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Chair

Mr. Neil Ellis

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Neil Ellis (Bay of Quinte, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Last week the committee ended its study on the needs and issues of specific indigenous veterans, and the report will be presented to the House on Friday, or maybe early next week. An invitation to the Minister of Veterans Affairs for the supplementary estimates has been sent in the interim.

Today we have a panel of three organizations with four witnesses. We are pleased to welcome from Courtenay, B.C., retired Sergeant William Webb, and from Quebec, Honorary Colonel Stephen Gregory, co-founder of the Respect Campaign. He's accompanied by Ms. Brenda Fewster, national director, university outreach and program evaluation. From Ottawa, we welcome Mr. Ralph Mahar, executive officer, RCMP Veterans' Association.

After our opening statements, a round of questions will follow. When we get short on time, I'll start waving my hands, which means that you have 30 seconds left, but we'll try not to be too stringent with the time today.

We'll start with Sergeant Webb. The floor is yours.

Mr. William Webb (As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank my MP, Gord Johns, for inviting me, and thank the committee for the work you're doing.

I've asked myself a number of times over the past few months why I'd want to come here and testify to the veterans affairs standing committee. What impact would my voice bear on the decisions that this committee will make? To me, from sitting on the outside, you're all just a bunch of pretty faces, wearing pretty clothes, without the lived experience of a veteran. Veterans seem to perceive a lot of finger-pointing, paper-shuffling and talking, with little or no direct outcome to assist the struggles that the contemporary veteran in Canada faces today.

To me, talk's cheap and seemingly meaningless. Veterans are used to receiving orders, conducting our mission analysis and assigning our groupings and tasks while carrying out the mission. This does not happen at Veterans Affairs. The mission and tasks are being passed down, but they're not being understood or received at the local level. Case managers are not aware of what to do when a veteran, like me, is soon to be homeless and then becomes homeless.

We're told to contact our local Legion, and yet the Legion at the local level can't assist us.

The current system is designed to place roadblocks in the way of veterans. For example, since my release in 2016 I've had nine case managers, two of whom were actually qualified for the position. All the others were, typically, three-month contract hires with no experience. They, the contract hires, were unable to provide me with any support or answers to any questions I had.

Case managers are kept at a distance, yet federal offenders have better access to their parole officers than I do to my own case manager—and I served my country rather than commit crimes. I was released against my will six months before my 20 years, medically released. Those extra six months could have been the difference in keeping me from being homeless.

Last year I called the director of Veterans Affairs to inquire about the Veterans' Land Act. I was told on the phone, by their staff, that I needed to pick a fight I could win rather than one I'd lose. So, as a fighter, I chose to fill out my application and mail it off, with support from the Chief of the K'ómoks First Nation and their chief land claims negotiator, Mark Stevenson, and I've yet to receive a reply from the director to my application for the land act.

My journey to homelessness began post-deployment in 2012. I was not provided with decompression upon returning from my deployment. I was given five days' leave and then thrown into a high-stress teaching position, which pretty much ended my career. Upon my release from the royal Canadian Army, I was living in Shilo. I was paying \$800 a month in rent, then moved back to Vancouver to be closer to my two sons, one of whom has autism and requires specialized care. The cost of rent for suitable homes in B.C., as most know, for me was \$2,500 a month—that's all I could find. That was taking two-thirds of my income and all of my pension. I was unable to provide any support to my boys. I couldn't provide food. I couldn't provide insurance coverage and health care.

The housing crisis is only one issue facing veterans in B.C. Those of us who require medical service dogs are at a huge disadvantage.

On January 1, 2016, the B.C. legislature put into force the B.C. Guide Dog and Service Dog Act. This act does not recognize any service dogs or guide dogs from outside British Columbia. It recognizes one agency and one organization, an American organization. This is a complete violation of my charter rights. The human rights act of Canada is being violated, as well as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This act has prevented me from obtaining housing in B.C. because I have a service dog that isn't trained by this American organization. This was one of the main driving forces for me, in May of last year, to go homeless and live in my trailer in the parking lot of Walmart. The only reason I was able to find housing was that a former veteran sat on that board, and he was a Commonwealth veteran, not a Canadian veteran.

Upon my release in February 2016, a mountain of paperwork was thrown at me, with little to no help from the release section. At that time, I completed three TD1 personal income tax forms: one for my pension through Public Works Canada, one to Manulife and one to Veterans Affairs. None of those forms was actioned, which subsequently left me with a tax bill of \$6,700. Without a fixed address, I was unable to access a post office box, as Canada Post requires a fixed address to obtain a post office box. I was unable to get access to information from the Canada Revenue Agency because I didn't have a fixed address. I was unable to renew my B.C. driver's licence because I didn't have a fixed address.

Once I was able to access the information, I was informed that my request for my tax forms was not processed. I contacted each office, and only Public Works apologized and realized they had made a mistake. Veterans Affairs' answer was that they hadn't receive it, and so was Manulife's. I again filled out the forms and filed them. Once again, none was actioned for the 2017 tax year, leaving me with a tax bill owing to the CRA of \$12,000. Right now, that's going to be require me to pay the CRA \$1,184 a month over the next two years to keep from going into arrears and to keep my pension from being garnished by the CRA.

The disability tax credit must be reinstated for veterans with complex PTSD and OSI. Currently, we are not able to receive those benefit deductions.

I currently receive benefits from Manulife for long-term disability. The private contracted insurance company required me to file for early CPP disability. I am now going to have less when I'm 65. I am now going to be paying more in taxes and have even more medical forms and paperwork to fill out. Members receiving LTD benefits from VAC are not required to file for early CPP. Again, there are two classes of veterans: those of us prior to 2006, and those after that; those of us who are on Manulife long-term disability benefits, and those who are on VAC long-term disability benefits. Because I was forced to file for CPP or lose my long-term disability benefits, I'm unable to claim my medical forms on Manulife, but those who are on VAC can claim their medical form expenses. This past year I spent over \$400 that I can't claim—Manulife does not reimburse.

This past week I received a letter from Public Works, which administers my pension, requesting a lump sum payment of \$8,167.76. Because of Manulife's requirement for veterans to file for early CPP, I'm now required to pay back my bridge benefit that Manulife wants two and a half years' worth of. I've also incurred

over \$11,000 in credit card debt as a direct result of the eight-month delay in receiving benefits upon my release.

After just finding housing, I'm again facing homelessness because of the two-tier benefits system we're facing. I suspect that in the next six months, because of the financial pressures placed on me and my kids by my four service providers—yes, four financial service providers—I will become homeless again.

● (1540)

To navigate the financial requirements of all these providers requires weeks of research, volumes of paperwork that a veteran with complex occupational stress injuries is unlikely to manage, and it's too much to bear. This is a prime example of why veterans commit suicide.

What I want to see change is that the minister immediately needs to step in and move me off Manulife long-term disability benefits and onto Veterans Affairs long-term disability benefits. It's unfair for me to pay more to get less. I pay \$211 a month to top up my pension so they can take away \$486 a month.

Members on the Manulife plan who have been deemed 100% disabled should be moved. Any members on Manulife should have their medical documentation covered 100% like VAC. The disability tax credit for veterans suffering from complex PTSD and OSI must be reinstated by CRA. That difference could save a veteran from being on the street.

Access to the Veterans Land Act could provide a similar structure to Habitat for Humanity's and provide homes for veterans. There's an act in place; let's tweak it and move it so we can find affordable housing for veterans. Right now, affordable housing is set up for the hard to house, not for those of us who have children.

The support received from VAC financially is an emergency fund, yet case managers are either unaware of it or don't know what to do or how to administer it. It doesn't reflect the cost of living in communities such as in the Comox Valley, and it's not accessible to those of us who are homeless.

Support from Legions doesn't even recommend it. At the local level where I live, there's no help. They're unaware of what the contemporary veteran is facing in today's reality.

Community organizations won't touch a veteran in my area because they assume that Veterans Affairs will take care of us.

Salvation Army won't assist us. When I became homeless, they told me to go to the Legion or call Veterans Affairs. The military family resource centre at CFB Comox can assist vets, but they're very limited because they believe that VAC will help, and the local executive director is even unclear about his mandate to assist veterans. No one is able to track veterans' homelessness at this time.

Ontario has good numbers. I know of three veterans who are on the street homeless in our area, who I'm working with. From the numbers I've received from OSISS, it's probably more likely that there are six. Veterans' assisted housing is always in larger metropolitan areas, leaving those of us in rural areas with no help, unless we move to a large metropolitan area.

I served my country and never questioned it for 20 years. The oath I took was not just an oath to serve, but to give my life if needed. If a sitting MP can receive a pension after six years, why is it that I have to fight and scratch my way through a system designed to fight me every inch of the way, destroy my family and break me down.

My former MP Pat Martin joined the CAF the same month and year I joined. We served the same amount of time, yet he's receiving an annual lifetime pension of \$93,000 to a tune of \$3.8 million. I only receive \$14,400, \$10,000 below the Canadian government's target for the poverty line.

Many studies and reports have been done since 2006 regarding the prevalence of PTSD and homelessness among combat veterans. In particular, the last study on the reasons why veterans become homeless was done in 2011. "Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and the Mental Health of Military Personnel and Veterans" was the name of the study.

Every morning I wake up, I have a choice. I can choose to fight the system and spin my wheels, become disillusioned, frustrated, downtrodden, or I can choose suicide. Those are the choices that contemporary veterans face.

Today, I choose to live and fight the losing battle only so my sons don't have to live on the street again. However, this is a battle that I am slowly losing.

• (1545)

I ask you, what choice will you make when you wake up to address the reality that we veterans face every single day in our country?

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Gregory.

Mr. Stephen Gregory (Founder, Respect Campaign): First off, I want to thank you, Sergeant. As a fellow Canadian, it makes me proud to sit beside you. I'm sorry for your situation. The testimony I have is nowhere near as compelling. I'm a business guy from Montreal who has taken up the cause of our veterans, and my efforts seem insignificant after your testimony.

Thank you for having us here. It's an honour to be here. I think this is a very important study, and I encourage you to continue your efforts.

I am pleased to introduce my colleague, Brenda Fewster, who is here in her role as national director of university outreach and program evaluation for the Respect Forum.

I don't live the difficulties that you have just heard the sergeant say he faces. What I see are some of the things you're doing well, specifically your conferences where you bring people together to be heard, like this meeting. We as Canadians need to hear the cry for

support and help by the sergeant and others. Please continue doing that.

Your well-being fund is one of the reasons I'm here today, which I greatly appreciate, along with your support for real guys on the street with practical programs like the Veterans Transition Network at UBC, Can Praxis, and VETS Canada, just to mention a few.

As I said, I've never served, sergeant, but I have many friends who are veterans who share your struggles, some very tragically. However, I have seen some solid efforts that need to be recognized on the part of leadership in the Canadian Armed Forces, specifically Support Our Troops, and OSI clinics. They are run by good people trying to do the right thing.

The Respect Forum organizers believe that the problem of homelessness among veterans is too big for you alone to solve, but the good news is that there are many organizations with good people who are trying to contribute to that solution. It's important to acknowledge their efforts, because there are literally thousands of them. Whether it's conducting point-of-time homelessness counts, producing data, or trying to bring specific practical solutions, we have to recognize that there is work being done.

We've seen significant strides being made since 2010 to help us begin to understand the scope and the nature of veterans' homelessness, and listening to the sergeant, I don't believe all of those messages are getting across to the decision-makers. The practical things that the sergeant mentioned really need to be taken into consideration—the dysfunction with respect to regulations. However, I will let Brenda speak to the situation from a more academic perspective.

• (1550)

Ms. Brenda Fewster (National Director, University Outreach and Program Evaluation, Respect Campaign): Thank you.

Beginning with the Gulf War, Canada entered "an era of difficult Canadian military operations and an accelerated tempo of deployments to the heart of many of the world's most complex conflicts." This was at a time accompanied by simultaneous cuts in personnel and a downturn in recruitment. As we know, we have not traversed this era unscathed and we are now confronted with such phenomena as PTSD, homelessness, suicide and adverse impacts on the families of veterans.

Much of the suffering can be seen in research, which discerns a downward spiral towards homelessness, including financial distress; trouble finding or keeping a job; broken ties with one's family, friends and community; addiction; and mental health problems. In the 2010s we have seen a spike in research, particularly policy facing research in veteran health and well-being to help us to respond to the suffering.

This research has been catalyzed by new investments in research infrastructure that focus on military veteran and family well-being. To name a few, in 2010 we see the first life-after-service study by VAC's research directorate, as well as the establishment of the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research. One year later, Ray and Forchuck produced their eye-opening study on veteran homelessness. This was followed in 2012 by the launch of the Veterans Transition Network, an initiative focusing on mental health that evolved from UBC's veterans transition program, which began in 1998. In 2013, authors Van Til and others produced a research synthesis report on homelessness. The ombudsman for DND and the Canadian Forces submitted a report to the minister of national defence assessing the well-being of Canada's military families. A review of the literature on mental health and well-being of military veterans during military-to-civilian transitioning was produced by Shields and others in 2016, and in the same year we see the publication of a Canadian model for housing and support of veterans experiencing homelessness.

On a closing note, I would add that the Respect Forum was fortunate enough to be able to host a presentation about this model with Dr. Forchuck herself in Montreal in 2017.

• (1555)

Mr. Stephen Gregory: Thank you, Brenda.

These studies that Brenda cites, to the sergeant's message, just sound like more words, and yet they're necessary for us to get a better understanding. We still have a problem with homeless veterans despite all the efforts, and, as you say, all the words and fancy language.

There are other problems. Of course, there's data-informed policy, research to understand the scope and the nature of the problem. The specific issues that were raised by the sergeant aren't unique to the sergeant. He would attest to the fact that very many of his peers have faced that mountain of paperwork. Despite the fact there are many people who seem to be out there to help, access to them is quite restricted, and as he points out so well, in rural areas it's nearly impossible.

The challenges faced by the homeless in shelters are a whole other issue, just in identifying them, understanding the military culture and how to approach them, securing financial support and housing, and providing psychosocial supports. A shortage of physicians in some areas, and the relationship that non-VAC physicians have with VAC in trying to get things done by the latter, and the duplication of effort, are just tragic. There are significant and seemingly endless administrative hurdles in front of our veterans, who, as the sergeant pointed out, aren't equipped emotionally to deal with the frustrations.

What's worse, from my perspective, is that we estimate there are nearly 2,000 organizations across the country that are actively trying to support our veterans. When I started the Respect Forum in 2015, my brigade commander said there were too many of us. He thought a dozen was too many. In my first meeting there were over 48 organizations that were present. The problem they face is that they don't know about each other and don't know how to work with each other, to the point where collaboration that would seem to us to be obvious is just not happening.

The consequence of such a dysfunctional state of affairs is being experienced by our veterans and their families, who are falling through the cracks. It doesn't need to be this way at all. In light of what you've attempted to do and the accomplishments made, there's a wider landscape of uncharted services that provide support to you and to our veterans. My question is, what can Veterans Affairs do to enhance its role vis-à-vis these many organizations serving veterans?

We propose an answer. First, we think that VAC should keep doing what it's doing well. There are many veterans who are very pleased to get a pension cheque thanks to you, and your administration of their pension can't go unnoticed, but the need to streamline the claims approval process for known issues and access to emergency funding are pretty obvious. Beside me we have a veteran who served us all, and we're not helping him.

I think it was a very strong move to support community programs with your veterans' well-being fund. I'd suggest you consider adding to and expanding it. With every dollar that you spend reaching out to community organizations, there are other people who match that funding and who outperform. You get much more for your money; you're stretching every dollar.

I think you can continue to leverage your stakeholders through even better outreach, through your conferences and other supporting systems. I think you have to continue to work harder at the retraining and reintegration of veterans.

I believe the second and most important part of the answer is leadership. The leadership that VAC can bring to many organizations providing services to veterans, I don't think can be underestimated. To this end, VAC could support initiatives that help to locate and make better use of data sets so that we can better understand veteran homelessness, from the municipal point-in-time counts, HIFIS—homeless individuals family information systems—and studies that map the service environment for our veterans: who's doing what, how and when, and where they get funded. You can promote more collaboration and the leveraging of resources and expertise.

• (1600)

I know for a fact that if you approach someone in Calgary, sir, you'd get all the support you needed to fill out those forms, hand over fist, from the Legion.

It's not happening in his area, and that shouldn't be the case.

Veterans Affairs could promote the sharing of formal and informal experiential knowledge between service organizations and researchers; research collaborations; innovative approaches to service delivery; the creation of tools that help service providers to better deliver their services; research that maps and measures the business models and the impact of those models to service providers. And you can help us to deliver more expansive and practical job transition training and support.

With this in mind, I would now like to tell you about the Respect Forums, if you haven't heard about them. The Respect Forum is a national networking initiative that strives to help improve the services for Canada's military veterans, retired first responders—police, firefighters, paramedics—and their families. If you wore a uniform and you ran into danger, we want to be there to help you.

We want to help them in their fight against the phenomena that you referred to as PTSD and homelessness, which can result ultimately in the tragedy of suicide.

The Respect Forum meetings are designed to promote collaborative approaches to service delivery, knowledge sharing and knowledge development. Forum meetings bring people together from health, social services, all levels of government, universities and community and peer support organizations. Participants have the opportunity to talk about their organizations, the services they provide, the challenges they face and the research and community engagement activities they're undertaking. This paves the way to explore possibilities for collaboration.

I started them in Montreal, and they are by invitation only. The reason they're by invitation only is that not all of these organizations actually want to work together, and some denigrate each other. When they do that, we disinvite them to future meetings. Our attempt is to create a collaborative environment, one that promotes working together, not nasty, critical sessions—you can fill in the words.

With the support of Veterans Affairs and the family well-being fund, we were able to move from seven cities—in which we were being funded privately—to 19 cities across Canada. By the second week of April, we will have held 19 sessions across the country. Some are in small towns like North Bay and places like Thunder Bay, as well.

The Respect Forum is an initiative of the Respect Campaign. It's a completely civilian project. Without going into it, I'll just tell you that there is permission to play. You don't come to the meeting unless you're prepared to respect each other. You don't come to these meetings unless you're prepared to share knowledge and the contacts that you might have. We don't just want not-for-profit. We're looking for commercial partners as well. They have something to provide in the way of solutions. We want different perspectives. The meetings are all non-partisan.

What we're doing, very practically, is running two meetings a year—one in the spring and one in the fall—across these 19 towns. That's our intent. We're going to be surveying them to find out what the gaps are and where we can better support them in the exchange of knowledge. By the end of the year I'd like to be able to present a map, and I think it will be of nearly 2,000 organizations across the country, so that in each brigade people know who is doing what, how and when, and we can facilitate better collaboration. I think if we're able to establish a collaborative environment, sustainable governance and an enduring financial model, we'll be able to be a part of the solution that's so desperately needed.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Mahar.

Mr. Ralph Mahar (Executive Officer, RCMP Veterans' Association): Good afternoon.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, for your invitation to the RCMP Veterans' Association to appear before you today with respect to the issue of homeless veterans.

I am the executive officer of the RCMP Veterans' Association. I report to our president and board of directors. I am a veteran of the RCMP. I joined in 1974 and served until 1984, performing general police duties. I left the RCMP in 1984 and spent the next 23 years in the law enforcement and security domain, and have worked for the past 12 years on a range of issues in military support and in continuing in law enforcement elsewhere.

I want to tell you a bit about our association. The RCMP Veterans' Association had its origins in 1886, only 13 years after the establishment of the North-West Mounted Police itself. Since its creation and establishment, it's matured and evolved over the past 133 years. Since 2014, we've been incorporated as a not-for-profit corporation under the Canada Not-for-profit Corporations Act. We have 30 divisions across the country, with almost 7,000 members in large cities and smaller communities, from Vancouver Island to Whitehorse to Newfoundland, and many points in-between.

Our association offers membership to former RCMP members and employees, both sworn officers and civilians, who served with the force. Many of our members will have served an entire career with the force, for 25 to 35 years or more. Many others have served for shorter periods of time and moved on to other career paths within law enforcement or other fields.

Our purpose and objectives are articulated within our constitution, and they include to promote and assist in the promotion and advancement of the best interests of Canada; to be of service to the Government of Canada when required and requested; to co-operate and render assistance to the police, especially the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, in all matters of common interest and concern; to promote the physical, social and economic welfare of the association's members, or the members of their immediate families; and to provide support to worthy community services or organizations of a charitable or benevolent nature.

In achieving our objectives, our strength is our members. Our members bring energy, commitment, diverse experience and talent to the volunteer roles they perform within the association. They devote tens of thousands of hours annually in support of worthwhile causes, and for the good of the association. Across the breadth of the association, our members are actively involved in many good works within communities. This includes advocacy and support for our veterans, their families and surviving spouses to assist them in understanding the range of benefits they may be eligible for if they are suffering from service-related injury or illness.

We offer guidance to our veterans in helping them be aware of the resources and groups within their communities that are providing physical and mental health services. We visit RCMP veterans and surviving spouses who are in hospital, care homes, or in their residences if their mobility is impaired and they are amenable to seeing old friends and colleagues. We support our members and their families in the time of bereavement when a veteran dies by attending celebrations of life to show respect and gratitude for their service to Canada. We serve as honour guards, if the family requests, at those celebrations of life. We offer information to surviving spouses to help them navigate the difficult time of bereavement through providing them with a guide for survivors and executors, prepared in close consultation with the RCMP, which identifies survivor benefits and the responsibilities of executors.

Our divisions are also actively involved in supporting communities and charitable causes through fundraising, as volunteer international couriers of bone marrow donations in collaboration with the Bruce Denniston society, by collecting and shipping toys to northern communities in need at Christmastime, and in a host of other ways.

We participate in RCMP events to honour and celebrate the history of the force, to ensure that our history is told, understood, respected and recorded for future generations.

Our members are deeply proud of their service with the RCMP and are grateful for the incredible work done today by the men and women of the RCMP as they serve and protect Canadians. We maintain a close and collaborative relationship with the RCMP in every region of the country. As stated within our objectives, we remain ready to render assistance to the RCMP and other police forces when requested.

● (1605)

We're well aware of the challenges facing police personnel and front-line officers, as we have walked that walk ourselves. That said, we appreciate that the demands upon police officers are ever-increasing and the complexity of the investigative environment is also evolving at a rapid pace. It is a heavy burden they bare.

The plight of homeless veterans is deeply felt by our association. We've been considering ways whereby we could be supportive in an effective and sustainable way. We have participated in focused dialogue on homeless veterans in round table forums hosted by Veterans Affairs Canada. We've met with organizations such as VETS Canada, Soldiers Helping Soldiers, the Legion, and recently with Steve and his group, the Respect Forum, to educate ourselves, to learn about what they are doing and, potentially, to find ways to collaborate.

Our association was proud to be a supporting sponsor of the Veterans' House Gala hosted by the Multifaith Housing Initiative here in Ottawa this past September as they raised money to build Veterans' House, a 40-unit residential centre for homeless veterans and veterans at risk on the grounds of the former CFB Rockcliffe. Veterans' House is an inspired initiative that will provide homeless veterans with a safe and welcoming place to find peace and to recover. We wish MHI and their strategic partners every success in this incredible project as it proceeds to completion.

The association has supported VETS Canada through their Guitars for Vets program. But our capacity as an association to provide direct financial assistance to homeless veterans is limited. Our association is financially supported by our dues-paying members and supplemented by some funding by a few generous sponsors. We don't have deep pockets. Our annual revenues closely match our annual expenses and discretionary spending is modest at best.

We're grateful for our dialogue with significant players within this environment, such as VETS Canada, which has a decade of experience and a legacy of substantive contribution and active help to homeless veterans, and veterans at risk.

VETS Canada's establishment this past year of a drop-in centre in Ottawa, and their partnership with the Province of Alberta in the establishment of the veterans service centre in Edmonton offers safe places, active support and hope for veterans who are struggling.

We intend to be a helpful partner with others in support of homeless and at-risk veterans. However, given our own limited financial capacity, while we've participated in initiatives for the broader veteran community, our direct efforts have been and remain focused more exclusively upon RCMP veterans who are struggling, who have experienced homelessness, or who are at risk. This makes sense because RCMP veterans are not eligible for support through programs such as the veterans emergency fund established by Veterans Affairs Canada to support homeless or at-risk veterans.

The veterans emergency fund was established to provide emergency funds to military veterans in immediate need of food, clothing, rent, mortgage, medical care and other expenses to maintain safety and shelter, but RCMP veterans who have emergency needs do not have access to these funds.

The incidence of RCMP veterans who are homeless or at risk is negligible, but not non-existent. There have been cases, including recent ones. I'm in the process of dealing with one that came in today, and there will continue to be cases in the future.

As an association, our knowledge of RCMP veterans in need of support is reliant upon being informed of cases when they exist. That knowledge may come to us from a Veterans Affairs Canada case officer who is in contact with the veteran. It might be from a friend or a former colleague, but rarely by the veteran themselves.

It is fair to say that we don't have an accurate assessment of the number of RCMP veterans at risk. While we expect that the incidence is low, it is also likely under-reported.

We became aware, after the fact, of one tragic case of an RCMP veteran who died of exposure in a harsh winter living while living in his vehicle in 2015, after being evicted from a low-income property. The veteran had served 20 years with the force and took his discharge in the early 1970s. His life later unravelled and he hit bottom almost 40 years after he left the RCMP. When our association learned of his death, we collaborated with RCMP and the local funeral home to afford him a dignified laying to rest. He was subsequently buried at the RCMP cemetery at Depot Division, Regina. We mourn his tragic passing, and we wish we had known of his struggles earlier so that we might have been able to offer help, if he were willing to accept it.

● (1610)

The primary source of financial support that the RCMP Veterans' Association can potentially extend to RCMP veterans in need is through the administration of a \$50,000 allotment of benevolent funds made available to the RCMP Veterans' Association by the RCMP. Entitled the RCMP Benefit Trust Fund, as stated within the Royal Canadian Mounted Police regulations 2014, regulations permit the RCMP to grant funds to the RCMP Veterans' Association "to maintain a program to seek out and assist former members and their dependants under terms and conditions set out by the advisory committee".

When our association becomes aware that a former member or their dependants are in financial distress, we can engage the member or the dependant to assess their needs and extend defined and reasonable financial support. This program has provided meaningful and welcome assistance and relief to RCMP veterans for many years, and our association is grateful to the RCMP for making a portion of the fund available for veterans and dependants, and for entrusting our association with its administration.

Understandably, there's an assessment process that takes time, and criteria must be met for the extension of financial support. While the financial support extended can—and has—proved critical to a recipient in supporting human dignity, it is not designed for emergency response. In reality, veterans are often very reluctant to reach out for assistance. Their needs are often acute and immediate, particularly for emergency transitional accommodations.

If our association is unable to respond quickly, there is a great likelihood that the veteran will lose hope and refuse further contact, putting them at risk and rendering them desperate.

The veterans emergency fund is ideally suited to these kinds of immediate demands. Our association will be writing to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, the Honourable Jody Wilson-Raybould, asking for the criteria for the fund to be broadened to include RCMP veterans.

In a similar vein, our association was very pleased to learn of the creation of the veterans and family well-being fund, established in the spring of 2018 to provide grants and contributions to private, public or academic organizations to conduct research and implement initiatives and projects that support the well-being of veterans and their families.

The type of projects that the fund was designed to support included such things as suicide prevention research, initiatives to

help homeless veterans find housing or any innovative project that contributes to the well-being of veterans and their families.

Our association submitted a sophisticated proposal seeking to conduct research upon the RCMP's international peace operations program over its 30-year history, to interview deployed personnel and their spouses, to determine their experiences and to learn about the impact those operations had upon their physical and mental health. Admittedly, these peace operations in Haiti, Kosovo, Afghanistan and other venues have been particularly challenging for RCMP members.

Our objective, in part, was to record oral histories of those experiences and make that product available to the RCMP, historians and the public. Our proposal would have resulted in a historical public record in an accompanying documentary film to acknowledge the contributions of these deployed RCMP personnel and their families. In honouring their contribution, we believe it would certainly support the well-being of veterans and their families. There were more than 100 submissions to Veterans Affairs Canada seeking funding. Twenty-two outstanding organizations, including the Respect Forum, were approved for funding. Most certainly, their work will benefit veterans and their families.

While we were disappointed not to be chosen, we were much more substantially disappointed to learn that our proposal was rejected from the outset as being ineligible, as RCMP do not have the same status of veteran within legislation.

Certainly, RCMP personnel in deployed peace operations face the same risks and are subject to the same challenges as many of our military colleagues. In many instances, RCMP and Canadian military are co-deployed. Their deployments are of comparable duration, and their families at home in Canada experience the same dislocation, worry, loneliness and often the burden of single parenting while their spouse is in a risky theatre of operations.

● (1615)

Our association will be petitioning Minister Wilson-Raybould to reconsider the eligibility of RCMP veterans for submissions for grants and contributions to the veteran and family well-being fund.

Recently the Prime Minister appointed Mr. Craig Dalton as the veterans ombudsman, succeeding Mr. Guy Parent, who served with great integrity in that capacity for the past seven years. The RCMP Veterans' Association has the deepest respect for Mr. Parent and is very grateful for his service to Canada, both during his time in the Canadian Forces and as ombudsman. We welcome the appointment of Mr. Dalton to this critical position. Considering his long and distinguished career in the Canadian Forces and his considerable experience with the governments of New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, he is eminently well qualified to understand and represent veterans. We wish him the best in this post.

Our association was proud to have one of our past presidents, Dave Leblanc, serve on Mr. Parent's advisory committee, and we're equally pleased that our most recent past president, Al Rivard, has been invited to sit on Mr. Dalton's advisory committee. Mr. Rivard looks forward to working with Mr. Dalton and will ensure that the perspective of RCMP veterans is articulated with clarity and integrity.

This concludes my prepared comments. I want to thank you again for this opportunity to be here and I look forward to your questions.

• (1620)

The Chair: Thank you. We'll begin our questioning with Ms. Wagantall for six minutes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Six minutes?

The Chair: Yes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay. Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to start by speaking with Sergeant Webb. I have just a really quick yes-no question, and then I'll get you to expound more later.

As you were serving in the armed forces for very close to 20 years did you ever imagine that you, as an individual who had served, would find yourself homeless?

Mr. William Webb: No.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you.

As I'm looking through everything that you've said today, a lot of these issues arose prior to your becoming homeless, but seem to be related to your experiences in trying to navigate through what supposedly was available to you. The first thing I will note is that just six months before reaching 20 years of service, you were released.

Mr. William Webb: That's correct.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: You weren't provided a method of decompression from serving, coming back on your last appointment.

Mr. William Webb: On my last appointment, that's correct; I wasn't decompressed.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay.

You mentioned service dogs. We have a lot of information coming our way in regard to service dogs. There's no question in my mind that a service dog can make a huge difference to the health of a veteran, to the point where they won't end up in difficult circumstances; yet we see a lot of disjointed efforts on that front and not a clear directive on how service dogs can be beneficial and how to set the standards. There's a great deal of that competition that I believe Stephen was speaking of.

Your service dog is not acceptable in B.C., correct?

Mr. William Webb: That's correct.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay. We can go into that as well, but really quickly.

Were none of your forms actioned by all of the organizations you sent information to?

Mr. William Webb: None of my personal income tax deduction forms were actioned.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Personal income tax forms.... Did the one organization that apologized say why they apologized and what happened?

Mr. William Webb: They said it was mishandled in the email transfer between their two departments within Public Works.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay.

You also talked about the emergency fund. We've had a lot of conversations on that as well, the fact that it is there but is very difficult to access. Actually, case managers are sending Veterans Affairs Canada here in Ottawa a number of people who are in emergency situations because they've had trouble accessing that fund.

Also, community organizations, I think, are very important in this picture, yet they assume that, well, VAC will help you. So that's been the struggle where you are.

Mr. William Webb: It's a huge struggle.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you.

In a lot of this, services from Veterans Affairs are very important. You mentioned that two of your case managers had served for at least 20 years. Where were they in your nine-case-manager line? Were they at the beginning or in the middle?

Mr. William Webb: My first case manager was amazing. She ran the western Manitoba office.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: From what date to what date?

Mr. William Webb: Prior to my initial release, she helped me to do some navigation. She helped me up until my release in 2016. After that, the case managers were all three-month contract hires, until about one year ago when I moved to the Comox Valley. The case manager there used to run the Brandon, Manitoba office before it was closed by Veterans Affairs. Now she's retired.

• (1625)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I had no idea we had case managers on three-month contracts to handle the most difficult scenarios. Are you absolutely sure of that?

Mr. William Webb: Yes, I'm absolutely positive. If you look at my file, each one of my case managers were short-term, three-month contract hires out of the Victoria office.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay.

Could you talk to me a little more about the service dogs and the regulations around them and what we need to see in Canada to make this... Not every veteran needs or can handle a service dog. We're not saying that every veteran in Canada should receive one. What needs to be done to make this service available in the way that it should be available to veterans?

Mr. William Webb: In British Columbia, the provincial government only recognizes one organization, and that's an American organization that self accredits.

Because my dog was trained out of Winnipeg, I as a person with a disability am required to pay a fee to do a test to certify my dog. A veteran with exactly the same disability who has a dog from this American organization isn't required to do the test or pay a fee—they get a pass.

We're not getting any assistance in B.C. Right now with my service dog, I am denied public access to any provincial offices. In the last couple of weeks, I've been denied access or removed from BC ferries. I'm not allowed to travel on BC ferries because my dog does not belong to this organization that's recognized by the provincial government.

We can't get any traction with the provincial government; they don't want to hear it.

When our constitutional and our human rights are being violated, I can't get accommodation because the province doesn't recognize my service dog. They've given the exclusive rights to one American organization, and the Veterans Affairs study, along with the Canadian General Standards Board proposal to do a national standard went off the rails—and I've got the information—because the former speaker of the House in B.C. had a direct impact on both those studies. The former speaker is a member of Assistance Dogs International, and so were two other MLAs. That issue has caused problems not only for me, but also for four other veterans in my local area and 300 veterans who have service dogs from outside Assistance Dogs International.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bratina, you have six minutes.

Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.): Thank you all for your presentations.

We have a variety of views and approaches, and of course Sergeant Webb, we're very much touched and appreciative of your being present here. I know you wonder, sometimes we all wonder, what the good outcome is going to be, but I can assure you that your testimony here today is very important, and we're glad that you're here.

Of course, thank you for your service.

I'm trying to go backwards. Would you have signed on about 1992? When did you join the military?

Mr. William Webb: I was sworn in at the beginning of 1997.

Mr. Bob Bratina: How long was your career in the military—20 years?

Mr. William Webb: It was 19 years and six months.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Was there a point during your service when you started to consider life after the military, if ever? I'm not sure whether you're a medical release or what, so how did that go for you?

Mr. William Webb: At that time, I was married and had two young boys at CFB Shilo. We always planned a life after the military. However, I didn't foresee suffering an injury during my tour, and coming home with no support from my commanding officer or from my force commander, General Leslie, or the former Chief of the Land Staff General Devlin who said they would support me if I was injured. That didn't happen. I was moved and shuffled off into a corner and then released against my will.

•(1630)

Mr. Bob Bratina: Regarding the information you gave us on your trying to access benefits, we've heard that a lot from veterans. Part of

it is simply the mental strain of having a life change and having to fill out scads of documents where, if you made one mistake somewhere, the whole thing is thrown out and you have start all over again. That leads to the kind of frustration that we've heard.

One of the things recently has been the My VAC Account. Are you familiar with that as well?

Mr. William Webb: Yes, I'm familiar with the My VAC Account. Most of the veterans whom I work with find it extremely cumbersome to log in through the partner program. It can become frustrating for me at times. Emails are typically replied to within 72 hours. I could get a call back, if I'm lucky, from P.E.I. within 48 hours.

Mr. Bob Bratina: When you've been in these situations of homelessness, or living as you told us, do you have devices to communicate, a cellphone and so on, or do you have to go someplace, a library or something?

Mr. William Webb: No, I have a cellphone.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Okay.

Mr. William Webb: I have access to one.

Mr. Bob Bratina: So you do have that kind of access.

Mr. William Webb: Yes.

Mr. Bob Bratina: What relationship do you have with your former comrades, if at all?

Mr. William Webb: Very little to none. My home unit is in Manitoba. I live in B.C. The association is set up, and it's an officers' association. There isn't an NCOs' or a senior NCOs' association, so that's lacking on the military side.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Let me put that question to our guest from the RCMP, Mr. Mahar.

My son's a member. It seems to be me that there is active camaraderie, so it is very tight. Post-service, do members continue some kind of an affiliation to any great degree?

Mr. Ralph Mahar: I can tell you that, in the context of our association, we strongly encourage it. We have a membership of about 7,000. There are probably 15,000 to 20,000 former RCMP members and employees out there. As an association we're looking to recruit them. Their willingness to join an RCMP organization afterward is very much a personal choice. The RCMP has, as you all know, had a difficult road the last several years. That has had an impact on members and their readiness and interest in maintaining contact with a veterans' association after the fact.

It's very much a very personal decision. We do have a lot of members who are joining. We're grateful for that. We're empathetic to those who have no interest at this point in time in having anything to do with the association.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Right.

Ms. Fewster, are you at Concordia?

Ms. Brenda Fewster: Yes, I am.

Mr. Bob Bratina: With universities taken as a whole, is there much programming that you've been able to observe that relates to veterans' issues?

Ms. Brenda Fewster: An important part of what I do with Respect Forum is mapping who's doing what in Canada. Now we already know that the Canadian Institute of Military and Veteran Health Research is doing that on its website right now. You can see the clusters of expertise. You can see individual researchers. We know that in 2014 there was a Canada research chair appointed at Mount Saint Vincent University for community engagement and social innovation. I believe it's Dr. Deborah Norris, who focuses on the families of veterans. At UBC, at the other end, they are the ones who started the veterans transition program in 1998, and thanks to them they got the Veterans Transition Network going in 2012. Then in-between those two we see Queen's University, which is the host institute for CIMVHR, and then you have pockets. I just discovered someone at McGill University who's in psychiatry who focuses on PTSD.

I think CIMVHR is doing that job of mapping expertise. With the Respect Forum, we're looking at how can we bring those experts to meet with practitioners, the shelter people, the people providing day services?

• (1635)

The Chair: Mr. Johns, you have six minutes.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Thank you all for your important testimony.

I'll start with Sergeant Webb. First, thank you for your service. Thank you for coming all the way from home, on Vancouver Island, and for your important testimony today. It's really important for the committee to hear your story and the challenges you're facing.

You talked a bit about the veterans emergency fund. Can you elaborate about how that has played out for you?

Mr. William Webb: I've applied three times to access that fund. All three times, I was denied because I was homeless and didn't fit the criteria. The fund itself isn't enough. Where I live, the cost of living is so high that you may as well give me five bucks, because that fund doesn't cover the expenses we face for emergency rent or the cost of living, period, in British Columbia, compared to maybe northern B.C. or another rural area in Canada, such as Nova Scotia or Newfoundland. It doesn't cover anything.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thanks. That will lead to my next question on the cost of living on Vancouver Island. We've got three bases: CFB Esquimalt, Nanoose Bay and CFB Comox. Can you talk a little bit about how expensive it is to live in Oceanside or the Comox Valley, where we have two bases, in rural Canada; and what the challenges are, even if the fund were to come forward and act quickly? What would that look like with first and last month's rent and the requirements to find a place, never mind with an occupancy rate of .01%? Can you speak a little about what the needs would be to actually get on your feet and what kind of supports are necessary?

I also will cite Cockrell House, because that has been a great place to help veterans out of Victoria. But the need for a Cockrell House in rural communities, especially adjacent to bases...

Mr. William Webb: Where I live, to meet my immediate needs to keep me from being homeless, it would cost upwards of \$7,500 for first and last month's rent and to be able to meet basic needs.

Cockrell House and houses similar to Cockrell House—there's a house, a couple of places here—are for hard-to-house people. They're for single veterans. They don't assist people like me with two young boys. I'm excluded from the help and assistance of those facilities. So, emergency funding is primary for me to keep my boys from living in a 20-foot travel trailer in a parking lot and having to pay extra medical expenses because my son's autism needs aren't being met by living in a trailer.

Mr. Gord Johns: Maybe you can add even having a service dog, which you need. Are there further challenges there as well?

Mr. William Webb: Every day I wake up and go into my community, and I'm challenged by local business owners and government officials because I don't have the B.C. government service and guide dog ID card. We can't, as I said before, get any traction in B.C. or assistance from MLAs, or anybody who was involved with the original committee documents. We're hoping that a dialogue can be set up with Veterans Affairs, and people can have some dialogue with the AG in B.C. You'll realize quickly the protectionist thing going on with regard to guide dogs. That whole system is broken. It causes me to not be able to find accommodation, because of that act.

Mr. Gord Johns: Yes. It sounds as if it's a task the government needs to address, and I certainly hope Veterans Affairs will reach out to the provinces and find a way to navigate through this.

You talked about nine case managers. Living in coastal British Columbia, we know that sometimes time zones can be a challenge. Can you speak to some of the challenges of not having a wing of Veterans Affairs on the west coast to best service veterans; if that's an obstacle or if that comes up with the Atlantic time zone, or if there are issues with Charlottetown?

• (1640)

Mr. William Webb: When we put a phone call in to our case manager, the call centre is in Prince Edward Island. It's on Atlantic time. So if I call at 12:05 Pacific time, it's closed. I can leave a message, and that's it. I can't call my case manager directly. They don't provide us a direct number to the Victoria office. My case manager is 300 kilometres away from where I live. If I need to speak to my case manager, I have to wait two to three days for a reply.

Mr. Gord Johns: We talked about housing—

How much time do I have?

The Chair: You have 25 seconds.

Mr. Gord Johns: We talked about housing specifically for veterans. Cockrell House was fundraised through private money. I know Mr. Mahar talked about Veterans' House and other great projects that are happening. We heard testimony here at committee about the project in Ottawa and that the municipal and provincial piece didn't have the funding to contribute to build veterans' housing and that those governments saw it solely as a federal responsibility. Some of the challenges may be around finding money for housing without the federal government's taking sole responsibility for veterans, funding.

Maybe I'll pass that to Mr. Mahar, because you spoke a little about it.

Mr. Ralph Mahar: I'm sorry, is the question in terms of the challenges?

Mr. Gord Johns: It's on the need for the federal government to come up with 100% funding for veterans' housing.

Mr. Ralph Mahar: Is the question, do I believe that they should?

Mr. Gord Johns: Yes.

Mr. Ralph Mahar: Quite honestly, my own response with respect to that is I think there's a shared responsibility. Our communities need to understand that our veterans have paid a price. Our veterans, particularly with the volunteer army, have put themselves in harm's way of their own accord because of their dedication to our country. I think it's important that citizens, not just government, understand the commitment that has been made and the contribution that has been made. Citizens and all levels of government, including the private sector corporations, should be engaged with respect to providing support for those kinds of facilities.

I would like to see a healthy contribution by government to ensure that it succeeds, but I think if we put it solely and singly on government, then it lets the rest of society off the hook and they don't necessarily feel the same engagement that they should.

The Chair: Ms. Ludwig, you have six minutes.

Ms. Karen Ludwig (New Brunswick Southwest, Lib.): Thank you all for your testimony this afternoon.

Thank you to both gentlemen for your service.

Certainly, as the daughter and sister of veterans, the testimony here is quite personal to me. As well, being a mother and a grandmother, my first question is for Sergeant Webb.

You have a son living with autism. We have not heard about your other son. He must be about 20 years old.

Mr. William Webb: My autistic son is nine and my other son is six.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: They're young. How do you explain to them the situation they're in, and are there other services that you're able to reach out to or that are reaching out to you for your children?

Mr. William Webb: The only other service that was reaching out to my children was the director of the Ministry of Children and Family Development for an apprehension order because of our living arrangement. That's the only outside agency that has stepped in, and it wasn't pleasant.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Sergeant Webb, were you eligible for a lump sum pension?

Mr. William Webb: I was eligible for a lump sum pension. Some of that was invested into my kids' well-being. A large portion of it was taken by my now ex-wife, because the strain for support was so great that we're no longer together.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Thank you for sharing that. I know that's quite personal.

The reason I ask that question is that one of the things we have heard about the difference between a lump sum versus the pension for life is that Veterans Affairs is better able to track a veteran who may eventually become homeless when they are receiving the pension for life. That's something I just want to highlight. I think there's someone here who can probably talk with you separately about your circumstance at the end of this meeting.

Thank you.

To my friend from the university, as a long-time university and college educator... One of the things we have heard consistently at this committee is about self-identification of a veteran who is homeless. I'm wondering how you're able to collect the stats on that. In terms of consistency and reliability, are you collecting them in the same format and sharing them the same way as other post-secondary institutions, and researchers in general, are?

• (1645)

Ms. Brenda Fewster: My exposure to this is more with municipal point in time counts. For example, Montreal conducted its count, Je Compte Montréal, in 2015. At that time one number about veterans came out, that 6% of them consisted of homeless veterans, which seemed higher than anywhere else in Canada. Of course, the problem with that type of data is that there is no validation. That's very problematic. If you consider the average rate of adult homelessness in Canada of around 2%, you'd look at 6% and think there was a huge problem with veterans in Canada, that they are overrepresented in the population.

It is really important for us to understand the scope of the problem to obtain valuable data. On that note, I recently got in touch with the scientific director for the 2018 count, and we're hoping to see the data set become available so that we will see the demographic data, including the length of time and how many times people have been homeless.

We're really missing validated data.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Thank you for that because I think that somewhat ties it together. As raw and objective as data sounds, when we are looking at developing policies, such as for the RCMP, the data does need to be collected in an authentic format.

One of the areas we have not heard much about has been members who have served for such a long time and have families. The familial part of it is an important piece to tie in, as well as for the healing. Sometimes in a very proud culture there is reluctance on the part of people who have served their country to ask for anything back, and it's very difficult to come forward to say that you're homeless or are in need of services—and certainly when families are involved.

We have heard from some organizations regarding guide dogs, and I thank you, Sergeant Webb, for raising that. It is an important example, if we take it completely outside the issue of homelessness. I represent New Brunswick Southwest, where in 2018 we had flooding that was ranked as one of the top 10 catastrophes in Canada. The fact that people didn't have a place to take their dogs meant that too many people stayed in their own homes. As we know with guide dogs, they are family members and on any given day, for those of us who have dogs, that might be the best friend we can rely on. The guide dog is an issue that we need to look at.

I thank you, Mr. Mahar, for your service with the RCMP and for raising the importance of collaboration among different levels of government and different services. It isn't one government takes all.

The committee has heard of the challenges with municipal housing. First, under our national housing strategy, veterans have priority. The challenge seems to be that there's a bit of a black hole sometimes, because different organizations and different levels of government may say that it's not their responsibility, but Veterans Affairs' responsibility. Ultimately it is the responsibility of us all. Your words today, Mr. Mahar, certainly offer that encouragement and the importance of our working together collaboratively, not just for the sake of talk but so that the outcome will be that people will be better off tomorrow than they were today. Thank you for that.

The Chair: Mr. Samson, you have six minutes.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Thank you very much to all of you for your presentations.

Sergeant Webb, I want to thank you especially for your service and your testimony today. It is extremely important for us to be made aware of some of those issues. It's very hard to understand the situation you're in and that you are not receiving the help you need. I hope we are able to do something quickly on that front.

Mr. Mahar, thank you for your service as well. Your organization does some great work.

Mr. Gregory and Ms. Fewster, thank you for your support and the work you do for your organization as well.

Sergeant Webb, I'd like to learn a little more about some specific areas. What year were you released?

• (1650)

Mr. William Webb: It was February 16, 2016.

Mr. Darrell Samson: That was 19 and a half years of service. What happens between 20 plus years and less than 20 years, or 19?

Mr. William Webb: Once we receive 20 years of service, we get a fairly substantial jump in our pension. Because I didn't receive that extra six months and didn't meet that threshold, I'm not eligible to meet that pension bracket.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I thought I heard you say that it's \$12,000. Is that it? It's substantial, but what would be your pension with less than 20 years, in general?

Mr. William Webb: My pension right now is about \$14,400 a month. Now that there's the clawback for the top-up on my pension, it's more like \$9,800.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia—Headingley, Lib.): I'm sorry, did you say per month?

Mr. William Webb: I meant per year.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Yes, per year.

Mr. William Webb: If it were per month, I wouldn't be here.

Mr. Darrell Samson: That clawback is effected because of the insurance versus...?

Mr. William Webb: It's effected because of Manulife's policy that we file for early CPP.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Which we've....

Mr. William Webb: Which Veterans Affairs doesn't require its members to do.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Yes, I've heard about that. Thank you for sharing that piece; it's extremely important.

You talked about service dogs. Are you aware that we've put in a tax credit for service dogs? Does that help in any way, shape or form?

Mr. William Webb: No. It's so minimal that it's a drop in the bucket. It doesn't alleviate the pressure that the disability tax credit would. The disability tax credit would be far more beneficial to people with complex PTS and OSIs, or injuries, than the service dog credit.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I'm just saying, because Cousineau from Nova Scotia fought hard for that service dog tax credit.

Mr. William Webb: I've been claiming my service dog as a medical expense since I received my dog.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Okay.

Are you aware of the new ID veterans cards that we...?

Mr. William Webb: I'm still waiting for mine to come in the mail.

Mr. Darrell Samson: You made reference to the fact that you didn't have it and that did cause you many struggles as you were moving forward.

Mr. William Webb: Being homeless, I'm not allowed to renew my driver's licence without a fixed address. I'm unable to drive my vehicle and take my kids to clinic appointments because I don't have a driver's licence. In B.C. you're required to have a fixed address.

Mr. Darrell Samson: And you didn't have a service card before?

Mr. William Webb: No. I was released prior to the service card being cancelled. My base would not fill out the paperwork and allow me to apply before I was released.

Mr. Darrell Samson: The service card was cancelled in 2014?

Mr. William Webb: It was February 2016.

Mr. Darrell Samson: The service card?

Mr. William Webb: Yes.

Mr. Darrell Samson: You didn't receive the other one yet. We'll run a check on that. It's extremely important.

You did share something that I wasn't aware of. You said that with housing, if there is more than one person involved it's a problem being able to access those programs.

Is what I understood correct? Can you explain that a little?

Mr. William Webb: Because I have children, I don't have access to any of the organizations that offer community housing for veterans. That community housing is set up for primarily hard-to-house homeless veterans who are dealing with addictions and far more severe mental health issues than I deal with.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Were you homeless?

Mr. William Webb: Yes.

•(1655)

Mr. Darrell Samson: Someone helped. He was not a veteran from Canada but an ally, was he?

Mr. William Webb: Yes, I was able to get into some form of social housing because of a British veteran who worked for that organization.

Mr. Darrell Samson: What can we do to identify homeless veterans? Would you have any suggestions for us? It's a very important issue.

Mr. William Webb: From what I've seen from the data from the Legion Ontario Command, they do a fairly decent job tracking homelessness.

There is no mechanism in place where I live, through the Vancouver Island Health Authority. They are not tracking veterans. They don't even ask the question, when dealing with homelessness in B.C.

I'm your resource to initiate that process in my region, because I work with veterans. We're the resources you should be asking to do the work for you on the ground—the boots on the ground.

The Chair: Mr. Kitchen.

Mr. Robert Kitchen (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you all for being here today.

I'm going to continue on that same line, if I might.

Sergeant, we heard from a constable, I believe, from Vancouver, who is helping veterans on the street there. I suspect I know what you're answer's going to be. It sounded like she was doing it 24/7. I was totally impressed with the amount of work she puts into that. What I think I'm hearing from you is that you've basically taken on that role on Vancouver Island and that there's a big difference between veterans on Vancouver Island and veterans in downtown Vancouver.

I come from rural Saskatchewan, and it's very difficult to get into those areas to find out who are veterans are. Do you have any comments, maybe speaking from that perspective, as to the challenges you have on Vancouver Island?

Mr. William Webb: There are no services at all for homeless veterans on Vancouver Island—zero—especially for people who have children and are homeless. We don't qualify for those social housing projects. In places like Vancouver or Vancouver Island, if you ask anybody who is homeless, everybody's a veteran because they all think they're going to get some help or some free money. We need a common stream to track the data, to make sure they are veterans. It's pretty easy when I ask, "What's your service number?",

and they just throw a number out there, you know they're not a veteran.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Okay. That's a big challenge that we hear. We're hearing that veterans don't identify with the question, "Are you a veteran?" They will say no, but if you ask them, "Did you ever wear a uniform?", then you at least get that first initiative to talk with them.

Mr. William Webb: That's a pride thing with veterans: we don't want to ask for help.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Right.

Mr. William Webb: We're supposed to provide the help.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: True. It's the same with our RCMP, our police officers, and our first responders. They have that attitude. That's why they took these jobs—to help, not to ask for help themselves.

Sergeant, I'm just wondering if I might step back a bit and ask you a personal question. If I'm asking too personal a question, by all means please just say no.

You were in Shilo, correct?

Mr. William Webb: Correct.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: With...?

Mr. William Webb: The 1st Regiment, Royal Canadian Horse Artillery.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Okay. When you served, you did your tour of duty in...?

Mr. William Webb: Afghanistan, from 2010 to 2011.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: From 2010 to 2011. Were you in Kandahar or Kabul?

Mr. William Webb: We had just moved to Kabul. I was involved in the incident where Master Cpl. Greff, from 3rd Battalion, was killed.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Sir, you said earlier that you were released against your will. I'm wondering if you could explain that to me.

Mr. William Webb: The contract that I signed with the Canadian Forces was to end at the end of 2016. My release paperwork came through the medical side and said, "You are going to be released on February 16." I said, "That's unacceptable. My contract to serve was over at the end of 2016 anyway. I need to stay and serve to get my 20 years." My chain of command said, "No. This your release paperwork. You're going to sign it." I refused to sign it. I was charged with insubordination and failure to follow, through National Defence Act, section 129, and I was released in February 2016.

•(1700)

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Would you mind telling us why they were releasing you?

Mr. William Webb: I suffered a head injury, complex post-traumatic stress and occupational stress injury. I'll still say it today—we're the plague. When we ask for help as acting, serving members, we become the plague, and nobody wants to be around us. I was shuffled into a corner, into an office, and that was it.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Right. Thank you, sir.

Mr. Gregory and Ms. Fewster, we talked a little bit earlier, but part of what we talked about—and, actually, the sergeant alluded to it as well—is that there are multiple groups out there, not only for service dogs but also for providing services to our homeless veterans, and there is no organization. Everyone thinks they're the boss, and everyone thinks they've done the plan better than anyone else. On both of those topics, would you mind commenting on that?

Mr. Stephen Gregory: My brigade commander in 2015 said there were too many of us. What he was complaining about was the fact that we were stepping on each other's toes. I was sitting on the board of Canada Company at the time. Wounded Warriors was doing different things, and True Patriot Love and Canada Company didn't really share ideas. I saw first-hand how we were working, not necessarily at cross-purposes, but without collaboration.

We started the first meeting, and as I said, 48 organizations came together, and the deal was that we had to try to find ways to learn from each other and capitalize on the resources we have.

What the sergeant refers to in Comox is endemic; it's across the board.

We held our first meeting in Victoria earlier this year, and people were wide-eyed just learning about each other. It was quite fascinating.

That's where it starts. If we don't bring these groups together to talk and build relationships, they won't trust each other and won't collaborate. So we're just taking a tiny step. It almost seems worthless compared to the problems the sergeant is facing, but it's a starting point, because right now, I figure that there are at least 2,000 organizations. By the way, these are good people, and many of them are veterans.

Hopefully, what we're going to be able to do is... I'll come and knock on your door, sergeant, if you don't mind, because we need to bring these people together and give them the chance to work together.

Thanks to your well-being fund, we're creating paid volunteer positions. For veterans who can work with us, it's a little thing, but maybe we can give them \$500 to run a half-day meeting for us. You think, who cares about that? Who the person who cares about it is somebody who is making \$500 when they otherwise wouldn't, and they're serving their country again.

Thank you.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: More veterans helping veterans?

Mr. Stephen Gregory: Yes, more veterans helping veterans.

We think we can stretch every dollar and create more collaboration. That's what our hope is.

On the question of service dogs, the issue is particularly vicious. I'll provide more support. There are people whom I can't invite to a meeting, because they're so hostile toward each other. It's just ridiculous.

In the absence of a standard, we have problems.

Ms. Brenda Fewster: From the point of view of the social worker in an emergency room, or a psychosocial counsellor in a shelter, or a

police officer who encounters a homeless veteran, you don't know who to contact. You may not understand military culture, you don't know the questions to ask. You don't know how to identify a veteran, and once you do, whom do you call?

The flip side of looking at this is to think of the civilian service providers at the community level working with veterans, who don't know whom to contact to work with veterans, how to identify them, and how to help them.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Eyolfson.

Mr. Stephen Gregory: Can I give you a practical example?

The Chair: Can you make it quick? I'm sorry, but we're into eight minutes now.

Mr. Stephen Gregory: Forgive me.

At our second meeting, we asked if organizations had a common protocol for identifying veterans. The answer was no. There are groups you fund that probably do, but they wouldn't give us the protocol, so we brought six organizations together and built a protocol that we share now widely with anyone. Soldiers Helping Soldiers was a big part of our solution for that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Eyolfson, you have six minutes.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you, all, for coming.

Ms. Fewster, you mentioned the emergency department. I was interested in that, as I am a physician who worked in the emergency department for 20 years. I got used to seeing and dealing with a lot of very upsetting things, and yet I still find it difficult to listen to some of the stories at this committee, like yours, Sergeant Webb. Given that baseline of what I got used to hearing and seeing for 20 years, this is hard to listen to. It is a horrendous thing that has happened to you, and I am sorry that it did. This is why we are here: We want to prevent this kind of thing from going on.

This is useful. It helps to tell us what we need to do.

I want to expand on part of Mr. Kitchen's question. You said that you had an operational stress injury and a head injury, which was the reason given for your medical release. Had you not been released, I'm assuming, from what you're saying, even if there were limitations to what you could do, you were still willing and wanting to serve. Is that correct?

• (1705)

Mr. William Webb: I could have served in a different capacity. Maybe not in my specific trade, but I could have moved over to a combat support role easily.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Okay. That's what I was thinking from what you were saying.

This is something that has come up. I have asked a lot of questions of a lot of people for a different studies, but it's one of these common threads that comes through.

We talk about the issue of universality of service in the Canadian Armed Forces. If there were an alteration in that policy and they said you could still serve a very useful role in the armed forces, but that there were certain things you couldn't do and that you couldn't technically meet the universality of service requirement, would that have helped you and perhaps given you an opportunity to continue serving as long as you wished?

Mr. William Webb: I don't believe I didn't meet the universality of service.

Being put in a temporary category and then being moved to a permanent medical category, I had no opportunity or option to get off the permanent category. Once you're placed on a permanent category, it is impossible to get off it.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: I'm sorry, what do you mean by permanent category? Do you mean permanent restriction on the kinds of duties you could do?

Mr. William Webb: Permanent category means that you're permanently impaired. To prove that you're not permanently impaired is virtually impossible in the military medical system.

I was provided no opportunity to do so, even though I was having treatment regularly and was meeting my obligations through my work. Once you're on a permanent category, that's the ticking time bomb for your release.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Absolutely, yes.

This is what I'm getting at. If the universality of service did not apply—

Mr. William Webb: I could still pick up a rifle.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Yes, I know. But what I mean is, had you been on that permanent medical category somewhere in someone's checklist that would have put you under—not universal...but would you have still been able to serve while still on a permanent category?

Mr. William Webb: Absolutely.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Okay. Thank you.

That's what I was thinking. That was what I was assuming from what you were saying.

You were stationed in Shilo. I'm from Winnipeg....

Mr. William Webb: Sorry.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: I get a lot of that.

There was previously a veterans' services office in Brandon that was closed and has been reopened. Had that been open and available at the time you were released, would that have been a helpful resource to you?

Mr. William Webb: I had more support from a Veterans Affairs case manager at the IPSC in Shilo. She went well beyond her mandate as a case manager to assist me.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Okay. Thank you.

Just switching gears a bit, Mr. Mahar, we had a conversation before. I'm an RCMP brat. My father served 24 years in the RCMP.

Mr. Ralph Mahar: I'm grateful for his service.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you. Yes, so was I, and likewise for yours.

He also dealt with Veterans Affairs due to some orthopaedic injuries and some hearing loss. He trained in the days before they heard about hearing protection when you did firearms training.

We were saying that there is a different demographic, of course, for homeless RCMP veterans. Here's something that I wish more people realized. You've pointed out that there are a lot of veterans' services for which, for some reason that I can't figure out, RCMP veterans are not eligible. We need to remind people that RCMP veterans are indeed veterans and sometimes served in many of the same capacities as armed forces.

We've identified a number of risks that predispose armed forces personnel to becoming homeless, and many of them probably apply to the RCMP. Given the relatively low incidence that you cited, it might not be enough to answer this, but are you aware of any factors that might be unique to RCMP veterans that might predispose them to homelessness?

• (1710)

Mr. Ralph Mahar: I think the way I'd like to respond to that, sir, is to say that when we interpret or consider someone an RCMP veteran, they may have served 35 years with the force, or they may have served two years with the force and gone on to other things.

I think there's a very broad and significant range of factors that contribute to homelessness. Some of it relates to mental health, some of it relates to addictions, some of it relates to marital breakup. Life's a bumpy road. I don't believe that all of those issues necessarily originate.... They certainly can originate with hard service—difficult, traumatic service—and the effect and the impact of that. In those cases that I am most familiar with that we are dealing with presently, there are two sides to it. One side is in the context of serving members. For several of those, it's been a decade or more since they served. The things they are experiencing have transpired afterwards. Some of the experiences they had a member may have contributed to how their lives went off track, but it wouldn't necessarily be exclusive. That's one piece of it.

Another piece of it is the types of financial support that we do provide, and continue to provide, to survivors of members of the RCMP, particularly those who are more aged and whose partner's pension concluded at the time the member died. There were no survivor benefits, so we have widows of RCMP members who had no survivor benefits after their husband died and we do provide assistance to them to help cover the gap. That's on this side.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Shipley, you have five minutes.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): I want to thank you also, Sergeant Webb, as I do Mr. Mahar. It's not a cliché of thanks. For all of us, when we say it, we understand the significance of your duty to our country. Thank you.

I would like to go to Mr. Gregory first. You and Ms. Fewster talked about the amount of research that has been done to help veterans and what should be done.

Can you talk to us a little bit about...? I think you said sometimes—maybe it was Mr. Webb who said it. How do we get the practical part of what these studies say into action? Research is great, the academics of it all are great, but it's where the rubber hits the road that really counts.

I was on the veterans committee when I first got elected a number of years ago. I've learned so much, but one of the things I continue to hear in my riding—I've got 13 Legions there—is that although more is always needed, veterans need help to get what is already there. Give us some thoughts of what you can do through your organizations to bring all of that work into a practical sense, and what can veterans do to make it happen for individuals like Mr. Webb?

Mr. Stephen Gregory: I think you can continue to provide the leadership that you're providing and to step it up. I think this is a big deal.

The fact of the matter is that most of the organizations operate in the absence of any understanding that there's someone else doing the same thing in a city in another province. A good example of that is Honour House and Maison Biéler in Montreal. Maison Biéler is sitting on a good chunk of change, and they might reinvent the wheel if they weren't in contact with Honour House.

Number one, keep bringing these people together and support the development of knowledge exchange among them.

The next thing is to get to the sergeant's issue, namely, training. There's no reason why the people in his Legion aren't better trained. It's mind-boggling when in other towns, like Calgary and Edmonton, veterans really get good service when they go to a Legion. This is the patchwork of our country that needs to be sorted out. I think the starting point to the answer is leadership. I'm very grateful that you've given us a little bit of funding, because we're going to try to support that.

•(1715)

Mr. Bev Shipley: I want to thank you for what you're doing. Then I want to touch on those two things.

One, the disturbing thing, Sergeant, was when you mentioned that your case workers for three months were contract people.

The other part of it is that out of my 13 Legions, we have a benefits coordinator. You have to remember that my large urban area is 14,000 people. It isn't London, Calgary or Vancouver. It's rural. In some of those Legions we have veterans who are very good and go way beyond what their obligation would be under VAC or through the Legion, in carrying through. Some of them don't have that expertise.

I don't think Veterans Affairs can be the be-all and end-all to everything—I really don't. In some of those Legions, they maybe don't know what to do. I'm thinking of two right now who are going to be leaving because their son, who's a veteran, has moved north: they want to be with him. I think the sergeant can relate to that. Now that Legion's going to be left—and they are saying they're not sure

who's going to pick this up. My office, all the offices of the MPs, are there, but should more training be done through organizations like yours, Mr. Gregory, or—

Mr. Stephen Gregory: This is a huge, multi-faceted issue. Let me give you an example. I'm a gunner, and it makes me very sad to hear that a fellow gunner looks on the association as if it doesn't really do anything. If he were PPCLI, he'd be taken care of differently, more like the RCMP. . We have a patchwork of associations among the military, and it's worse in the reserves. The sergeant was reg force, and God bless him: He's getting a heck of a lot more than any reservist I know would ever get. They're really left on their own.

The Canadian Armed Forces could direct better support among the associations. Jon Vance has said that we really want to be there from birth to death, that sort of thing, but the fact of the matter is that it's not happening. Unfortunately, I've heard many stories like the sergeant's, where they're hurried out of the forces and then left with no support.

CAF is part of the solution. You're part of the solution. I think Ralph said it best: this isn't your problem alone. It's not government's. We can't ask you to solve this problem. You can help us inspire other Canadians to step up. We need more veterans who will band together—just common citizens. It really irks me to think that everybody looks at you as being the saviour. You're not the saviour. It's time for all of us to buck up.

The Chair: Mr. Johns, you have three minutes.

Mr. Gord Johns: Sergeant Webb, do you see the problem getting worse? We've seen real estate prices go up about 50% on Vancouver Island, just in the last three years. You've identified three, maybe six, veterans whom you're helping—thank you for your work there. How do you see things moving forward, without some of these solutions you've talked about?

Mr. William Webb: Without active, targeted funding from Veterans Affairs to deal with housing, it's going to get worse. Some people always say to talk to the local Legion. You're well aware that we live in a rural area like yours, Mr. Shipley. I have three Legions in three very small communities. Local Legions are protectionist. You mentioned amalgamation or amalgamating resources. They won't have it.

As a contemporary veteran, I can say that the Royal Canadian Legion will cease to exist before I die. It's done. The contemporary veteran doesn't want to be part of it because there are too many civilians. We don't look to the Legion as a resource anymore. They're not a resource.

•(1720)

Mr. Gord Johns: Do you want to speak a little more about what needs to change for someone who's ended up in a situation like you've been in, like the six veterans you've identified? What needs to happen immediately? What does the government need to do? What resources can we provide? What are the solutions?

You talked about \$7,500 to get started. Maybe elaborate more, if you could, on what needs to happen.

Mr. William Webb: It needs to be targeted toward local living expenses. The cost of living where I live on Vancouver Island is far more expensive than it is in Calgary. I live in very rural Vancouver Island. I can find rental accommodation in Calgary for half the price that I'm paying in the Comox Valley, at \$2,500 a month for a small home.

Mr. Gord Johns: How much time do I have?

The Chair: One minute.

Mr. Gord Johns: I have a question for Mr. Mahar.

We talked a little earlier about a more holistic approach to serving our veterans. All of us are responsible for that. I appreciate that and I agree. However, you talked also about the well-being fund and the need for the RCMP Veterans' Association to be able to benefit from that.

We hear there is a lot of downloading happening from government onto organizations to fill the gap. Maybe for some of that we need to have organizations to do that, and they can be innovative. Sometimes maybe it should be government filling the gap.

You speak about the well-being fund and how important that would be to your organization and how that would help. Maybe give us some idea of how you could use it.

Mr. Ralph Mahar: It's a new fund. I don't think it's possible to comment on its long-term benefits because we haven't seen what it has achieved. But in terms of the promise that it was offering with

respect to providing active support to veterans and their families and the types of issues it was looking to support research on—suicide prevention and homeless veterans—we believe we had an initiative that would certainly be responsive to our veterans and acknowledge the contributions they have made in international peace operations. I think the fact that we are and continue to be deemed ineligible for that deprives our veterans of the opportunity to share and appreciate their status as veterans—because they indeed are veterans. I think in some respects it cheapens or devalues the contributions they have made. I believe there is value that can come of that. We know that the organizations that have been supported by it are doing outstanding work. I'm grateful that the fund has been established. I wish the RCMP would be eligible for it. I hope the minister will be sympathetic to that view.

The Chair: Thank you.

That ends our time for today. On behalf of the committee, I'd like to thank you all for taking time out of your day to testify and for all that you've done for veterans, and continue to do.

A motion to adjourn, Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson: So moved.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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