



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

43rd PARLIAMENT, 2nd SESSION

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 004

Thursday, November 12, 2020

Chair: Mr. Bryan May



Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Thursday, November 12, 2020

• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone. We know we have a limited time with the minister, so I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number four of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

Pursuant to the motion adopted on October 27, and Standing Orders 81(4) and 81(5), the committee is undertaking the study of the main estimates and supplementary estimates (B) 2020-21.

We are very pleased to welcome back to committee the Minister of Veterans Affairs and department officials.

I want to be very respectful of the limited time we have, so I want to welcome the minister and invite him to make his opening remarks.

Minister MacAulay, the floor is yours.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Thank you very much.

Thank you, members of the committee. It's an honour to be here and that everything works today. The last time we sat down and had a meeting, a few days later we were all sent home. I want to thank you all for the work you've done over the past few months advocating for veterans and their families.

Mr. Chair, Remembrance Day was yesterday, so I think it's fitting I'm here today talking about how much our veterans mean to us, at a time when we honour those who have served Canada in times of war, military conflict and peace.

Let me first say that over the past eight months, my department has been working to make sure veterans and their families keep receiving the benefits and services they deserve. I have personally spoken with them about how they're experiencing the pandemic and the supports the department can provide. My message has been that we're here for them and will always be here for them. The employees of Veterans Affairs Canada have come through in delivering services and financial benefits to veterans and their families while working from home. Veterans are a priority for our government. You've heard me say that every time I've sat here. That's because I use every chance I get to make sure that past and present members of Canada's military know how grateful we are for their service and their sacrifice.

Our government is taking action to make sure Canada's veterans are well served and well supported. The 2020-21 main estimates and supplementary estimates are an example of that. The \$5.4 billion in these estimates represents a 19% increase over the main estimates from last year. That is approximately \$800 million more that we're putting directly into the pockets and well-being of our veterans. It's money for educational opportunities and career transition services, tax-free benefits for caregivers and services for families. It's money that will make a big difference in the lives of our veterans and their families. For this reason, we have to do better on service delivery. The backlog is unacceptable. That's why I made it my top priority when I became Minister of Veterans Affairs and I directed the department to make it its top priority as well. This past June, we introduced a strategy to reduce wait times for veterans. This includes overhauling how teams are organized, making better use of technology and reducing the time it takes to make decisions.

In June, we announced a nearly \$200-million investment to address the backlog. This means keeping the 168 adjudicators hired through budget 2018 and hiring an additional 350 employees dedicated to further reducing wait times. According to the Parliamentary Budget Officer's report, these new hires will have a significant impact on reducing the backlog.

The decision-making process on benefits and programs has been streamlined so less complex cases can move through the system faster, allowing more time to tackle very complex, multi-condition types of claims. It is our top priority and we will not stop until the backlog is under control.

It's also worth pointing out that earlier this week our government announced \$20 million for a veterans organizations emergency support fund. The fund will provide organizations with the resources they need to keep operating and supporting the veterans community as we deal with the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We're forever grateful to each and every one of our veterans for their service and sacrifice and will continue to do everything we can to make sure proper support is available to them.

With that, Mr. Chair, I'm pleased to answer any questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

I will backtrack a little bit here and also welcome General Walter Natynczyk, deputy minister, who is on the call. Also joining us today are Charlotte Bastien, assistant deputy minister, strategic oversight and communications; Rick Christopher, assistant deputy minister, strategic policy and commemoration; Steve Harris, assistant deputy minister, service delivery; and Sara Lantz, acting assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and corporate services branch.

Thank you, all, for joining us here today and helping us through this process.

First up, for six minutes, we have MP Brassard. The floor is yours, sir.

• (1110)

Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister. I'll get right to it. Minister, do you know when a budget is going to be tabled by the finance minister in Parliament?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: No, Mr. Chair. That information has not been made available yet.

Mr. John Brassard: Minister, you realize it's been 19 months since a federal budget was tabled in Parliament. Is that correct?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: You're right, John; it has been 19 months.

Mr. John Brassard: Okay.

Let's talk about the backlog, which is the elephant in the room.

Minister, you mentioned in your opening statement that this was a number one priority when you became the minister a year ago, yet in your time as minister we've seen the backlog grow to almost 50,000 cases now.

I hope, Minister, that you can appreciate just how dire this situation is for veterans and their families who are well beyond the service standard set out by VAC, and who are in fact, in many cases, waiting two years to have those benefits adjudicated and processed.

Minister, there has to be a better way to do this. What are you doing to correct it?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much, John. I appreciate your question, but the backlog itself is under 20,000. Of course applications come in every day, and I believe that's what you are referring to. There are some 40,000 applications already in the department waiting to be adjudicated.

Of course the backlog is totally unacceptable, and my honourable colleague is well aware that the number of first-time applications has increased by 90-some per cent, so of course that increases the job for our adjudicators.

We, and I, have indicated quite clearly that the backlog is my number one priority, and we will deal with the backlog.

Mr. John Brassard: Minister, we know the backlog is the number one priority, but that backlog keeps increasing.

As we've gone through this COVID-19 crisis, we've seen government move at the speed of light when it comes to processing claims for the emergency response benefit, for example. Eight million Canadians received those benefits simply by clicking on "send", to the tune of \$82 billion. We've seen the student benefit, from which 1.1 million students ranging in age from 18 to 22 have received \$5.9 billion in benefits. I simply can't explain—and I've tried—to veterans who have asked me how that can happen and yet there are 50,000 backlogged claims and we can't get veterans and their families the money they need.

Minister, this is a dire situation, so if the government can move at the speed of light for this, then why is it not moving at the speed of light for Canada's veterans and their families?

I don't understand why I was just muted, Mr. Chair, but I want to....

Why not increase the eligibility criteria? Why not presume that many of these injuries are attributable to service, and process these claims more quickly? It would free you up from any additional layers of bureaucracy, Minister.

Veterans, right now, are having a difficult time getting doctors' notes because of this crisis, Minister. There have been solutions presented to Veterans Affairs and yet many of those solutions are not being implemented; in fact, those solutions are resulting in court cases against Veterans Affairs because the veterans are not receiving their benefits in a timely manner. There are options, Minister. Please look at them.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you, John. I appreciate your question and I know you wouldn't want to mislead.

The backlog is under 20,000, and of course, we have taken many measures to deal with this situation, including, when we took over government, hiring 1,000 people who were displaced by a previous government. Also in the last supplementary estimates, we—

• (1115)

Mr. John Brassard: Please stop muting me. Somebody is muting me. I don't know who it is, Chair—

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Brassard. Nobody is muting you. I haven't seen—

Mr. John Brassard: My mute button is going off.

The Chair: On our side we're not seeing that at all, and we can hear you just fine.

Mr. John Brassard: Okay. I have a question with respect to that.

The Chair: You have a very small window in which to ask that question.

Mr. John Brassard: Minister, how many additional staff were hired to implement the CERB program and the student benefit program?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: John, you know that's not under the Department of Veterans Affairs program.

The fact is that what we are doing in Veterans Affairs is making sure that we attend to the veterans to make sure they receive their benefits, which they deserve, as quickly as possible. That's why we are going to address the close to 20,000 backlog that is in place. We have put a system in place by coordinating the staff, digitizing the applications and also hiring 350—

Mr. John Brassard: You're layering the bureaucracy. You're making it much more difficult for veterans to get their benefits.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: John, you have to let me answer the question.

Mr. John Brassard: Minister, this is an important issue.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Do you want me to tell you what we're doing?

The Chair: Excuse me—

Mr. John Brassard: It isn't working.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: It is working.

The Chair: Excuse me. It's through the chair, please, Mr. Brassard.

Let's not let this get out of control. Please direct any questions through the chair.

The time is up, but I'll allow the minister to finish answering the question.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Mr. Chair, I would like to answer the question.

Number one, yes, the backlog is under 20,000 and it's unacceptable. We put a system in place to address this. We coordinated the staff. We hired 350 extra employees, along with 180 employees who were in the department, to make sure they are well trained to deal with the backlog. Now with the digitizing and the coordinating of staff, we are having an effect. When we put the other 500 people in place, we will start addressing the backlog much quicker.

The Chair: Thank you—

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Of course, we have no control over what comes into the department. We have to deal with everything that comes in and that's what we will continue to do.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll move on to MP Lalonde, please, for six minutes.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Mr. Chair, if I have enough time, I would love to share my time with my colleague Sean Casey.

Good morning, Minister. It's a pleasure to see you once again.

As we know—and you made some comments about this—Veterans' Week just wrapped up across the country, cumulating yesterday with a different type of Remembrance Day ceremony across the country. I certainly appreciate the importance of that date to honour our veterans.

I represent Orléans, a community that has one of the largest concentrations of active and retired members in the country. I am also a member of the Royal Canadian Legion, Orléans Branch 632, so I'll give my plug for my Legion here in my community. We have over 865 active members. Certainly this ceremony was very different, Minister. Usually we have the second-largest gathering in the country, after the national celebration in Ottawa, so this was very different.

I would like to ask you to talk to us about the importance of Veterans' Week and the poppy campaign. Second, could you please provide some detail on how the pandemic impacted this year's celebrations?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much. I appreciate your question.

Of course, Veterans' Week is vitally important. It provides an opportunity to remember and honour those who have done so much for us, but as we always say, we should do it more than on Veterans' Week. What we should do when we see veterans on the street or anywhere we meet them—maybe in the mall—is to just say, “Thank you”. It puts a smile on their face. You have to realize what that man or woman went through to become a veteran—in fact, what they did for us.

This year across the country it was a different commemoration. It was sad, I would say, in ways, because the people were not there who really wanted to be there, but again, health is what comes first and the veterans always tell me they fully understand that.

Veterans do everything we ask them to do, right from defending our freedom and fighting in wars to walking into long-term care centres in order to help us. We owe them everything and I thank them so much.

● (1120)

The Chair: MP Casey, I believe you're up next.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Minister, you were interrupted a couple of times when you were trying to explain the situation with respect to the backlog. I want to give you a chance to answer some of those questions without interruption. One of the allegations that was made by Mr. Brassard was that the backlog is increasing. You indicated that the backlog right now is at 20,000. Is that an increase or a decrease from where it was?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Than you very much, Sean.

That is a decrease. Of course, you have to understand that the number of first-time applications have increased by over 90%, which of course we must deal with. We digitized the files and we coordinated the staff. That has had an effect, but we also have 350 new employees in training. Right after Christmas these people will come online and start dealing with the backlog. We have affected the backlog at this point, but we intend to affect it much more down the road because we're going to have extra staff who are dedicated to the task. We're going to have the files digitized. We're going to have them coordinated in one place. We won't have to send files to one place and then another and then wait to get them back. We want to make sure it's done as quickly as possible.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you, Minister.

There was another allegation in one of the questions that the wait times are now up to two years. Can you give us some sense of what the average wait times are and what the percentage of files might be that are in the two-year range for waiting? I just want to fact-check how realistic that assertion is.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Of course, the backlog was higher than it is today and it is down some. Of course, we intend to do a lot more to make sure that the backlog is diminished a lot more. We have to make sure that we have the process in place because this is an ongoing process.

If you want to know how that situation is right now, I will let the deputy address that specific question.

General (Retired) Walter Natynczyk (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thanks very much, Minister, and thanks, Mr. Chair, for the opportunity to comment.

As the minister indicated, we have expedited the process across the board. Any file that is waiting for a prolonged period—years, as you mentioned—that's where we've often lacked information and have gone back and forth to the veteran to try to get additional information. We're trying to clear all of those long-standing files out as soon as possible.

My last data point in terms of an average is that it was in the order of 28 to 30 weeks. I'll try to get a more up-to-date average to you. We met with the Royal Canadian Legion recently. They ensured that we're aware that there are some long-standing files that we're trying to clear, which the minister has indicated have waited way too long. At the same time, there are other files that are very clear with all of the information and all of the diagnosis, which we are turning out well below the 16-week standard.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now for six minutes Mr. Desilets.

You have the floor, sir.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Good morning, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, esteemed committee members.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the new veterans ombudsman, Ms. Jardine, who will be taking office soon. I wish her well in her new role.

Minister, it's a pleasure to see you.

Obviously, my first question pertains to French. As you know, Quebecers love their language and never back down. We feel as though the language has been disrespected in recent weeks. You clearly know what I am referring to. I would like you to address the departmental post that appeared on various social media sites, a post that was very disrespectful to the French language. It was embarrassing.

Then, I would like you to comment on the backlog of claims submitted by francophone veterans. They have to wait 45 weeks before their claim is decided. That's roughly twice as long as their anglophone counterparts, who receive a decision in 24 weeks. What I am most interested in are the changes you have made in recent months to reduce the excessive amount of time it takes to process francophone claims, unlike anglophone claims.

• (1125)

[*English*]

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much, Luc.

First of all, thank you for congratulating our new ombudsperson.

On the tweet that the department put out, I certainly apologize. It should not have happened. We've directed them to make sure this does not happen again. We will evaluate and make sure it does not happen again.

Also, Luc, we recognize that more needs to be done to ensure that francophone veterans and women veterans receive a timely decision on their applications. That's why we established a dedicated francophone unit to improve processing. We're hiring more francophones and bilingual staff to further reduce wait times for francophone veterans.

With the just under \$200-million investment, we will address the backlog and reduce wait times for veterans. That is what I've committed to do, and, Luc, as you know, that's what I indicated when I became Minister of Veterans Affairs, to make sure this was my top priority and the department's top priority.

I thank you, Luc.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: On that subject, Minister, I would like some sense of a time frame. Being a former manager, I think that information is important.

We all know that you want to reduce the backlog—something we all want. I realize you want processing times to be the same for both francophone and anglophone claims. That said, how long will it be before things are back to normal? Three months? Six months? A year?

[English]

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: As I've said, by 2022 we will have addressed the backlog.

What we have to do is what I've indicated previously, to make sure we digitize the files and coordinate the staff. Luc, with that alone, we have started to reduce the backlog. When those new employees come online, it's going to make a big difference. We're going to have about 500 new employees ready to start dealing with the backlog. It's essential, and we're going to do that. As you know, it's my top priority, and I will certainly address it.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: How much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

[English]

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: What I've said previously is that we will have addressed the backlog by 2022. We have already started addressing the backlog. Today the backlog is under 20,000 applications. That's unacceptable, but there's a move downward. What we have to do is to make sure that figure continues to move downward.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I heard you loud and clear, Minister. Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I asked you how much time I had left.

[English]

The Chair: I'm just checking on that. Give me one moment, please.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Okay.

The Chair: Continue. I'll let you know when you have one minute left.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Minister, I understand your time frame for clearing the backlog, but I think there is a mismatch between the steps you are taking and the size of the problem.

I am going to follow up on what my fellow member Mr. Brassard said earlier. Within just a few weeks, the government was able to respond to the pandemic and process eight million applications. Forty thousand is a lot less than eight million.

Can you not make some sort of special effort—a war-like effort—to clear the backlog? You don't need to walk me through your plan again. I know it by heart. It is fine, but I still do not think it's enough. This calls for a war-like effort.

• (1130)

[English]

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I fully understand what you're saying, but the process has to be put in place. We have to have a process to deal with applications.

There are applications. Let's say we are dealing with a paratrooper who has bad knees or with a gunner who has hearing loss. We're going to make these very quick or automatic. But there are very complex cases that we have to deal with, also considering that there are a lot of cases, period.

Once we get it under control, which we will do and are doing at the moment.... And it is going down. The thing we had to do with government is to put the appropriate process in place, and that's what we did. We got the funding to do it through Bill C-4, which you supported, and I appreciate that. That will help us hire the people. They will be trained, and there will be the French.... The languages will be well addressed. We will make sure that these people are trained specifically to deal with the backlog. With that, we will be able to address the backlog.

That is the priority. That's what we have to do.

Also, if there's a veteran or anybody at all who hears there's a veteran in dire need, we have the emergency fund, which can certainly address these issues.

I would ask my deputy if he could expand on the emergency fund. It's very important.

The Chair: Thank you. We are out of time. Maybe we can come back to that.

MP Blaney, you're up next.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you so much, Chair.

Hello, Lawrence. It's always good to see you.

I want to clarify first of all that there are, in fact, over 40,000 applications. You're saying it's under 20,000. I just want to make sure everybody understands that veterans can apply more than once, so there can be a great number of applications outstanding, with more than one belonging to a single veteran.

I think it's important that we don't confuse those messages. The reality is that there are a lot of applications that many veterans are still working on.

Minister, the last time you were here with us you talked about the reality that VAC could always use more money, but that money alone wouldn't solve the backlog issues. We know there have now been over 300 new hires in June. I am concerned they are still considered temporary.

Given that the PBO report says that without these additional employees the backlog would only worsen, when are we going to see these temporary employees called permanent?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much, Rachel.

Of course, the figure you're quoting on the backlog includes the applications that came in yesterday. I know you know that. It's important to realize that the backlog is under 20,000, and it is totally unacceptable, but we are working on it. It was higher, and we are making it lower.

The process we put in place by coordinating the staff and digitizing the files is starting to work. The 350 plus the 180 we are training will be on staff. I will let the deputy answer when they will be on staff, but these people are going to be well trained to deal with the backlog. That's what they are specifically trained for. That is the problem—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Minister, I'm sorry to interrupt. Of course, you know that, but they are being called temporary staff, and when we look at that backlog I think it makes sense that they should be permanent.

Is there ever going to be a time when they are moved off that temporary list?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: They very well could be. The 180 who are on now were on a temporary list, and now they are on this list.

Look, if you're needed in the department...the Government of Canada is required to provide appropriate benefits to the veterans of this country.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Yes, they are, sir.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: That is what we are going to do, but I would let the deputy answer that.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: No. It's okay. I think you answered.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Okay.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I really appreciate that. I'm curious, what is the ministry's plan? We know a lot of veterans are wanting to apply, but having challenges getting doctors' notes and whatnot because of COVID-19. What we're seeing is this invisible backlog building that we're going to see once things calm down. We have definitely heard in my office from many veterans who have not been able to fill out their applications.

Knowing that we already have a significant backlog, knowing that we have a lot of veterans who are not able to access their applications as quickly as possible because of the realities in their communities, what is the plan to prepare for that sudden increase I expect we will see in the next few months?

• (1135)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Rachel, first of all, I truly know that you care. You're dedicated to the task, and I appreciate that. The fact is that we have no control over what comes in. The only thing we can deal with is what comes in. The health and safety of veterans and their families is vitally important, and during the pandemic we did that.... That's essential to make sure that the virus does not spread.

But, you're well aware of, and you supported in the House, Bill C-4, which provided \$20,000 for the Legion, ANAVETS and other organizations right across the country. These organizations do so much. It's vitally important that they stay up and running. I know you know that.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I couldn't agree more, sir. You know that I—

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: You know, there's difficulty filling out forms. I might not be great at it myself. You need people who know how to fill out the forms. The problem with forms is that

something vitally important could be missing from them, and you have to make sure that it is all there.

Since the pandemic emerged we have put out over half a billion dollars in funds for veterans, which is vitally important—and they must have it. If there is a spike afterwards.... As I always said, our job is to make sure that we provide the benefits for veterans. We have a problem with the backlog. We're going to address it. You helped us in the House by supporting Bill C-4 to put the 350 new employees, plus the 180 we're training, in place. We will do that. Along with the changes in the department, we will make sure we address that backlog.

There's one thing about the department; we have no idea what's coming in, but we do know one thing, that we have to address it.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I certainly hope you have a bit of a plan, Minister.

I have another question. I've been working with a lot of MPs' offices across Canada, because getting authorization forms submitted to help support veterans is a very hard process. Right now, there is a fairly clear system in place for the CRA and Service Canada, but unfortunately in some cases people are required to mail in a physical copy to Quebec—an authorization form—which takes a week from provinces like mine, B.C., or even longer if they're more remote. Then there's a three-week processing time before the authorization is sent back and before the office can even begin to support the veteran.

I'm just wondering, if we could ask you to create a solution...because if we already have a long backlog, it makes sense to have an authorization form so that MPs can support their veterans in the way they should, instead of having to wait six to eight weeks to get that authorization form simply to take the next step. Can I get a commitment from you to work on that, Minister?

The Chair: Please give a very quick answer, Minister.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Rachel, you have the commitment, because we have to make sure that we do everything we can—and I know you care—to make sure we get the proper remuneration for veterans, and we will.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Now we go over to MP Wagantall for five minutes, please.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister and Deputy Minister, for being here with us today.

I have to say, if I were a veteran listening to this right now, I would be devastated. I am hearing the same things I have heard on this committee since I first came on to it in 2016—the same explanations of what we're going to do, the moving forward with hiring more people—yet this backlog, sir, continues to grow.

We have veterans who are struggling with mental health issues. It all began back in 2017, with the story of the Lionel Desmond case, when the Canadian press came out and realized how far behind we were at that point in servicing our veterans' needs. At that point, Gary Walbourne had already indicated it was time to end troops being forced out for medical reasons before benefits and services were in place.

Yet, even now, in 2020, we just heard from Amy Meunier, the director general of the centralized operations division at Veterans Affairs Canada. An article recounts that: “She said the department is also looking at partnering with the Canadian Armed Forces to access veterans' health records in order to determine more easily whether an injury was related to service or not.”

This, to me, is outrageous, that we're still at this point. That backlog, sir... We're using different metrics here, but the reality is that there are close to 50,000 separate applications that are still in process; 22,000 of those “were considered complete and were waiting only for a decision from the department.” What does that mean, “a decision from the department”? How long does that take? Is that the 16 weeks?

I have an individual who is not a severe case and who applied for his pension a year ago, October 2019. All the paperwork was there, and he was still looking at possibly up to 64 more weeks to have it processed in the decision phase. This is the decision phase for 22,000 applicants.

Therefore, sir, my question to you is, when are we going to get action? From what I understand about the hiring process, and what I've read about getting people hired for this role, is that we need to move it across Canada and set up a department in a place where it can work outside of the Charlottetown site. Yet it took this government no time to shut down the Vermillion site and move it to Edmonton for their purposes.

That's my question for you. What are we doing concretely to get these people employed—employed full time and long-term—and taking care of our veterans?

• (1140)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much, Cathay.

You mentioned 2016. I can just tell you what we did. I think you're fully aware that after we formed government in 2016, we hired 1,000 employees who had been released by the previous government, and we also provided a lot more programs for veterans to deal with people in the military who were going to become veterans and civilians—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Excuse me, Minister—

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Just give me a second to answer you—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I want to know what you're going to do now. This is where we're at now.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I'm telling you what I'm doing now. Right now, I'm sitting down talking to you, or trying to.

The fact of the matter is this is what we did. With these new programs that we had, the education program itself, that is so... I think there are about 800 people accessing the education program when they leave the Canadian Armed Forces, when they're veterans. These people are becoming very valuable to our economy across the country.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Sir, I thank you for—

Chair, I would like to ask another question. One minute?

The Chair: You have about one minute. Go ahead.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay.

Sir, the programs are there. I understand that. The problem is the backlog in dealing with benefits and medical needs. This is where our problem is. They can't access those programs to the extent that they should because the systems are not in place. If this was any kind of a business initiative, it would have been dead in the water a long time ago.

When are we going to get access to those files and this seamless transition from the armed forces into the veterans scenario that you have talked about? We're looking right here. It's a two-year period for many of these people.

The Chair: We're at time, almost, but I'll allow time for a very brief answer please.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Of course, some of the programs I was explaining will help ease the transition from the military to civilian life.

It's also vitally important, Mr. Chair, that I indicate to everybody that the employees in Charlottetown at Veterans Affairs Canada are the best in the country. I stand behind them 100%. They have done an excellent job and they've worked hard from home during this pandemic. It is vitally important to recognize that.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Now we go over to MP Amos for five minutes, please.

Mr. William Amos (Pontiac, Lib.): Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister.

If I have time, I would like to share my opportunity to speak with member Andy Fillmore in Halifax.

Minister, the riding of Pontiac, as you're well aware is 30,000 square kilometres of territory all across western Quebec. I have over 40 small towns in my riding. There are many Legions. These are community institutions of great significance to our region. They're institutions in the community that go beyond providing support to veterans and their families; they provide a meeting place for communities.

Your recent announcement of \$20 million of support landed very well. There was great appreciation for it. I've had that opportunity to speak with many of my Legions and they want you to know how much they appreciate that investment, but they also want you to know that they're concerned about their future, they have major financial difficulties and they're very concerned about their ability to provide that extra level of support.

I wonder if you could speak to the investment that has been made, but also the challenges that face our Legions that are so important to all of Canada.

• (1145)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you, William.

Bill C-4 came about with a lot of consultation with the Legion, ANAVETS, VETS Canada, True Patriot Love and many other people across the country to make sure you and I and everybody on this call and many people right across the country understand how vitally important these veterans organizations are.

They are the lifeblood of many communities. In fact, where I live, that's the meeting place and it's so important. Also I will tell you that—pray God, it doesn't happen—if this virus continues we have to look at this again as a Parliament. The House of Commons would have to look at it again to see what more needs to be done. It's essential; they're much more than just meeting places, which are important for social events, but these organizations work so hard as you've heard on this committee today. People are concerned about people filling in applications, helping out veterans, delivering meals. All of this work is done by these veterans organizations right across the country.

It's our responsibility to make sure that they do survive because the reason why you can say what you like to me here today is because of those veterans. That is essential and that is what makes Canada such a great place to live.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move now to MP Fillmore for just under two minutes.

Mr. Andy Fillmore (Halifax, Lib.): Thanks, Chair.

Thank you, minister, for joining us.

I want to ask you about the centre of excellence on PTSD and mental health. Perhaps you and/or the deputy can help me out here.

In 2018 the government announced \$17.5 million for the centre of excellence on PTSD and mental health. I see that the centre is asking for \$6.3 million under the appropriations we are considering today.

Could you update the committee on the work that is being done at the centre and speak to whether you feel that the investments be-

ing put towards the centre are achieving their goal? Are they serving veterans living with PTSD and mental health challenges?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Andy, thank you very much.

Of course, everybody on the committee understands how places like the PTSD centre of excellence are of great importance. Having been around here for a long time, we all thought that you had to see an injury. That certainly was the case.

Mental health is such a vital part of what we do. The country is obliged to make sure that these services are supplied.

I'll turn it over to the deputy to explain further.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Thanks, minister.

The Chair: You have about 30 seconds.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Sir, the answer to your question is yes. The centre of excellence for mental health and post-traumatic stress disorder is really paying huge dividends. Again, the notion is of a hub-in-spoke approach, wherein the centre of excellence is really a hub for research. It is looking for best practices both within the country and from all of our allies around the world, bringing them together and then distributing all of that new knowledge and best practices throughout our 11 operational stress injury clinics and to the thousands upon thousands of mental health practitioners who support our veterans and their families across the country.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, general.

We'll now go over to Deputy Desilets.

You have five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I apologize, Minister, but we are really putting you through your paces today. We care about this a lot, much like you, as we know. The only thing we disagree on is the best way to fix the problem.

In his latest report, the Parliamentary Budget Officer suggested that you hire 400 staff. My understanding is that you hired 300 employees in June, 100 shy of the number recommended by the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

I don't see anything in the latest estimates about that. Does that mean you will not be following the Parliamentary Budget Officer's recommendation?

• (1150)

[*English*]

The Chair: I apologize, just before the minister speaks, because I said it would be five minutes. Unfortunately, Mr. Desilets, it's two and a half minutes.

Please continue.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Darn.

Please carry on, Minister.

[*English*]

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I thank you very much, Luc.

You agree somewhat with what we're doing because we all agreed with the funding for the veterans' organizations. It was so vitally important. Bill C-4 was so important in order to access the 350 employees, plus the 180 employees that would be added with it. That will be over 500 employees who will be directed specifically to deal with the backlog.

Of course, I very much appreciate what the Parliamentary Budget Officer has to say, I always do, as it's always constructive. He also indicated that the new employees would be a big help. He did not address the digitization of the files or the coordination of the staff. Luc, that is, in fact, what has happened up to now. The new staff are in training and will be ready to tackle the backlog after Christmas, when they will be on it. We have lowered the backlog, but will lower it more.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I see.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer suggested that you hire 400 staff. Will you? Right now, there is nothing in the votes for that.

[*English*]

The Chair: Minister, be very brief, please.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Mr. Chair, I appreciate Luc's question.

The fact is that we did hire 350 people, plus the 180 who are going to remain on staff, which means over 500 people in fact. That will have a major effect on the backlog, which is vitally important to do.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Now it is over to MP Blaney for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

I was feeling very hopeful for Luc and myself, thinking we would get more time, but that's okay.

Minister, first of all, I just want to thank you for the commitment to looking at how to get authorization for MPs to support veterans more quickly. I think that will help. I know that these wait times are terrible and I couldn't agree more with what Cathay said. The reality is that veterans are struggling profoundly, and I know she gets those calls from across Canada, just as I do, and it's very concerning.

I have talked to you as well about the fact that some veterans are making the decision, based on what they've heard from Liberal folks who are saying, "Apply for the CERB. It doesn't matter. We'll figure out the details on the other side." They are doing that out of desperation because they've been waiting so long for their disability

pensions to come in. They are poor, struggling folks, and they have served our country, and we certainly don't want that happening.

I thank you for the commitment around the authorization.

I am going to ask as well about what we can do to improve MPs' access to Veterans Affairs. With a lot of other departments, there are specific lines for MPs to access support. The departments work closely with our offices to help people, and we want to do more, but we need those support lines for MPs' offices and things like that to be put into place. I'm just wondering if you would help us with that as well.

The Chair: There is just over a minute remaining.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much, Rachel.

Number one, I know you truly care and I will help in any possible way I can, but I want to say to you and to everybody on the committee and to anybody who is listening that if there is a veteran who is struggling, the Department of Veterans Affairs has an emergency fund. It is so vitally important that you—and I know you will—direct them to that path, because for anybody who is in great difficulty, this funding is there, and we want to make sure that it's accessed.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Minister, has the uptake of the emergency fund gone up simply because of COVID-19?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I would have to ask the deputy for the exact figures on what has been accessed.

The Chair: Could you give us a 10-second answer, please?

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Early in the pandemic, Mr. Chair, the uptake from the emergency fund had increased slightly but right now, and over the last few months, it's actually been tracking similar to the way it has been in the last two years that it has existed.

Thank you.

● (1155)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we will move over to MP Seeback for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Kyle Seeback (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, the PBO says that the backlog will be reduced to about 10,000 applicants by March 2022. That's in their report.

You've said today that you will have addressed the backlog by 2022. Does "addressed" mean eliminated? If it means eliminated, when in 2022, in that big block of 12 months, will it be eliminated?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Kyle, thank you very much.

Of course you're well aware, as is everybody, number one, that the reason I do not want to say we're going to totally eliminate the backlog is that there is—

Mr. Kyle Seeback: So "addressed by 2022" doesn't mean eliminated. Is that what you're saying today?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: What we're doing in the department and what I have directed the department to do is to address the backlog. We want to deal with the backlog and make sure it's dealt with in an efficient manner. I can assure you, Kyle, and everybody on the committee that it will be dealt with.

It's impossible to say—

Mr. Kyle Seeback: What does “dealt with” mean?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: —that we're going to eliminate—

Mr. Kyle Seeback: What does it mean? We know you're trying to.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: What we're going to do is to make sure that we have it well under control and that we get it to be as low as possible. We will be sure to do that. In fact, even without these 500 plus employees coming online, we have reduced the backlog and we will continue to reduce the backlog.

However, what I cannot say as the minister is that... Number one, we do not know how many are coming in. If there are complex cases, I expect that's what will be left. Complex cases could be left afterwards. What I don't want to say is that every last file will have been dealt with, but what we will do is to make sure that it's addressed. I don't want you to be able to say to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, “You promised you were going to totally eliminate the backlog.” That is a big thing to say because of the complications in applications, and I think you understand that.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: I understand that.

I just want to be clear. What you're basically saying to veterans today is that when you say it will be addressed by 2022, that means it will be reduced somewhat, not eliminated. By the end of December 31, 2022, the backlog will not be eliminated; it will be addressed, whatever that means.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I never said it will not be eliminated. I—

Mr. Kyle Seeback: So when in 2022 will it be eliminated, then?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I explained to you what takes place in the department.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: I know what takes place—

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I explained to you what doesn't—

Mr. Kyle Seeback: —but I'm just asking you.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Again [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Mr. Kyle Seeback: It's okay to say that it won't be eliminated.

The Chair: Again, we'll have questions through the chair, folks.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Well, Mr. Chair, what I'm trying to do is respond to my honourable friend as to the complexity of some of the cases, and I think you have to be honest in your answers. I am not going to say there will not be files that will be over the 16 weeks after 2022.

What I am saying is that the files will be addressed, the process will be in place and we will deal with the backlog. I can't have Kyle or anybody coming to say to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, “You promised there would not be one file, that you would totally elimi-

nate it.” That is not the language to use. What we're going to make sure—

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Understood. I understand. You're saying that you can't commit to its being completely eliminated in 2022.

I have limited time.

It's been recommended that the military Health Services Group, which treats all personnel, determines if a medical issue is an attribution of service. Why has that decision not been made? That would expedite files very quickly.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: We're doing everything to make sure we expedite files as quickly as possible. I told you what path we're on. That is the path we're on, that is what's going to deal with the backlog, and it will deal with the backlog.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Minister, the fastest way to eliminate the backlog would be to do what you did with CERB: to give people the CERB first and then later determine whether or not they're eligible.

If we can do that for high school students, for example, let's say, who earned \$5,000 and then were immediately entitled to CERB, why can't we “believe veterans first”, give them the benefits they so desperately need and then review the file? You did it for students. Why can't you do it for veterans?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I think my honourable colleague understands that the veterans application process is very different.

I think he also understands what would happen if we didn't hire those 350 extra people, if we didn't train them to deal with the backlog. We have to make sure that the files are dealt with appropriately. There are some very complex files, and we will continue to deal with them.

As I said, with this, we will address the backlog, and there will be a very small backlog, if any, after 2022.

● (1200)

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Minister, you've done a—

The Chair: You have two seconds. Finish your thought.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: There's no point. Thank you.

The Chair: Next we have MP Fillmore, please.

Mr. Andy Fillmore: Thanks, Chair.

Let's hit the veterans independence program quickly, as we close up.

VAC is seeking \$360 million for the VIP, which, for the benefit of committee members, provides funding for services such as grounds maintenance, housekeeping, meal preparation, personal care and professional health and support services for veterans.

Just quickly, I wonder if you can tell me about the uptake of the program. Have there had to be any adjustments because of the realities of COVID? Is there anything we need to be focusing on to make sure that veterans have access to home care while they're waiting for a contract bed?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Andy, that is a vitally important subject, of course, and it's been around before, and the last time I was in Veterans Affairs. This program is so vitally important to veterans. I will let the deputy answer as to how the uptake has been. I understand how critically important it is. It means that veterans can remain in their own homes a lot longer. They can remain independent a lot longer, and that's what we all want to see on this committee: to make sure they do.

I'll let the deputy expand on this with some more—

The Chair: Be very quick, please.

Gen (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk: Thanks very much.

The veterans independence program is a best practice globally. We know for certain that it is keeping our veterans alive and healthy much longer as a result of their being able to be as close as possible to home and family through their years of aging.

We have seen an increase across the board because, again, veterans do want to stay home. During COVID, we are also offering to the families, if they're worried about their loved ones who are in long-term care homes, to return them to their own homes and are providing additional support in their home places.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Unfortunately, I have to step in. We do need to wrap up the hour, but I need to leave a minute here.

Pursuant to Standing Order—

Mr. John Brassard: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Yes, MP Brassard.

Mr. John Brassard: Mr. Chair, I have submitted a motion to the clerk, in both official languages, which I would like to put forward right now.

The Chair: Can we vote on the main estimates or do you want to do this beforehand? We're running out of time here, sir.

Mr. John Brassard: Okay, so—

The Chair: We can come back to it. Is it about the main estimates or supplementary estimates, or is it about something else?

Mr. John Brassard: It's.... I don't know whether you have a copy of the motion.

The Chair: I do not.

Mr. John Brassard: It's a motion to report to the House, so I don't think it has anything to do with the main estimates or the supplementary estimates. As long as we come back to it after the vote, I would appreciate that.

The Chair: Okay. Number one, just procedurally, you can't move a motion on a point of order. That's number one.

Number two, can I ask your indulgence just to allow us to go through the procedure of reporting the main estimates? Then we're going to suspend and come back in the next hour with witnesses. When you have a time slot, you can speak at that point.

Is that fair?

Mr. John Brassard: Mr. Chair, frankly, I'd like to move the motion then, not on a point of order.

The Chair: It requires 48 hours' notice, sir, if that's the case, because I don't have the motion. None of my colleagues here has the motion to do that.

Mr. John Brassard: Okay, so I'm putting on notice the motion, Mr. Chair, just so that you're aware. The clerk does have it in both official languages, and, if you like, I can read into the record what the motion states.

The Chair: Let's move forward with this. As I said, it's improper to move a motion, and I suspect.... I'm just getting word that you can put it on notice, but can you just indulge me to go through this procedure? After that you will, I suspect, have time in the coming hours here today to discuss this. That would be the normal process for this.

Okay?

Mr. John Brassard: Okay.

The Chair: While I have you there, sir, I know I reached out to IT. Did they touch base with you about the issue with muting on your end?

• (1205)

Mr. John Brassard: They did, Mr. Chair. To be frank, I get a little animated with my hands, and it could have occurred—and I apologize to the chair for this—that I touched the wrong button or the right button, for that matter.

The Chair: Listen, we're all living in a very bizarre world right now, so I accept your apology. It wasn't necessary, but thank you.

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), the committee will now dispose of the main estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2021 minus the interim supply of the House agreed to on March 13 and June 17, 2020.

Do I have unanimous consent to dispose of the credits in one motion?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: On division.

Mr. John Brassard: On division.

The Chair: Excellent.

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$1,158,864,928

Vote 5—Grants and contributions.....\$4,044,621,627

(Votes 1 and 5 agreed to on division)

VETERANS REVIEW AND APPEAL BOARD

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$9,660,535

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall I report the votes to the House, minus the amounts voted in interim supply on March 13 and June 17, 2021?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much.

Now for the supplementary estimates (B), pursuant to Standing Order 81(5), the committee will dispose of the supplementary estimates (B) for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2021.

Do I have unanimous consent to deal with the votes in one motion?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: On division.

Mr. John Brassard: On division.

The Chair: Excellent.

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Vote 1b—Operating expenditures.....\$17,759,213

Vote 5b—Grants and contributions.....\$1

(Votes 1b and 5b agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall I report the votes to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much, everybody.

I'd like to say a big thank you, Minister MacAulay and General Natynczyk and your team, for being patient with us and coming back, given the technical issues we had at the last meeting. I thank you all for your participation today.

We are going to suspend briefly to allow the minister to move on with his day and to bring in the witnesses for our next session on the backlog.

• (1205) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1215)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on October 27, the committee is resuming its study on the backlog of disability benefit claims at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

We welcome all of the witnesses who have taken the time to join us during Remembrance Week. I will list the witnesses and then go over a few procedural notes and we will get started right away on testimony.

Appearing as individuals, we have both Charles Scott and Gary Walbourne, former ombudsman of the Department of National Defence. Representing the National Federation of Retirees, we have Simon Coakely, chief executive officer. Representing the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, we have Yves Giroux, Parliamentary Budget Officer. From the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada, we have Doreen Weatherbie, president (members); and Paul Hartigan, manager, Atlantic region.

Thank you all for taking the time out of your day to be here to help us with this study.

Each of the organizations will have five minutes for opening remarks, after which we will proceed with rounds of questions.

I will signal when there is only one minute remaining, so just keep an eye on me on your screen. Keep in mind that a minute is actually a long time, so you don't have to panic if you have a lot left to say. When the time has elapsed, both for opening remarks and during questions, I will hold up the hand, doing my best to allow folks to finish their thoughts.

First we have Mr. Walbourne, but I don't see him up yet—

Mr. John Brassard: Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Brassard.

Mr. John Brassard: My hand is raised, Mr. Chair. Before the previous part of the meeting ended, I mentioned that I'd like to put forward a motion. The clerk does have the motion in both official languages. I'm not sure whether it's been distributed, but I do seek clarification as to whether we can put a motion on the floor and vote on it today.

You mentioned that 48 hours' notice was required. My intention is to put the motion on the floor and to have a vote on it based on the testimony of the previous witnesses we had at committee. I'm asking for some indulgence by the new witnesses, but I would like to deal with that if we can.

The Chair: I understand that you're able to put the motion on notice. It will completely depend on the topic of the motion. If it's relevant to what we're talking about today, then, yes, you could move it. Otherwise you would need unanimous consent to move it without the notice.

Again, the clerk has it, and I'm seeing it just now, but I don't know that anybody else has seen it yet, hence the need for that time.

Can you confirm that it's about the backlog?

Mr. John Brassard: I can confirm that 100%, Mr. Chair, but I would seek clarification from the clerk on the need to have unanimous consent to move a motion that is germane to what we're discussing today.

The Chair: I invite the clerk to speak, to clarify the procedural side of this, for sure, if she wishes.

• (1220)

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Jolène Savoie-Day): Thank you, Mr. Brassard.

You do need 48 hours' notice, but if you are putting the motion on notice, you may do that. If you want to move the motion without having given the 48 hours' notice, then you would need the unanimous consent of the committee.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you for that clarification.

I'm anxious to hear what the witnesses have to say, so in order to keep going here, I'm going to ask that at some point near the end of the meeting I can put the motion on notice formally. I am going to need some time to do that.

Thank you.

The Chair: Noted. Thank you very much.

Going back, did we have any success with Mr. Walbourne or no? Okay. We'll give the tech folks the opportunity to continue to help him out.

If we can bump Mr. Scott up to the front of the line, the next five minutes is all yours, sir.

Mr. Charles Scott (As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. I'm very grateful for the opportunity to present a human side to the systemic issues Canada's veterans and their loved ones are subjected to when requesting financial benefits and treatment services for the injuries and illnesses they sustained in service to Canada.

My testimony today is drawn from my own experiences in navigating through Veterans Affairs Canada's complex policies and procedures. Unfortunately, my experiences are shared by countless other veterans, who, since I have gone public about my grievances with Veterans Affairs, have connected with me to share their stories of sanctuary trauma when they were attempting, like me, to take steps in their healing journey.

The current system of three benefits regimes, coupled with constantly changing policies and procedures, presents major barriers to veterans accessing benefits and services. This frequently exacerbates the veterans' injuries and illnesses and leads to them abandoning their claims.

During my exit interview from the Canadian Armed Forces in 2008, a Veterans Affairs employee assessed me to be at high risk of contracting post-traumatic stress disorder. This was not brought to my attention, and my family and I suffered immensely for almost a year. After taking treatment matters into my own hands, I was eventually diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder in 2009.

I discovered the note in my file after recently accessing my DND and Veterans Affairs file through an access to information request. Sadly, this was not the first of many times that Veterans Affairs would fail to support me as I struggled to manage the injuries and illnesses I sustained in service to Canada.

In 2013, my case management was removed without my knowledge. I made attempts to contact my case manager several times and received no response. In 2018, I required approval for a medical device that was above the Medavie Blue Cross grid amount. Without a case manager, I was left communicating with the national contact centre network and, at best, a Veterans Affairs service agent on the telephone, who had no authority to approve costs for a medical advice above the grid amount.

Eventually, I was forced to seek the assistance of my member of Parliament, as the unsupportive Veterans Affairs processes were exacerbating my injuries and my mental health was deteriorating. It took several months of advocating, appeals and my MP's involvement to eventually receive the device.

My health took a steep downward turn in 2018. With a disability rate of 93%, I was left to navigate the Veterans Affairs processes on my own. Unable to balance the demands placed on me as an employer, parent, partner and person, I wasn't able to continue working. I

applied for the diminished earning capacity career impact allowance and career impact allowance supplement in July 2018 through the My VAC online portal. This application was rejected because I had no case management to complete the referral to the regional interdisciplinary team in Edmonton.

Finally, I was assigned a newly hired case manager in November 2018. By this time, my total disability rate had increased to 123% due to injury reassessments that I facilitated on my own. In December 2018, my case manager advised me to apply for the career impact allowance, and I was approved in January 2019.

When I inquired about my diminished earning capacity application, my case manager explained that they needed to consult with their mentor about my eligibility. I never received any follow-up from my case manager with regard to my DEC application after that. I was relying on my case manager to support me in accessing benefits that I desperately needed. Sadly, reviewing my files highlighted that my case manager was not engaged and did not request any medical progress reports from my numerous health care providers, nor did they complete a case management plan to identify my needs. My file was never updated to reflect my treatment needs and financial benefits entitlements.

Prior to the introduction of the pension for life, I lost contact with my case manager, as they terminated their employment with Veterans Affairs and my file was not handed over to another case manager. Because of this negligence, I lost out on the diminished earning capacity and the CIA supplement. Although an internal memorandum was distributed to veterans service teams across Canada stating that any veteran who was participating actively or inactively in various programs was to receive a DEC and secure financial benefits before the change of legislation on April 1, 2019, my case manager did not receive that memorandum. It was not until later on, in April 2019, after the legislation changed, that I was assigned a new case manager when I contacted Veterans Affairs.

● (1225)

In addition to this, the government still has not acknowledged the harmful effects of mefloquine. As a veteran who is suffering from the effects of mefloquine toxicity, officially known as quinism, I currently have two injury claims attributed to mefloquine toxicity in the backlog. I cannot wait for this specialized [*Inaudible—Editor*] for another two years. Mefloquine is being delayed in the courts currently, which is delaying the outreach, screening and the independent inquiry, which is so important and was costed by the PBO.

In conclusion, I wish to reinforce that the service delivery model is broken. There is a three-tiered benefits regime system with major benefits disparities. I, for one, fall under all three benefits regimes and the financial disparity is in the range of \$3,000 to \$4,000 per month.

Veterans were promised that they would never have to take their country and their government to court for the benefits and services they are entitled to, yet today we are seeing a record number of veteran lawsuits and Human Rights Commission complaints in process.

I voluntarily served Canada's military. I would do it again, but respectfully, you owe me and thousands of veterans a better duty of care.

Thank you for your time.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Scott. Thank you for your service, and we agree.

We now go over to Mr. Coakeley, chief executive officer of the National Association of Federal Retirees.

The next five minutes is all yours, sir.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Simon Coakeley (Chief Executive Officer, National Association of Federal Retirees): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The National Association of Federal Retirees is the largest national advocacy organization representing active and retired members of the federal public service, Canadian Armed Forces and Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and retired federally appointed judges, as well as their partners and survivors.

With 176,000 members, including over 60,000 veterans and their families, the association has advocated for improvements to the financial security, health and well-being of its members and all Canadians for more than 50 years.

I would like to begin by recognizing Veterans Week, the service, dedication and sacrifice of our military and veterans, and their families, including members of the National Association of Federal Retirees.

Thank you, committee members, for inviting the association to speak today. My remarks will be supplemented by a written brief, and our association stands by to participate in other future areas identified for study by this committee.

The transition to civilian life can be especially challenging for those who are dealing with illness, injury or trauma, as you've heard. Unfortunately, this transition is often further complicated by the absence of any systemic approach to ensure transitioning veterans have continuity of their access to primary medical care.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further negatively impacted veterans' ability to access the hands-on medical assessments and reviews needed to support Veterans Affairs Canada claims, which may have downstream consequences on workload and backlog. These issues are compounded by unreasonable wait times for disability benefit processing at Veterans Affairs Canada, which results in lack of veteran confidence in a system they must rely on. For some, the wait

times are retraumatizing or compound an existing moral or institutional injury.

A system focused on rebuilding trust with veterans is critical.

The infusion of \$192 million to hire temporary employees to reduce the backlog is welcome and necessary, and the department should be commended for continuing to address the backlog through the challenges of 2020. However, we must recognize that systemic issues led to this backlog. Already, this investment will prove insufficient to eliminate the backlog in 12 months. There is little data on how a gender-based analysis plus, or GBA+, lens is being used with this funding to ensure the backlog is addressed equitably, because we know that women and francophones are disproportionately impacted by the backlog.

● (1230)

[*English*]

The report of the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman on timely and transparent decisions from 2018 noted that anglophone applicants waited on average 24 weeks for a decision while francophones waited on average 45 weeks. That's a 21-week difference, or almost twice as long, with applications most often delayed during the adjudication stage.

Veterans Affairs Canada recently shared that nearly one-third of decision-making staff are now French-speaking, and it shared with stakeholders that the department has implemented a focused approach to triaging and processing francophone veterans' claims.

Just last week the department shared that it anticipates success in addressing the backlog of francophone claims by the end of the year, a goal for which the department should be commended but also held accountable.

Women today comprise over 16% of the military, and there was a goal to have 25% serving by 2026. Women veterans suffer injuries and illnesses resulting in medical releases at higher rates than do male veterans, which makes women the fastest-growing segment of Veterans Affairs Canada's clients, a trend that is likely to continue.

Wait times are one of the many issues that disproportionately affect women veterans, the group also identified in the Veterans Ombudsman 2018 report as waiting longer to have their claims adjudicated.

Forty-two per cent of female clients waited over 40 weeks for a decision while only 26% of male clients waited that long. We are aware of cases that were left pending for female veterans for more than 104 weeks or two years. Less is known about the experience of RCMP women veterans with respect to claiming, processing, wait times and backlog at Veterans Affairs.

VAC should know why the delays are happening in processing women veterans' claims and should have a targeted plan to fix those issues on an urgent basis. While the department has undertaken a GBA+ strategy, systemic biases and research gaps need to be closed. The sex- and gender-specific issues and needs of women veterans must be equitably addressed within the department by the federal government. Specific measurable goals and accountability are essential to rebuilding trust in the system.

GBA+ is a mandatory imperative that must be mainstreamed into everything Veterans Affairs does. This should be prioritized and properly resourced.

As the veterans' ombudsman said:

It is unfair to make veterans and their families wait unreasonably for compensation to which they are entitled, especially when a favourable decision can also provide access to needed health care benefits.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you. That was four minutes and fifty-nine seconds. Well done, sir.

We go now to our next witness, who will get an extra second on his time, Monsieur Giroux, from the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

The next five minutes and one second is all yours.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Giroux (Parliamentary Budget Officer, Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair. I don't think I will be using the extra one second.

Good afternoon, vice-chairs and members of the committee.

Thank you for the invitation to appear before you today. This is my first virtual appearance before the committee. I am pleased to be here today to discuss my office's report entitled "Disability Benefit Processing at Veterans Affairs Canada", which was published on September 28, 2020.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer, or PBO, supports Parliament by providing independent and non-partisan economic and financial analysis to parliamentarians. As the legislation states, we provide this analysis for the purposes of raising the quality of parliamentary debate and promoting greater budget transparency and accountability.

Consistent with the PBO's legislative mandate, at the request of your fellow committee member, Ms. Blaney, the member for North Island—Powell River, my office prepared an independent analysis of the service standards of Veterans Affairs Canada for processing disability benefit applications. The purpose of this report is to assess the impact of additional resources on the evolution of the backlog of disability benefit applications and on maintaining service standards once the backlog has been addressed.

In March 2017, the number of pending applications was 20,693, but by March 31, 2020, it had reached more than 49,000. Of these, 22,000 were considered complete and were waiting only for a decision from the department.

While the resources allocated to processing applications for disability benefits provided by VAC have increased in recent years, the influx of applications has consistently outpaced the department's processing capacity.

• (1235)

[*English*]

In June 2020, the government allocated an additional \$192 million in funding to help the department reduce the backlog of applications for disability benefits. With part of this funding, the department plans to retain 160 temporary employees already working for VAC and to hire an additional 300 temporary employees.

Based on our analysis, we estimate that, with these additional resources, the backlog will be approximately 40,000 applications by the end of fiscal year 2021-22. Our projections show that, without these additional resources, the number of pending applications for disability benefits will reach approximately 140,000 by that time. Further, with these additional hires, the backlog will stop increasing and the number of pending applications will be reduced by approximately 10,000 applications by the end of 2021-22.

With the human resources currently allocated to processing applications at VAC, the backlog should stop growing, but it will not be eliminated by March 2022. In addition, if all the employees hired with the additional funding are not retained, the backlog will start to increase again. While a number of scenarios could lead to eliminating the backlog, our report examines two options.

The first option we assessed is the extension of the additional funding recently announced. We estimate that the total cost of this option would be \$105 million from now until the end of fiscal year 2024-25.

The second option we assessed is the resource requirements needed to eliminate the backlog within 10 months and maintain the service standards thereafter. We estimate the total cost of this option would be \$126 million from now until the end of fiscal year 2024-25.

I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have regarding our analysis or other PBO work.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, and you were well under time, which I appreciate.

From the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada, we have up next Doreen Weatherbie, president, members; and Paul Hartigan, manager, Atlantic region.

My notes indicate that, Madam Weatherbie, you are going to be speaking and the next five minutes is all yours.

Ms. Doreen Weatherbie (President, Members, Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Good afternoon.

[*English*]

Thank you for the invitation to address you today.

As mentioned, I'm Doreen Weatherbie, consultation president for the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada vis-à-vis Veterans Affairs.

I have with me today my colleague Paul Hartigan, one of the employee relations officers and manager at the Atlantic PIPSC office in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Over the years, I have endeavoured to create a strong, productive and meaningful relationship with senior management, including the deputy minister, the ADMs and HR staff. I am happy to say that they have generally reciprocated, and together we have worked on many files to create positive change for employees and veterans. I respect the integrity of senior management, and I have complete confidence in the nobility of their intentions.

Having just observed Remembrance Day, it is abundantly appropriate that we are having this discussion on the backlog of veterans' benefit claims and how to address them.

The members I represent are immensely proud of the work they do. They provide support for Canadians who were willing to sacrifice everything for Canada. On a daily basis, my members see the consequences of the ravages of war. When Canada chooses to send men and women across the world to defend what we believe to be right and just, there are consequences.

I would suggest that veterans deserve a balanced, thoughtful review of their case. That is why it's imperative that each case be given the appropriate review time. The files that my members review are long, complicated and full of horrifying details that would result in nightmares for most of us.

The report "Disability Benefit Processing at Veterans Affairs Canada" identified that an experienced employee could expect to complete 17 applications per month. Therefore, on average, each case takes a little over a day to complete if the reviewer is experienced. As the report notes, it will take a couple of years for the new employees being hired to reach the level of experience.

Further, given the complexities and implications that each case can present, it is not unreasonable to devote more than a day to a veteran for the review of the implications of their military life. Because staffing levels have been inadequate, the backlog has grown. This adds frustration to my members and to the veterans.

I want to see the backlog addressed, as do my members. Timely service for our veterans would bring an immense satisfaction to all. However, the proposal to date has been akin to addressing an amputation with a band-aid.

My members are being asked to put in long hours of overtime to address the current workload and train new employees. However, the problems being faced are systemic. The number of clients continue to grow, and the support they require becomes more complicated as they grow older.

The overtime compounds the problems by creating mental health issues, such as burnout and stress leave within the workforce. Even the planned hiring identified in the report is temporary. While the analysis clearly shows that those resources will barely bring the workforce up to a sustainable level, only after the new hires have a couple of years' experience can we expect to see a significant dent

start to be made in the backlog, at which time the current plan would dismiss all of the newly trained resources.

The health care and computer science professionals that I represent have demonstrated time and time again that they will go above and beyond the call of duty to help veterans. My members are willing to work with management to come up with innovative and meaningful solutions. However, we need management to be strategic and hire for the long term if we are going to address the looming backlog. Veterans are not going away, and the issues they face are not going away.

In closing, I want to say that while the actions being proposed in the government's plan are meaningful, they are also inadequate. Short-term hiring for permanent problems doesn't fix anything. It merely postpones the problem of an increasing backlog. The best way to support our veterans is to ensure that enough resources are in place to review and resolve their concerns in a timely way.

• (1240)

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

[*English*]

Mr. Chair, if there are any questions, I'm available.

The Chair: Thank you for staying on time.

I can see Mr. Walbourne.

If we could, we will do a quick sound check with you, sir. I see that you don't have a headset, which is sometimes a problem for interpretation/translation. Can I ask you to let us know where you are right now? We'll have the folks on the technical side make sure that we can proceed.

Sorry, Mr. Walbourne, you're on mute. That's the first step. It's to take you off mute. Perhaps you could talk for a few seconds so that we can do a sound test.

• (1245)

Mr. Gary Walbourne (As an Individual): Good morning, everybody.

I hope all is well. The weather is nice and cool here in Thunder Bay.

How is the sound? Is it good?

The Chair: We're just waiting to hear from the technician.

Can you sit a little closer to the mike?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Is this better?

The Chair: I'm just getting word that this is not going to work.

As long as everybody is okay with your not appearing by video, the preferred audio option would be for you to log back in on the other device that you were using and we'll go that route.

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Okay.

The Chair: You're the last person to testify, so I don't want to encroach on the privilege of my colleagues to ask you questions.

If you could go ahead and do that, we'll suspend for a very brief moment, hopefully, to allow you to do that, sir. Thank you.

We are suspended.

• (1245) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1245)

The Chair: I will bring the meeting back to order.

Without further ado, I'm happy to welcome Mr. Gary Walbourne, former ombudsman of the Department of National Defence, to our committee.

Mr. Walbourne, the next five minutes are all yours.

• (1250)

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Thank you.

Good morning, Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today and to discuss the backlog of veterans files at Veterans Affairs Canada.

It's been just over two years since I left the position of ombudsman for the Canadian Armed Forces and the Department of National Defence, and just over 10 years since I was appointed deputy ombudsman at Veterans Affairs Canada.

From the very first day, the backlog and transition were an issue, from the day I walked into the office at Veterans Affairs Canada. I wish I were here this morning with a new approach to deal with the backlog. Sadly, I am not. However, what I can do is reiterate what has been said about and what has been offered as solutions.

To start, the first thing we need to understand is that transition happens the day you enlist. Several years ago, I discussed the CRA-type model for our transitioning members. Currently, the Government of Canada accepts taxpayers at face value, and any anomalies are dealt with through an audit process, a simple online application, and this is possible for veterans.

However, getting to a CRA model would require a change in both who does the work and how it is done. So how do we get there? First and foremost, the determination of attribution of service, in my opinion, should be done by the Canadian Armed Forces. If the Canadian Armed Forces holds enough evidence to end a member's career, how is it possible that this level of evidence is not enough to open an application at Veterans Affairs Canada? The CAF currently determines attribution of service for reservists. Why not for all?

With attribution of service declaration in hand prior to the member leaving, now they know they're in the club, so any determination done at Veterans Affairs would be determining the level of finance, compensation or service delivery.

The ultimate goal, in my opinion, would be to have an online application that can approve benefits and services using the declaration of attribution of service that has been released by the Canadian Armed Forces as the ticket to approve that application.

I strongly believe the current system is broken beyond repair. It is a bolt-on system, and every time we add a new program, policy or protocol, the ripples are felt throughout the system. Adding more and more people has been the battle cry for years—which we have done to the tune of millions and millions of dollars—yet the backlog persists, because it is simply not a people issue. This is a process issue. Continuing to do more of the same and expecting a different result is really not sensible.

There are two areas of responsibility: the organizational responsibility and the individual responsibility. The goal of Veterans Affairs Canada—to process 80% of all files within 16 weeks—is the organization's and not the individual's. However, when this responsibility is not met, our transitioning members suffer, and by extension their families. They suffer through financial stress, continuity of care, family breakdown, homelessness, loss of job opportunity under the Veterans Hiring Act, and the list goes on. Serving members in transition and our veterans deserve so much more.

It can be fixed, but it is going to require a change in leadership thinking, a willingness to let go of our familiar systems, and a commitment to the change that would better serve this unique group of people who, unlike all others, signed the ultimate blank cheque for the Government of Canada. What we really can't afford is to continue down this path.

I stand ready for any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir, and thank you so much for your patience with our technology.

We'll go straight to questions. I believe MP Wagantall is up first for six minutes, please.

• (1255)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you, Chair.

I really appreciate all of the witnesses, and I want to verify the fact that we deeply appreciate two things—I do—and that is the work of those who are serving our veterans within the public service for VAC. There is no question of our sense of your commitment and your efforts, so thank you so much.

Of course, the challenges we are facing, as Mr. Walbourne said, are systemic and they are processing issues. There's no reason why it can't be dealt with. It just takes the will.

First of all, I would like to ask our Parliamentary Budget Officer this. You've been challenged in your report by the deputy minister, indicating that your metrics, I guess, and your methods of coming to your numbers in regard to the backlog were incorrect. I would like a quick statement from you on that, in terms of their perspective on where that backlog is as compared to yours, and the ability to reduce it, to remove it.

Mr. Yves Giroux: Sure.

We asked Veterans Affairs Canada for the information that formed the basis of our report. We started from data that was provided by the department itself, so in that sense there should be no major difference in the state of the backlog as of March 31, 2020.

We also used the same assumptions that they used regarding improvements in productivity for employees at Veterans Affairs. In fact, we used the highest point of productivity that employees reached in 2015-16, so from that point I think we have a very similar approach when it comes to productivity.

What our report does not take into consideration is policy changes—for example, should the department decide to change the process by which it assesses applications—because that would not have been known to us when we submitted an information request.

For all intents and purposes, our conclusions should be the same. If Veterans Affairs has new information that they did not disclose to us when we made the information request, well, so much the better for veterans, but we were not provided with that information.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I really appreciate that. Thank you so much.

I would like to ask Mr. Scott this next question.

Thank you so much for your service and for your determination in your own care and reaching out and trying to do what you can through VAC.

I have to say that in this whole approach of pre-approval of applications and looking at this backlog, I keep hearing VAC say that you will see within the mandate letter a commitment to look at automatic approvals for the most common injuries and illnesses, such as mental health and musculoskeletal injuries, and then again, that we are “looking at partnering with the Canadian Armed Forces to access veterans' health records in order to determine more easily whether an injury is related to service or not.”

These are things that have been said year after year, Mr. Scott. Could we have a comment from you on where that raises the level of sanctuary trauma, and your perspective on being cared for by Veterans Affairs?

Mr. Charles Scott: Thank you, ma'am. That's an excellent question.

The onus has always been placed on the injured and ill to advocate for themselves and to navigate a gauntlet of processes for these applications. Documentation sometimes is there from DND but doesn't get transferred over to Veterans Affairs, and often the veterans and/or their caregivers are the ones who are advocating for them.

The processes are extreme. They subject the veterans and their families to sanctuary trauma by having them prove that they are actually ill and injured, when the documentation, for the most part, is there in the file.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you so much.

Mr. Walbourne, thank you so much for the work you have done in attempting to make the changes that I believe we really do need to make for our veterans. I wonder if you might have a comment on that as well.

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Yes. Thank you for the question.

You know, I start to sound repetitive to myself after a while. We're beating a drum here.

Look, we've tried this process. We've put people to it. We've put money to it. I saw a backlog 11 years ago. There's a backlog, and it's 2020. I just think we're going at this from the wrong end. We're end-loading all the money.

Why don't we front-load the money, do the process before the member leaves, have it in hand and set up a CRA model? Then Veterans Affairs can do the right work of auditing and make sure the member has enough—that they're in the right lane—and has all the things they need. I just think we have the cart in front of the horse here.

• (1300)

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

I'll maybe ask you this as well. As you know, in May, we had previous ombudsman Dalton's 2020 report, “Financial Compensation for Canadian Veterans: A Comparative Analysis of Benefit Regimes”. I know that you have a breadth of understanding across this transition from CAF to VAC that needs to take place. Do you see as well that we could take really historic steps to modernize the way we're taking care of our veterans, all veterans, from the same perspective?

The Chair: You only have about 10 seconds, but I'll give you an opportunity to answer that question, please.

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Yes, Mrs. Wagantall. To answer your question, without a doubt we have the ability. I believe the parts of the system are in place where we need them. We just need to get them connected in the right order. We're doing this backwards. I think it is possible, yes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Samson, the next six minutes are all yours, sir.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all the witnesses here today. It's extremely important to help us in this very important task of dealing with the backlog as efficiently and effectively as possible. I want to thank all of you for your contribution today.

I'd like to start with my colleague Mr. Giroux.

Thank you to you and your staff for the excellent work you do. It is another very important piece that is required to help us through this. As you well know, and as many of our listeners know, we have seen an increase of 60% in applications over the last year, and a 90% increase in first-time applicants. This is a big factor, as you said in your presentation; it's increasing the demands because of the added benefits that have been increased. Between 2015 and 2016, we were receiving 45,000 applications. We are now receiving 63,000. That's an increase of 18,000. In the decision-making by Veterans Affairs, where in 2015 it was 42,000, we're now up to 57,000, which is a 15,000 increase. That's a very important piece that we don't talk about enough, I believe.

The department has put forward a plan. You made your report, as you indicated earlier. I believe your report focuses mostly on people and capacity, but the plan brings other pillars that are crucial. One of the pillars they brought forward is digitization. That, I believe, can increase our efficiency. The other one is the integration of teams and innovative hubs. Those are strategies that are in the report, which your report doesn't take into account, even in terms of the innovation processes.

I'd like you to speak about those pillars and share with us how those can help move that backlog. As our colleague Mr. Walbourne said, it's not only about people; it's also about other processes we could put in place that would help us achieve our goal, which is to eliminate the backlog.

Thank you.

Mr. Yves Giroux: Our report takes into consideration issues or improvements to processes that were known to us as of the end of March. It includes digitization. It also includes a couple of other improvements that were known to us at the time of the information request, such as clusters and so on. It does not include policy changes. For example, automatic approvals of certain types of disability applications are not taken into account, but improvements in processes such as digitization are included in the report. They are factored into the necessary investments to reduce the backlog or eliminate it in 12 months. These are all in there. However, we did not factor in policy decisions that were not made or were not known to us at the time of drafting this report, which would have significant impacts on reducing the backlog.

We did a sensitivity analysis at the end of the report to show what an improvement in productivity or a decrease in productivity would do to the backlog and how it would behave should, for example, employees become more productive for whatever reason, such as further improvements to the process and so on. It's for illustrative purposes, in case parliamentarians like you want to make further assumptions or ask questions of the department with respect to the impact of productivity improvements.

• (1305)

Mr. Darrell Samson: Without those added policy changes, we've seen a drop from 23,000, I think, to 19,000 now. With these policy changes and strategies in the plan, we will see as well major improvements. We also need to keep in mind the people we're adding, which is 168 plus the 350, who will in effect be at work and ready to do the adjudication in January. We should see some major improvement in that area as well, wouldn't you think?

The Chair: Give a brief answer, please.

Mr. Yves Giroux: With the additional resources in June 2020, we expect the backlog to be reduced by about 10,000 applications, compared to the current situation, by March 2022, so this is an improvement in the backlog.

Mr. Darrell Samson: That is only with your report, which does not take in the necessary policy changes.

Mr. Yves Giroux: Exactly.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Therefore, there will be many more than 10,000.

Mr. Yves Giroux: If there were additional policy changes to the way the applications are treated, yes.

Mr. Darrell Samson: There are some you are now aware of that you were not aware of at the report stage.

The Chair: Thank you.

We now have MP Desilets for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first question is for Mr. Coakeley.

In your opening statement, you talked about the importance of a systemic approach to address the issues that led to the backlog. The automatic approval of disability benefit claims is an idea that has gained popularity among members, as evidenced today and at the last meeting. It is a recommendation we made that is now catching on.

What are the benefits and drawbacks, in your view, of automatically approving disability benefit claims? We want to fully understand what the process would entail.

Mr. Simon Coakeley: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

As a matter of principle, we are in favour of a process to automatically approve benefit claims, which would certainly have advantages, but also drawbacks. Keep in mind that the first goal is to help veterans reintegrate into civilian life, so every effort must be made to make that transition easier. It is about more than just clearing the backlog.

In the nineties, I was head of the bureau of pensions advocates at Veterans Affairs Canada. The backlog was pretty sizable back then. In my experience, many cases are similar. For instance, a lot of veterans may have hearing problems from exposure to high noise levels. In the course of a military mission, they can certainly be exposed to explosions, engine noise and so on.

We think it's important to take a step back and determine whether the impairment is likely attributable to service. Consider soldiers who jump out of aircraft or tanks and who go on to have knee problems. What would be worse is to grant the disability pension and, then, reverse the decision. That would involve Veterans Affairs Canada taking back the money it had paid out, so that is an important consideration.

With all due respect for veterans, we recommend that the department carry out pilot projects on a given disability. Another option would be to grant a pension benefit immediately on the basis of the facts and to carry out a pilot project on the increases afterwards. That would reduce the risk that the department would have to recover money that had already gone out to veterans.

I'm not sure whether that answers your question.

• (1310)

Mr. Luc Desilets: It does, but I have follow-up questions.

Would you support the automatic approval of claims, but on a partial basis? In other words, could it be done gradually? Let's go back to the example of the veteran who jumped from an aircraft during a mission; let's say there is a 95% likelihood that they will have knee or back issues. Should the department grant the veteran 50% of the benefit amount, and then, wait a year, two years or five years to pay out the rest?

Mr. Simon Coakeley: In the nineties, when I was at Veterans Affairs Canada, that was more or less the practice. Veterans were granted disability pensions according to the extent of their impairment expressed as a percentage. The department also determined the extent to which the impairment was attributable to military service. The department could determine, for instance, that the veteran had a 50% impairment, but that 20% of the impairment was attributable to military service.

I've been away from Veterans Affairs Canada for 20 years now. A system like that would provide veterans with an immediate pension, and thereby give them access to treatments and services such as the veterans independence program, which the minister mentioned in his statement. Veterans could access those services from the outset. In civil law, there is such a thing as commencement of proof in writing, so yes, it would be possible.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

I have a minute left. I would very much appreciate hearing from Mr. Scott.

First, I want you to know that I was deeply moved by your story. The committee always appreciates hearing from people who came up against barriers when navigating the system. Where do you stand on the automatic approval of claims? Would it have helped in your case?

[English]

Mr. Charles Scott: Automatic approval, yes...because I had documented evidence dating back to 2009. However, I just want to point out that hiring new people will not necessarily help if you're not changing the processes, which is what we're talking about.

If you want to talk about a pilot project, I would ask the committee and the government to consider piloting what's going to happen to the backlog when you have so many mefloquine veterans submitting claims for their injuries. Yes, I think the streamlined version, as was previously talked about, similar to CRA, would help.

The Chair: Excellent.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you very much, gentlemen.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We are now going to move to MP Blaney, for six minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank all of the witnesses today. I would like to make a special acknowledgement to Mr. Scott. You have come in front of the committee and shared very personal information; I really respect that. I respect your bravery and I thank you so much for your service.

I'm going to start with Mr. Giroux. First of all, thank you so much for taking up my request to do this report. I found it very enlightening. I am concerned, though, to hear several VAC executives and ministerial staff say that the backlog report doesn't account for changes the department is making.

Section 4 of the report specifically addresses changes in productivity within the department. Could you speak a little bit to that? Please help me understand how what I saw as such a helpful report to help us get to where we need to get, to honour our veterans, is somehow becoming something that is not helpful to the ministry.

• (1315)

Mr. Yves Giroux: The report we drafted and provided to you and to parliamentarians takes into consideration improvements that were mentioned, such as digitization of files. It takes into consideration what we were told by Veterans Affairs were improvements that they made. It's a bit surprising for me, personally, to hear that there are further improvements the department is undertaking, which will further reduce the backlog, without my office and me having been informed of that while we were drafting the report.

Nonetheless, we know that bringing in new staff, as the report suggests as a way forward, would probably decrease productivity. If you bring new hires into a system as complex as the veterans benefits system, it takes a while for employees to become fully familiar with the process. Even if it is true, and I have no reason to doubt it is true, that Veterans Affairs is implementing further changes to increase the productivity of its staff, bringing in new staff would probably decrease productivity.

That is why we have made the assumption in our report that productivity of employees overall would gradually improve over two years if the department were to implement either of the two scenarios that we mention in the report. Productivity would increase gradually over two years and reach its highest level, which was recorded recently, in 2015-16, after two years, once employees are up to speed.

That, I think, is probably a fairly generous assumption to begin with. If there are further enhancements to the processes that the department has put in place, I am very happy to hear that, because it will benefit veterans who are waiting for applications to be processed. However, I was not given any evidence of that when my team and I were drafting the report.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you. That is extremely helpful for me.

When I look at the report... The other thing you addressed so well was the idea of service standards. I think what you just told us is very informed of how long it's going to take. Ms. Weatherbie also talked about the fact that it takes a while to train people, and you can't base those high-trained folks...and how fast they can move through the system.

Then we heard Mr. Scott's story as well. What we see, and the workers have been saying it for a long time, is that they are doing their best to keep up, but the service standards are falling because they don't have the appropriate number of people. It depends on which department or which community they are in. There are so many variables.

Can you talk for a minute about those service standards and how long it will take to get to that level of service standards, so we don't see veterans like Mr. Scott falling through the cracks?

Mr. Yves Giroux: Thank you for the question.

The VAC service standards are that 80% of applications are to be processed within 16 weeks. What we are seeing now is that these service standards are not met and only 37% of applications are processed within these timelines.

Under the two scenarios we have looked at... In the first scenario, the service standards would be met by February or March 2023, so that's two and a half years from now. In the second scenario, where the backlog would be totally eliminated within 12 months, service standards would be met after 12 months. Depending on when the implementation starts, that would probably be sometime in 2022, 12 months after the changes under scenario two are implemented.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much.

Mr. Scott, my last question in this round goes to you.

First of all, I deeply apologize for the experience you've had to live through. We see the service standards. I don't want to blame the workers. I think the workers are doing the best they can, and they have not gotten the support they require, which means the impact is felt by veterans.

Can you talk a little about the timelines of how long you've been waiting? You talked about being dropped off again and again by your case manager. Can you speak a little bit about what that feels like?

• (1320)

The Chair: We're almost at time, but I will allow for a quick response, please.

Mr. Charles Scott: Thank you, ma'am. That's a very good question.

I have been waiting for at least two years for the career impact supplement. I currently have two claims in the backlog, for post-concussion syndrome and traumatic brain injury, which is attributed to mefloquine toxicity. That could take years. They are giving me 60 days to get a neurology examination. That doesn't really work, especially when we have COVID. Trying to find a neurologist takes a long time.

I hope that answered the question on the time that I had.

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir.

MP Carrie, I believe you have five minutes.

Mr. Colin Carrie (Oshawa, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all the excellent witnesses today.

I want to start and get right into it with Mr. Scott. You said that the service delivery system is "broken". I think Mr. Walbourne said the system isn't fixable. Madam Weatherbie, when she talked about the plan that's on the table, mentioned that it is an "inadequate" plan. She stated that it's like "addressing an amputation with a band-aid". That statement right there gave me a huge visual of how bad this is.

My colleague asked you a bit about the pre-approval process. If I understand correctly, you said it might be good for a pilot project. From your experience, do you see any downside to having a pre-approval process at all?

Mr. Charles Scott: Thank you for the question, sir.

A downside to a quicker approval process—

Mr. Colin Carrie: It's pre-approval.

Mr. Charles Scott: I believe that is going to be a personal question. Would that assist me? It may, potentially. It could also increase the backlog. There are a lot of veterans right now who have abandoned their applications because they are just unable to navigate through the processes and, unfortunately, the bureaucracy.

Perhaps it may assist. I haven't really had anything that was streamlined, so it's difficult for me to answer that question completely.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Okay. I appreciate that.

Maybe I could go to Mr. Giroux with the same question I asked Mr. Scott.

Mr. Scott said some veterans have abandoned the process because it's taking so long for them. First, do you have any idea of what the rejection rate would be for applications?

Also, do you see any positives, advantages or disadvantages, to this pre-approval rate? It seems the government can do this type of thing. My colleague mentioned the CERB and how easy it was. Basically, it was just click and send. The government was able to get the funds out to Canadians very quickly, even after CRA mentioned that perhaps some people weren't even qualified for them.

Could you please comment on the pros and cons of pre-approval? Also, what would be the acceptance rate for these claims for veterans, if you do have those numbers?

Mr. Yves Giroux: Unfortunately, I don't have the numbers for the rejection rates off the top of my head. The department for sure has that information, I hope. Maybe I can get it for you after the meeting.

With respect to the pros and cons of pre-approvals, the pros are quite obvious to everybody who is listening in today. It is faster approvals, so it's decisions and money flowing into the hands of the applicants much faster. The cons, unfortunately, are a lack of certainty to a certain extent, with people not knowing whether there would be an audit on their case after the fact. From the government's perspective, there would probably be difficulty in recovering amounts that could be overpaid in cases of applications that are not founded or that are not eligible.

These are the main pros and cons that I would see. If I had half an hour, I could probably come up with a longer list of pros and cons, but off the top of my head, these are the main elements that come to mind.

Mr. Colin Carrie: I think everyone around the table would like to come up with solutions. That's why I was very impressed with the witnesses here today.

Perhaps we could dig down on that a little more. If we had a pre-approval process, like some of the veterans organizations have suggested, and it had a verification aspect to it after the fact, would that help as far as pre-approval goes? Would you see a necessity, for example, for full-time equivalents? Would we have to increase those, or could it be handled within the system?

• (1325)

Mr. Yves Giroux: Based on my experience at the CRA, you can devote the same number of resources to an audit-based system where you approve everything automatically or you take the application at face value and then you audit. It depends on the strength and the coverage of the audits that you want to undertake. You can do that with fewer resources if you're willing to take a bit more risk, or you can use the same resources if you want to minimize the risk of overpayment. There are multiple models when it comes to pre-approvals and then audits after the fact. It depends on the coverage rate that the government is comfortable with or wants to undertake.

When it comes to pre-approvals there's a variety of models, from very few resources devoted to audits, to virtually the same levels if you really want to overlook or audit as many applications as possible. I think it would be more reasonable to have fewer resources to be fair to the process.

I'll stop it there because I see Mr. Chair with his hand up.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Thank you very much.

The Chair: We'll now move over to MP Fillmore, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Andy Fillmore: Thank you very much, Chair. I appreciate that.

Warm thanks to all of the witnesses for coming and joining us today.

I want to ask a question about understanding the processing delays. I'd like to hear from the witnesses on a question that I put to the deputy minister at our last meeting. VAC service standards indicate that in normal circumstances, as we talked about today, 80% of the decisions should be made in the first 16 weeks. It would appear that we're kind of left to wonder what constitutes normal circumstances, given that, according to the deputy minister, the very first backlog appeared back in the 1920s, it seems.

In any case, we've heard a lot about how more staff and better streamlined decision-making are important, but we have to understand also the specific reason that a claim might not meet that standard beyond the bureaucratic staffing issue that may exist. There are three things I'd like to ask you about. Could you describe what you feel normal circumstances would be under the VAC standard? What's the reality in terms of why fewer people than 80% were moved through the processing? What steps do you think VAC could be taking to better serve those veterans who have a claim that would take longer than the average—that 20% or, as the case may be, larger than 20%, that go beyond normal circumstances?

Can you help us out there? I ask the question to each of the witnesses and to whoever would like to dive into it.

Mr. Simon Coakeley: Perhaps I could start. When I was the chief pensions advocate at Veterans Affairs back in the nineties, we were dealing with backlogs back then, so it doesn't surprise me that we were dealing with backlogs in the twenties as well.

Basically, if you want to talk about a normal claim that could be decided reasonably quickly, you would be talking about a claim where you had "adequate" evidence of a disability—I put adequate in quotes, because to a certain extent adequate is in the eye of the beholder—that you were able to link back to military service or, in the case of the RCMP, RCMP service. The challenge with that is getting the documents together. The evidence of the disability is getting a doctor's opinion. Mr. Scott talked about his requirement to get a neurological assessment, which is very difficult at the best of times and is even worse now. There's the level of proof the system needs in order to accept that the medical diagnosis is acceptable, whether it needs to be from a specialist or from a family doctor, and then the link back to what your service was.

I think some of that can be done somewhat presumptively. It's not surprising that people with military service have hearing problems, because they've been exposed to loud noises over the course of their career. It's not surprising that people who jump out of airplanes or tanks may have knee problems. Some of the other areas are a little more complicated, but there is work that could be done there. The problem is even, in my own experience, making sure you have a normal file. You need all of that information. You need the flow of information from the Canadian Armed Forces into Veterans Affairs. You need the flow of information from the doctors.

You could also look, I would say, to what goes on in other countries and to what goes on in the workers' compensation world. There are certain things where we know, if a person is exposed to this, then that is the natural result. It's not rocket science.

• (1330)

Mr. Andy Fillmore: If anyone else would like to answer, please go ahead.

Mr. Scott.

Mr. Charles Scott: Thank you, sir. I'll give a short answer.

In terms of what's happening now in a lot of situations, I can use me as an example. With the change in legislation on April 1, a lot of the authority was removed from the regional level and placed in centralized units, such as the diminished earning capacity unit out of Winnipeg. They are completely removed from their veteran clients. There's no context. My case manager operates very much on a secluded island with no email or phone number to contact outside of the veterans service team. That really prevents and blocks communication interdepartmentally.

As well, the appeals process is far too gruelling for veterans and their families to go through. It needs to be streamlined.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We go now to MP Desilets for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This is a very informative discussion and not necessarily because it seems to coincide with our position. My sense is that we are making progress when it comes to the automatic approval of disability claims.

I have a question for Mr. Coakeley, but I want to say something first.

By putting up with a backlog like this, we end up accepting the unacceptable. You can argue that it goes back to 1834, but that does not make it any more acceptable. The figures we are seeing today bring to mind the pandemic and the number of COVID-19 cases. No one is surprised anymore to hear that Quebec's daily case count stands at a thousand. Why am I comparing the two? Because a backlog of 40,000 claims is not okay. If the current model isn't working, it's time to consider doing things differently. When your approach to a problem doesn't help, you change the approach. That was a brief comment to preface my question.

Mr. Coakeley, as you mentioned, research is an important part of identifying systemic problems. It can lead to better practices and policies. That is certainly an area we need to focus on to reduce this backlog—which, may I add, is totally unacceptable.

You talked about the need to close research gaps. We disregard the scientific dimension and research carried out by countries comparable to ours. Could you please elaborate on that?

Mr. Simon Coakeley: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

Research gaps definitely exist, as they do in other fields. Canada isn't the biggest country in the world, so the pool we have to draw on for research can be very small in some areas. Even though Canada clearly has research gaps, that does not mean our counterparts in the United States, England, Australia and New Zealand do not have relevant experience we can leverage. I gave the example

of our Five Eyes partners because we work together on so many initiatives.

I also want to stress the importance of carrying out targeted research. I mentioned women veterans, who suffer from different illnesses. Military service has different repercussions on women. There is little research on the repercussions of military service on women and other groups. The Department of Veterans Affairs needs to have access to quality data.

• (1335)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

MP Blaney, go ahead for two and a half minutes, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

My question is for Ms. Weatherbie.

One of the things that have concerned me—and I've asked the minister about this several times—is the idea of hiring temporary workers when I think there is a need for permanent workers. I'm just wondering about what's happening with that, and your opinion on those issues.

Ms. Doreen Weatherbie: That is my focus here today. Yes, we're hiring and the training has been going on continually for the last two years. That being said, the processes have also changed. I see the two of them coming together, with the IT help that is going on with PFL and all the other components of new strategies in the processing, but the problem is that we're getting them together. They're coming together, but then in two or two and a half years, the temporary people are gone, so we're back to where we started.

Five years from today if those temps leave, we'll be back where we started, with backlogs occurring again.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you. That is so helpful.

I want to thank you, Mr. Walbourne, for talking, on the defence side, about more work being done prior to military folks being released. I am sad to say that this is something I heard from you in the defence committee many years ago, so it's unfortunate that this is still something not solved.

I'm just wondering if you could speak a little about that and about how that would work post-transition. My concern would be, if work is done while people are still in the military but then other issues arise when they leave, how those post-transition concerns would be addressed and whether Veterans Affairs would work with the Department of National Defence to make that a smooth transition and would be allowed to continue to work on someone's file and modify it, depending on their need.

The Chair: Give a quick response, please.

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Okay.

First of all, there are a couple of things. The 80% target for 16 weeks only starts when Veterans Affairs Canada has a complete file, so we need to know that.

Second, someone talked about raising the quality of the output. I think you can only do that by raising the quality of the input. Up front, the Department of National Defence determines attribution of service. That's the card that pre-approves. The determination is made by Veterans Affairs Canada about the level of service for compensation.

To your question about late manifesters, there are always going to be late manifesters. I've always said that they will always need an arbitration arm at Veterans Affairs Canada to deal with that. People leaving the military with PTSD can have no symptoms today, but three years from now their world can be completely different. There are always going to be late manifesters.

However, as others have said, we have a track and trend of the types of activities these members partake in and the outcomes of those activities. We're data rich and knowledge poor.

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir.

Now we'll move over to MP Brassard for five minutes, please.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you, and with apologies to everyone, I'm not going to be able to get to you all. I have lots of questions, but I have to focus and target my questions to specific individuals. One of them is Mr. Giroux.

Mr. Giroux, you spoke about the report that you did. It was quite concerning to me to hear you say that improvements to improve this backlog, although publicly being exalted by the government, weren't actually shared with you and your department in coming up with the recommendations and the assessment that you did.

Is it unusual, in your experience, that the government would talk about these issues publicly, yet not share that information with your department?

Mr. Yves Giroux: Yes, that would be unusual. I'm not saying necessarily that the department is wilfully not sharing information with me. They may be under the impression that there are improvements being made that we have not taken into consideration, while we have indeed taken them into consideration. What would not be unusual is for one of my reports to irritate a government department or a government institution. That has happened before and I suspect it will happen in the future.

We asked the Department of Veterans Affairs for information before preparing the report. We discussed the main thrust of our conclusions, and they had opportunities to correct some of the misunderstandings that could have arisen. We did not hear about that in the course of drafting this report, so I'm a bit surprised to hear, after the report is tabled, that there are things we have not taken into account.

• (1340)

Mr. John Brassard: I am too, quite frankly, Mr. Giroux, because some of those things or the improvements that they're proposing to make could in fact—but we don't know based on your report—improve the conditions of these backlogs and reduce them, or in some cases cause them to be greater. I'm concerned about that.

Mr. Walbourne, you and I have had lots of conversations over the years. My fear is that we're going to be in this situation in five years if things don't improve, or 10 years if things don't improve. People versus process, are you confident at all that we can get this right, Mr. Walbourne?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: No, I think we're going to be having the same conversation in the next three, five, seven or 10 years. We have to come to the realization that we've poured millions and millions of dollars and hundreds and hundreds of people into this system, saying we're going to eliminate the backlog. Where's the backlog? It still exists.

I don't know what you need to do to get the point across. Has anyone stopped to look at the process? If bad information and miscommunication are being poured into the front end of the system, you can imagine what the reaction at the back is going to be.

I have empathy for Veterans Affairs Canada, having worked there. They're a great group of people. I'm telling you, these folks are focused on getting it right every day for the veterans, but they're given such a labyrinth to walk through that's so complicated and complex.

I'll give you a quick example: the Veterans Hiring Act. A veteran, a transitioning member, may have an opportunity to be hired by the Government of Canada, but the file bounces back and forth in the department for months at a time and opportunities are lost. We talk about a backlog of files. We need to stop doing that. This is a group of people. These are not files and numbers. Mr. Scott is sitting right here. He's one of these people we're talking about. We're sitting around talking about how much money we can shove into this and how much effort, but we don't stop and give an honest look at the process. We have to get there at some point in time. It's essential.

Mr. John Brassard: I appreciate your candour, Mr. Walbourne. You're always frank.

Mr. Scott, with that level of frustration that's happening across the country with veterans, we're seeing increases in lawsuits. Please give the committee a sense of the level of despair, how dire the situation is within the veteran community as it relates to the processing or the lack of processing of these claims and that frustration they're feeling in their families as well.

Mr. Charles Scott: Throwing money at a human problem will not work. I agree with the comments being made here. We could be talking about this, and we will be talking about this, in the years to come. I propose that a Veterans Affairs royal commission occur here in Canada to look at the systemic issues. Throwing money will not solve this. We will be talking about this next year and the year after that. A Veterans Affairs royal commission would totally open up the lid on this, so that we could work together as a country to support our veterans.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We are going now to MP Casey.

I have to warn you that your time is cut down to about two or maybe two and a half minutes to give us the latitude to deal with committee business.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to be addressing my questions to Ms. Weatherbie and Mr. Hartigan.

I want to start by thanking you for your representation of the people who are on the front lines of dealing with the backlog. I have the privilege of representing many of them in Parliament, just as you do in their professional work.

What we heard from the deputy minister is that the people involved in the backlog are essentially represented by three unions: the Union of Veterans' Affairs Employees, the one that you lead and another union that deals with the financial people.

I'll get you to confirm that and explain to the committee the role that your members play.

Ms. Doreen Weatherbie: There are three. The UVAE represents employees who are part of PSAC. They fall under the admin assistants, the WP2s, who also help with the files. Then you have PIPSC and you have finance. There are over 500 PIPSC employees with Veterans Affairs. There are doctors, nurses and medical adjudicators, who are the primary owners of the files. There are over 200 IT people. They govern all of the new programs that are implemented in this system. There are procurement officers who fall under PIPSC.

• (1345)

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you, Ms. Weatherbie.

If I understand you correctly, it's primarily your members who are on the front lines. There are some supportive roles by the others. That being the case, were you surprised when the president of the Union of Veterans' Affairs Employees said that it's unfortunate a lot of the adjudicators are based in Charlottetown?

Ms. Doreen Weatherbie: I don't recall that particular statement, sir, so I really shouldn't comment on it.

Mr. Sean Casey: I'm reading it from the transcript of the meeting. I've written to her twice on it and she has chosen not to reply.

Ms. Doreen Weatherbie: I work very well with all unions, as I mentioned, working with senior management and the deputy.

The medical adjudicators are not all in Charlottetown. We have quite a few in the Quebec area because they govern some of the French issues. We also have them in Ottawa. We have them out west. Especially now with COVID, we're hiring. In this virtual world, they can be at home and looking after files.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you.

The Chair: I'm afraid I have to step in and bring our meeting to a close. I want to thank all the witnesses for being here today and helping our study on the backlog.

I will ask the witnesses to log off Zoom.

We're going to go right into some committee business here.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Go ahead, MP Desilets.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Mr. Chair, I have a quick point that will be of interest to everyone, I think.

Mr. Giroux said something very important earlier—that he would forward the committee the numbers for the rejection rates, in relation to the automatic approval process.

Do we know for sure that he will do that?

[*English*]

The Chair: I would have to check with the clerk to see whether that has been submitted. If not, we will give him the opportunity to share it with our committee and make sure it is distributed to all members.

Oh, sorry—are you asking Mr. Giroux, or me?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Mr. Giroux alluded to this earlier, but it wasn't clear to me whether he would be doing it or not. Will Mr. Giroux be providing the committee with the numbers for the rejection rates? It is in relation to the automatic approval process.

[*English*]

The Chair: I will ask Monsieur Giroux if it is possible for him to send that information to the clerk of ACVA, and we'll make sure it gets out to all committee members. Okay?

Again, I thank all of you, witnesses, for your participation today. We will ask you to log off Zoom now, and I will recognize MP Brassard who has committee business for today.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to make sure that we are in public as well. Is that correct?

The Chair: That is correct.

Mr. John Brassard: Okay.

Mr. Chair, given the evidence we received today, not just from the minister but also from these very compelling witnesses, I've submitted a motion to the clerk in both official languages and I'll put the motion on the floor right now. It is as follows:

That the committee is disappointed with the lack of progress shown by the government in clearing the backlog of applications for veterans disability benefits and reports this motion to the House.

• (1350)

Would you like me to speak on it, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have the floor, sir.

Just so everybody knows, we will continue using the “raise hand” function in the participants section of Zoom. If you wish to speak, the order I currently have is as follows: Mr. Brassard, Darrell Samson, Andy Fillmore, Sean Casey, and Marie-France Lalonde.

I think, Monsieur Desilets, you had your hand up on your screen, so if you could jump on Zoom and put up your hand virtually—there it is—we’ll go from there.

Mr. Brassard, you still have the floor.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate being given this opportunity to deal with this motion.

Quite frankly, this is the most pressing issue that’s facing our veterans community today. I have heard—as I am sure many members of Parliament have—from veterans across the country about just how concerned they are about the backlog. We have lawsuits that have been launched against Veterans Affairs as a result of the backlog.

I think what was most striking to me during the testimony we heard from our subsequent witnesses was the fact that when we talk in the context of backlogs, we have to remember that these are people who served this country, who signed the blank cheque, as Mr. Walbourne said, and their families. When they get caught up in these types of situations, it has a profound effect on the state of their families, the state of their mental health and the confidence they have in their government’s ability to have their backs and “have their six”.

What I heard from the minister today, quite frankly, was the same thing we’ve been hearing for many months: that this is a priority for the minister. I don’t doubt that it is a priority for the minister, but what most concerns me is the fact that the process is not in any way—at least, I’m not confident in this—going to change to address this backlog in a manner that is required.

We’ve heard there are options available. I truly.... I lost my temper with the minister because I’m tired of hearing.... I’ve been dealing with this for four years, in my previous stint as veterans affairs critic at the time, and we have heard Mr. Walbourne talk about this for 11 years. This is not a people issue. This is a process issue, and there are process recommendations that have been made over the years to address this situation. We heard a lot of those process recommendations today.

My fear is that those recommendations are not even being considered by the government. What we’re doing is effectively layering on more bureaucracy—more process, in a way—for veterans, and hoops and hurdles for them to have to go through to have their claims processed. We’re hearing and seeing this, and Mr. Scott talked about the cases, the lawsuits across this country, because veterans are feeling compelled now to sue their government, despite the fact that the Prime Minister said that no veteran should have to

fight their government in court for the benefits they deserve. We’re seeing this happen across the country, because that level of frustration and anxiety is happening within the veterans community and in their families.

I am not confident, walking away from this meeting—and I think the evidence is pretty clear—that things are going to change any time soon. We made specific reference to the fact that government turned on a dime—on a dime—when the COVID crisis hit to allow the CERB benefit, the student benefit and the wage subsidy to go out the door quickly. In many cases, as was mentioned, for the student benefit, 15- to 18-year-olds, by simply pressing “send” on a computer, were having money deposited into their accounts within a period of three to five days, yet here we are with a backlog that is well beyond where it needs to be and, in some cases, yes, it’s lasting two years.

The process has to be improved to a point where I believe that we give veterans the benefit of the doubt, and in the context of COVID, it’s becoming increasingly difficult for veterans to be able to supply to Veterans Affairs the information, the documentation and the medical documentation that’s required in order for them to have their claims processed and adjudicated.

As for throwing more people at this problem, while it may have an impact in the longer term, in the near term I’m not confident. What this motion reflects is my lack of confidence in the government’s ability to address this issue in the immediate term, the emergency term, the urgent term that our veterans and their families are facing right now. They cannot, Mr. Chair, continue to have their claims go through a process that is not working for them.

• (1355)

Quite frankly, I didn’t get the sense today—I certainly heard this from the Parliamentary Budget Officer, and I didn’t hear it from the minister—that there was any sense of confidence that this thing, this backlog problem, is going to improve any time soon. I think the House needs to be made aware of not just what we heard today, and I think there has to be some discussion within the House on the solutions that are possible to provide the government in order to fix this very dire, very grave situation for veterans and their families in this country.

I propose this motion, Mr. Chair, with the sincerest intent to find a resolution to this.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

I believe MP Samson is up next.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I don’t hear MP Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson: You don’t hear me?

The Chair: No. Could you move your microphone close to your mouth? Is it plugged in?

Mr. Darrell Samson: Sorry.

The Chair: There you go.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I'm sorry. Usually my voice carries very well. That microphone is quite effective. I'm noticing that as we move forward.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to speak on this motion.

I have to be honest with all of you that today's presentation was touching. It was moving. It was difficult to listen to, because we want and need to do better, and we have to do better. I don't think anyone disagrees with that.

History teaches us well. History allows us to better understand where we came from, where we're at and where we need to go. We can't forget; we're unable to. Let's be honest now. There were cuts made in 2014. Those cuts eliminated 1,000 front-line workers and nine offices around the country.

Why it was done, I'm not questioning that. All I'm interested in is making sure we understand the real picture. The real picture is that in 2014-15 these cuts were made. That, by itself, would have put... All of you, no matter which party you're sitting with, understand the devastation that had on veterans and veterans communities and on the backlog—that is without a doubt. If we look at ourselves in the mirror, it is very, very clear.

The second thing that is extremely clear is that since 2015, when our government took power, we have invested over \$10 billion. That's not just money. These were programs, very important programs that had been shared by the veterans community: the education fund; the lifetime pension, bringing it back; all the various programs, caregivers, etc. These additional programs allowed many, many veterans now to make applications for benefits for themselves and their families. We have to be honest there. There is no question about that.

When you see 60% more applications, when you see 90% more first-time applications, when you see the increase in funding that we've added or the percentages of injury, where now you have a second and a third application from the same individual, that has to be taken into consideration. It is extremely important. That's the intake.

Now let's look at the outtake. We've indicated clearly that in the last five, six, seven, eight months there has been an improvement of over 4,000 cases that have been eliminated, over and above the backlog. This is going back. It means we're making headway, which is very positive.

The PBO just mentioned in his statement today that with his report, with what we have today, without taking his extra additional...but with what we have today, without taking all the policy changes, there would be an elimination of 10,000 from the backlog. That's without his additional hires.

You also have to keep in mind that Veterans Affairs brought forward this plan in June, and hirings are taking place now as we speak. I praise them for their recruitment. I understand they're making great progress on hiring all those numbers. I believe they're at 300 out of 350 today. They'll be ready for effective work in January.

The plan, including the new hires, the digitalization, the common applicants, if you will, the innovative process.... With all those pieces in the plan—which is not at work yet; it's just beginning—there will be that much more work being done in those categories once we have the 350 hired.

● (1400)

That being said, let's allow the plan. Let's work together to bring us forward. What we heard today is a clear sign of progress, and a lot of extra progress once we hit the ground with the new hires, as well as all the added pieces to the plan. Let's be fair and say that as a committee, we listened today. We received information that allows us to see progress, not as fast as we would have liked, but progress. We're confident that in the new year, with the plan in its full capacity, we will continue to see much more progress in 2021. That's to be fair.

To say that we didn't hear that there was progress made or that the pieces that are put in place now in the new plan will not bring progress is unacceptable. I can't support that.

I can tell you that we can do better. The people who have contributed today are helping us. All of us around the table who are bringing forward the various cases are helping us in moving that forward.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I have MP Fillmore next.

Mr. Andy Fillmore: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate that very much.

As the minister said earlier today, and as I'm sure all committee members agree, the existence of the backlog is unfortunate. It's unacceptable. And 100%, we all need to work on fixing the backlog. That's what this study is all about.

I would say that, at best, Mr. Brassard's motion is entirely premature before the study is complete. At worst, it is partisan political posturing at its worst. I've intervened in the last Parliament and again in this Parliament to point out how this backlog arrived. As Parliamentary Secretary Samson has pointed out, let's recall that it's a direct result of what happened the last time the Conservative Party was the government. It applied partisan politics to Veterans Affairs in an attempt to balance the budget on the eve of a federal election, eliminating 1,000 jobs, closing nine regional offices, slashing tens and tens of millions of dollars from the VAC budget. That's what caused these backlogs.

Contrast that with this government, which has invested billions of dollars back into our veterans and is now spending \$2 billion per year more on veterans than the Conservative government did in 2014-15, and the slew of new supportive programs that we've enacted for veterans. Because of these new programs, demand for the programs is higher than ever, which has the effect of compounding the Conservative-created backlog. In fact, a measure of the success of our new programs is that, according to VAC, in the time since we formed the government, the number of applications received grew by 40%.

I might remind the opposition of what famously happened when the Obamacare website was launched in 2013. The site was overwhelmed with applications. The site crashed. This wasn't an indication that Obamacare was flawed; it was quite the opposite. The website crash was an indication of the success of the program that was finally invested in after a period of conservative budget cuts in that country.

The success of our government's VAC programs and the demand that success has created is why we are rehiring employees who were dismissed and reinvesting money that was slashed under the Conservative government.

Mr. Chair, if Mr. Brassard would like to proceed with his motion, I'd like to propose the following amendment to his motion. If it's in order, I'd like to read the amendment now.

• (1405)

The Chair: Proceed.

Mr. Andy Fillmore: It would read: That the committee is disappointed with the previous government's decision to cut jobs within Veterans Affairs Canada and to close veterans services offices across the country, as far too many veterans are waiting far too long for their application to be processed, and to report this motion to the House.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm going to confer with the clerk on how to proceed. Give me two seconds, please.

Other people have their hands up, but we do have to deal with the amendment before moving on.

Could MP Fillmore please read the amendment again slowly—

Mr. Andy Fillmore: Sure.

The Chair: It would be for the benefit of the clerk and the interpreter.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake—Eastman, CPC): A point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Welcome, Mr. Bezan.

Go ahead on your point of order, sir.

Mr. James Bezan: I believe the amendment changes the intent of the motion and should be ruled out of order.

The Chair: Thank you. I will confer with the clerk on that, if you would give me a moment.

Andy, perhaps you can read the amendment again and explain it. Is it replacing the motion entirely? Is it going at the beginning or at the end? If it is a replacement, then it is a completely separate motion. If it is going at the beginning or at the end, which is in order, you will need to indicate that, sir.

Mr. Andy Fillmore: Okay.

It is entirely aligned with the intent of the original motion. The intent of Mr. Brassard's motion was to convey the committee's dis-

appointment to the House about the backlog. That's exactly what this is intending to do, although in more accurate terms.

I'll read it slowly so that it can be recorded by the clerk: That the committee is disappointed with the previous government's decision to cut jobs within Veterans Affairs Canada and to close veterans services offices around the country, as far too many veterans are waiting far too long for their application to be processed, and to report this motion to the House.

As you can see that it is plainly in keeping with the spirit of the original motion.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: A point of order, Chair.

The Chair: MP Blaney, on a point of order.

• (1410)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Mr. Chair, again, I need clarification. You did ask for it, Chair. Perhaps you could repeat your question: Will it be at the beginning or at the end of the motion? It does talk about reporting to the House, so I'm assuming it's in-between those parts, but it's still not clear to me.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Fillmore, maybe you can clarify it again. The motion has been read twice now. Will that be the entirety of the motion, or are you looking to add to the existing motion at some point through your amendment? If this is an addition, it's in order. If it's not an addition, if it's a replacement, then it is not in order.

It becomes dicey. I shouldn't say it's out of order, but it will be an issue throughout.

Mr. Andy Fillmore: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It is absolutely an amendment to the proposed motion. It continues to convey the original intent of the motion, which was to convey the displeasure of the committee with the backlog.

The Chair: Is it your intent to replace the text of the motion in its entirety with this existing motion. Is that correct?

Mr. Andy Fillmore: There is language in common. It is replacing some of the wording but keeping much of it intact.

The Chair: I see what you're saying now. I would agree with that in terms of its being an amendment to this existing motion. I just wanted to be clear that it was not an issue of putting it at the beginning, the middle or the end of the existing motion.

We do need to shift gears a little bit here, folks. We do need to debate the amendment. I have a speaking order still on the amendment, but—

Mr. John Brassard: Mr. Chair, on a point of order, within the context of the current study of the backlog, there was a motion put forward and approved by the committee. I think it would be helpful if we looked at what that motion said. Maybe we can call the clerk on that. As I recall, it was in the context of the backlog that is currently occurring at Veterans Affairs, not in the context of a backlog that perhaps existed five years ago when there was a change in government.

I think clarification on that would be helpful to determine whether in fact what Mr. Fillmore is proposing is actually in order.

The Chair: I would agree with that, John. The question that I would also put out there, which has already been addressed I believe by MP Fillmore, is that the motion is to conduct a study that we have not completed yet.

As to your motion today, although you're correct that it is in line with the topic of the motion, I would defer to the clerk to suggest that these are two very separate things.

Mr. James Bezan: If that's the case, Mr. Chair, then the amendment that Mr. Fillmore is proposing, which is a complete replacement of Mr. Brassard's motion, is not an amendment. It is a separate motion and should be called out of order as an amendment.

The Chair: As I've been instructed, that decision is up to the chair. I'm seeing that there's very similar content and similar issues. I would perceive that we can debate the amendment and vote on it before moving forward.

As I was saying before the point of order was made, we do have a speaking order. As of right now, we have MP Lalonde, MP Desilets, MP Wagantall and MP Blaney. That's the current order. We are discussing the amendment at the moment. I will cede the floor to MP Lalonde.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: I want to speak to the motion, but I'm very happy to see my colleague, MP Fillmore, bringing his amendment forward.

Before entering politics in 2014, I had the privilege of working with seniors and veterans in retirement residences. I saw first-hand the significant impact of, I would say, the lack of respect by the former Conservative government for our veterans and the impact of their having to live through the financial hardship that it caused and their willingness to stay home as long as possible.

Certainly, I have the utmost appreciation for our veterans. What we're experiencing right now, as Mr. Scott's testimony today reflected, has been the case since 2008. Many of our witnesses did speak about the fact the backlog has been part of our system for far too long. I agree with all of you that we are disappointed by that, but we have to put into context that this is not something that has just arrived upon us. I want to reiterate the fact that the issue we are seeing also goes two ways. Because we've invested billions of dollars into the system since 2015, repairing the damage caused by the previous Conservative government—and, I have to say, by the former minister for veterans, Mr. O'Toole—this is a situation where at this point we need to collaborate, and this study right now is bringing that perspective. I agree that the process needs to be conveyed.

I'm also very happy to see there is an acknowledgement within the department that this is unacceptable. The minister, the deputy minister and many officials came forward to share this with us, so I think MP Fillmore's amendment to the motion is extremely relevant to the case we are speaking of today. Mr. Brassard's motion originally was almost out of order, because in my view we are studying the backlog currently.

Thank you to my colleague.

• (1415)

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Desilets.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Although I don't have a ton of parliamentary experience, having been elected just over a year ago, I think it's rather inconceivable that the committee is discussing the backlog non-stop and preparing to keep that discussion going into next year. It's going to take a hammer-like approach to fix the problem.

I fully agree with Mr. Brassard's motion. Throwing neither money nor staff at the problem will fix it; the problem is structural. It is the way the system works. My understanding is that the system needs to change but can't right now.

When people say the backlog has been around since 1920 or what have you, that is not an acceptable reason in my eyes. We are talking about human beings here, people who fought for Quebec and Canada. Does this mean Veterans Week is really over? We have sung veterans' praises at every turn this past week, but now, we are talking about the backlog again and we are continuing to accept the unacceptable.

What I take from this is that I would think twice before enlisting, because if I were to enlist, I would have to be careful not to become injured. If I did suffer an injury, the government—the country on whose behalf I had gone abroad to fight—would do an about-face on my return and cause me nothing but headaches.

Accumulating a backlog of this size is unacceptable and sends a lousy message. When your attempt to resolve the problem is in vain, you need to change your approach.

That said, the amendment that was proposed a few minutes ago strikes me as an altogether different motion. I really don't see the connection. I think it will be up to the chair and the clerk to decide.

I have a short amendment to Mr. Brassard's motion. It's pretty straightforward. Should I move it now or later? I'm not sure what I am supposed to do.

• (1420)

[*English*]

The Chair: Just for clarity, sir, are you moving an amendment to Mr. Brassard's motion, or are you moving an amendment to Mr. Fillmore's amendment?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: We are discussing Mr. Brassard's motion, and the amendment that was put forward is not at all relevant, unfortunately. That is how I see it, but I am not the clerk. She can tell us.

I can read you my short amendment now if you like. I sent it to the clerk in both official languages. It reads as follows: and that the committee urge the government to follow the Parliamentary Budget Officer's recommendations.

That strengthens the motion, which I think is important, while giving our Liberal friends a good bit of flexibility.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. If it's an amendment to Mr. Brassard's motion, we'll have to come back to it. We have to deal with the amendment that is currently in front of the committee.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: That's fine by me, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: We have noted it. It has been read. We will come back to you, sir.

I have MP Wagantall up next.

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

First, I would like to reiterate what I'm hearing over and over again, what we've learned again today after solid testimony from so many individuals from all aspects of this issue, and what we've heard over and over again for the past four years: There is a need for this committee to do the right thing.

Mr. Chair, I challenge, if I'm able to do that, your interpretation of this as an amendment from MP Fillmore. This is not an amendment; this is a full change of a motion. I would encourage you to talk with the clerk further about that.

The fact is that, as we hear over and over again, it's not about the money. I keep hearing about \$10 billion that this government has put forward for veterans. If they can't access it the way it's supposed to be accessed, it means nothing to them, because the proper processes are not in place. Over and over again Veterans Affairs is failing, and it needs to be changed so that things are different for the future and this can be handled in a very expedient way.

For those on the other side of the floor who are frustrated with the motion that John has put forward, I would encourage you to look inward and realize that the most important thing you can do as Liberal members of Parliament, or whoever, is to go to the House and say strongly, along with this entire committee, that we are not satisfied with the direction in which the government is going. It is baby steps; it is band-aids, and it is not working. We have heard over and over again from capable people—the PBO, the previous ombudsman, people who are employers, part of the employment process for our public service and, most importantly, veterans—that the approach we continue to take in government is not effective.

If we are truly saying that it's about the veterans, that it's about the people, then we have to take a look at this and do what should have been done in the first place: say to the House of Commons that we are not satisfied and there is much more that could be done. It would be radical, and this government likes radical change. This is a change, and I don't understand why they are not prepared to take that radical move.

I would encourage the chair to realize that the first motion is the one that should be on the floor, as well as my colleague Mr. Desilets' recommendation for an amendment. I would say it's part of the process of what we need to do to move forward as a committee and to encourage the changes that need to be taking place because of the motion that John has put forward on the floor.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Wagantall.

MP Blaney now has the floor.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Today we heard some pretty telling testimony. The reality is that many veterans are going without their basic needs being met because there is a problem in the system. We can blame, and both parties deserve part of that blame. I don't feel comfortable now supporting any of these motions, because you're not recognizing the reality that veterans are struggling every day because levels of government have not done what they should have.

They cut back services during the Conservative government, and I remember that time. I remember that time from a different perspective, because the people I was serving got a ton of resources cut from their department, which meant we were suddenly put in a terrible place where we couldn't look after people.

However, this government hasn't done its job to get this work done. I'm absolutely horrified listening to the PBO today talk about his reality, listening to what this government is saying about the amazing work that his department did to uncover some of the challenges.

At this point, I hope we get our heads put on correctly. I'm sorry to say that so frankly. Just remember that our obligation is to veterans across this country. Our committee should step away from partisanship and start looking after the people who desperately need us to do so.

That's all I have to contribute.

● (1425)

The Chair: Thank you, MP Blaney.

On the participant sheet, I have MP Brassard.

Before I go to you, MP Brassard, just to clarify, we have an amendment to your motion on the floor. We also have the potential of another amendment coming, once we've dealt with this amendment.

Let's focus on the amendment as it is right now. Thank you.

Mr. Brassard, the floor is yours.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will also remind you that we have been at this for three and a half hours with little break, so at some point, if this is going to continue, we may need to take a break. I know I will.

I really appreciated what Rachel said, because, again, I'm really not trying to look at this on a partisan basis. I am extremely sincere in my intent, and I'm sorry this amendment has turned into having a partisan basis, even after the parliamentary secretary said that it wasn't partisan. I'm not the government. The NDP is not the government. The Bloc is not the government. The Liberals are the government.

We are hearing today, at least from those on the second panel, about a situation in which on one side the minister is saying that we're doing all these things—throwing money at the problem and throwing people at the problem—and then on the other side of that we're having witnesses come in and say that this is not going to resolve the issue, that the people and the money will not resolve the issue in its entirety, because it's the process that's the problem.

Given the lack of confidence, on one side, in the ability to deal with this situation by throwing money and people at it and, on the other side, witnesses telling us that this is not going to solve the problem, I'm just trying to ask the House of Commons to listen. This has been going on for years. I have stood up in the House of Commons, and I have accepted responsibility, as the critic for Veterans Affairs, for the inefficiencies and inadequacies in some of the things that we, as a Conservative government, did.

I know the situation was referred to our leader. I know Erin was trying to fix the problem that had gone on, but, unfortunately, he ran out of runway; the election happened, and the government got elected. They got elected on several promises.

All I'm trying to do is say to the House to listen. What's happening now.... If you want to redraw history, you have done a good job of that today. You can stand in the House and blame Conservatives all you want if this motion does get to the House. All I'm trying to say today is that whether it's Conservative, Liberal, NDP, Bloc, or whatever, what's happening is not working. It's not working for veterans. It's not working for their families. We can come up with ideas that we can push forward within the House of Commons itself, and say that these are the things we believe need to be done.

I agree with what Mrs. Wagantall said earlier, and I hope some of the members on the Liberal side would agree with me as well that we're trying to fix the problem. The people and the money are one side of it, but we're not necessarily doing anything on the process side.

That's all I'm trying to do here, Mr. Chair. If you want to play the blame game, I will stand here and accept responsibility, if that's what you want. If you want to take a chunk of meat out of me, go ahead. If you want to take a chunk of meat out of the Conservative Party, go ahead. Fill your boots.

But the issue here is not the blame game. The issue here, in my opinion, is to fix the problem, and that's what we need to do. This amendment, in my opinion, reeks of partisanship. It doesn't try in any way to fix the problem. It places blame. Okay, I accept blame. If that's what you want to do, I accept it, but let's move on, and let's get this to the House and figure it out.

I will say, Mr. Chair, on a final note, that I still think the motion that was put forward by Mr. Fillmore is out of order, regardless of what you believe. I would challenge you on that. It is completely separate from the motion that I put on the floor. It doesn't add anything to it. It's separate.

● (1430)

The Chair: That's going to change things, sir. If you're challenging the chair, that takes us in a very different direction.

I was about to comment on the fact that I personally believe.... In five years of chairing committees, I have never been in a situation where we are in the middle of a study and we pre-empt all other witnesses who have yet to appear, we pre-empt the feedback from the analyst, we pre-empt the work of the members of this committee to come out with a report, and we move a motion to send it to the House. That, sir, reeks of partisanship, with all due respect.

I have ruled that both motions are in order. If you are challenging the chair, we can move to that proceeding right now.

Mr. Sean Casey: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I will recognize MP Casey in a moment.

I'll get the clerk to identify whether I have to deal with the fact that the chair has been challenged before I move to another point of order.

Mr. Sean Casey: My point of order is in connection with the challenging of the chair.

The Chair: Okay. Then go ahead, please.

Mr. Sean Casey: One, I would ask the clerk for advice as to whether the motion to challenge the chair is in order, given the delay between the ruling you made and the challenge—that's the first thing—and whether the motion to challenge the chair is appropriate after a lengthy intervention. I understand that the entire speaking slot should be used only to challenge the chair and not to engage in debate, so I think it is flawed on two counts.

I would ask for a ruling on that before we proceed with a vote on whether the chair's ruling should stand.

The Chair: The clerk is conferring with her colleagues at this time. We'll just give them a moment.

The clerk could address the committee when she has an answer, please.

The Clerk: Thank you.

Mr. Brassard's challenging of the chair's decision is in order, so at this point we could move the question that the chair's decision be sustained and go to a recorded division.

The Chair: I'm looking to Mr. Brassard. Could you comment on whether in fact you wish to challenge the chair?

Mr. John Brassard: Mr. Chair, respectfully, I'm going to ask that we suspend for five minutes, if that's okay. First and foremost, I do have to take a break. If that's okay with you, then we can come back to it.

● (1435)

The Chair: I can confer with the clerk. I know that we have all been at this for three hours-plus, but so has the team that put all of this together. I just want to make sure that we don't have a hard stop coming up sometime soon, but I agree that possibly a suspension would allow us to move forward.

Are we good? Okay.

We will suspend and come back in five minutes. Is that enough, Monsieur Brassard? Okay.

We are suspended.

• (1435) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1445)

The Chair: I will bring the committee back to order. We're back from suspension.

MP Lalonde, you have your hand raised.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Okay.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: In the spirit of collaboration, as I think we can all agree that this committee had been moving forward quite consistently in our approach to finding solutions, I'm wondering if we could possibly create a friendly amendment. I'm not sure if my colleague MP Fillmore would agree, but certainly, before we start playing committee games, I would entertain the idea of presenting to all of you the idea of a friendly amendment to the motion of Mr. Brassard.

The Chair: I appreciate that intervention, MP Lalonde.

To follow the order that's in front of us right now, I do need to go back to MP Brassard to—

Mr. John Brassard: Mr. Chair, I withdraw the challenge, by the way. We can move on.

The Chair: Okay.

MP Lalonde, you do have the floor. You are next in line.

As a housekeeping issue, you can't propose a motion on a point of order. Just coincidentally, you are next in the speaking order here. It sounds like we may have some compromise here, so I'll allow you to have the floor.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm sorry about this.

Mr. Brassard, I want to reflect back on your motion and tell you what I want to strike out and everything. Let's try to find a good compromise.

Mr. Brassard's motion begins with "That this committee is disappointed with the lack of progress shown by the government". I would like to propose to the committee that we say this: "That the committee is disappointed in the backlog of applications and reports this to the House, and that the government respond."

You know, Mr. Brassard, we were saying that we were trying to...and I agree. I was trying to be maybe a little over-partisan on the history behind everything. I think we can all collectively agree that we do have a serious issue on our hands. We agree on that. By striking "with the lack of progress shown by the government", I believe we're removing a little bit of the partisan approach to that motion and striking a more collaborative approach that hopefully all my colleagues can agree on.

I'll read it again for the clerk, if I may, Mr. Chair. I'll speak very slowly for translation and for Mr. Desilets—

• (1450)

The Chair: I want my clerk to be happy with me here, so I want to make sure we are following the procedure.

We will come back to you, MP Lalonde, to do that, but we do have an amendment that we have to address. If we have unanimous consent to remove that amendment, we can then proceed. Really, in committee there is technically no such thing as a friendly amendment, but I understand what you are trying to do here.

Before we move to that, I would have to ask MP Fillmore to ask for unanimous consent to remove his amendment.

Mr. Andy Fillmore: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to ask for unanimous consent to withdraw my previous amendment, but I would add that it's on the basis of what MP Lalonde said. If we go in that direction, we'll all be happy. If we go in a different, surprise direction, I think we would reserve the right for another amendment. However, I like where this is going.

The Chair: Thank you.

Does MP Fillmore have unanimous consent to remove his amendment?

I'm seeing thumbs-up and yeses all around. Excellent.

(Amendment withdrawn)

The Chair: Is this a point of order, Mr. Brassard?

Mr. John Brassard: It is a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I am very pleased with the intent of Madame Lalonde's motion here. I would be willing to accept her motion as a friendly amendment to my motion so that we can move forward. Again, I think we're all clear that this has everything to do with our veterans. I certainly wasn't looking to lay blame. If removing the word "government" gets us to where we need to be, I'm very, very pleased to be involved in that.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brassard.

I will give the floor back to MP Lalonde, who still actually had the floor before I interrupted her.

Could you reread the motion with your proposed amendment?

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: So, Mr. Brassard, just look at your motion, and we'll go together on this one if I may: "That the committee is disappointed in the backlog of applications and reports this to the House, and that the government respond."

The Chair: This is an amendment to MP Brassard's original motion, so we will have to vote on that first.

I see that MP Casey's hand is raised. Is it referring to MP Lalonde's amendment? No? Okay.

We'll call the question on the amendment.

Madam Clerk, could you reread the amendment?

• (1455)

The Clerk: What I have here is this: “That the committee is disappointed in the backlog of applications and reports this to the House, and that the government respond.”

(Amendment agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: We now need to vote on the amended motion.

Is there any discussion?

MP Casey, you have the floor.

Mr. Sean Casey: We're on the main motion, as amended by a friendly or otherwise voted-upon motion.

I will not be supporting the motion. I understand that some of my colleagues will be. I will not be supporting it, solely on the basis that it is premature.

We have barely started this study. We have heard from some, but not all, of the witnesses. We have undertaken to witnesses, to the veterans community and to the House that we're going to do a thorough study, with multiple elements to the study, and that we're going to report back to the House with a summary of the evidence, with our impressions of the evidence and with our proposed solutions.

For us to prejudge where we're going to land on this.... It may be a majority report. There may be minority reports. There may be any combination or permutation of advice that we're going to give the House and the veterans community when this is done, but for us to prejudge the outcome of the work of this committee does a disservice to the members of this committee. I think it does a disservice to the witnesses from whom we have not yet heard. I think it does a disservice to the veterans community. Not only that, but even if we offered this prejudgment to the House today, what does that say to the witnesses who come next week on this topic? “We've already decided on the outcome. It doesn't matter what your testimony is.”

I think this is completely premature and completely inappropriate. Whether you're Liberal, Conservative, Bloc or NDP, this is not the right way to do parliamentary committee work, and I'll be voting against it.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Casey.

I see that MP Brassard has his hand up as well.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I see this as an important indicator to the veterans community—and I know Mr. Casey spoke about the veterans community—that we are, in fact, as a committee, disappointed at the current state of the backlog. To indicate that in a formal way is an important message to send to the veterans community.

On the issue of precluding anything, I don't think it does. I think we will have our witnesses come next week, as we did today. They offered very pragmatic solutions to this problem, many of which I expect will end up in the final report. I think this does send a mes-

sage to the veterans community, and I am asking everyone to support it.

Again, I appreciate Mrs. Lalonde's amendment on this. I think it accurately reflects what my intent was.

The Chair: Thank you.

I will move to calling the question.

Mr. John Brassard: May I ask for a recorded vote, please?

The Chair: Yes, of course.

(Motion as amended agreed to: yeas 10; nays 1 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: We'll move on very quickly here because I know everyone needs another stretch, as we're now working on the fourth hour of this meeting. I want to remind everybody that we are confirmed to meet next on Monday and Wednesday from 3:30 to 5:30. This is hopefully going to be our new regular time slot. At that point, we will resume the study of the backlog and hear from more witnesses. These will be our last two meetings on the backlog, which means we will soon start our next study, on the Royal Canadian Legion and other veterans organizations and their financial health during and after COVID-19.

I'd like to propose that all parties send their witness lists as soon as possible, in order of priority, to the clerk. In fact, we will need some by end of day tomorrow. I know this doesn't leave much time, but that will give the clerk at least one week to invite witnesses to the meetings that will take place on November 23, 25 and 30. Normally we have a hard deadline. I propose that you send what you have now as preferences for witnesses and that we have a hard deadline next Wednesday, assuming the clerk is fine with that, for the remaining witnesses. We just don't want to lose the opportunity to start this study before we rise for Christmas. I don't want to lose any particular meetings.

Is everyone okay with that? I'm seeing a lot of nodding heads.

We hope to have the report on the backlog ready for distribution by December 1. The committee will then be able to review it and we'll be on track to table it before the House adjourns for our holidays. Assuming there are no more bumps in the road and we can maintain our schedule, we have a good runway to get that in before we rise.

That's it. If there are no questions about any of the future meetings coming up, I would suggest we give everybody a break and adjourn our meeting.

Thank you very much, everybody. It was a productive meeting. We got through a lot today.

• (1500)

Thank you, Madam Clerk, and thank you to all the technical folks in Ottawa.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>