age or older is playing an essential role in the provision or coordination of the ongoing care in the veteran's home for which the person receives no remuneration, then the veteran would be eligible for the benefit.

If you look at the provision, proposed paragraph 65.1(1)(d) states:

the veteran meets the prescribed eligibility requirements.

That's the further caveat. Basically, in terms of the regulations that will be fleshed out, it will refer to the need for, again, a fairly high level of care, in other words, the most seriously disabled veteran, that we've been directed to address.

**The Chair:** Mr. Rafferty.

**Mr. John Rafferty (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, NDP):** I'd like to thank you both for being here.

My questions revolve around the transition of members from the Canadian Armed Forces to Veterans Affairs. For benefits to work, there has to be a seamless transition. I believe, in fact, the minister has said that's one of his goals, to ensure that there is a seamless transition.

I have three different areas that I would like ask about. The first is physician assessment. You may know that in question period yesterday there was a question brought up—there was no answer, but there was a question brought up—about a member who was assessed by the Canadian Armed Forces physician as having severe PTSD. The Veterans Affairs physician said it was simple anxiety that the member had. That's a big disconnect.

Can you tell us what progress has been made in the seamless transition of physician assessments, from one to the other?

**Mr. Michel D. Doiron:** First of all, I want to clarify that Veterans Affairs accepts the diagnostics from CAF doctors. We do not provide diagnostics. We have doctors who may review a diagnostic to say, "Do we understand exactly what the medical doctor is telling us?" It would be the same thing from the private sector, not just CAF. So we do accept the diagnostic from the doctor, and from there, that's where we base our eligibility.

I do not want to talk about individual cases; I know very well about this case, but I do not want to, absolutely, for confidentiality purposes. But we do accept them.

When the minister talks about transition, there has been—I don't know for how long—a transition interview, but it was not as complete as it could have been. What we want to do now is ensure that this seam is eliminated, meaning that when the individual is to leave the forces, a fulsome interview occurs, and occurs long enough in advance, not two weeks in advance. This act gives us the authority to do that interview upstream, when they're still serving, so that we can look at the medical records, go through the medical records, and determine what the needs are. We can identify needs, employment, and various issues to help ease that transition.

For some soldiers, it's "I'm retiring". It's easy. For other ones, it's a lot more complex to try to get them the care and the help they need when they leave the forces.

• (0920)

**Mr. John Rafferty:** Thank you for that.

Can I assume then that if the CAF physician's assessment is accepted by Veterans Affairs, it's pretty seamless? Although there seem to be some problems still in that transition. I'm sure you're aware and continue to work on that.

The second area is the seamless transition of case workers. I know that you're hiring more, but does that necessarily mean there's going to be a seamless transition from one to the other?

**Mr. Michel D. Doiron:** Yes, I guess is the short answer. But we have to understand that on the CAF side, case managers are nurses, so it's medical case management.

When you come to Veterans Affairs, it's psychosocial case management. We look at not only your physical and mental health, but can you get a job. At psychosocial we do all the aspects. I'm not a professional in case management, but we look at more.

Yes, we want the handoff to be seamless. You may have a case manager from CAF, but that handoff would happen while you're still in the forces to a case manager from Veterans Affairs.

**Mr. John Rafferty:** How about the member's family in that transition?

**Mr. Michel D. Doiron:** We always invite the member's family to come to the interviews. It is the member's choice if the family member attends or not. We strongly encourage it, because the member may tell us there are no issues, but the spouse may give us a different story.

**Mr. John Rafferty:** Is there a place for compulsory participation?

**Mr. Michel D. Doiron:** I think you would have to ask that to the CAF since they're still serving. My personal view is that they would be better suited to answer that question.

**Mr. John Rafferty:** Can you explain to us what happens in terms of benefits, not just these new benefits but benefits in general, when a member goes from age 64 to 65? In other words, one day they have certain benefits, but the next day is their birthday when they turn 65 and things change. Can you explain what happens there?

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** Thank you for that. Again, this essentially goes to one of the gaps that the committee identified in its report.

What was very clear was that veterans who were totally and permanently incapacitated, in other words, were unable to return to work after they left the military and could not be successfully rehabilitated, were eligible for the earnings loss benefit, an income support benefit. They would receive that benefit right up until age 65, but on turning 65, the benefit stopped. The only benefits that then continued were essentially the permanent impairment allowance benefit and the permanent impairment allowance supplement. Again, these are benefits paid under the new Veterans Charter.

Effectively, that gap, which this committee identified as being a significant issue, is being addressed now through this proposed RISB, the retirement income support benefit. That will ensure that the effects of that gap are mitigated through the assurance of the 70% minimum income based on a calculation of both the earnings loss benefit that was being received and the permanent impairment allowance and supplement benefits

**Mr. John Rafferty:** You talk about a member who is severely injured. What about those who have a different kind of injury, different kind of impairment, like PTSD for example?

**The Chair:** Mr. Rafferty, you haven't left Mr. Butler any time, but I know he can be short in his response.

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, for that confidence.

It's important to understand that for folks who have PTSD, depending on the severity of it, they could be, and in fact, many of them are receiving extended earnings loss benefits. These benefits equally apply to folks with mental health issues as they do to those with physical challenges.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Lizon, over to you.

[*English*]

**Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC):** Thank you to the witnesses for coming here this morning.

Before I ask any questions, I want to comment on the issues that Mr. Rafferty raised about different diagnoses of certain mental conditions.



I also serve on the health committee and currently, we're doing a study on mental health in Canada. We have scientists and doctors coming before us, and unfortunately, medical science is not at the stage where the tests are developed that enable certain mental disorders to be confirmed or eliminated based on tests, as can be done in other health issues where we can do blood tests, and so on. Unfortunately, we have to rely on doctors' opinions and we have to give them credit for what they do, because it's not an easy task.

Perhaps I could ask Mr. Butler, through you, Chair, to finish his thoughts on the family caregiver relief benefit which he was not able to finish, on how that flexibility would work, whether receipts are required at the end of the year, whether the family or the veteran would have to submit certain receipts, or some receipts or no receipts. I think this is important.

The amount is not that huge. Sometimes the cost of caring for disabled persons is much higher than what is offered. Could you elaborate on this?

• (0925)

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** Yes, thank you for the question.

If I go back to the original comments that I made, I think the important point is that the thrust of this is going to be trying to minimize the administrative burden on the veteran. Once eligibility is determined—and again, I should specify that the regulations have yet to be finalized, and they will be coming forward in the next number of weeks—I think the idea is to reduce the administrative burden and determine eligibility as per the legislation. Once eligibility is established, it's paid as a grant. It's up front, \$7,200 tax-free. The expectation is the veteran will use it for the purposes stated.

Again, it has been designed to be absolutely flexible so that if the veteran may reside, say, in Ottawa but he or she may have a son or a daughter living in St. John's, Newfoundland, or Vancouver and maybe he or she wants to bring that son or daughter home to Ottawa to help provide relief, that is going to be perfectly okay. The idea is to make it as flexible as we can to ensure that the veteran's needs in this respect are met with a minimum of burden.

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

My second question is in regard to the permanent impairment allowance. There are some veterans who currently are receiving the benefit due to their mental health injuries. That provides them with additional support. Do you have the information on what percentage of veterans are currently receiving PIA?

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** We should have it here. I can't tell you right off the top of my head, but we do have it here with our December 2014 stats, if we can just find it quickly.

**Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon:** Maybe in addition I will just ask, are there any limitations or restrictions on how the money received can be spent and how much flexibility is there?

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** It's important to point out that with the permanent impairment allowance it's an award paid in recognition of disabilities or impairments associated with severe conditions. In this respect these benefits are paid and there is no accounting for it. It's simply an allowance that's paid on a regular basis based on the severity of the permanent impairment condition. There is no accounting required at all with respect to those payments.

**Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon:** What is the amount that is paid? What is it based on?

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** The amounts of the permanent impairment allowance are paid according to severity. There are three grades of the benefit paid. They go from basically about \$600 to \$700 a month up to I think \$1,500 a month. There are actually three grade levels. According to the severity of your condition, you will be paid on one of those grade levels.

**Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon:** Could you explain to this committee how the retirement income benefit works?

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** If we go back to the retirement income security benefit, again it's based on a calculation of 70% of the income support plus permanent impairment allowance benefits received at the time the veteran turns age 65.

If the veteran was receiving earnings loss benefits from Veterans Affairs and he or she was also receiving the permanent impairment allowance or the PIAS, they would be added together and the veteran would be eligible for 70% of that amount less income received from prescribed sources. Prescribed sources, as we noted earlier, would be other income streams like Canada pension, like superannuation that the member or the veteran might be eligible for.

In other words, it's simply that the intent of the program is designed to ensure a minimum income level and 70% is the calculation.

• (0930)

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

Mr. Opitz.

**Mr. Ted Opitz (Etobicoke Centre, CPC):** Thank you very much for being here, gentlemen. I think it's critical that you are.

One of the problems that veterans have often related is just getting into the system and being able to fill out the forms and initially get in there. What steps are you taking to make that easier and quicker?

**Mr. Michel D. Doiron:** We have a task force that will be providing their report before the end of June on reviewing all our forms. Presently we're looking at the 23 most common forms, which actually account for 90% of the forms used by the department. We are working with our ombudsman's office. We've asked for comments from the ombudsman's office. We have worked with the Legion. They have actually helped us on working on one of the forms. We will be going out to stakeholders with these changes.

We're not only doing forms, but we're also looking at correspondence and the letters making sure that they are readable and understandable by the veterans and the veteran community.

**Mr. Ted Opitz:** Thank you for touching on that, because that's one of the things I was going to talk about: terminology. You guys know your file, but to listen to you, a lot of it is wrapped up in the legislation and the words that carry it, but that's not how soldiers speak. You really need to simplify that understanding. This is a comment more than a question. We understand op orders; they're very simple.

The purpose is good, but the whole situation, mission execution part, they get that. I'm being overly simplistic, but I think if some of that is addressed and is provided with some examples, a lot of what you're doing now, a lot of what we're bringing in is outstanding stuff, but it has to be understood for the troops to be able to access it and to understand it and to know which benefits fit for them because this is not a one-size-fits-all, clearly. Every veteran, every injury or injuries, multiples, is different for every individual. I think that needs to be clearly understood, and how they can access those benefits that relate to them, whether short term or long term, needs to be clearly understood. I would highly recommend that terminology.

As another recommendation, the case workers as they come in need to be able to relate to the veterans this way too. They need to be able to speak in language they understand. I think if you're able to do that, a lot of these problems will be resolved. I think a lot of it has to do with an understanding issue, a comprehension issue, as to what's available for veterans. I think that's definitely a way to go.

Speaking of these case file workers, what's their expected caseload going to be?

**Mr. Michel D. Doiron:** Once this is approved, there will be no more than one case manager for 30 case-managed veterans.

**Mr. Ted Opitz:** What does that mean?

**Mr. Michel D. Doiron:** That means one case manager will handle fewer than 30 case-managed veterans.

**Mr. Ted Opitz:** So that's a manageable workload whereby when they're working with a veteran, they're not going to be rushed; they're not going to feel they have to get through the process because they have to move on to the next guy.

**Mr. Michel D. Doiron:** That is correct, sir.

**Mr. Ted Opitz:** There's going to be adequate time for them to be able to give all the care a veteran needs.

**Mr. Michel D. Doiron:** In addition, within that 30 we are also ensuring that we balance the intensity and the complexity of their clients, their veterans, so no more than 20% would be complex cases. The majority would be the medium cases but no more, because if there were more than six serious or complex cases, they would run out of time.

**Mr. Ted Opitz:** That's what I was getting at, because not every veteran is going to be the same. Some cases are going to be very complex and some are going to be fairly simple.

I want to confirm something you said earlier. You said that the medical records and personal files and things like that are going to be much easier to access now. Is that what you said earlier?

**Mr. Michel D. Doiron:** We hope it will be much easier to access. We're working with CAF to accelerate our receiving the medical files. Redaction has begun. We are adding purposes. What I said was, we are adding 23 adjudicators embedded within CAF for adjudications, which then will accelerate because it's not the same level of redaction.

• (0935)

**Mr. Ted Opitz:** A lot of changes have been made for reservists. Can you describe some of those?

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** Although not contained within this bill, because it was simply a matter of a regulatory amendment that has already come into effect, this committee identified that there was an issue of fairness in how reservists were being treated through the new Veterans Charter earnings loss benefit program. The most significant change that was implemented through that process was to ensure that reservists who suffer service-related injury and end up coming into our rehabilitation program are receiving earnings loss benefits paid at the same minimum level as for a full-time regular force serving member. That minimum threshold is \$42,000. That addresses a concern which our stakeholders and veterans and this committee have identified over some time as an issue.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** I'd like to welcome a member to the committee, Marc-André Morin.

You have the floor for six minutes.

**Mr. Marc-André Morin (Laurentides—Labelle, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to know why it will take five years before more case managers are on the job.

**Mr. Michel D. Doiron:** The reason is the gradual increase in clients. We are currently managing the cases of 7,200 veterans but we anticipate that the number will increase to 9,700 over the next five years. So we will staff case manager positions over the next few years to accommodate that increase in clients.

**Mr. Marc-André Morin:** Meanwhile, veterans are waiting. They are waiting until all of those case managers are on the job.

In any case, there is a lot I don't know about the issue, but it makes me think of my friend Jacques. He's 92. One of his legs was shattered in the Italian campaign when he was 18. His last leg operation was in February. He told me about the services he was receiving.

He said that his story was a simple one. He and 10 of his buddies set off crawling through the trenches and spent a year and a half being shot at. He buried half of his friends, and when he got back, he could no longer walk. His father had to lift him off the train. He was never able to do any sports. In a nutshell, he needed assistance in order to live.

While it may be a simple story, he still has to fill out paperwork, with all kinds of fine print to take into account. He knows how to use the Internet, he chats with his nieces and nephews, he isn't afraid of using a computer, but in his eyes, it's an insult to be forced to do it, to have that constraint placed on him. When you've been through what he's been through, you need to talk to a human being.

It's a bit long-winded, but—

**Mr. Michel D. Doiron:** The reason for the additional resources—especially case managers—is to ensure that we have staff for those who need it, in other words veterans whose cases are being managed. We are making sure we have people to assist them.

**Mr. Marc-André Morin:** The government would have done well not to get rid of them in the first place.

How do you justify how complex the system is?

**Mr. Michel D. Doiron:** It has to do with the forms and paperwork. We're in the midst of reviewing our forms and the way we communicate to make sure that the information is clear, that veterans can understand it.

Nevertheless, certain pieces of information have to be provided when a veteran is filling out an application. We have to use forms and we have to ask for certain pieces of information.

**Mr. Marc-André Morin:** I would remind you that these aren't actuaries or lawyers who've been injured.

**Mr. Michel D. Doiron:** I realize that, and that's why we are reviewing the forms to make them a lot easier to understand and much more user-friendly.

● (0940)

**Mr. Marc-André Morin:** I know you're just doing your job, and I wouldn't want to be in your shoes these days, but it doesn't seem like things are changing very quickly. Every single government since the beginning has had a hand in creating the situation. It's like watching a clock that has stopped. If your patient enough to sit and watch it for 24 hours, it will display the right time twice.

[*English*]

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** Many thanks for those comments on that. That's very helpful, for sure.

I would say two things. First, I would assure you that we're actually very delighted to be in the positions we're in, because we have a very important cause to advance in supporting Canada's veterans, and quite frankly, it's actually quite enjoyable and a privilege. Second, I would say that if you go back to the minister's comments when he was at ACVA a few weeks ago, the department is actually involved in a very interesting direction now. The minister at the time spoke of three critical areas that this department is focused on. One is achieving service excellence. One is achieving basically a resetting of our approach to veterans, which is trying to make everything we do more veteran-centric. The other is trying to fix this transition, the seam between the Canadian Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs.

Part of what we hope to achieve through that exercise is actually going to the very issues you're raising, which is to ensure we approach it from the veterans' point of view and not from a program point of view, and that we deliver it in such a way that the veterans themselves are going to feel they're getting the support when they need it and where they need it. It's actually a very exciting time for us.

We thank you for your comments.

**The Chair:** We have just a couple of minutes left. I'll give the floor to Monsieur Lemieux.

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** Thank you, Chair.

Perhaps you could explain something to the committee and to those who are listening. We have what I call important initiatives for veterans. They're in the budget implementation act before Parliament. We're going to be reporting it back to the House. Of course, every indication is that it will pass through Parliament before we rise for the summer, and it will go to the Senate.

Could you give us an indication of the implementation time once this has passed through the Senate, especially for these financial benefits?

**Mr. Bernard Butler:** From our point of view, Mr. Lemieux, the intent is to ensure that everything is implemented as quickly as possible. That has been our mandate. That is the minister's commitment. Once the legislation is passed and the supporting regulations are approved and put into place, we will be immediately engaged in implementing it. Those implementation strategies are being worked on as we speak.

As the minister indicated the other day to the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, his intent is to ensure that these benefits, particularly the financial ones, reach the hands of veterans as soon as they can. That is the commitment the department is working towards.

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** Thank you.

Thanks, Chair.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** I'd like to thank our witnesses.

That brings our first hour to a close.

We will now take a short break in order to bring in our next panel of witnesses.

Thank you very much.

● (0940)

(Pause)

● (0945)

**The Chair:** I'd like to welcome the Veterans Ombudsman, Guy Parent.

[*English*]

I'd also like to welcome Sharon Squire, the deputy ombudsman, and Mr. Forbes from the National Council of Veteran Associations in Canada.

In this segment, we have the ombudsman, and of course,

[*Translation*]

Brian Forbes, from the National Council of Veteran Associations in Canada.

[*English*]

Each witness will have 10 minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Parent, the floor is yours.

**Mr. Guy Parent (Veterans Ombudsman, Office of the Veterans Ombudsman):** Mr. Chair and committee members, thank you for inviting me to appear today to discuss division 17 of part 3 of Bill C-59.

● (0950)

Thank you for the opportunity, and I also want to thank you for the critical role that you have played in the past couple of years that has brought us to this juncture.

[English]

Your report, “The New Veterans Charter: Moving Forward”, published in June 2014, helped to focus the debate, establish priorities, and bring the veterans community together. It also provided government with a unanimously approved blueprint for moving forward to address veterans' issues. It cannot be denied that this is now happening.

In retrospect, I am particularly pleased that the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman's “Report on the New Veterans Charter and Actuarial Analysis”, published in October 2013, was able to assist with your work.

The proposed legislation represents significant progress on several issues of long-standing concern to veterans and their families. Because it is narrowing the gap on needed changes, it is important that it pass quickly and be implemented without delay.

The work of the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman has been effective to date because it is evidence-based. Results are measured against the fairness principles of adequacy—are the right programs and services in place to meet the needs of veterans and their families—the principle of sufficiency—are the right programs and services sufficiently resourced, in terms of both finance and human resources—and, finally, the principle of accessibility—are eligibility criteria creating unfair barriers, and can the benefits and services provided by VAC be accessed quickly and easily?

[Translation]

It is too early to offer you my opinion on the effectiveness of the proposed legislation. It is still before Parliament and its regulations have not been published, and as a result, implementation has not been initiated. However, I can share with you today my perspective, in principle. So let us look at the proposed initiative through the lens of fairness.

[English]

Do they address the fairness principles of adequacy, sufficiency, and accessibility? I believe that they do, in principle.

Adequacy is addressed by the new retirement income security benefit, which would provide moderately to severely disabled veterans with continued assistance in the form of monthly income support payments after age 65, therefore meeting a new need for the veterans and their families. It also applies to the hiring of new front-line staff to improve one-on-one support for veterans.

Sufficiency is addressed in principle by the parity of the earnings loss benefit for injured reserve force veterans, who will now get the same minimum income support payment through the earnings loss program as regular force veterans do, again eliminating unfairness.

The hiring of new front-line staff to improve one-on-one support for veterans also addresses sufficiency with regard to human resources.

Accessibility is addressed by the broadened eligibility criteria for the permanent impairment allowance, which, together with the PIA supplement, provides approximately \$600 to \$2,800 a month in lifelong monthly financial support to veterans whose employment potential and career advancement opportunities have been limited by a permanent service-related injury or illness. It is also addressed by the proposed new critical injury benefit, which will provide a \$70,000 tax-free award to support the most severely injured and ill Canadian Armed Forces members and veterans.

Going forward, while the changes put forward in Bill C-59 are going to have a positive effect on meeting the needs of veterans and their families, we need to address non-economic compensation for pain and suffering, transition from military to civilian life, and veteran-centric service delivery.

We also need to always remember that the new Veterans Charter is a living document needing timely reviews and updates.

● (0955)

[Translation]

Collectively, I think that we should be encouraged at this juncture that our efforts are making a difference in addressing long-standing issues affecting veterans and their families.

[English]

This does not mean that the gap has been closed, but it is narrowed. However, if these new initiatives are looked at as steps in a commitment to continuously improve and adapt benefits to the evolving needs of veterans and their families, then this is a very positive indicator for the future.

Mr. Chair, I would like to also inform the committee that just yesterday we published an update on the recent announcements in regard to your ACVA recommendations, on how they actually have improved things for veterans and their families. We have provided copies that will be distributed to the members afterwards.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm ready for your questions.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** Thank you, Mr. Parent.

We'll now go to Mr. Forbes, for 10 minutes.

**Mr. Brian Forbes (Chairman, National Council of Veteran Associations in Canada):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

NCVA welcomes this opportunity to speak to this committee this morning on Bill C-59, with particular reference to that portion of the legislation dealing with the new Veterans Charter reform.

I first wish to state that it has become readily apparent over recent months that there have been a number of significant developments positively impacting on the operation of Veterans Affairs Canada and the department's relationship with the veterans community. We would be remiss if we did not commend the minister, Erin O'Toole, and the deputy, Walt Natynczyk, on their proactive engagement in the overall reform of the charter and the enhancement of the administrative culture within VAC.

With specific reference to charter reform, it is fair to say that significant momentum and substantial traction have been developed through the various recommendations brought down by the minister, culminating in the establishment of the current statutory amendments before Parliament, which clearly are the government's attempt to respond to their proposals made by this standing committee, the Veterans Ombudsman, the Veterans Consultation Group, the New Veterans Charter Advisory Group, and our NCVA organizations.

Unfortunately, many of the minister's announcements and proposed legislative amendments reflect, in our judgment, half measures and are clearly not fully responsive to the comprehensive recommendations made by this committee and the aforementioned multiple advisory groups. After years, however, of what I have described as unacceptable inertia within VAC, there are indeed solid indications that the first phase of positive, incremental change is taking place. It remains our mandate, and I might respectfully suggest the responsibility of this committee and veteran stakeholders, to maintain pressure on the government to complete this vital initiative in addressing the outstanding inequities which still remain in the charter.

Mr. Chair, I would now like to make a number of general comments on the bill and the impact it will have on the new Veterans Charter.

First, the clear focus on seriously disabled veterans is commendable as it has consistently been the position of NCVA that the highest priority of the veterans community and the government must be seriously injured veterans.

Second, it is self-evident upon a review of the substantive provisions of the statutory amendments that the devil will be in the details as there are a number of references in the legislation to regulations and policy guidelines that have yet to be formulated to support the general provisions of the act. It is my opinion that until these regulations are finalized, it will not be possible to evaluate the precise eligibility criteria for the newly proposed major benefits and the "factors to be considered", which are often mentioned in the bill, in the administration of the new law. It will be incumbent on veteran stakeholders and indeed this standing committee to monitor closely the draft regulations and policy guidelines to ensure that the substantive provisions of the act are not diluted or unduly restricted.

Third, it is also readily apparent that budgetary constraints still exist. It is our opinion, upon a review of the minister's announcements and the statutory amendments, that the proposals have been structured to fit into the budgetary envelope, resulting in proposed benefits that are targeted to specific cohort veterans rather than the veteran population at large. Unfortunately, in our view, the government fixation with balancing the budget in this election year remains a restraint on the complete new Veterans Charter reform at this time.

Fourth, as I stated to the minister through recent correspondence and through my presentation to the veterans summit, much more needs to be done to rectify the voids that have been readily identified in the charter. The present state of development cannot be considered a total *fait accompli*, but merely a significant first stage of remedial legislation.

Mr. Chair, I know we're under certain time constraints and my brief is fairly lengthy. I've made it available to members of the committee, but I'd like to highlight some of my concerns with regard to the bill and those areas where there are still gaps and inequities in the charter which have yet to be addressed in this legislation.

First, the earnings loss benefit must be elevated from 75% of former military income to 100% in accordance with the long-standing and consistent recommendations of the New Veterans Charter Advisory Group, the Veterans Consultation Group, and NCVA—or at least to 90%, as proposed by my friend, the Veterans Ombudsman. The current reduction of 25% in income is unacceptable, particularly given that this loss of essential revenue is imposed when veterans and their families face a period of rehabilitation as they attempt to re-establish themselves in Canadian society.

- (1000)

This is particularly material to those who are permanently incapacitated. In this regard, the career probable-earnings approach identified by this committee should be implemented to ensure the true impact of the projected career income loss is recognized. This proposal can be implemented by further reform of the PIA or the PIAS, or alternatively by a separate evaluation based on the mechanisms used by the Canadian civil courts to ascertain future loss of income for severely injured plaintiffs

Second, the SISIP long-term disability policy needs to be eliminated from veterans legislation and be applied only to non-service related disability.

Beyond the unnecessary duplication of the programs—SISIP and ELB—the compensation of veterans and their dependants should not be a function of the insurance industry, whose mandate in many situations is to minimize exposure of insurers' policies when applied to injured or disabled individuals. I speak more of that in the paper, and I'll leave that to your reading at a separate time.

Third, disability awards commensurate with civil court general damages should be facilitated by VAC.

It is to be noted that in lieu of implementing this long-standing recommendation, the minister has opted to propose a new critical injury benefit in the amount of \$70,000. This CIB is limited to the specific circumstances of a transitionally incapacitated veteran and to high-end disability award recipients. It is noteworthy in this regard that the CIB is fraught with definitional issues as to who is eligible for this benefit and what factors are to be considered by adjudicators in determining the scope and extent of this new provision. Although we support the establishment of the innovative CIB in recognition of the plight that seriously disabled veterans confront, the choice of VAC to compensate only this particular class of veterans, as opposed to incrementally increasing all pensions in the disability award system, is of concern. I might add that this recommendation has been consistently brought forward over the last six or seven years not only by this committee, but by all of the other advisory groups that have looked at the charter.

Fourth, improved access to permanent impairment allowance and entitlement to higher-grade levels of the allowance needs further evaluation. It will be recalled that the Veterans Ombudsman, Mr. Parent, in his empirical study of the charter identified that 50% of seriously disabled veterans were not receiving the PIA, and consequently the PIAS, and that 90% of these veterans receiving the award were only obtaining grade three, the lowest grade. The minister's proposal to widen the regulatory definition of PIA eligibility is commendable, but once again does not fully satisfy all aspects of the reform of this important allowance. This is particularly so for those seriously disabled veterans who fail to satisfy the criteria for PIA, but it is also of great significance when one considers that the amount of the PIA is a major element of the new retirement income security benefit, as was pointed out by Mr. Butler this morning.

We continue to strongly feel that our proposal to the standing committee in this regard is the best approach to improving this access to PIA. That is, once a veteran is deemed to be permanently incapacitated, the disability award received by such a veteran should be the major determinant in assessing his or her grade level of PIA. If you're over 78% disability award, you should be entitled to a grade one PIA. Between 48% and 78%, you should be at grade two. It's simple, straightforward, and triggered by the disability award.

Fifth, the family caregiver relief benefit requires further re-evaluation as it fails to comprehensively provide adequate financial support for the families of seriously disabled veterans where significant needs of attendants must be provided by a caregiver. This benefit, as brought forward by the minister, is commendable insofar as it goes, as a targeted support to allow caregivers appropriate respite or relief, but in my judgment, it represents only one element of the overall concerns confronting the caregivers of seriously disabled veterans in need of attendants. Such families are also facing, in many cases, a significant diminishment in income due to the fact that the caregiver spouse has been forced to give up his or her employment, and when coupled with the veteran's 25% loss of income, through SISIP or ELB, it often results in a financial crisis in the overall family budget.

I'll just be a couple of minutes, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

• (1005)

**The Chair:** Your 10 minutes are up. I thank you very much, Mr. Forbes.

Mr. Chicoine.

[*Translation*]

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

I'd also like to thank the witnesses for sharing their observations in their opening remarks. This is just the first step in improving the new veterans charter.

A lot of improvements still need to be made, improvements that appear in the ombudsman's reports over the past few years, as well as in the committee's June 2014 report. You called the legislation a step in the right direction, but I tend to view it as a half-measure as far as the three new benefits are concerned.

For instance, the retirement income security benefit is better than nothing, yes, but it only provides 70%. Mr. Forbes said that he was actually in favour of a formula that would provide 100%. Veterans should receive 100% of the benefit amount throughout their retirement years. Mr. Parent, I believe that was also one of your recommendations.

I'd like to hear your thoughts on each of the benefits, beginning with the retirement income security benefit. As the legislation is currently worded, does the benefit guarantee veterans financial security in their retirement years, post-65?

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

Mr. Chair, I think there's been a bit of confusion. The percentage referred to didn't concern the retirement income security benefit post-65 but, rather, the earnings loss benefit, which Mr. Forbes said should be raised to 100% and the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman said should be provided at 90%.

I explained to the committee that what was important, in our view, was ensuring that a person participating in vocational rehabilitation receive the same level of income support. We would like to see the individual keep at least the same amount of money in their pocket. We are proposing 90% because people wouldn't have to pay into their pension fund, retirement fund and so forth.

As for financial security after the age of 65, I agree with you, it's a step in the right direction. It's very hard to take a position on that, however, because the regulations haven't been published yet. Once we know more about the regulations, we'll have a clearer idea as to the impact. Nevertheless, it does satisfy a need that both our office and the committee identified given that the new veterans charter didn't provide for any benefit after the age of 65. This way, at least veterans will continue to receive 70% of the amount they were getting from the department.

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** Do you think the formula provided for is sufficient? As you mentioned, the person already loses income when they are injured. The allowance is 75%, but my understanding is that it will actually be between 70% and 75%, and that means 50% of the amount the member was receiving before the injury. Injured members are already receiving less income support, and that amount will drop even further post-retirement if they haven't made pension contributions for at least 10 years. In your view, is a benefit that represents 70% to 75% of the amount they were previously receiving sufficient for veterans to have a decent standard of living in their retirement years?

•(1010)

**Mr. Guy Parent:** Every veteran's personal circumstances are different. It will all depend on the other income streams that the veteran and his or her family have at the time. And that makes it very tough to have a comprehensive solution that will work for all veterans. I should also point out, Mr. Chair, that the word "sufficient" isn't in the ombudsman's vocabulary. There will never be a portion that is sufficient for our veterans. We are constantly working to meet the demand.

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** Mr. Forbes, what do you think?

[English]

**Mr. Brian Forbes:** Yes, thank you for the question. Mr. Parent and I respectfully disagree on this one. We've talked about this for many months.

We would like to see, as the member is suggesting, that when you're dealing with totally and permanently incapacitated veterans at the age of 65, you continue the earnings loss benefit at 100%. What is concerning is the example you've raised, Mr. Chicoine. If the veteran does not receive any PIA, he already has ELB or SISIP at 75% of his military income, so you're really talking about 70% of 75%, which is 50%. What is crystal clear is that if this new provision, this RISB, is going to work, there's going to have to be an enhancement of the ELB and an enhancement of the PIA, so that the numbers will make more sense at the age of 65. It is our view that the RISB is a half measure because it basically talks in terms of a percentage of a percentage.

One of the things that we have felt strongly and which Guy and I have talked about many times is, should you really apply what is the private and public sector model of 70%, which public servants are certainly getting? We're talking about seriously disabled veterans. Their circumstances don't change at the age of 65.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Mr. Lemieux, it is your turn.

[English]

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** Thank you, Chair. To our witnesses, thank you for being here.

Actually, it's an interesting discussion. Let me just ask a question about that.

I think the ombudsman made a good point that a lot of these circumstances are very personal, meaning they are unique to the individual who is being considered for benefits. For example, sometimes it's easy to think that the ELB, which is at 70%, should be at 80%, should be at 90%, should be at 100%, but there are other benefits too that a veteran may have access to. It's very individual.

For example, if someone is a moderately to seriously injured veteran, is the disability award being taken into consideration there? That can be quite a large lump sum payment up to \$300,000. In addition to that, there's the SISIP payment for dismemberment. If a member lost an arm, lost an eye, lost two eyes, lost an arm and a leg, there could be a significant lump sum payment that is in addition to any type of ELB they would receive.

The third thing I would mention of course is the military pension. It is true some soldiers are young and may not be in the pensionable

window, but there are others who are and would receive their military pension.

I think there are a lot of factors. If I may, let me ask the ombudsman about that.

When you're advocating a position for the ELB, for example, are you taking into consideration these other benefits to which a veteran may be eligible?

**Mr. Guy Parent:** Thank you for your question and comments.

Mr. Chair, I would like to point out that when we published the new Veterans Charter review, we actually made a point of not mixing up the pain and suffering amounts with the income replacement amount. There's a big difference between the two. In fact, you could say that under the new legislation, the critical incident benefit is a pain and suffering payment, not a replacement for income. If you mix the two, then it is very hard for young veterans to understand how beneficial the new Veterans Charter is compared to the old Pension Act.

In terms of the earnings loss benefit, we have always urged the government to up the benefit to, as I say, 90%, or no change in income. Obviously, the earnings loss benefit will change, as you say, depending on the other income received by the veteran. At age 65 a veteran may receive very little ELB because of his pension and other. The ELB is based on the pre-release salary, so at 65, a person might be getting very little earnings loss, and if they are getting PIA and PIAS, then they are benefits for life. They don't stop at 65.

•(1015)

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** If I may, I would bring it to the legislation and what's in this legislation.

I really appreciated your remarks, and I particularly appreciated your fairness principles of adequacy, sufficiency, and accessibility, and how you looked at what's in the legislation. You defined what's in the legislation through your fairness principles.

I don't think anybody feels the work is now done and that's that. I think these are just important steps. They are milestone steps in terms of moving forward.

I would ask the ombudsman from that perspective, is your recommendation to committee members to actually pass this legislation so these new benefits can be implemented?

**Mr. Guy Parent:** As I said in my remarks, yes, it is. In fact, again, it may be described as a half measure by some, and it might be described as not sufficient, but it's a step in the right direction and we can't take that step unless the legislation is passed.

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** Great. Thank you.

Let me ask Mr. Forbes the same question, because I think this is a critical question. I think depending on who you speak to and what their emphasis is in terms of delivering benefits, there's much more that can be done in any one, two, three, or uncountable areas. However, this is a very defined bill, and it has very concrete measures in it, concrete measures in terms of financial benefits that will be delivered to veterans.

I understand you want more. I understand from your remarks that you're not happy with what's in there, but is your advice to committee members to support this legislation so it passes into law and will actually deliver these benefits to veterans?

**Mr. Brian Forbes:** Let me be very clear, Mr. Chair. In my remarks, I indicated that there are positive elements to these recommendations and in the bill.

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** Well, what would your recommendation be?

**Mr. Brian Forbes:** What my conclusion would have been.... I thought I'd suggest it, Mr. Chair, if you'd allow me to get to that conclusion.

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** Absolutely.

**Mr. Brian Forbes:** The conclusion that we really wanted to talk to you about is that there is work to be done. There is a lot to be done in the charter. There are inequities in the charter. I think we all agree.

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** Right.

**Mr. Brian Forbes:** We'd like to urge this committee to actually obtain a formal commitment from the minister that he will look at these changes in the timeframe of the future that he can define, or that this committee can define, as a follow-up to the passage of this bill.

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** Sure, but we have to vote on this legislation.

**Mr. Brian Forbes:** Yes, but I think it's important—

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** What would be your recommendation?

**Mr. Brian Forbes:** —that you make that caveat part of the exercise.

**The Chair:** Mr. Lemieux, you asked the question. Wait for the answer.

**Mr. Brian Forbes:** Let me just suggest that we would urge you strongly as a committee to obtain a commitment from the minister on the future course of action.

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** He is committed to that too.

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

Mr. Valeriote, first I want to thank you for chairing the meeting in my absence. The thing was still there when I came back.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**The Chair:** I hope it's still there after you're finished with your questions.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** I hope you haven't cut into my time by saying that.

You didn't take the bait, Mr. Lemieux.

It's rare that I disagree with the Veterans Ombudsman, very rare, but I don't believe these are adequate and I don't believe they're sufficient. I don't think \$139 a week for a family caregiver relief benefit is adequate, and the critical injury benefit has completely excluded PTSD sufferers.

But what you have to say, Mr. Forbes, is far more important than what I have to say, so I'd like you to finish your prepared remarks. I'm going to give my time over to you if you would return to your remarks.

**Mr. Brian Forbes:** Thank you.

There's an important consideration when we're looking at the family caregiver relief benefit. Our belief is that the government is reinventing the wheel and that in the Pension Act we effectively have had an attendance allowance provision for many decades. The attendance allowance provision has been very beneficial to traditional veterans and their families where there's a caregiver need.

Certainly from our perspective—my other hat is that of chair of the executive committee of the War Amps of Canada—the traditional war amp found that the attendant's allowance provision was critical as he grew older and depended more on a caregiver, whether it was a spouse or family member. That in itself will provide \$15,000 to \$20,000 of tax-free money to a veteran and his family under the provisions of the Pension Act, which I think we should borrow for the purposes of the new Veterans Charter.

I would also suggest—and I appreciate your giving me this opportunity, Mr. Valeriote—that the DND policy of the attendant care benefit program is extremely important. It's part of their legacy of care program, which is excellent. We have a number of young amputees and their wives who are benefiting from this program. It provides as much as \$3,000 a month or \$36,000 a year. When you compare that to the family caregiver relief benefit of \$7,200, there's a concern. Quite frankly, why should we reinvent the wheel when we already have benefits that will work and will be more fulsome and more comprehensive for the family?

Thank you.

• (1020)

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** I listened carefully to Mr. Doiron earlier, who talked about hiring 100 more people as part-time and full-time caseworkers. I could not get a commitment from the minister the other day on how many are for this year. Nobody knows. It's over five years. He then said, "Oh, there are going to be 2,000 more veterans that are coming online."

By my quick math, that's 100 part-time and full-time divided among those 2,000, which is 20 each. The numbers aren't adding up for me. I believe they're wholly insufficient.

Could you comment on that, Mr. Forbes?



**Mr. Brian Forbes:** The first comment I have regarding these new announcements is that I do give the minister credit for at least proactively involving himself in the staffing question.

One of the concerns we have had, Mr. Chairman, is that as a veterans community we have been told over the last number of years that staff cuts, closure of district offices, and so on are fine, that effectively we can take care of the load of work that comes forward and of the applications from veterans. Now we're learning in the year 2015 that we're short.

Mr. Valeriotte, whether we're short 100 or 200, we need new case managers, and we need new adjudicating staff members, after a period of time when we were told as a veterans community that these things would not be necessary.

**Mr. Frank Valeriotte:** Could you comment, Mr. Forbes, on your awareness—because I'm told that it isn't an issue by Mr. Doiron—of the transition of an active member to Veterans Affairs and their medical diagnosis? We know that Corporal Fitzgerald had his diagnosis downgraded from severe PTSD to depression, which disintitiled him to benefits. I know that Captain Perry Gray appeared before this very committee months ago and related the very same experience, which is that for what they're told by doctors at DND that gets them basically pushed out of the forces, they're told the opposite by Veterans Affairs.

Do you have an understanding of what's happening in that regard? Could you explain it to us?

**Mr. Brian Forbes:** I think to be fair, Mr. Chair, through you to Mr. Valeriotte, what is now being put on the table by the deputy minister, Mr. Natynczyk, is a new modus operandi with regard to the establishment of medical and disability findings. As you may know, our understanding is that the VAC case managers will be going to the front of the line and will be sitting down with the veteran before he is medically discharged—six months before, ideally—to determine his medical situation and those disability benefits that will be available to him when he is medically discharged through VAC. All of this is very positive. Hopefully this will alleviate what you've described in your examples, because we see them as well.

I have to say it's a work in progress because just the other day a young amputee out of Afghanistan came to us and he was totally confused. He's medically discharged as of last week. He hasn't got his SISIP benefit or his superannuation in place. As you know, the two set off. He's not clear as to where he should turn for his vocational rehab. Is it SISIP? Is it VAC? There's still confusion, but I think the minister and the deputy have a plan of action that will hopefully improve all of this.

**The Chair:** Mr. Hawn.

**Hon. Laurie Hawn:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you both for being here.

There are a lot of moving parts in this discussion, and I think one of the problems that people are having from my point of view is understanding the purpose of some of these new benefits, the critical injury benefit, for example, and the family caregiver relief benefit. They are targeted and they are specific for specific needs that have arisen.

Regarding the critical injury benefit, for example, Mr. Ombudsman, somebody could collect that more than once. If you get shot somewhere, if you fully recover, you're not going to get a disability award because you've fully recovered—terrific. But you're still eligible for the critical injury benefit because you're going to go through some hell to get better, and that could happen more than once. It's a very specific benefit for a very specific purpose. I'll just use that as an example.

We talk about perfection, and obviously we always strive for perfection. Mr. Parent, will we ever get to 100%? Will it always be a work in progress? I think it will. We're always going to be striving to do more and better because things change. I've said this before, that in 1938 we didn't know we'd have hundreds of thousands of World War II vets. In 1948 we didn't know we'd have tens of thousands of Korea vets, and now we have tens of thousands of Afghanistan vets. In 20 years we'll look back and say that we didn't know we'd have tens of thousands of vets from something else. So are we looking at a work in progress?

When something comes out, and the ombudsman and the Auditor General always put out reports and there's some good news and bad news. The opposition always picks up on the bad news; that's politics. We always pick up on the good news; that's politics. But is it fair to say it's a work in progress?

This is progress. We need to vote on this. We need to support it. Frankly, all sides need to support it, but I know that won't happen because that's also politics. But are we just faced here with a continuous work in progress that we all have to be committed to, to make that progress and keep making that progress? Is it ever going to stop?

• (1025)

**Mr. Guy Parent:** That's a good question.

Mr. Chair, I said in my opening address that we are here because of a unanimous decision that brought this committee to agree on the recommendations from ACVA. This is what the answer to these recommendations is, the sequence of events that led us to today. Again yes, it's a step in the right direction and we're moving forward. I think what's important is the veterans' and families' needs will continue evolving, and we need to make sure there is a continuum in this movement of getting things better as well.

Also, it has to be veteran-centric, not just made to facilitate administration and not just to have easy legislation and regulations. Some of these things, I think, are important when you say their personal situation...like what will somebody's income be at 65? By being veteran-centric, I would expect that when a veteran turns 64, somehow proactively he's contacted by the department and somebody says, "You're going to be 65 next year. What's going to happen to you?" Let's do it now. Let's not wait until.... I have all kinds of processes and mechanisms in place.

Yes, I agree with you. To me we've opened a door and we need to put our foot in there now before they close it.

**Hon. Laurie Hawn:** Mr. Forbes, to go to you with Mr. Lemieux's question, part of that...and maybe it's just a step, maybe it's a half-step to some. Maybe the glass is half empty, half full. Everybody can pick their metaphor, but the step is to support this legislation. Is that a fair statement?

**Mr. Brian Forbes:** I appreciate that. I would just share our pain in the veterans' community.

In 2006 the Veterans Charter was enacted and we were promised, as a basic veterans stakeholders' group, that this was a living charter and that each year there would be a total review, as we're doing this year in 2015, of the charter to identify those areas where there are voids and inequities. It's the frustration, I think, of 10 years of waiting Mr. Hawn, through you, Mr. Chair. This has finally reached a point where there's an opportunity to get it right, and it is discouraging in a way that we have not yet taken on all of the elements of this new Veterans Charter reform.

That is why I feel it's important that we continue the momentum. It may seem like an insignificant thing to you, but I would suggest that getting the formal commitment of the minister that this momentum will continue, and I know he's made strong statements before this committee and in other places, like the veterans summit, to that effect.

I think it's important, and I give credit to this committee. In 2011, when you passed Bill C-55, you made it a condition that the minister of the day would come back to you, as I recall, within six months, to take a look at the bill to see how effective it was. I would like to suggest you do that with regard to this bill.

**Hon. Laurie Hawn:** Well, he has made that commitment. I tend to be a glass half-full guy and I'm going to keep trying to fill the glass. I'm not going to moan about the part that's not filled yet; I'm going to work to fill it. The minister has made that commitment and this committee has made that commitment, and everybody in the community writ large has made that commitment. We approach it maybe from different angles and so on, but I'll take that as saying that, yes, we should pass this as at least a step in the right direction.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1030)

**The Chair:** Mr. Rafferty.

**Mr. John Rafferty:** Thank you very much, Chair.

I thank both of you for being here.

I agree with you, Mr. Parent, about being proactive and I think there's not very much of that at the moment. How that happens, I think, is a plan that should go forward to make sure people don't fall through the cracks.

We're talking about a timely review of the charter. I want to quickly ask both of you, what would you suggest was timely in terms of not only this committee, but committees carrying on? Would timely be every new session? Would timely be every year, every two years? Do you have a sense of what timely would mean to you?

Certainly it's not nine years.

**Mr. Guy Parent:** No, that's for sure.

Through you, Mr. Chair, I would say two years would probably be timely to my mind. There was a two-year clause in Bill C-55 and it seems to me that it takes a year or so to get things into place, and there are new missions and things like that which may affect the impact on veterans and their families. To me, two years would be a good time to look at that.

However, that doesn't mean the department should not look at it on a daily basis and every time an evolving need is made known. Certainly, as a special adviser to the minister, I can bring things to him as far as what is changing in the veterans community and what is evolving is concerned. Then the department needs to be responsive to that immediately, not wait for.... Always, my concern would be that if you set a specific time, people may wait on the thought that we'll be doing the review in six months. That's not meeting evolving needs, to my mind.

**Mr. Brian Forbes:** I wouldn't disagree with that, but I also think we're at a particular juncture at which it's time to continue the momentum that we've just built up. There are many more points, but I've identified six points this morning that have to be addressed in order to complete this current review of the new Veterans Charter.

I think there's a momentum now to continue this work. I know we're facing an election in the fall and anything can happen, but the reality is the department maintains itself and Veterans Charter reform should be on the table now.

I was asked at the veterans summit, Mr. Chair, what my new priorities are for our organization, and I said that the old priorities have to be completed. We've identified this morning—and you've seen this from many advocates over the last number of months—areas which the minister has yet to address. He acknowledges that. Let's be fair to the minister. I believe he is under budgetary constraints at this time. He can only do what he can do within the budgetary envelope.

It's an election year. There's a certain focus on this government regarding the budget and the balancing of the budget. Next year we'd like to see these issues come back to this committee. This committee doesn't have to do any more work. You've identified these issues. You've identified them, Mr. Rafferty, so why should we have to come back and redo that work when you've done an excellent job of putting together a package which has yet to be fully addressed?

**Mr. John Rafferty:** I have one more quick question. I think I have time left, and perhaps both of you can answer.

There was a mention about private insurance. Certainly, all government departments and services are moving to privatizing a number of services. Just on a personal level, I think it's problematic in a department like Veterans Affairs to be moving more and more to the use of private insurers, and so on. You talked about gaps, Mr. Parent. Do either of you see any issues, any problems with this move away from actual Veterans Affairs employees?

**Mr. Guy Parent:** My first comment to that, Mr. Chair, would be that using some of the insurance system, like SISIP, with the new Veterans Charter was not very beneficial. Certainly, looking forward to the future I think we need to stay away from insurance approaches, because certainly a lot of the confusion now with vocational rehabilitation and with long-term disability has to do with us or the department actually trying to mimic what was in the SISIP program of the time.

•(1035)

**Mr. John Rafferty:** Mr. Forbes.

**Mr. Brian Forbes:** Actually, I can go back to 2009. The New Veterans Charter Advisory Group was set up by this government in 2007. One of the more fundamental priorities that we identified was eliminating the SISIP program as part of VAC's income replacement culture.

Just quickly, Mr. Chair, when this act was passed in 2006, there were restraints placed on what VAC could do because of the SISIP program. We were touching on that. But the 75% of income, the age 65 termination date, the 2% cap on inflation, and no probable career earnings were all part of the insurance program. It had to be borrowed at that time in order to get the charter through, but we're still living with it almost 10 years later.

It has to go, to be very blunt.

**Mr. John Rafferty:** Thank you.

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

Mr. Opitz.

**Mr. Ted Opitz:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and through you, thank you all for being here.

Clearly, we're all seized with veterans around this table. There's nobody who gets up in the morning and asks, "How do we do it worse?" We all want to strive to do it better. That's something that we're all trying to do and, as my colleague said earlier, a lot do change. Back in the days when he was flying a Sopwith Camel in the First World War....

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Ted Opitz:** I had to get that in.

But you know a lot did change then as it did in 1938. There's no possible way we could have anticipated the level of issues and Korea after that. For example, we went through shell shock and combat fatigue. PTSD was only diagnosed in the 1970s as an actual term. So there's a lot of flexibility here and latitude for discovering new things because as we progress, the war injuries are different and they're caused differently. They're caused through different weapon systems and other things. How do you treat that?

We have new treatments for PTSD every day that they're working on. DRDC, as the ombudsman well knows, and CIMVHR and others are working to address these things. They are trying to get ahead of the curve and identify people through genetic markers who might be susceptible to this and be able to treat that earlier or to be able to address it. There's a lot going on.

By the way, when we bring even a half-smile to the ombudsman facing me, it makes my day, so I'm happy about that.

As Mr. Hawn said, the minister is absolutely seized with it. He is absolutely committed to it. Sir, you had a veterans summit. That's commitment for this minister to be able to address that with stakeholders and to be able to talk about that. He has a deputy minister who, I think everybody here will agree, is top drawer: my old boss General Walt Natynczyk, who was just absolutely the right man for the job, is doing brilliantly.

There are a lot of vets on this side of the table, three veterans. Many of the minister's staff are veterans, one currently serving as the CEO of a medical unit still. So, I mean, if that doesn't say commitment, I absolutely don't know what does.

I know that this government and the minister are absolutely seized with moving the yardsticks forward on this and this committee, folks, will never be out of work. We will never be out of work. We will always have something to address year after year on this committee about veterans, because this is an ever-changing, ever-evolving issue with veterans. New things will happen. Things will change. New treatments will reveal themselves or new problems will reveal themselves, and we will have to address those. That's why this committee will always be here, I think, in perpetuity. We do have things to address. There is a gap. It's narrowing all the time but it may never completely close, and that's why I think we have to deal with that.

Our previous witnesses—to address some of the comments you made right now about what some of the problems are—addressed in their testimony that the language is going to change and how they're talking to veterans so it's much more understandable and doesn't sound like it's right out of the legislation. I mean, I have trouble with it; I have to read it two or three times sometimes to understand it, and I work in this environment. It needs to be made clear. They're going to do that. The new case workers who are coming on line will be educated and trained to work with this and to address it, so better communications are en route and getting done. Are they going to happen by tomorrow? No.

But there's going to be an option to, as this evolves, as the deputy minister said.... As they start to implement this plan with the changes, which I think we have agreement on that you all counsel this committee to vote for. It will be implemented and delivered as a service delivery, to use a term that you used earlier, to the veterans.

Given some of my comments and given the fact that previous witnesses already addressed what some of the changes are coming: being able to be more understandable, more flexible, making sure that the application process is simpler and quicker and that there is guidance given to veterans as well, as you all know, the initiative now is to blend. You know as soon as a recruit is taken on that they will learn throughout their career about VAC so once they retire, there won't be any mysteries. They will know how to access it. They will know how to deal with it much better. I think as we move forward over the next few years that will start to manifest itself.

•(1040)

Mr. Parent, would you have any comment?

**The Chair:** Mr. Parent, that five-minute preamble is leaving you one minute.

**Mr. Guy Parent:** I think the best way to answer that is, when you have a chance afterwards, look at the blog report we produced yesterday. That is a report card on the recommendations you made and the recommendations we made. There are some x's there, things that didn't happen, but the majority of the changes meet the intent of the recommendations. I think that's important. I think if you read this report you'll see we've come a long way in the right direction. However, there are still some gaps, and for those gaps, as Brian has indicated, and as the whole community of veterans has indicated, we need to keep the momentum going. That's important.

The work you've done in the last few years to move that forward is laudable. Thank you very much for that, but we need to keep it moving.

**Mr. Brian Forbes:** Could I speak to that for a second, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair:** I think considering the preamble, I'll give you a minute too.

**Mr. Brian Forbes:** Thank you very much.

First of all, I want to compliment Guy on the chart he's produced. We saw it for the first time last evening, and I certainly encourage the committee to take a look at that.

Mr. Opitz, I think one of your comments, which I am quite attracted to, is that the administration now under the control of Walt Natynczyk is a much improved administration that is getting TS faster, which I particularly like. The veteran-centric attitude he brings to the entire assignment is laudatory.

The one thing I would suggest to you is that access to benefits is one thing, and the improved language is important, but the entitlements have to be there at the end of the day. That's why I've suggested this morning, in a bit of a critical way, that the other half of the loaf is yet to be completed. Walt Natynczyk can't give us that half loaf unless the government provides the legislative entitlement.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Forbes. You stayed on time.

**Mr. Brian Forbes:** I'm doing better, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** You're getting good brownie points with the chair.

Mr. Lemieux.

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** Thank you, Chair.

Just as the meeting is winding down, I'd like to make a proposal to the committee. I think we all agree this is important legislation. A few days ago, I had offered to the committee that we have extra meetings. I was suggesting two extra meetings to make sure we hear from the most number of witnesses as possible. The opposition gratefully accepted one extra meeting, which is the meeting we're going to have tonight.

Mr. Chair, what I'd like to do is propose the second meeting for Wednesday evening, for just one hour. I say that because I believe there are four witnesses we haven't been able to schedule into the two meetings we're having, and this will give them an opportunity to talk about the legislation and what's in front of us. As I mentioned, certainly from our perspective on this side, it's important that we hear from as many witnesses as we possibly can.

I'd like to put that out to the committee, that we host one more meeting—a one-hour meeting, not a two-hour meeting—on Wednesday night.

**The Chair:** We don't have a lot of time to discuss this.

Mr. Valeriote.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** Of course, a number of people have made commitments. We have votes at 6:00 p.m. The Speaker is hosting a dinner for retiring members of Parliament, and one day, if you're talking about tomorrow night.... Are you talking about tomorrow night or the following Wednesday?

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** This Wednesday.

•(1045)

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** That's tomorrow evening. I don't know what witnesses you're suggesting we bring here on 24-hours' notice, but they're likely witnesses you're going to propose—

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** No.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** I don't know how the NDP feel, but I'm happy to do it early next week, or Thursday morning. It's short notice.

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** It is short notice. It's meant to be accommodating to witnesses. They're not our witnesses.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** What time are you proposing?

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** It would be after votes. I believe up until votes we're all jammed up with other meetings, question period, and votes.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** I won't be obstructive. If it's there, I will be here. If a meeting is called, I will be here, Mr. Chair.

**Mr. Ted Opitz:** It's one hour?

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** Yes, one hour. My proposal would be it would be after votes for one hour.

**The Chair:** Mr. Chicoine.

[*Translation*]

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

It's short notice. Neither John nor Peter will be here tomorrow. As for me, I can't commit to finding people. I'm not against the idea of holding an extra meeting, but it might be better to have it next week. I could say yes but, at the same time, I know that two members of the committee probably won't be available.

[*English*]

**Mr. John Rafferty:** This is just a personal thing for me. I'm actually going back to my riding right after this meeting. I won't be here tonight, nor will I be here Thursday. This is important. If we could move it to next week, that would be good. I'm already missing two this week.

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** I don't think we can move it to next week because it has to be reported back to the finance committee by June 2.

I agree with you that it is short notice. I will say, too, that I offered a week and a half ago or two weeks ago to have two meetings. It's only now that the clerk has been trying to reach witnesses that we have found out that not all the witnesses can come to fill these two. The meetings will be full, but there are witnesses who said they could come on Wednesday night. As I said, they're not our witnesses or star witnesses. They're just—

**The Chair:** I think we've had a fulsome discussion on this.

Do we agree or disagree?

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** I look to the opposition to see what....

I'm making it as a proposal, Mr. Chair.

**Mr. Frank Valeriote:** If the meeting is called, I'll be here.

**The Chair:** I have agreement from the government. I have agreement from the third party.

Do we have agreement from the opposition?

**An hon. member:** Yes.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you all for your cooperation.

[*English*]

The 51st meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs will be tonight in this room from 6:30 to 8:30.

I want to thank our witnesses, Mr. Parent and Mr. Forbes.

I particularly want to thank Mr. Forbes for complimenting the committee on its work. I took good note of that.

This evening we will continue our study on division 17 of part 3 of Bill C-59.

[*Translation*]

In our first hour, we will hear from the Royal Canadian Legion.

[*English*]

**Mr. Pierre Lemieux:** Just end the meeting. Gavel her down.

**The Chair:** I'm going to let you know more tonight.

The meeting is adjourned.

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