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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg



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• (1105)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 30 of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[*English*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on Monday, November 21, 2022, the committee is resuming its study on the impact of the new rehabilitation contract awarded by the Department of Veterans Affairs on the role of the case manager and quality of service delivery.

[*Translation*]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of Thursday, June 23, 2022. Members may attend in person in the room or remotely using the Zoom application.

Interpretation services are available, and those of you using the Zoom application can make your choice at the bottom of your screen.

A reminder that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

Pursuant to our routine motion concerning login tests, I wish to inform the committee that all witnesses completed the required tests prior to the meeting.

[*English*]

Now I would like to welcome, first of all, the clerk, Naaman Sugrue. He is here with us.

I would like to welcome, as witnesses, the Honourable Lawrence MacAulay, Minister of Veterans Affairs; and, from the Department of Veterans Affairs, Paul Ledwell, deputy minister, and Steven Harris, assistant deputy minister, service delivery branch.

[*Translation*]

I am pleased to yield the floor to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, the Hon. Lawrence MacAulay.

[*English*]

You have five minutes for your opening statement. Please go ahead, sir.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

Thank for the invitation to appear today to discuss recent contracting changes to Veterans Affairs Canada's rehabilitation service and supplementary estimates (B), which will be discussed in the second hour.

You have heard a number of views from many people, and I would like to take this time to provide you with some facts.

Up until this year, there have been two separate contracts in place for the delivery of rehabilitation services and vocational assistance. Medavie Blue Cross had previously administered all medical and psychosocial rehabilitation services, and all vocational services have been managed by Canadian Veterans Vocational Rehabilitation Services.

In June 2021, a new national contract for rehabilitation and psychosocial services was awarded to Partners in Canadian Veterans Rehabilitation Services, following an open and transparent process.

I want to clearly point out that this change was made in consultation with veterans, their families, and Veterans Affairs Canada staff to ensure that the services we provide to veterans are improved under the new provider, and that the transition from the old system to the new one is seamless. This new contract provides 14,000 veterans with vital support and access to over 9,000 health care experts and specialists in 600 locations right across the country.

From January to May this year, Veterans Affairs held two rounds of consultations with approximately 60 veterans and their families with experience in the program about how program updates related to the contract might serve them better. Their feedback helped us develop a strategy to best meet their needs.

For example, they want shorter wait times for services and reports, as well as timely service from case managers and service providers. They also asked for more connection time with their caseworkers. This contract addresses these concerns with nationally consistent, standardized and timely rehab assessments and service to help veterans improve their overall well-being.

A third round of consultations is planned for early 2023 for veterans who are part of the first phase of the migration over to the new contract.

Within the department, there were three main working groups that met several times a year. These were made up of various employees from field operations, IT, performance measurement, the national learning unit, and stakeholder engagement, among others. The Union of Veterans' Affairs Employees also identified several employees, most of whom were caseworkers, to participate in various working groups.

The department presented at six town hall sessions for case managers and other service delivery staff, with more planned every six to eight weeks as we continue the migration of veterans to the new contractor. Approximately 800 people attended each of the last two town halls.

Training materials are also provided to ensure that case managers have the information they need when they need it as the systems become available. Training will continue during the transition phase and until full implementation, to ensure staff are fully engaged and comfortable with the new contractor. The thoughts, concerns, and perspectives we have heard have helped shape how services will be delivered to veterans and their families.

When they were consulted, our case managers asked for a more manageable workload and fewer administrative tasks. Under this contract, they will no longer have to help veterans find providers in the community, write rehab plan goals, or chase providers for reports that are supposed to come in every 30 days. With these tasks transferred over to the new service providers, case managers can see a reduction of up to 15 hours a month in administration burden once all clients have been migrated to the new provider. This will allow for more time for veterans and rehab needs, just as our case managers and vets wanted.

Simply put, the contract will not mean any reduction in case managers at Veterans Affairs.

• (1110)

Caseworkers are not health care workers or professional specialists, and this is not work they have ever done at Veterans Affairs. We greatly value the work our case managers do, and that's why we are focused on helping them spend more time with veterans and clients than on doing their administrative tasks.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[*Translation*]

I would like to welcome one of our colleagues, Mr. Greg Fergus, who is replacing Mr. Wilson Miao.

Welcome, Mr. Fergus.

[*English*]

Now let's go to our first round of questions.

I invite Mr. Blake Richards to go ahead, please, for six minutes or less.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Thank you.

Minister, I want to get to some of the details of the contract in a moment, but first, the last time you were before this committee, you

were discussing medical assistance in dying. You indicated to us that there were four veterans who had this issue raised with them by one particular caseworker and that had been referred to the RCMP.

Since that time, I know that I'm certainly now aware of at least eight veterans who have had this occur, and there have been at least three additional case managers or service agents involved in this, so we're at a situation where we have eight veterans and probably as many as four caseworkers.

That includes Bruce, whom I mentioned to you last time, as well as, obviously, one case that was raised in last Thursday's meeting and has been in the media quite extensively since. That's the case of Christine Gauthier, who is in a wheelchair because of injuries she suffered serving this country and has been fighting with Veterans Affairs for five years to try to get a lift put in her house. As she has told us, she has been fought by Veterans Affairs every step of the way. She put it well. She said that Veterans Affairs won't help her live her life, but they have offered to help her die. That is a statement that I think hits everyone who hears it, and it's something that we should all be concerned about.

Now, she wrote to you about that back in July 2021. At that point in time, you were aware of this and did nothing until August 2022, when another veteran's case hit the media. Can you tell us, Minister, why did you do nothing from July 2021 onwards and put other veterans' lives at risk?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

First of all, for Christine and anybody else out there who has any difficulty with this or has been involved in this issue, we want them to come forward. With Christine, we want to work with her to make sure we help and provide any service that we can in order to help her.

I would tell you that we have reviewed our files, and what I indicated two weeks ago, I believe, here before the committee.... I indicated quite clearly that there were four cases involving one case manager. This is totally unacceptable. Veterans Affairs does not provide MAID services at all.

What I can tell you is that we have found nobody else who has indicated to.... We find no information to indicate—

Mr. Blake Richards: Minister—

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Let me answer the question. You asked the question and—

• (1115)

Mr. Blake Richards: Well, sure, but let me interrupt, because you're telling me you still believe that there are only four, when we have had Christine Gauthier come forward and we have had Bruce come forward. Also, I'm aware of at least a couple of others. Granted, they haven't come forward, but we know that a couple of them have.

Minister, beyond that, in July 2021.... You say you want them to come forward. Christine Gauthier came to you in July 2021. She did come forward and you did nothing. Do you not see that as a problem?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: You've indicated quite clearly in your statement, I believe, that Christine Gauthier was offered this service. I have to be very careful what I indicate about specific files—

Mr. Blake Richards: Have you done any investigations—

The Chair: Excuse me.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I believe I would have to ask my deputy to respond. I just want to be careful. I do not want to affect the investigation, but we want to find out exactly what happened, when it happened and who was involved.

I would ask my deputy to respond to that.

Mr. Blake Richards: Sure, and just before you do that, Minister, I can appreciate that you don't want to do anything that would cause harm to the investigation. However, can you tell us whether you have done anything? You were aware of this case back in July 2021 and clearly didn't pay attention to it, but now that it has come to light in the media and in this committee since last Thursday, have you investigated what happened or done anything to try to investigate what happened in that period of time?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: As I indicated previously at the meeting, upon hearing this, I asked my deputy to conduct an investigation. They're doing that. I was briefed a couple of weeks ago, and I asked my deputy to expand the investigation. He has done that. It has been referred to the RCMP. That has been done. What we want to do is make fully sure that anybody who has any difficulty in this way.... However, I think, in all fairness, we have to let the deputy respond to what you indicated at the committee. That's what I have done.

Go ahead.

Mr. Blake Richards: Just before you do that—

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: You're not going to let him speak.

Mr. Blake Richards: Minister, sure I will, but you're the one responsible. This was brought to your attention in July 2021, and you did nothing for over a year. Now you're telling us, "Well, there's an investigation." That's great. That's wonderful, and we're glad to see that that's happening, but you keep telling us that there are four.

We know that there are more than four, without a doubt. I'm aware that, with regard to the previous case that came in the media, the agent involved is in British Columbia. Christine Gauthier is located in Quebec. I heard her on a podcast this weekend where she indicated that she had two separate caseworkers who both suggested MAID to her. One was male, and one was female, so there is more than one caseworker involved here. There clearly is.

I wonder what you've done to investigate it. Can you maybe tell us—whoever's going to answer it—how many total times your investigation has uncovered that MAID has been brought up in either a call with—

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Richards. I'm sorry. The six minutes are way over. Please leave some time for the witnesses to answer questions.

Now I'd like to go to Mr. Sean Casey for six minutes or less.

Please go ahead.

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

Minister, several times you attempted to answer Mr. Richards' questions, and he interrupted you. You have the full six minutes to provide whatever additional information you tried unsuccessfully to present to the committee.

Go ahead, Minister.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

First of all, there's been an indication made that I received information, that somebody wrote to me indicating that MAID had been discussed with them. Overall, that's not the case. I would like my deputy to respond to the specific issue that came to light here the last day we were at the committee, because it's only fair that the facts be brought out.

Mr. Paul Ledwell (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

To respond to the questions that have been raised.... As indicated at the last appearance before the committee, 402,000 unique veterans' files have been reviewed for any specific reference with regard to MAID being raised inappropriately with a veteran—402,000 unique files. Through those files, we've isolated four cases involving one individual. If there's other information that needs to come forth that is not represented in those files, we'd like to see that. The minister has been clear about that, and we've invited veterans to come forward. If they're not comfortable coming forward to the department, they're welcome to come forward to the veterans ombudsman.

With regard to the specifics about Veteran Gauthier, who was here before the committee last Thursday, those files have been reviewed. They were reviewed as part of the 402,000, through that full review. They've subsequently been reviewed based on the issues that the veteran raised on Thursday. There's no indication in the files, in any correspondence, in any notation based on engagement with the veteran, of a reference to MAID. If the veteran has material and indication of that, again, as we've invited other veterans, we would welcome seeing that, reviewing that and making that part of our investigation.

It's critically important, as the minister has underlined and as we have stated repeatedly, that we get to the bottom of this, the full breadth of this, and that we address the issue. Up to this point, four cases have been established involving one single employee.

• (1120)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I would also urge you, Mr. Richards, if you do have information.... What we're trying to do is get to the bottom of this issue. We have the investigation in place. We have some facts from the investigation. We want to make sure that we get to the bottom of this issue, and I would ask anybody at the committee, any veteran, anybody who's listening, to please bring forward any information they have.

We need to know the facts, and that's what we want to see happen, because we want to make sure that veterans feel comfortable to come to Veterans Affairs. It's very important to realize that there are thousands of employees at Veterans Affairs Canada, and they truly care. They're hurt by this. We want to make sure that we get this situation rectified as quickly as possible. That is what we're trying to do, and that is what we will do.

Thank you.

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

The reason you were invited to come to the committee today was to talk about the contract, so how about we do that?

I'd like to refer you specifically to some of the testimony that we heard from the president of the Union of Veterans' Affairs Employees and invite you to respond. Virginia Vaillancourt, when she testified before committee, said that case managers fear that, through the new rehab contract, veterans will lose their human face-to-face contact with someone who will be an ally, an advocate and quite often a trusted friend to their families during some pretty dark times.

Minister, how would you respond to that fear as expressed by the union president of case managers?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

Of course, with this new contract, there are 14,000 veterans, approximately—probably a few over that—who depend on this type of contract. They have access to 9,000 experts, health experts and other experts, in 600 locations right across Canada in order to make sure that they're able to address their needs.

Why this new contract was put together—basically putting two contracts together—is that the caseworkers asked us in consultation to try to make sure that they have more time to spend with veterans. With this contract, they have more time to serve veterans. They have about 15 hours a week, approximately two days more, with this situation alone, because they don't have to do the administrative work and they don't have to find the different experts in the field right across the country. The contract has people in place to do that. That's what we want to make sure of.

My job is to make sure that we provide the best services we possibly can for veterans in the best way we can, where they need it and when they need it, and that's what we're doing with this contract.

Thank you.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you, Minister.

Ms. Vaillancourt also said that the bigger question is whether we want the face of service to veterans to be a kind, caring and com-

passionate case manager or a for-profit corporation that serves its shareholders. How would you respond to that critique, Minister?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

Of course, this is not a new.... This is a new contract, but it's not a new way of doing things. It's just a better way of doing things.

Thank you. I think my time is up.

The Chair: That's exactly right, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Casey.

I want to welcome our colleague Marc Dalton, who is subbing for Cathay Wagantall. He's on the screen.

[*Translation*]

We now go to the second vice-chair of the committee.

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor for the next six minutes.

• (1125)

Mr. Luc Desilets (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Greetings to our guests.

Minister, I'm pleased to see you're full of energy.

Last week, we heard from Christine Gauthier. I know you're very familiar with the case, but just a brief reminder that, in 2018, Ms. Gauthier relocated and requested that an elevator be installed in her new home. The department granted her claim in 2020. That same year, however, Ms. Gauthier was forced to file another claim because the contractor had botched the installation of her elevator. It was a bureaucratic snafu, somewhat unpleasant, but that's life, for now.

As of this year, there is still no elevator in Ms. Gauthier's home. She has now been waiting five years for an elevator to be installed. Her claim has been pending for a very long time and Ms. Gauthier has to wriggle her way down the stairs like a worm. I don't want to discuss medical assistance in dying for the moment.

I am personally affected by this, and I find it hard to understand why quicker action can't be taken.

Could you simply give me a guarantee that you will give special attention to this specific case, which I find inhumane.

[*English*]

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you, Luc.

I do know you care about veterans, and I appreciate that.

On individual files, I'm not supposed to discuss them and I won't, but the issue that you raised has been raised, so I will certainly make it a priority to do everything we can. That does not mean that we can provide everything that an individual asks for, but we will do everything we can under the regulations in order to make sure that this veteran receives what she truly needs. She went out front for us and protected us. I fully understand that, and it's vitally important that we do that.

I think on the file itself—and I don't deal with individual files—I'll mention to the deputy that I hope it can get some specific attention. I think it would be appropriate for him to expand on that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I understand that, Minister. However, as you also know, the department has granted Ms. Gauthier's claim. We're talking about a few hundred thousand dollars to install an elevator. It's just a matter of slightly expediting the process.

Mr. Harris or Mr. Ledwell, when a minister fails to meet expectations, authorities such as the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman, the Office of the Auditor General, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages and the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer are there to make suggestions to assist in rectifying the situation and taking the required corrective measures.

My concerns are mainly related to the consortium. How can we ensure that adequate services are provided? Will it have to demonstrate its methods? Will there be another evaluation of the quality of services rendered? If so, how will that be done?

[*English*]

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

I can fully assure you—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Pardon me for interrupting, Minister. I thought your colleagues were going to answer my question.

As you wish, Minister. Go ahead; I'm pleased to hear your comments.

[*English*]

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Mr. Desilets, I believe it's fair to say that there are more francophone specialists available in Quebec and more francophone specialists available outside of Quebec with this contract. I wanted to make sure of that.

However, on the details of the contract, Steven can respond.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Steven Harris (Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs): The contract includes performance measures enabling service providers to ensure they can meet their objectives and also enable the department to conduct audits.

Under the contract, there will definitely be performance reviews, which will be reported, and the Department of Veterans Affairs will ensure that everything is in order. Should any issues arise with the contract, veterans may contact our department to ensure they are resolved.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Can the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman or the Office of the Auditor General conduct an audit?

Mr. Steven Harris: Not specifically of the contract, no. However, we work closely with those two organizations to ensure that any issue that may arise in the context of the contract is resolved.

• (1130)

Mr. Luc Desilets: What you're saying is interesting. We'll probably see in six months to a year, when we start seeing some results.

As you know, my other concern is francophones. Of the 9,000 health workers who will be involved with our veterans, how many do you think will come from Quebec and how many will have French as their first language?

Mr. Steven Harris: I can simply say that, right now, the number of workers involved under the new contract is more or less the same as with the former service provider, which is to say nearly 500 in Quebec. The new service provider is still encouraging other workers to register to offer their services.

Mr. Luc Desilets: That means that, in proportion to the number of veterans, we'll have the same number of businesses providing services in French.

Mr. Steven Harris: Yes, that's more or less it. As I said, the number of workers is roughly the same right now. We're still looking out for and actively seeking other service providers to ensure good performance in Quebec.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris and Mr. Desilets.

[*English*]

Now I'd like to turn the floor over to Ms. Rachel Blaney, for six minutes or less, please.

Go ahead.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I thank all of you for being here today as witnesses.

Where I want to start is, first of all, by acknowledging how many veterans are in the audience today hearing from this committee. I want to recognize them and thank them so much for their service.

Before I get into the service delivery concern I think many of us share, I do want to acknowledge that it's been a difficult period of time. We've heard stories from multiple veterans, some of them publicly and some of them anonymously, regarding their concerns about being offered access to MAID, which we know legally doesn't really make any sense.

We've heard that there have been letters that have been sent both to you, Minister, and to the Prime Minister. What I heard earlier is that if veterans want to come forward to VAC, there is an openness to that and an encouragement of that, and that if they don't feel safe, they can go to the veterans ombudsman. I understand that and I do hope veterans come forward. This is very serious.

I'm just going to come back to the fact that we still know that there is no recording by Veterans Affairs of conversations that happen. Right now what I understand is that a basic search for those discussions goes through case files.

I'm just wondering if there is any exploration of this and, if veterans want their conversations to be recorded, any consideration of looking at this. It seems to me we're getting into a position where it becomes very much "he said, she said", and veterans deserve better. They served our country.

I just want to make sure we don't let this fall down. If there is a big concern we need to address, we want to see it done and we want to see it done well. Part of that is having something we can go back to in order to make sure this never happens again.

I'll leave that to you, Minister, to respond to.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

Regarding the "he said, she said", I want to make it crystal clear. I received no information indicating that MAID was used. I did not receive any information on that issue concerning last Thursday's...and any other that I know of in any letters I have received.

I certainly agree that this has to be dealt with. That's why, as you know, I want to make sure I give you the facts. What I want to do is make sure you have the facts, and the fact is that at this time there's an investigation on. There are four people. There's one case manager. That's unacceptable, but that's where we are at the moment. It has been referred to the RCMP, just so we make sure you know that this is what we're doing. But we have to—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm sorry to interrupt, Minister, but the point I'm really curious about is whether there are any discussions about recording conversations so that we can do this. I don't think any veteran in this country wants to feel like he or she hasn't told the truth, and that's what I'm concerned about at this point. There is this sense of "We didn't know. Are you telling us?"

I want to honour veterans' truth and their experience. This is very important, because they need to feel safe. Will there be any discussions moving forward about recording conversations or even allowing for the option that if a veteran wants a conversation to be recorded, it will be?

• (1135)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: First of all, I want you to know that there is the Privacy Act, of course. Most veterans want to make sure it's private. That's why I want you to be fully sure, just so you know—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm going to leave it at that.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Please give me the chance. The fact is that you have to know truly that I did not receive any information on the issue that was discussed here last Friday concerning MAID. Other issues.... But you're right.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Okay. Can I get on to the service? I think you've answered the question. The answer is no. I'm confused about that—

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: The answer is that I did not receive—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: —because Immigration does record those conversations, but that's fine.

I just wanted to go back to the fact that we did have a service provider testify last week on her over 20 years of providing direct services. She did all the forms she was supposed to at the beginning, and then she received the form to fill out, and she did not have any of the services that she provided on the form. She requested from VAC information so that she could fill out that form properly. She has still not heard anything back.

I'm just wondering. When you have a service provider who has worked with veterans for over 20 years, I would assume we don't want to lose that kind of experience. What is happening and what systems are in place to make sure that when they ask for information, they get it so that they're not just off the list and their experience gone?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I can assure you, we don't want to lose any experts in Veterans Affairs Canada. Caseworkers definitely play a major role in this issue.

On a case-by-case.... I have to be careful what I say about cases, but I would turn it over to my deputy on this specific case.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Thanks.

Mr. Chair, on these kinds of issues, we absolutely don't want to lose service providers. We are reliant on those service providers to meet the needs of veterans at every level and through every advantage that we have in terms of supports for veterans.

In some cases, where information is being sought, we do have to do a review on the privacy element of this. If this is information that is being shared externally—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Just so you know, this isn't about services. This is about.... She provides, for example, occupational therapy. When she got the form about what services she could provide, that wasn't an option for her. She wondered which part of the form she should click.

This is the problem. Also, it took a very long time. She still hasn't heard back. It's been a couple of months.

The Chair: Give a quick answer, please, in 10 seconds.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: We will correct those forms. The whole idea is to increase the number of service providers, especially geographically and on that expertise level.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

Now, let's go to the second round.

I invite our first vice-chair of the committee, Mr. Blake Richards, for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Blake Richards: I want to wrap up our previous discussion.

I think it's fairly clear to see why veterans fail to have trust and confidence in you and your department.

You heard the case of the veteran known as Bruce, who came forward and indicated that he was offered medical assistance in dying. You heard Christine Gauthier, who came to this committee and indicated that two separate agents offered her medical assistance in dying when she was seeking help in getting a lift put into her house. Then you wonder why veterans don't feel comfortable coming forward.

You sit here and tell us that you still think there are only four cases, despite the fact that you have veterans who have come forward. In one case, they came to you as early as 2021, well before this ever made the media. You sit here and continue to tell us that there are only four and there's only one agent, when veterans have clearly indicated that's not, in fact, accurate.

I really hope, Minister, that you're going to go away from this meeting and think really long and hard about how you've failed our veterans in this regard and how you're going to have to do better. You've potentially put veterans' lives at risk.

I want to move specifically to the contract. I want to ask you about the contract.

How would you say the transition period has gone, Minister? Is there anything that you would have done differently if you could go back in time?

• (1140)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much, Mr. Richards.

Nobody wants to indicate that it's not safe or good for veterans to go to Veterans Affairs Canada. I would expect that nobody at this committee would ever want to portray that to the public. We have thousands of staff who are fully dedicated to the veterans.

As for the names you mentioned, I do not deal with specific cases. I have never met Mr. Bruce.

Mr. Blake Richards: Minister, the question I asked—

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: You asked me a question and I would like to have the courtesy to be able to answer it.

Mr. Blake Richards: I asked you a question about the contract and the transition.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: You said a number of things.

Mr. Blake Richards: Sure, I made some comments, but I've asked you—

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I'm making comments, too, and I have the right to do it.

Mr. Blake Richards: It's my time. I'm asking you a question and I'd like an answer.

The Chair: Excuse me.

Mr. Richards, I've stopped your time, your five minutes.

For the translation, please.... If you ask a question of one minute, then it should be an answer of about one minute, too.

Please, go ahead.

Mr. Blake Richards: Mr. Chair, on a point of order, when I ask the minister a question.... If you're asking us not to cause an issue for translation, then can I ask you, as chair, to try to hold the minister to be relevant to the question that I've asked?

In this case, it was about the transition of the contract, how he felt it has gone and what he would have done differently. I didn't hear anything that was addressing the question.

The Chair: I understand that, but it was at the beginning of his answer.

Please, let him go on and we'll see if it's relevant or not.

Mr. Blake Richards: I'll just point out that it seems as if the minister is trying to kill time so that we can't actually get to the heart of the questions we're trying to ask.

The Chair: The time is stopped.

We have Mr. Casey on a point of order.

Mr. Sean Casey: Mr. Chair, it's my understanding that the witness is allowed to have as much time to answer the question as the member has in posing it. This member repeatedly poses long-winded questions and then interrupts the minister over and over again when he tries to answer them.

I think if there's an opportunity for the chair to intervene to maintain a fair exchange, it would be to put a halt on the interruptions until the minister has been allotted the same amount of time as the person posing the question.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Casey.

Mr. Richards, go ahead.

Mr. Blake Richards: On that point, certainly I think we all appreciate that when someone is asked a question, they should be given some time to answer it. The problem we have here, in many cases, is that when you ask a question, the question is not being answered and other things are being brought up.

I would ask you, as chair, to please try to hold the minister to some semblance of trying to respond to the question rather than filling time.

The Chair: I'd like to tell everyone in the committee, and even the witnesses, that the meetings we have are important for us and also important for the veterans who are watching us. So please, let's act accordingly.

Go ahead.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you for that, Chair. I certainly agree.

There are a number of veterans in the room today and we thank them for their service. I know they're here to hear some of the answers, and I'm sure there are many others watching elsewhere. Let's try to reset and start again.

Minister, can I ask how you would say the transition has gone? What would you have done differently if you could go back in time, if anything?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I'd like to answer the first part of the statement. However, I will tell you that the transition has just started, and my understanding is that it's going very well. We've had a number of information sessions leading up to this to make sure that the transition went well. In September 2021, we had a session. In December 2021, we had a session. We will have another session next March.

We're working to make sure that this contract works better for veterans. We have more access to more experts in more areas across the country, in more locations. That's what veterans wanted, and that's what we're providing.

Mr. Blake Richards: Well, Minister, we've heard something different from every other person we've heard before this committee, whether they be veterans, service providers or VAC employees themselves. They have no idea what's going on and they think there was a real lack of consultation and information. When you say it's gone very well, I think you might want to re-examine that.

Can you tell me, were you aware that during the period of time of the transition—so the period of time from October 25 to November 29, when this took effect—no new mental health services were being provided to clients? Were you aware of that, Minister, and what do you have to say about that?

• (1145)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: First of all, I want to assure you that people were invited to those sessions to make sure that the transition went well, and there has been no gap in services between the old contract and the new contract. The deputy who's in charge of it can expand on that, if you wish, but that's exactly the answer—

Mr. Blake Richards: Minister, let me interrupt. You're saying that, but the documentation provided by your department said something different. It says that case managers are requested to not create any new medical or psychosocial services for any new participants during the period of October 25 to November 22, which ended up being November 29.

Minister, again, this is a situation where the lives of veterans may have been put at risk because they were not being provided with the services they needed. That's because of the decision by your department. You seem to be unaware of it.

Please tell us what are you going to do to ensure you're not going to allow decisions like this to be made that put veterans' lives at risk.

We've seen it with medical assistance in dying, where you ignored something you heard from a veteran. We're seeing it now,

where you seem to be unaware of the communication from your own department.

Please, Minister, we have to take this far more seriously.

The Chair: Minister, you have 30 seconds to respond.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

I can assure you that all the services were available through Veterans Affairs Canada, but I'll let my deputy comment.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Mr. Chair, I can say that no veteran was denied service during that period of time. Any veteran who came forward with a need for service—mental health, psychosocial supports—was provided with those services.

That communication was about the transfer of files.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ledwell.

Now I'd like to invite, via the screen, Mrs. Rechie Valdez, for five minutes or less, please.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.): Thank you, Minister MacAulay and the department, for joining.

Minister, do you have any further answers to the questions that were asked, or were you able to finish your train of thought? I just want to confirm.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I'd like to indicate, before we get to the end of it, what improvements are incorporated in this new contract.

Services are customized to each veteran's and family members' unique background and needs, and we strive to have an approach and methods that are indigenous-sensitive and culturally sensitive, continued access to rehabilitation services in the language of your choice and 24-7 access to an online portal through which veterans and family members can submit claims, manage appointments and access resources. Veterans and family members will have a chance to share their experience and satisfaction about the program, input that will help us make sure that the rehabilitation and vocational assistance programs are the best they can be.

That's it, essentially. There are quite a number of other things, but I appreciate the time to be able to say that we're providing more service, with more people, in more areas. I'll let the assistant deputy expand on it, but that's what we're doing.

Mr. Steven Harris: I think it's fair to say, as the minister has indicated, that the key interest here is in making sure that veterans have access to expert supports no matter where they live across the country—whether in urban settings or in rural settings.

It's about making sure not only that the rehabilitation specialists are there but also that the specialists are there to support them from a medical and psychosocial point of view, so if you need access to physiotherapy, psychology, occupational therapists or others, those services are provided, whether at an in-person site or remotely. We've seen many of our providers adapt over the course of the COVID period to reach people from a distance, which is a really significant benefit for our veterans. No matter where they live, they can reach experts who can help in their rehabilitation needs.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you.

I just want to mention this. In this committee, we've heard from several case managers from VAC who have testified about how much they care for veterans and how hard they work every day to ensure that each veteran's needs are taken care of. They have shared their passion and their concern for veterans.

I just want to encourage veterans who continue to listen to this committee to continue to seek help from VAC because there are case managers who care and who are waiting to hear from them while this investigation continues. I just wanted to share that.

I will move to my questions.

With the new contract, Minister, and to the department, can you clarify what the average ratio of case manager to veteran would be to continue to provide that strong level of service to them?

• (1150)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

I can tell you it's 30:1 at the moment, but if you would like, the deputy could expand further on the program itself and how it works.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: The minister is correct. The current ratio is 30:1, Mr. Chair.

That is an improvement. We've been seeking to improve the ratio. We know that our target is 25:1, so we are not at the target, but we are getting closer to that.

It's really important, as has been underlined by the minister in testimony, that we allow case managers to spend more time with their veterans. The case manager is the main point of contact, is the direct link between the veteran and their needs, and is there to ensure that the veteran has what they need and that their family has what it needs.

Having more time to spend with that veteran, having more time to plan out, is really critical. It's not just about the quantity, in terms of the ratio; it's also about the quality. That's really critical.

We have 482 case managers at Veterans Affairs Canada, supporting more than 14,000 veterans with complex and significant needs. They do this work very passionately.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: I would definitely agree with you there.

In this committee, concerns have been expressed in the past about having more long-term case managers and front staff versus short-term staff. Can you comment on whether this contract can assist with having more long-term staff?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

Of course, we make sure that we have enough staff in place. As you know, the ratio with case managers is 30:1, but the backlog is a problem. We have invested in both areas, and both areas are going in the right direction. We're not there yet, but it's coming to where it should be.

What we have to do is make sure we have the appropriate staff and programs in place to help veterans live the best life they possibly can. That's what we're committed to doing, and that's what we will do.

Thank you.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you, Minister.

To the veterans in the room, thank you for your service.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Valdez.

[*Translation*]

Two short interventions of two and a half minutes each will follow.

I would first like to invite Luc Desilets to take the floor.

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

Mr. Harris, my question will be short. I'd like to know why the contract's start date was pushed back. If I'm not mistaken, it was changed from November 22 to November 29.

Mr. Steven Harris: It wasn't the start date of the contract that was pushed back, but rather that of part of a system that supports both veterans and Veterans Affairs Canada employees. It's a new system module that they're already using.

We wanted to be sure of the quality of the module and to ensure that everything would work right from the start. So we delayed the rollout of that module by seven days.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Should we therefore conclude that the consortium's officials weren't ready?

Mr. Steven Harris: The idea was really to ensure that everything would go well, that there would be no issues with the system and that everyone would be able to use it. The delay didn't affect the services provided to veterans.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Many questions have been asked at the committee's recent meetings about the transparency of the consultation conducted on these issues. You've repeatedly told us that you asked some 100 persons for their opinion. However, some witnesses who were senior union officials gave us a completely different version of the situation, telling us that they hadn't been consulted.

Are you still saying that 100 persons were consulted?

[*English*]

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Yes, Luc. I can assure you that the union, the case managers, IT and a number of different groups connected with Veterans Affairs Canada—I had a list—were involved all the way.

As you realize, this contract was signed a year and a half ago, but we want to make sure that people understand this is not a new idea. This is an improved idea to make it better for veterans. That's what we are doing.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I don't know if this is confidential information, but could you give us a list of the people consulted together with their positions, Mr. Harris?

Mr. Steven Harris: I don't believe we can disclose their names. However, we can definitely tell you the number of organizations, other parties and veterans that were consulted both in and outside the department.

• (1155)

Mr. Luc Desilets: That information would be very relevant to the committee's work. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

I now give the floor to Rachel Blaney for two and a half minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

I'm very concerned about this, because what I've heard from numerous case managers and from numerous veterans is that the numbers of people providing services have gone down, rather than up. That concerns me. It feels like we're being sold a bag of goods. It says 9,000 service providers, which is fewer than before.

I understand, and I've heard this directly from service providers, that their pay level has gone down because of this contract. They're getting less money to provide the same services that they were providing before. That is very concerning. I certainly hope that is addressed in a meaningful way, because I don't want good service providers to stop providing valued services to veterans because they aren't making what they used to make for the same work. It makes no sense.

We have also heard that the PCVRS and the RS—rehab service—specialists don't know how to get the clinical care manager in place for a veteran. That used to be put in place through Blue Cross, but there is a gap, so that position doesn't seem to be clear.

We then heard from service providers who are trying to provide the services and trying to fill out the appropriate work. They did the expression of interest and then they got the form. The services they provide are not on the list. They're trying to figure out from the office where to put it, whether it is a different category and whether the office can explain the form, and they're not getting answers for months. This means they are not providing the service, because the deadline has passed.

I am really concerned.

We also heard from multiple case managers that the process that unfolded didn't make a lot of sense. They didn't know how to do it. They were concerned about providing their services to the veteran. They're worried because many of their jobs are not steady. They're often temporary workers.

I look at all this.... Based on the testimony we had in this committee from case managers, we had multiple case managers emailing our committee saying, "Yes, we totally agree with this testimony", so it seems to me that there are all of these issues.

How are they going to be addressed? How is this committee going to be made aware that these issues are being dealt with in a meaningful way, so that veterans get the services they deserve?

The Chair: Minister, you have only 30 seconds.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: My heavens, Chair, you're skimping on my time, but whatever.

Ms. Blaney, the fact is that there are more experts in the field, not fewer, and that will expand. There are more sites available now than there were, and that will expand.

The consultation process was held with key stakeholders and subject matter experts with Veterans Canada, case managers, field representatives and the union. We made sure we had everybody involved we could possibly involve.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

There are two last interventions of five minutes each.

I'd like to invite, on the screen, MP Fraser Tolmie for five minutes, please.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, veterans come from a career where other peoples' lives depend on them, and their lives depend on others. Trust is their code and their culture; it is a culture of trust. This fundamental core value is essential when a vet hands over that trust to a caseworker, but, from what I can see, from my chair, trust is broken.

When there has been very little or no consultation in the rollout of this contract, this further breaks the trust of the vet who is waiting on proper care.

What has been shared by you in this committee and in past meetings doesn't line up with what is going on with those who have come forward and shared their testimony. This investigation that you speak of concerning MAID is just a review of files. More has come out from media sources, podcasts and this committee than has come out from your providing information to this committee. In fact, you've had to answer to these revelations rather than report them. Ms. Gauthier showed up with a suitcase of files and personal notes not addressed.

Has Veterans Affairs created a loophole for MAID?

• (1200)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I am sorry that you would ask that question, but you can ask what you wish.

The fact is, absolutely not. There were four situations developed by one case worker, which was totally unacceptable. When I heard about it, I made sure that the deputy conducted an investigation. Then I asked him to extend the investigation, and the RCMP are now involved.

You talk about trust, and trust is so vitally important. We have thousands of Veterans Affairs staff who truly work hard and care so much about the veterans you spoke about. The facts are the facts that I just gave you, and if the facts change, we want to know what the facts are that change, but somebody can't just say something about something somewhere. We have to deal with facts as far as this is concerned.

If there are more people out there, if you have more information out there, we want to know it. The department wants to know it to make sure that we address this appropriately.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tolmie, go ahead, please.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Yes, well, number one, we should not be doing the investigation for you, and that's where the breakdown of trust has come, Minister. No one trusts you. They're not coming forward to you because they don't trust this department, and this lies squarely on you, sir.

What are you going to do to regain that trust within this department and within those vets who are looking for help? What are you going to do?

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Tolmie. Wait just a second; we have a translation problem.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Yes, there's no interpretation into French.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Tolmie, could you unplug and plug your headset back in, please? We have a problem with translation.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Is that okay?

The Chair: No, it's not good. Try it again.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: I'll try this one more time. There we go.

How about if I put my mike down a little bit?

The Chair: We still have a problem with your sound for translation.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: I'll unplug one more time.

The Chair: By the time you do that... I think you've already asked the minister your question, so he can answer. There are two minutes left.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

If people feel like my honourable colleague has indicated, they can talk to the ombudsperson, who will directly inform the department of whatever issue should come forward.

What I want to do is make sure that veterans feel fully comfortable to come to Veterans Affairs. We have an issue, a totally unacceptable issue. We're dealing with the issue, but what we have to do

is make sure that veterans feel comfortable to come to Veterans Affairs.

I am not conducting an investigation. The department and the RCMP are conducting the investigation. As I said many times, what we want to do is make sure we get the facts. If you have facts that will assist the investigation, please bring them forward, but we need facts. If we have facts, we will deal with them.

What's vitally important with all the programs.... You're fully aware of all the programs we've put in place since 2015—

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We have one minute left. Let's try with Mr. Tolmie.

I think your sound is not good enough, Mr. Tolmie.

Go ahead, Mr. Desilets.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I don't know what you're going to do for the rest of the meeting, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Tolmie asked his question in English, but I didn't get the interpretation into French. I wanted to intervene when the minister was speaking, but I couldn't hear the question. However, I did hear the answer.

The Chair: All right. I believe a technician has tried to call Mr. Tolmie.

[*English*]

If you want to share your time, maybe one of your colleagues will be.... We have one minute left.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: If everybody can switch off their microphones in the room, I'll speak.

I just have one more question, Minister—

• (1205)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Mr. Chair, on a point of order, the interpreters—

The Chair: No, it's not good for the translation. It's not working. I'm so sorry.

Who would like to take this last minute?

I will invite Mr. Dowdell to take one minute.

Mr. Terry Dowdall (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I've been on this committee for just a short period of time. Since I've been here, there have been three issues, and quite frankly all three have been a fail. We have MAID, we have the contract and now the backlog, which seems to be quite consistent.

I know that in most organizations.... I don't know if there have been performance reviews on how this department is run. I've been very disappointed with it, so I'm curious about that. In most organizations, even in an NHL hockey team, for instance, if they have this kind of treatment, usually the coach or general manager or somebody has to come forward and come clean. From what I've seen from this, I'm extremely disappointed.

Minister, you sat here and said basically that nothing seems to be your responsibility, whether it's the investigation.... I get that it's separate, but there has to be some onus on you for the disappointment that's going on—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Dowdall.

You have 15 seconds, please, Minister.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Yes, I do have a responsibility: to make sure that we deliver to veterans in as timely a manner as possible the programs that we put in place.

The backlog is down from 22,000 to 8,400 or 8,500. We are working full time to make sure we address the backlog. We're working to make sure that veterans receive the compensation they truly deserve. We have done that, and we'll continue to do that.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dowdall.

Now I invite, for the last question on this panel, Mr. Churence Rogers, for five minutes or less.

Mr. Churence Rogers (Bonavista—Burin—Trinity, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you for being here again. You and your officials have been frequent visitors to this committee, and your contribution is appreciated in order to rectify some misconceptions or to provide some facts on the things that have been addressed with regard to the new rehab contract.

I know that I've been mystified by some of the responses we've gotten from some of our witnesses at some points in time, and I've sought clarification. I'm happy to hear that the deputy minister and you are rectifying some of these comments.

I realize that it is really challenging to move to a new system. Every time you move to a new system, of course, there are people who challenge what you do because they are so used to doing things in a certain way.

What I want to ask you is, what exactly will this contract do? You can repeat it for the record. Also, what is different from the two previous contracts that were in place? How many veterans will be supported by the services provided under this new contract?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: The fact is that there will be over 14,000 veterans served with this contract. The contract will, at this time, have 9,000 experts in 600 locations across Canada. Both numbers will go up when need be to make sure we can serve veterans right across the country and make sure they receive what they should receive when they need to receive it. That's what we're trying to do.

As to the transition, it's fair to say it was quite seamless. The reason is that the department had sessions with employees before this transition came into play.

I'll let the deputy expand on that, but you're right.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Previous to the unrolling of this contract, there were two contracts. One focused on medical and psychosocial, and one focused on vocational. This new contract is a single contract where all of these converge. What that does is allow a veteran to have one plan that addresses all of those areas. A plan will

be developed with a case manager, and it will be supported by rehabilitation service experts. This list of experts is accessible to them right across the country.

We're beginning with those 9,000 experts on those points of service for those 14,000 veterans in 600 locations, as the minister indicated. We'll look to increase that to ensure that more service providers are there to support veterans in the communities, and with the needs they have in those communities.

This provides a one-stop shop for the veteran with their case manager. It provides case managers with access to people who will chase down all the information they need. It will help book appointments and ensure that the paperwork is in place, so there aren't any obstacles to getting those appointments and getting the follow-up appointments that are so necessary.

It's good for the veteran in terms of access and information, and it's good for the case manager in terms of allowing them more time with the veteran.

• (1210)

Mr. Churence Rogers: I want to ask you this. Will there be any case manager job losses because of this new contract? Should rehab, psychosocial, and vocational services be provided in-house by Veterans Affairs? Has Veterans Affairs ever directly provided these services in-house?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: No, there will be no case managers losing their jobs.

Mr. Rogers, you and I talked about this in Newfoundland, about how far some people have to drive. What we did was combine the two contracts into one to make sure that the case manager just has to go to one contractor. As the deputy said, there are about 15-16 hours of work per month taken away from the case worker to make sure that the case worker can dedicate that time to the veteran.

As I indicated many times, what we are doing with this contract is providing the service we should be providing to veterans when they need it and where they need it. You and I discussed mileage, and what it could be, so it's pretty important for rural areas, smaller areas across the country, to have access to a contract like this.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rogers.

[Translation]

This concludes our discussion with the first panel of witnesses.

[English]

Witnesses, I invite you to stay.

[Translation]

We will suspend so the next panel can settle in and conduct the sound checks.

[English]

Also, we will make sure that everything is okay with our colleague, Fraser Tolmie.

[Translation]

We are suspended.

• (1210) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1215)

[English]

The Chair: We can now proceed to the second panel of this meeting.

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(5), the committee is undertaking the study of supplementary estimates (B), 2022-23: votes 1b and 5b under the Department of Veterans Affairs, referred to the committee on Thursday, November 17, 2022.

We still have with us the Honourable Lawrence MacAulay, Minister of Veterans Affairs; Paul Ledwell, deputy minister; and Steven Harris, assistant deputy minister, service delivery branch.

Now we add to our witnesses Ms. Sara Lantz, acting assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and corporate services branch; Ken MacKillop, associate deputy minister, by video conference; Amy Meunier, assistant deputy minister, commemoration and public affairs branch, by video conference; and Pierre Tessier, assistant deputy minister, strategic policy, planning and performance branch, by video conference.

[Translation]

The time is now 12:22 p.m. I will allow Minister MacAulay five minutes for his opening statement.

A reminder to the members that, if we want to table our report on supplementary estimates (B), 2022-23 in the House, we will have to reserve the last 10 minutes of the meeting to discuss it before voting.

[English]

I would like to invite the Honourable Lawrence MacAulay for five minutes, please.

• (1220)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and members.

I will move on to supplementary estimates (B).

For a department like ours, where more than 90% of the budget represents payments to veterans, it's important that we conduct regular budgetary reviews to make sure that we're on track to meet the needs of our clients.

Our benefits are demand-driven, so no matter how many veterans come forward, when eligible, they will receive their benefits. They are based on estimates, and the process guarantees that whenever a veteran comes to our department this year, next year or beyond, the benefits will be available.

Over the past several years, significant investments by the government and numerous changes at Veterans Affairs have resulted in a noticeable improvement in service delivery. In fact, since 2016, we have invested well over \$11 billion to ensure that veterans get

services and benefits when they need them. This is \$2 billion per year more in the pockets of veterans than the previous government.

Regarding the backlog for disability benefits, the government continues to make investments to bring it down. The \$140 million we invested earlier this year is helping to continue to reduce the backlog and wait times for veterans. I am happy to report that in the past two years the number of applications over the service standard has been cut by more than half, from 23,000 in 2020 to 8,653 today. Average wait times for veterans have been reduced from 43 weeks to 25 weeks. This is a significant improvement in service from where these numbers used to be, but we all agree that there's more work to do. By next summer, we expect to have the backlog under control and meeting our service standard.

As you can see, Mr. Chair, these supplementary estimates add \$78.8 million to our current year's budget, a 1.4% increase. This includes \$52.9 million of the \$140 million to extend disability adjudication resources. Through these estimates, the department will also receive \$14 million of the \$43 million announced last month to allow us to retain case managers and other frontline team members who serve veterans every day.

These investments in case managers allow the department to better support veterans with complex needs. Among those needs is mental health. Last April, we launched a new mental health benefit that allows for immediate coverage for treatment for anxiety, depression and trauma-related disorders. You will see that the estimates include access to \$8.4 million to support development of the mental health benefits program. Since April, over 1,500 veterans have received support through this program, and many more will receive support in the coming weeks and months.

The department has also been proactive in reaching out to veterans who might be vulnerable. Throughout the pandemic, thousands have received phone calls and follow-ups from Veterans Affairs Canada staff checking in on their well-being. As always, we remain grateful to our many partners across the country who work with us to support veterans on the ground and make sure former members are able to lead healthy and productive lives.

Soldier On, for example, was part of bringing the Invictus Games to Vancouver-Whistler in 2025. For Canada, it will be a great honour to host ill and injured veterans and still serving members from 20 nations. Over the next three years, the government is contributing \$15 million in funding to help organize and deliver the games. These estimates include \$2.3 million for that investment to help support the effort.

I can ensure you, Mr. Chair and all members of the committee, that these supplementary estimates represent an important and necessary investment in the health and well-being of our veterans and their families.

Thank you so much.

• (1225)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Now, I'd like to tell you that we're going to have only one round of questions, of six minutes each, but members can split their time with a colleague.

For the first question, I'd like to invite Mrs. Cathay Wagantall for six minutes or less.

Please go ahead, Mrs. Wagantall.

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

Thank you, Minister, for being here today. I appreciate it.

You mentioned the billions of dollars available for veterans. However, we have had a serious issue with not being able to supply those dollars because of the backlogs. I understand that they're becoming more reasonable over time, but I have to ask why it seems that it's taking so long for VAC to understand what the... I hear case managers saying that they're overloaded and they need more, with a long-term vision for serving our veterans. This has been a huge issue.

Is there a plan to actually make sure those dollars get out the door and those programs get out the door the way they need to, with the use of our case managers in numbers that will actually provide for the needs of our veterans?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much. It's a good question.

In fact, it's true that the backlog was large, but as I indicated, it's down to well under 8,000. We have to bring that to the national standard, and we will.

On case managers, we have had a major investment in case managers and hired quite a number, to make sure they remain in place for another three-year period in order to make sure that we address the backlog and that veterans receive the funding they should receive.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: So my understanding—

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: But as I indicated quite clearly—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Yes. I understand what you're saying, Minister—

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: —we do put \$2 billion extra—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Chair...?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: —into veterans' pockets than the previous government did. So we are getting some money out.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Here's the thing, though, Minister. Those case managers who were brought on were brought on temporarily, because the idea is that we just need to deal with this problem and then it will disappear and go away. But clearly, our case managers are managing far more than 25 files each. That potential will remain there. We have veterans who, rather than getting the

best service possible, have been surviving through a lot of sanctuary trauma.

I want to bring to your attention, too, with regard to the mental health funding you mentioned, that right now, as you know, we're dealing with a horrific crisis in regard to MAID and what has been happening within VAC. We're dealing with its impact not just on actual individuals coming forward who have been impacted directly. There is now, indirectly, a sense of frustration and horror about those circumstances. Yet we're saying, on the one hand, that their mental health is so important to us.

Can you tell me what is going to be done to make it very clear that MAID will no longer be considered within Veterans Affairs Canada so that the mental health service can actually now basically begin to deal with an issue that has grown exponentially because of the circumstances around veterans being directly offered MAID as a means of dealing with their mental health issues?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

As you're aware, MAID never was, and will not be, anything that should be offered by Veterans Affairs Canada.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: It should not be offered.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: It should not be offered. MAID is dealt with between the doctor and the patient only. Veterans Affairs never did offer, and will not be offering, MAID consultations. That will not take place.

• (1230)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: But sir, they are; Veterans Affairs is.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Yes, you're right; a problem arose, and that's why I asked my deputy to conduct an investigation, to take every means possible to make sure that this does not happen again. That's exactly what he did.

I just want to say that if you have any information that would help us to clean this up and make sure that it doesn't happen again, we want it.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay. I would be pleased to contribute to that.

Have you asked all veterans to indicate to you directly whether or not they have been approached to consider MAID as an option for the treatment of their issues? Have you asked that question of the veterans community, to please come forward if that has been the case?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: As I've said many, many times—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Yes or no?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: —we want to make sure that any veteran who has had anything like this happen, or has been offered MAID, comes forward and brings the information forward—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: What is the vehicle, sir, for them to bring it forward?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: —so that we can deal with it—even the RCMP was involved in this investigation—and bring it to a complete conclusion—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Excuse me, Minister.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: —to make sure that veterans feel safe to come to Veterans Affairs Canada.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: You are the minister. Can you tell me exactly what vehicle is available to them? How have you been communicating that to them? What avenue do they have specifically to bring forward their concerns in regard to MAID being offered to them personally?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

If they wish, they can contact Veterans Affairs Canada, or they can contact the ombudsperson.

I would let the deputy expand on that.

We want to make sure that anybody who has any problem...please, bring it forward. We need the information.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: If I could, Mr. Chair, to the member's question, we have not sent out a specific request to every veteran in the country asking them to come forward as a result of this. However, given the attention of this at committee and given the attention through the media—quite rightly, given the significance of this—I think it's been very clear that if anyone has had this experience, we've asked them to come forward.

As the minister indicated two weeks ago at committee, if a veteran is not comfortable coming forward to the department, either through the minister or through me as the deputy, we've invited them to come to the ombudsman, which is an independent office and a safe place to raise this issue—

The Chair: Mr. Ledwell, I'm so sorry.

Mrs. Wagantall, it's over.

Now let's go to MP Darrell Samson for six minutes or less.

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

Thank you all for being here today. It's extremely important, and we appreciate the information that you're providing us on the various topics. That would be the rehab—you were able to clarify some very important facts—and now on the supplementary estimates.

The word that I want to touch on is “facts”. I think the facts are the key here. When I became MP in 2015, I was very disappointed, to be very honest, that our numbers in the backlog were so high. We invested \$11 million and what we were doing was adding new programs to support veterans, like the income replacement, the pension for life options, the well-being fund and the emergency fund. Those were key elements, but the numbers weren't going down, and I was asking what was happening and what was causing this.

I think I got the answer. The answer is, one, that the new benefits added more applicants. We've seen that. The facts show that there are a lot more applicants.

The other factor—let's not hide from that—is that the former government in 2013-14, before the election, cut the budgets on the back of our men and women who served. We saw cuts in two major areas. There were nine offices right across the country.... I know.

I'm from Nova Scotia, and we have a large population. We were very upset, because we lost that office in Sydney. We then saw over 1,000 frontline employees fired.

By rehiring all of those people and reopening all of those offices.... It takes a long time to find the personnel and do the training.

Those two factors are why, in my understanding today, the backlog was so big. Maybe you can talk about that.

There's also the fact that we're seeing the backlog.... It's not enough. We need to be at zero. Get me straight clear. We need to be at zero, but I'm so happy that we went from 22,000 to 8,500. Tell us a bit about how things are improving in that way, because we have to get to zero. It's crucial.

• (1235)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

Yes, without question, when we formed government, we had to hire a lot of people and we had to train a lot of people. When I became minister, I indicated that my number one, main priority was to address the backlog, and we have done that to an extent. It's not good enough, but we have invested millions of dollars in making sure that we brought it down. As you know, it was at 23,000 and it's now at around 8,500. We hope to bring it to the national standard. It won't be zero, because there are a lot of complicated cases that take time, and everybody understands that, but we must make sure that we continue on the path we're on.

Yes, there were a lot of reasons for people to apply, and new applications have increased by 50% now. Sometimes it's higher, but now it's about 50%. People feel very comfortable coming to Veterans Affairs Canada, and we want to make sure that they continue to feel comfortable coming to Veterans Affairs Canada, because they deserve to receive the programs that we've put in place in order to make sure they have as good a life as they can, because they stood up for us when we needed them.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you very much, Minister, for that answer.

The second thing I heard a lot about during the 2012-15 period was the loss of the pension for life option. They were getting a lump sum. It was good for some and not so good for others, from what I understand. We brought in the pension for life option. Can you tell me how many people, since we brought it back in, have taken advantage of that very important pension for life?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

A pension for life, of course, is something I would support strongly. There are two options. Of course, it's up to the veteran to decide which option they want to take.

I'm sure the deputy or some of my officials would have figures on that.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: We'll ask Steven to do that.

Mr. Steven Harris: I'll have to come back to you on the exact figures of who has taken pension for life. It's a suite of three programs. It's pain and suffering compensation, additional pain and suffering compensation, and an income replacement benefit.

The number of people who have taken a lump sum versus a long-term monthly payment varies and has varied since it came into effect in 2019. We'd be happy to provide that number right back to you and to the committee.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Could you provide that to the chair, please? I'd appreciate it if you could provide that information to the chair, which would be very important.

The other change that took place about six months ago, which we announced, is crucial. Mental health is so important for all Canadians. It's very important for our veterans as well, but we just can't have veterans with mental health challenges wait for services. They have to get the services immediately.

What have we done to support our veterans in mental health?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

I think you're aware that we announced a program of \$140 million. When veterans come forward with mental health problems, they can access the funding immediately. This is so important. When you deal with the issue right off, it's so important. Six thousand veterans have signed up and 1,500 are actually getting funds from this \$140-million asset. It's quite important.

If you deal with the problem as soon as you can, there's a better chance of fixing the problem. That's what we feel.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Samson.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

Minister, I just want to clarify something regarding the remarks you made an hour ago. You said that the employee who had offered a veteran medical assistance in dying was a service agent, not a case manager. Is that in fact what you said?

[*English*]

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Ledwell: She was a service agent.

Mr. Luc Desilets: All right.

Minister, I'll ask you another question since you're here.

Under these votes, you're requesting \$43.1 million to extend the contracts of temporary employees. Here in the committee, we suggested that you hire permanent employees. As you can understand, in a period of employment uncertainty such as the one we're now

in, it's always preferable to have permanent employees because there's a good chance we can retain them longer.

You said you partly agreed with our recommendation. Can you tell me why you only agree in part.

• (1240)

[*English*]

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much, Mr. Desilets.

My responsibility is to make sure we have the people in place to serve the veterans in as timely a way as possible. That's what I have done. That's why we have the extra funding for the caseworkers. It's to make sure they continue doing what they do.

As you're fully aware, we're on the right path, but we haven't gotten there yet. We need to reduce the backlog to the national standard. We will do that by next summer, but it's a task. We have to make sure we do it.

You're also fully aware, I know, that we implemented a lot of programs. You fully agreed with those programs. They're vitally important to veterans, too.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I'll put the question do you in a different way.

Don't you think that permanent positions would be more attractive than temporary positions such as the ones we currently have.

You may answer with a yes or a no, as in the House.

[*English*]

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much, Mr. Desilets.

As you know and as I indicated, my responsibility is to make sure we have the people in place to serve the veterans when they need to be served. That is what I will continue to do.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: You'd make a good politician.

Mr. Harris, on October 27, 2020, you stated that the department's objective would be to reduce the claims backlog to 5,000 by March of this year. The minister presented something else earlier, but the only figures we currently have aren't at all trending in that direction. We aren't talking about 8,500 pending claims today, but rather 10,144.

What's your reaction? What's going on? Are you short of funding? Is predictability the problem?

Mr. Steven Harris: The backlog is now 8,600 claims.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Where did you get that number? We have none of that in—

Mr. Steven Harris: The figures on our website aren't always up to date. To be more precise, the total as of today is 8,653 claims.

Mr. Luc Desilets: That's as of today.

Mr. Steven Harris: Yes.

Mr. Luc Desilets: If that's the case, that's fantastic, except that we have a problem: we're working with the figures we have at our disposal, and what you're saying is absolutely inconsistent with the figures we currently have.

Do you think the idea that one day there might be no claims backlog is realistic?

Mr. Steven Harris: That will never happen because our service standard is to process 80% of claims within 16 weeks. There are reasons for that. There are some very complex cases, and there may be delays in gathering information. Consequently, some claims will always take more more than 16 weeks to process.

Mr. Luc Desilets: You'd like to reduce the backlog to 5,000 claims. You assume that the number of claims will remain the same over time, don't you?

Mr. Steven Harris: We prepare estimates, but the number of claims may fluctuate. We always monitor the number of monthly and yearly claims very closely to ensure that we have enough people to meet estimated needs. We always encourage veterans to submit claims to us as soon as they can.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I have no reason to doubt that, but, if the backlog is 8,500 claims, does that mean you've received fewer claims in recent weeks and months? There has to be some consistency in the number of claims in order to maintain that number. Have there been fewer claims?

Mr. Steven Harris: There haven't been fewer claims. We have more people processing them. Consequently, the number of decisions made has risen, which has reduced the backlog.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Explain something to me.

You cited a service standard of 80% of claims. Why that percentage?

In the medical system, and even in teaching, where I used to be, people strive for high but realistic standards and objectives. If a 100% standard isn't realistic, what would have to be done to achieve it? After all, we want to get better.

Mr. Steven Harris: The goal is to reach 100%. Two years ago, we were able to make a decision within 16 weeks in only 30% of cases. In the last quarter of the year, we hit 60%. Consequently, we're improving, but we still have a lot of work to do. We've made a lot more decisions, which will help us meet our 80% service standard.

• (1245)

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

[*English*]

Now, for the last question, I'd like to invite Ms. Rachel Blaney for six minutes or less.

Go ahead, please.

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

I want to get back to the fact that the AG did a report in May 2022 that was quite concerning to me. She expressed, very clearly, that the service standard had not been met in seven years, and that 80% of veterans applying for disability benefits for the first time were waiting about 39 weeks—which, of course, is a lot longer than the service standard of 16 weeks.

What I found most compelling and fascinating about the report was the fact that the Auditor General said, repeatedly, that the data collection in VAC is so poor that it's impossible to identify where the bottlenecks are, or whether the solutions proposed or resources put into the system are actually working in a meaningful way. That concerns me a lot. This is the very core of accountability: having a data system that is clear enough to know that, if an improvement is offered or an announcement is made, it's actually going to mean something substantive for veterans.

I'm wondering whether there are any discussions happening at the department around cleaning up this data collection system, so that bottlenecks can be identified and, when an actual solution is proposed, there's a way to measure whether it's fixing the problem that the announcement around dollars said it would.

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

We're always working to improve our systems, no matter what. We will continue to do that.

There's no question that we have made major investments in the backlog. We haven't gotten to where we should and will be. We will be there by next summer. That's a commitment we made and will meet. We want to make sure veterans receive it in a timely manner. Now—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Sir, I don't want to interrupt, and I definitely don't want to hurt the interpreters by arguing over one another, but I really just want to know clearly, are there any discussions about addressing the issue of data, which is such a major problem?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: I'll let the deputy respond to that but, as I said, we're working continually to make sure we have the proper systems in place.

Thank you.

Mr. Paul Ledwell: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

The short answer is, yes, there are extensive discussions going on, both within the department and with other parts of government that are equally challenged with reporting on and tracking data.

In addition to the investment around personnel, the department is making significant investment around automation and digitization, as well as process improvements. One of the great benefits we have now that is increasing in its use is the number of veterans who come forward through a My VAC account. It allows for the assurance that the applications are complete and that the information is connected and it's more easily tracked. That, frankly, builds up our ability to track each of those applications as they go through the system to understand where the perennial organizational challenges may be and how we can invest and correct those challenges.

That's a very active undertaking to make the process more seamless for the veteran and to make the process more smooth in the department.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you. I will assume, then, that the next time we see an Auditor General's report there will be a substantive change. I will wait for that.

I just want to come back to this one part, though, which is the fact that from 2019 to 2020 there was 8% lapsed, almost 9% lapsed, spending for Veterans Affairs, and between 2020 and 2021 it was 11.6%. Just to give people a sense of that, it's over \$630 million that was there in the department and not spent. There obviously seem to be resources there. I'm just wondering why these resources were not used to address the data concern. I figure you'd probably be able to get a pretty good system with that kind of money.

I also want to recognize, and I'm going to give you a very short time to answer this, that still with the marriage after 60, which you all know I'm going to continue to fight forever because I think it is absolutely wrong that a veteran who finds someone who loves them and will care for them in their aging years has nothing to leave for their survivor.... We know that in terms of the funds for this veterans survivor fund, there's still nothing going to survivors.

When there are those kinds of resources, why aren't we seeing them, one, invested in data so those systems are fixed so the veterans have transparency and we know where the problem is, and two, invested so that people, survivors of veterans, who have cared for and loved veterans, for very many years in some cases, actually get a little bit of support instead of living in destitute poverty?

• (1250)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Ms. Blaney, I think on the first issue you know very well what the answer is. Of course, there has to always be enough funding there to make sure that we provide the funding for the veteran when the veteran applies. The problem is that it's a lot of money and a lot of money returned, but we have to always be sure that the money is there. That money is not lost. That money is there for the next year and the next year, to make sure that the veterans receive the benefits they should receive.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Okay, thank you for that. I hear the answer to that question.

My last question is this. I would like to have an explanation about why VAC is the only federal department whose main office is not in Ottawa. Why is that the case? What is the impact of that?

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

It works very well in Charlottetown. I think Veterans Affairs Canada works with thousands of staff, and they do an awful lot to make sure they improve the lives of veterans. They have done that and will continue to do that.

Thank you so much.

If I am leaving, I just want to thank you, Mr. Chair, for the time and for giving me the opportunity to do both because I have an appointment on Thursday that I cannot miss, but I also want to thank everybody on the committee and the veterans who are here for coming here because it's so important.

We're all working together to make it better. Thanks to everybody.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister, but please stay for a few minutes, because we have to vote on the supplementary estimates.

[*Translation*]

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Vote 1b—Operating expenditures.....\$62,894,446

Vote 5b—Grants and contributions..... \$2,000,000

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

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you. That's what we'll do.

With that, I want to thank all the witnesses who have appeared before our committee today.

For this second part, concerning supplementary estimates (B) 2022-23, I want to thank the Hon. Lawrence MacAulay, MP and Minister of Veterans Affairs, and the departmental witnesses: Paul Ledwell, Deputy Minister; Steven Harris, Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery Branch; Sara Lantz, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Chief Financial Officer and Corporate Services Branch; Ken MacKillop, Associate Deputy Minister; Amy Meunier, Assistant Deputy Minister, Commemoration and Public Affairs Branch; and, lastly, Pierre Tessier, Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance Branch.

I also take this opportunity to thank our entire support team: the interpreters, the technical team and the clerks.

The meeting is adjourned.

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