



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

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# Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

EVIDENCE

**NUMBER 041**

Monday, March 20, 2023

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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg





## Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Monday, March 20, 2023

• (1535)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)):** This meeting is called to order.

Welcome to meeting number 41 of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[*English*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on Thursday, March 9, 2023, the committee is undertaking its study on the subject matter of the supplementary estimates (C), 2022-23, votes 1c and 5c under the Department of Veterans Affairs and vote 1c under—

**Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC):** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

You mentioned that this meeting is pursuant to the motion that was passed by the committee on March 9. That motion indicated that this minister should be here for two hours. I note in the notice of meeting that the minister will only be here for one hour.

Can you explain why that is the case, or if you can't, could the minister explain?

**The Chair:** I heard your point, Mr. Richards, but I have some procedure that I have to read first because this is a public meeting. Let me finish, and I will answer your question.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4) and the motion adopted on March 9, 2023, the committee will now begin its study of the Main Estimates 2023-2024. We will be examining votes 1 and 5 for the Department of Veterans Affairs, and vote 1, under the heading of “Veterans Review and Appeal Board”, which were referred to the committee on February 15, 2023.

This meeting is taking place in hybrid format pursuant to the House order of Thursday, June 23, 2022. Some of the members and witnesses are attending in person.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules for witnesses and members to follow.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are participating by videoconference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. When you are not speaking, your mic should be on mute.

A reminder that all comments must be directed through the chair.

Pursuant to the internal economy motion regarding sign-on tests, I can inform the committee that the witnesses completed the required tests before the meeting.

[*English*]

I would like to welcome Ms. Lisa Marie Barron, who replaces Ms. Blaney. Thank you for being here with us.

I'd also like to welcome our witnesses. Welcome to the Honourable Lawrence MacAulay, Minister of Veterans Affairs.

• (1540)

[*Translation*]

We welcome the following officials from the Department of Veterans Affairs: Paul Ledwell, deputy minister; Ken MacKillop, associate deputy minister, by videoconference; Amy Meunier, assistant deputy minister, commemoration and public affairs branch, by videoconference; Steven Harris, assistant deputy minister, service delivery branch; Pierre Tessier, assistant deputy minister, strategic policy, planning and performance branch, who is with us in person; and Jonathan Adams, acting director general and acting chief financial officer, finance.

To answer Mr. Blake's question, there was indeed a motion and the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure did its work. There was some question about inviting the minister for the review of the Supplementary Estimates (C) 2022-2023 and the Main Estimates 2022-2023. From the communications we have received, the minister is available for one hour only. That is why I agreed to send an invitation to appear for one hour. The departmental officials, on the other hand, will be with us for the entire two hours of the meeting.

The members of the committee are free to debate the main estimates and the supplementary estimates.

[*English*]

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I don't want to belabour this, because we have only an hour with the minister, but was anything done to find out why the minister is failing to comply with what we asked of him?

**The Chair:** We contacted the minister's office, and he was available for only one hour. We will have plenty of time during this session, so maybe the minister will be able to answer your questions.

Right now—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Mr. Chair, I'll just point out that if the minister chooses not to comply in the future, I think it would be disrespectful to the committee for you as chair to endeavour to find out why and to hold him to account a little bit on what the committee is expecting. I think it's incumbent upon the minister to show some respect for the committee and comply with what we're asking. He's here in Ottawa, clearly, so he should be able to be here for the two hours.

I'll leave it at that.

**The Chair:** Okay. Let's start.

[Translation]

Minister, you have five minutes to deliver your opening remarks. The committee members will then have questions for you.

Please go ahead.

[English]

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

Thank you for having me here today. It's a pleasure to be here, and it's always a pleasure to come to the committee. I'd like to thank you for your recent work on veterans employment, and I look forward to receiving your report and recommendations.

I'm here today to discuss the main estimates and supplementary estimates (C).

On the main estimates, you will see funding to extend disability adjudication resources for another year, as set out in budgets 2020 and 2021. This will help us to continue to reduce the backlog.

I know you all have a keen interest in where we're at in reducing the backlog, so I'm pleased to share with you that the backlog presently sits at 6,800, which is more than a 70% reduction since its peak of more than 23,000 in 2020. We're on track to meet the service standard by the end of the summer.

We also received additional funding to support mental health benefit programs. These programs allow veterans to immediately receive mental health care when they apply for disability benefits for an eligible mental health condition and to maintain this support until a decision is made on the application or for up to two years from the time the application is received.

On the supplementary estimates (C), you will see requests that are specific to the department's commemorative activities. Remembering our fallen and the important battles that have marked Canadian military history is vitally important. This is why, these estimates contain funding requests for our commemorative infrastructure in Europe.

Last year we learned that a commercial development threatened the Juno Beach Centre and the surrounding land. We worked closely with the Juno Beach Centre association and French authorities to jointly purchase the land. As part of my European trip last month, I was able to congratulate everyone involved. The \$4 million in these estimates will help to protect the site from any future development. I can assure you that every dollar noted in the main estimates and supplementary estimates (C) will make a significant difference for

veterans and their families and in our efforts to honour Canadian military service abroad.

The department's annual budget is \$2 billion higher than it was when we formed government. That is money going directly into the pockets of veterans.

I would also like to note that I was pleased to provide the committee with the investigative report into inappropriate conversations with veterans about medical assistance in dying. You have all had the chance to review the findings, and I hope that, like me, you are relieved to know that these isolated incidents, though terrible, are not indicative of a more systemic issue.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'll be pleased to try to answer your questions.

• (1545)

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

We're going to start our rounds of questions of six minutes each right now. I invite the first vice-chair of the committee, Mr. Blake Richards, to begin.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Minister, first of all, thank you for being here. I wish you were here for the amount of time we'd asked you for, but I appreciate that you are here.

However, I will say this: I've had this role as your shadow minister for about six months now, and I've taken the opportunity to meet and visit with veterans across this country. The first thing I will say is that many times what they're telling me is, "We're so glad someone's listening." They feel like you and your government aren't listening.

Second, they're pointing out things like lack of service for many of the claims they need to live their lives. At a meeting recently, I brought up the point that the service standard is 16 weeks. There was laughter throughout the room, because they know that is just not anywhere near what's happening right now. There was literally laughter at the idea that this was the standard. They were not feeling that it's being met. There is a new switchover of a contract that's leaving veterans without services. There is just....

I could go on and on, but I think what it really boils down to is a saying that we've all heard, and veterans use it consistently: "Deny. Delay. Die." It's the way they feel they're being treated.

It all comes to a real head when we talk about this medical assistance in dying fiasco that we've seen in your department. It really, I think, hits home hard for a lot of veterans, who feel that they're not getting the consideration they deserve. Then, on top of it, there's the insult that it's being suggested to some of their comrades that maybe they should consider ending their lives. It's something that needs to be taken seriously.

I looked through the report that you mentioned in your opening comments. I looked through that report. It seems as though you basically asked employees to self-report if they did something wrong, and maybe did a keyword search of some files.

It also notes that there were as many as 19 other veterans who came forward and indicated that they had these discussions brought up to them inappropriately as well, but you found that none of those were valid allegations. Are you saying that those veterans were all lying?

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

If you have met these people, all I would ask you is why you didn't bring it forward.

You know that I asked for an investigation led by the deputy minister. If you don't press the deputy minister, you could go to the ombudsperson—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** No, you're making an allegation, Minister. I'll tell—

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** If you don't press the ombudsperson, you could go to the RCMP. If you have information that indicates this took place, why would you not bring the information forward when you're asked to do it?

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Do you know why veterans are afraid to come forward to your department, to you? They're afraid of repercussions. Your department's already not providing them with the services they need. They feel that it will be even worse for them if they come forward.

I've talked to many veterans and I've encouraged them to come forward, but they tell me they're afraid to come forward because they're afraid your department will give them repercussions for it. That's why they're not coming forward, Minister.

When you have a report that comes out that says that up to 19 more of them have come forward with allegations, and you're telling us that you found there's nothing inappropriate that occurred, how do you think that makes veterans feel? It really sounds as though you're saying that you think they're lying. Is that what you're saying? Why are you not believing these veterans? Why are you not taking their allegations seriously?

• (1550)

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Mr. Richards, you were asked by the government. Do you not trust public servants? Do you not trust the ombudsperson? Do you not trust the RCMP? If you have six or 19 and you're bringing these figures forward, we would ask you, for the sake of the veterans whom you seem to meet, who are so fearful of us—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** This isn't about me, Minister—

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** If they're fearful of us, I would like to hope that you would bring up what you did for veterans when you were in government—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** This isn't about me. This is about you.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I hope you brought that up—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** This is about the veterans—

**The Chair:** Excuse me. You know the rule. We have interpretation, so we have to wait for your turn. If you ask a question for about two minutes, you have to allow about two minutes or so for the answer.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** It sounds like he's—

**The Chair:** Minister, you have the floor. Just conclude. We have one minute and 20 seconds left so—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** It sounded to me as though he'd concluded, Chair.

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Mr. Richards—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** This is not about me. This is about—

**The Chair:** I gave the floor to the minister because—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I've asked the minister a question, and he's refusing to answer it.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I am very pleased to answer your question, Mr. Richards.

**The Chair:** I said the minister has the floor.

Please, Minister, go ahead.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I appreciate that.

If my honourable colleague is meeting veterans who are fearful of Veterans Affairs, I wish he'd bring that forward. We want to make sure that we serve veterans every way we possibly can to make sure they receive their benefits at an appropriate time.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC):** I have a point of order—

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Mr. Richards is fully aware that this government has put \$2 billion per year into the pockets of veterans more than when his government was in power. He's also aware that we have asked—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Come on. There's a point of order.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** —everybody to bring any information they have forward to the RCMP—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** There's a point of order.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** —to the ombudsperson—

**The Chair:** Minister, please. I have a point of order, so I have to listen.

Please go ahead.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I really do not believe that the principle that you have chosen to apply here is actually an accurate one. We have a minister here, and I have asked him a direct question. He's not answering the question. He's going off on all sorts of other things because he's trying to fill the time. You've given him the opportunity by providing the power for him to do that, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** It's not a point of order. I don't want to have any cacophony—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I'm allotted six minutes, Mr. Chair. I should get the opportunity to ask questions—

**The Chair:** No, just a minute, Mr. Richards—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** —and not listen to a speech from the minister.

**The Chair:** Mr. Richards, please. We have two hours for the meeting. I said that you know the rules, and there's not supposed to be any cacophony around here. The translation group has problems translating if we go back and forth. You asked a question, so please wait for the answer.

Go ahead, Mrs. Wagantall.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Thank you so much, Chair.

I just would like to challenge you on your interpretation here. I agree that we can't all be talking at once. I struggle with that a bit myself, so I apologize.

That said, it is the member who has the floor to ask the questions and determine when they're ready to go to another question. I believe that's the case. Can you just quickly clarify that?

**The Chair:** Yes. In the committee, when someone asks a question, let's say he has about six minutes. If he asks a question for four minutes, he has to allow the witness to answer the question. I don't say that the witness should take four minutes too, but allow him enough time to answer the question. It was that situation of answering the question. As you know, it's not for me to judge if the question is related or not—

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** No, nor to determine the time for the member to ask the number of questions they want to ask.

**The Chair:** Yes, but we must allow enough time for the witnesses to be—

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** That's a judgment you're making, when it's up to the member to determine when they want to move on to another question and do it appropriately.

**The Chair:** Okay, great.

Mr. Richards, you have 30 seconds left in your six minutes. Please go ahead.

• (1555)

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Let me ask it another way, Minister.

What did you do? Did anyone at the department speak to any of these veterans to determine what happened, any of the veterans that you indicated came to you? Name a—

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Of course, Mr. Richards, they attempted to contact veterans and they did contact veterans. They always contact veterans—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** And they determined that they couldn't believe the veteran?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Are you going to determine how I answer? This committee has changed a lot. Normally you ask the questions and I give the answer. You don't dictate to me how I answer.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Mr. Minister, you spoke to them. Did you—

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** What I'm telling you is yes. The department did contact veterans, and if you do not wish for me to answer, that's okay—

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, Minister. I'm sorry, everyone. The six minutes is over now.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** You're not answering. That's a problem, Minister. You're telling me that you don't believe them—

**The Chair:** Excuse me. You have no mike. The time is over.

Now I invite Mr. Miao for six minutes or less, please.

**Mr. Wilson Miao (Richmond Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister and officials, for joining us today to discuss the supplementary estimates (C) and the main estimates. It's always great to talk to you about the important work you are doing for veterans at Veterans Affairs.

I also want to acknowledge your visit to Vancouver recently to tour the new Legion Veterans Village in Surrey and the centre of excellence for veterans and first responders, which is focusing on PTSD and mental health as well as mixed medical and rehabilitation services.

In your opening remarks, you spoke about the threat that was facing the Juno Beach Centre last year, and many members, including me, heard from our constituents in large numbers about the concerns surrounding this proposed condominium development on the land next to the centre. Can you please tell this committee more about the funding that will help protect the land, and also discuss your recent trip to the centre? I suspect that this trip was much different from the one you took last year.

Thank you.

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

Of course, on the Legion Veterans Village, it was certainly an eye-opener to go there, and for Captain Greene, of course, anybody involved in Veterans Affairs understands what that man went through. To have explained what took place at the Legion Veterans Village and what they were able to do to rehabilitate this human being who was brutally attacked with an axe in Afghanistan is certainly heartwarming, because that's our job: to make sure that we provide for veterans everything we possibly can to make sure they lead a good life. I understand that Captain Greene is up and walking, is able to talk and is improving all the time. What a privilege it was to visit that village. They do so much.

On Juno Beach, of course, as you know, a number of people at this table were there last year when we found out that a condominium development was going to take place there. It was a very difficult situation. It's important to understand that a lot of Canadian blood was spilled on that land, which was going to be sold to a developer. A number of us went there and met the group, and then I met with my counterpart in Paris and we had a great discussion. Of course, you'll see in the supplementary estimates the \$4 million. We worked with the French government, and I want to thank the French government for being involved and so helpful in order to make sure that land was protected. That was done.

I went to Juno a few weeks ago, and it was certainly a great privilege. One of my stops was to thank the people for preserving this property. Also, I was able to announce an investment of \$11.7 million to help maintain, modernize and enhance the visitor experience at Canada's 15 overseas memorials, including Canada's National Vimy Memorial and the Beaumont-Hamel Newfoundland Memorial.

It's so important that we invest in these areas. Anybody who has been at Juno or Vimy Ridge certainly understands how important that is for Canadians.

I thank you for the question. It is vitally important to the French government and to the Canadian government and also very important to the veterans and Canadians in general, because Canadians have a great respect. We heard a lot about the development. Nobody was doing anything illegal, but there were moves made that were just totally unacceptable.

Thank you.

**Mr. Wilson Miao:** Thank you, Minister, for sharing that.

Also, I noticed there is funding earmarked for the 2025 Invictus Games in Whistler and Vancouver. The Invictus Games are an incredible experience and opportunity not just for veterans but for CAF members. Could you please speak more about this investment in the games and what this means to veterans, their families and Canadians?

• (1600)

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much, Wilson, for the question.

I have to thank so many people who worked so hard to make sure that the Invictus Games will take place in Vancouver and Whistler. It's an honour for Canadians, and it's certainly no trouble to see that it's an honour for people in Vancouver and Whistler. I did have the privilege to go there.

It's such an honour to see these veterans showcase what they can do, like when they're out demonstrating sledge hockey. They have great pride, the veterans, when they're out demonstrating that. They have great pride, and this is all about rehabilitation. It's not about winning or losing. It's to make sure they participate with other countries, with allied countries around the world.

It also was wonderful to be at the Invictus Games two years out event, which was a reception to honour the veterans and to say thank you to people. Many in the private sector invest in veterans programs, which is so important, and then there are the veterans

themselves and the people working so hard on this to make it happen. It was certainly enjoyable to see that—to see the pride in people and to see rehabilitation taking place with veterans. It is so important.

I would think that in two years Whistler and Vancouver will certainly be hopping. This is something in which many other countries, including Great Britain, France and Australia, will be participating.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

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

I now invite the second vice-chair of the committee, Luc Desilets, to take the floor for six minutes.

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

Thank you all for being here.

Thank you for joining us, Minister.

I would like to continue in the same vein as my colleague Mr. Miao. A big thank you for investing \$4 million in the Juno Beach Centre. We were there together. I put a lot of effort into this file because I believed in it. This investment of \$4 million has made it possible to move forward on this project. It was also a good opportunity for all parties to work together. The veterans benefit from this, and we are all here for them.

I do have some questions for you, however. I cannot just say nice things.

There was a \$1-billion surplus in 2023, to be precise, \$921,556,000. We all had trouble understanding that. How is it possible that such an astronomical amount was not spent?

For my part, if I had a billion dollars—I will repeat some things I have asked for in the past—I would hire more francophone review board members. This goes without saying in order to once again reduce the gap between francophones and anglophones or even eliminate it once and for all. It is a question of equity. I would recruit employees for permanent positions. A permanent position is clearly much more appealing than a temporary position or a contract. Saying that a given position will no longer be needed in a year or two is not realistic. In fact, the last 10 to 15 years have shown us that the workload is increasing, not decreasing. I was pleased to hear you talk about a number of veterans waiting. According to my information, there are 8,000 veterans waiting.

I would also hire more case managers to lighten their duties— which are not easy—and their heavy workload. In the past year, we learned that an incredibly high number of veterans were receiving services from a case manager.

I would like to ask you what happened to that billion dollars. Do you intend to reinvest it in the 2023-2024 budget for Veterans Affairs?

• (1605)

[English]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Number one, on Juno Beach, I think it was so important that it was a non-partisan group that attended that. You may very well remember the interview on that. That's so important. It really involved the French people when that interview took place and when the group at Juno Beach put on.... You saw it—it was quite a show. It was a true human feeling about veterans, which is so important.

That brought us to the point of the French government. As you know, I went on the next day and met my counterpart in Paris, as I said. Really, I have to feel that the interview had a lot to do with it. I know my deputy spoke to them in Paris. I spoke to them too, but that interview was so important. Being there was so important.

You mentioned the lapsed funding. There's been lapsed funding in Veterans Affairs for many years. What we have to do is make sure the funding is there to provide any veteran.... When their funding is approved, the money has to be there. There has to be more than is needed or we will have less than is needed, and that's not acceptable. That's been this year, last year and every year I've been in Veterans Affairs.

You mentioned positions. Of course, my job is to make sure we have the appropriate people in the appropriate places and meet the requirements for veterans as best we possibly can. You mentioned.... I think you said 6,800 veterans. That's the backlog at the moment, down from 23,000. It's so important that we continue on the track to meet the national standard. I know you care about veterans and want to make sure they receive the proper remuneration and what they deserve. We're working very hard to do that.

Thank you.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Let me ask the same question again. Will that surplus be included in the 2023-2024 budget for Veterans Affairs?

[English]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Yes, any dollars that go back to the treasury are just there for the next year to make sure that we have the funding in place so that veterans receive the appropriate remuneration. It is always there. It is not lost at all.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** If this is nothing out of the ordinary, as you said, that means we should also expect a budget surplus at the end of the next fiscal year.

[English]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Yes, you would expect it every year, I think, here at this committee. Every year at about this time,

you would get.... I've been at Veterans Affairs before, and this question always comes up, but we always have to make sure that the appropriate amount of funding is there so that we can provide funding for veterans. That's why it's there.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I don't think it was as high last year, but that's fine.

Thank you, Minister.

[English]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Can I answer?

**The Chair:** Yes, go ahead. You have 15 seconds.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Yes, it could be less, but it's always a figure more.... It might have been a bit more this year and a bit less last year, but there always has to be a surplus there to make sure we meet the requirements.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Now I'd like to invite Ms. Lisa Marie Barron to please go ahead for six minutes or less.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, NDP):** Thank you, Chair.

Welcome, Minister. I'm happy to be here today covering for my colleague, MP Rachel Blaney. I have some questions for you.

The first one is around the recent rollout of Veterans Affairs Canada in recently outsourcing two rehabilitation services to Partners in Canadian Veterans.... I'm sorry. I'm mixing up the words. It's specifically the PCVRS. I'm hearing that it's been going badly, to say the least, from union advocates, service providers, case managers and, most important, veterans. For example, Veterans Affairs employees say that it costs 25% more to outsource than it does to invest within, in the employees within.

I'm wondering if the minister is listening to these concerns that are being brought forward and if he will commit to cancelling this problematic contract. If not, why not?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much for your question. Welcome to the committee. Say hello to Rachel.

This rehab contract will provide 14,000 veterans with access to approximately 9,000 health professionals in around 600 locations right across the country. My job as Minister of Veterans Affairs is to make sure that we provide services for veterans when they need them, where they need them. Absolutely no one will fall through the cracks. It will be completely seamless for veterans and reduce administrative burdens on caseworkers. In fact, it will give caseworkers more time to work on files.

Case managers and everybody involved have been consulted. We have consulted case managers. We have consulted veterans. We have consulted anybody involved in Veterans Affairs on this roll-out. I think I'd like my deputy to—

• (1610)

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Actually, Minister, I'm sorry. If I could interrupt, could I continue on the questions and ask your deputy questions in the next hour, if I may?

Thank you.

I'm wondering if you could clarify, Minister, why it was decided not to invest in hiring more permanent workers within Veterans Affairs Canada instead of outsourcing the rehabilitation contract to a company owned by Loblaw's.

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

The fact of the matter is that this is a contract.... It's different at the moment, but the fact is that this is a contract that has been going on for a number of years. Different governments have had this contract, and now why we did what we did was to make sure we're able to provide these 14,000 veterans with different locations right across the country. In fact, they have 600 locations now, approximately, and if we need more, they would be added.

What we want to make sure of is that veterans don't have to drive 200 miles in order to have rehab or to see a psychiatrist or whatever. What we wanted to do, and why this contract is where it is, is that it provides for veterans where they need it when they need it. That is simply it.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you, Minister.

Have you been meeting with the union and, in particular, the Union of Veterans' Affairs Employees? I'm hearing that the union has been raising alarms over the transition to the contract and has repeatedly requested a meeting with the minister, but has been unsuccessful within the last two years. Can you speak to that and why you're not meeting with the union?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much.

I've been meeting with veterans and people involved in the union ever since I became Minister of Veterans Affairs. I think it's vitally important to do that and, along with that, meeting with veterans and veterans' groups right across the country. If you're going to put programs in place, you have to meet the people they serve. That is of course what I have done, and that's what I will continue to do. Most people want this contract.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you, Minister.

I'm sure you can appreciate the importance, as well, of the position and the importance of the position of the president of the union.

Have you committed to meeting with the president of the union as well?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** As I said, I continually meet with union people and veterans and anybody.... I haven't set up a meeting at this moment, but the fact is that I meet with people all the time. In fact, I'm meeting with somebody in about three-quarters of an hour or half an hour. I mean, that's what I do. I meet with veterans and veteran organizations and people who help veterans all the time. That's what I want to do and that's what I will continue to do.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you.

To confirm, you have not met with the union president.

Could you answer yes or no to that question?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I'd have to check. I did meet with her. I can't just tell you when it was. Yes, we have met.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you.

The new system for rehabilitation services requires that Veteran Affairs Canada's case managers confirm the eligibility of the veteran and then refer the veteran to PCVRS. I'm speaking of things you already know.

Unfortunately, my colleague MP Blaney and others have been receiving emails from veterans who are describing the interview process within the rehabilitation service specialists process as taking up to three hours. They're being told things like their medication should be cut in half. This is clearly very upsetting for veterans who are reaching out for help.

Is the minister concerned about veterans who are not being treated properly within these systems?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I would always be concerned about veterans who are not receiving the appropriate treatment. I think my honourable colleague is well aware that we've discussed this with case managers, with union people and with veterans. What we want to do and what we are doing is making sure that nobody falls through the cracks. That's what we have done. That's what we will continue to do.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Barron.

Now, let's go to the second round for a total of 25 minutes. I would like to start with Mrs. Cathay Wagantall for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here. I look forward to meeting with the others who are here in the next hour.

Lifemark and WCG were given this contract for the rehabilitation program. Their requirement was to create a rehabilitation service plan unique to each veteran participating. It could include a combination of one or more medical, psychosocial and/or vocational rehabilitation interventions involving six key function areas: mental and physical functioning, social adjustment, financial security, employment and personal productivity, family relationships and community participation. It's the whole gamut there, Minister.

I just have a question in regard to the way the program is being implemented. The first year and half is an implementation period. I assume that time has passed. I'm just wondering how much funding, out of the \$560 million, Lifemark and WCG have received to date. That's a 30-second question. I have three altogether. The last one, I think, you'll want to spend more time on. Do you know the amount?

• (1615)

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I do not have the amount before me here, but the deputy would probably have the amount.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Okay. I will ask him later. That's fine. Are you not aware, Minister?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I'm not aware of the exact amount, no.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Okay. That's fine. That's great. Thank you.

On the \$560 million then, I would assume you're not aware of the dynamics between those two companies and how much is being released in what way to each of those organizations.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Of course, there's always oversight on all parts of the—

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** What is it? That's what I'm asking, Minister.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** What I'm telling you, Ms. Wagantall—

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Could you answer in 30 seconds?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I'll do my best if you let me.

The fact is, for all monies that are spent by Veterans Affairs Canada, there's always oversight. In this case, there was an evaluation of what we could do in order to provide the best services for veterans right across Canada. We felt that if we could provide 14,000 veterans with access to 600-plus professionals right across the country, that would ensure that veterans were served appropriately. What we want to do is make sure we provide veterans with the services they want where they want them. That's what we're going to do.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Okay. Thank you, sir. You aren't aware. That's fine.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I am aware. I'm fully aware. I am. That's what we're doing.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Thank you very much.

The partnership is required to maintain—and this is in their directives as well—an up-to-date list of registered rehabilitation service providers to whom veterans may be referred. One of the main tasks for this group partnership will be to replace the current list and “develop and define their [own] comprehensive network of rehabilitation service providers depending on the business model for service delivery.” I'm trying to figure out that business model.

Prior to this, case managers ran the medical and psychosocial rehabilitation program, and the contractor managed the vocational.

I am aware, from an ATIP, that the full list of service providers for veterans to date is 250,000 across the nation, and it's being brought down to 9,000. Veterans are actually requesting therapies as part of their rehabilitation plans in this new partnership. They're being told by PCVRS that they can access these through their Blue Cross A-line coverage. They're actually being pushed away from this partnership to their Blue Cross coverage.

In the past, the case managers always coordinated these therapies for the vets, and it was collaborative. What we have heard from multiple practitioners—and we have heard today from a lot of those who have provided these services—is about the loss of that rapport and the working alliance between the clinicians, the veterans and the caseworkers. The new rehabilitation program appears to negate that relationship, yet they're not providing the service.

My question to you is this: Why did Veterans Affairs Canada choose to contract out the delivery of the entire rehabilitation program, and why are they already failing to meet the veterans' needs for mental and physical rehabilitation treatments? They are pushing vets to go by themselves to deal with Blue Cross for these things.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much.

We have met and we will meet the requirements. That is why we've continued to keep the professionals who were there when you were in government, when your party was in power, but we've added to those to make them more available to veterans. That's what I'm trying to say. The fact is that they're available to 14,000 veterans, with many locations right across the country.

What we want to do with this contract is to make sure we provide the services, whatever the profession, where they need them. That's what we're doing. That was done partially before, but now we've improved the program.

Thank you.

• (1620)

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

I'd like to remind all members and witnesses to address their questions and answers through the chair, please.

Now, for five minutes I invite Mrs. Rechie Valdez.

Please, go ahead.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the minister and the department officials for joining us in committee.

Minister, I want to thank you for providing us updates on the Juno Beach announcements as well as on the investments towards the funding for the 2025 Invictus Games in Vancouver and Whistler. That's such a huge win.

Minister, I don't know if you had an opportunity in the first round to provide as elaborate an answer as you were hoping to. I want to give you the opportunity, if you want to mention or answer anything from the first round of questioning, before I go into my own questions.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** No, I'm good. That's okay.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** That's perfect.

Minister, this committee—

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I hope you'll ask them to me again.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** Thank you.

This committee recently received the final version, as you know, of the report on MAID being inappropriately raised with veterans. I really want to thank you all for the work you're doing and for all the work that went into that report. I'm happy to see that this incident does appear to be isolated to one employee.

Over the last six months, we've spoken about the impact this has had on the veterans community but also on Veterans Affairs. I'm sure these actions have impacted their ability to do their jobs and their reputations as VAC employees.

Could you speak about the impact this issue has had on frontline workers and the important work they do in serving veterans and families?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, for an important question.

This was, of course, an unfortunate situation. It was totally unacceptable. As you know, when I was informed about the MAID issue, I did this: I immediately asked my deputy to conduct an investigation, and then we saw fit to bring in the RCMP.

The fact is, we wanted to do this for the investigation, and perhaps this will help answer the first question. We made sure that anybody who had a problem in this area contacted the deputy, the department, the ombud or the RCMP eventually. We wanted to make sure we got to the bottom of this and investigated it as thoroughly as we could. It was one individual who conducted the conversation with veterans four times, which was totally unacceptable. It caused an awful lot of difficulties, I think, for our great staff at Veterans Affairs Canada.

I've been around for a while, in a few departments. I don't know a more dedicated staff than that of the Department of Veterans Affairs. They truly care about veterans. Of course, this hurt them.

They have great pride in what they do. If you had my job, you would see this. If you go to the Department of Veterans Affairs.... It's good to do that, as a committee, in order to see exactly what kind of effort they truly put into it. Not only that, but they also volunteered their time. They're very dedicated to the veterans. What happened hurt dedicated employees.

I want to say that we probably have the best public servants in the government, and I want to publicly thank them so much for what they've done and continue to do: making sure veterans receive the proper remuneration. It's our job to put that together, and it's their job to deliver it. They're doing that in fine form.

Thank you.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to clarify something you said earlier. To correct the record, if any veteran were to come to you—yourself or your departmental officials—you are there to be there for veterans. You're open to that. You're always going to be willing to support them. Is that correct?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Absolutely.

The report is in, but if anybody has a problem in this area, we want to know it. We're wide open to hearing it. What we want to do, as we always do, is provide the appropriate services to veterans. It's so important that people realize that. It's important for the public servants in Veterans Affairs Canada to understand we're behind them. I certainly am, 100%. They are dedicated public servants who do a great job and will continue to do so. Of course, they appreciate what we do here too.

This was a very unfortunate issue that hurt a lot of people. It's unfortunate and totally unacceptable.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1625)

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

[*Translation*]

We will now have two speakers for two and a half minutes each.

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor first.

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

Minister, we have seen a huge decrease in disability benefits. They have dropped like never before. These are the best results, I believe, in the last seven years as regards the gap between francophones and anglophones. The gap is currently eight weeks, which of course is eight weeks too long. Francophones should not be penalized in that way.

Allow me to relay something that Raymond Th  berge, the Commissioner of Official Languages, said. He stated that he was especially concerned by the nature of these complaints, since they involve services provided to people who have served our country and who need support. He maintained that the wait times should be the same for francophones and anglophones, for all services offered by federal institutions.

Minister, what specifically still needs to be done to reach equity in the short term in the treatment of francophones' and anglophones' files?

[*English*]

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

You're absolutely right. What we have to do is make sure.... There was a big problem between female and male, and now that's been met. With the French veterans, it was 15 weeks—unacceptable, totally unacceptable—but it's now at 2.4 weeks longer. That's unacceptable, but we're on the right track—the same track we're on with the backlogs—to make sure we meet the requirements.

Of course, every veteran, whatever language they speak, deserves the appropriate remuneration, because they're the ones who give us the right to sit here and say and do what we wish.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I can hear you very well, but you are talking like an expert politician.

What specifically can be done to ensure that francophones and anglophones are treated equally?

What measures are being considered right now? Are there any?

[*English*]

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Yes, and I believe that the track we're on.... You've been at committee with me a number of times, and you saw what happened as we've progressed with the backlog. As I said, it was at 15 weeks, and now it's at 2.4 weeks.

Luc, that's not acceptable. It's not good enough. We have to meet the requirement and we will, I think, by this summer. The gap will be closed this year. There will be no gap.

**The Chair:** Thank you—

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Do you think that by next summer the discrepancy will be a thing of the past?

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

[*English*]

Also, I will remind you, Minister. I know that you know Luc, but please address your answers through me.

Now for two and a half minutes, I'd like to invite Ms. Barron to please go ahead.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you, Chair.

Minister, as you know, my colleague Rachel Blaney has been working hard on the marriage after 60 clause, which predominantly impacts single senior women with low incomes. I'm wondering why the minister is holding on to the \$150 million in the veterans survivors fund and why these funds have not been released to the identified spouses.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for the question.

You know we're committed to making sure that veterans and their spouses have the support they need. We've been working with Statistics Canada and the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research to gather the information about these survivors, and we have that. We will use the results of this information to inform how best to support these survivors. I can assure you.... I have to make sure that we support veterans and their families.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you, Minister.

This clause is clear. We know that this clause is sexist. It discriminates against women. It's archaic and it needs to be changed. Why are we keeping this gold digger clause in the books? We just need to get rid of it. What's happening with the delay on this?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you very much.

I indicated quite clearly what I am doing in my responsibility as minister. That's what I have done and that's what we will continue to do, and we will be dealing with this shortly. You're talking about the \$150 million.

• (1630)

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you.

I'm just processing another response there.

Would you agree that this gold digger clause is sexist and archaic in discriminating against single women, Minister?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** What I can do as Minister of Veterans Affairs is make sure that we make sure veterans have the appropriate funding they deserve. That is what I have to do. That's what my mandate is as Minister of Veterans Affairs.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you, Minister.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Will I do that? Yes, I will.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you.

My colleague Rachel Blaney has also been working on the clawbacks to serving women who won their class action sexual harassment lawsuit against the RCMP. She has been up to ask you a question about that as well. It's a shame that we're seeing their pensions being clawed back because they received settlements. I'm wondering if the minister could speak to why the government is currently retraumatizing these brave women.

Will the minister stop the clawbacks immediately?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** We appreciate the work the veterans ombud's office has done in providing the recommendations to the government, and I thank her.

The women who came forward and disclosed their experiences in the Merlo Davidson did so with incredible courage. We will contact the veterans—

**The Chair:** Thank you—

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** —who have had their disability pensions reduced—

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister. The time is up, so I have no choice.

Now I have Mr. Fraser Tolmie for five minutes.

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

Minister, thank you for joining us today.

Minister, in your response to my colleague, Mr. Richards, earlier concerning medical assistance in dying, you said, don't you trust the government? You put the onus on Mr. Richards to come forward with veterans who had been offered medical assistance in dying.

Minister, I think I need to point this out to you, sir. Veterans don't trust the government. Veterans have served, their trust has been broken and they feel betrayed. I think that's something where, even though you're putting the offer out to speak to these vets, they feel they have lost confidence. The veterans I met this past weekend....

You stated in the House two weeks ago that there is absolutely no one falling between the cracks. Do you believe that?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** First of all, what you asked me was whether I said.... What I intended to say, if I did not say it, is that the public service, Veterans Affairs, the deputy minister of Veterans Affairs and the RCMP are involved in this investigation. They had every opportunity. As you know, there have been statements made that different numbers of people have had this problem, but we need them to come forward. If anybody has the information, come forward. We need that information.

We did an extensive investigation. I know you respect the RCMP. The fact is that, if there's any problem with what has been done, we want to know. If there's anybody who hasn't been treated right, we want to know. I want to know. The deputy wants to know, and I'm sure the public servants of Veterans Affairs do.

I stated that I think we have the best public servants in the country at Veterans Affairs Canada. I have had the privilege to work with them twice in my career, and they are fabulous.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Thank you, Minister.

Okay, as I stated earlier on, I met with veterans this past weekend in Moose Jaw, where they were able to come forward and share some of their stories with regard to accessing help from Veterans Affairs. When you stated in the House that there is absolutely no one falling between the cracks.... What you stated in the House and what I heard on Saturday morning are completely opposite.

Do you stand by your comments?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I indicated quite clearly what this contract was for and what it is to do. Yes, I stand by my comments to make sure that we provide the appropriate service for veterans right across the country when they need it and where they need it. That's what I have done, and that's what I will continue to do.

That's why we have this contract.

• (1635)

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Minister, what I have seen and what I have heard from my constituents, from veterans, is completely opposite to what you have just shared with me.

Minister, with regard to the almost a billion dollars of unspent funds and the reduction of the backlog, many of the people I have met.... Their applications have been denied. They have been turned down. They have been denied because of technicalities in their applications and red tape.

The question that comes to my mind is this: Is that why we're seeing a reduction in the backlog? Is it because applications are being denied, which means that, with the backlog going down, the money and surplus that you have is still not being accessed by veterans?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** No, that is not correct at all. The fact of the matter is that the number of people who have applied for veterans assistance at Veterans Affairs has been over 40%. The fact is that a lot of people are applying because, as you are fully aware, there have been a lot of enhanced programs since your government was in power. There are a lot of opportunities for veterans for education and rehab. All of these things are so important for veterans, and many people are looking for—

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Minister, while I have just one more minute here, sir.... How many applications have been denied?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I don't handle all the applications.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** How many applications have been denied? How many people have been denied or rejected?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** It's approximately 20%.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Twenty per cent of veterans who have to prove they need help are being rejected.

Thank you.

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

Now, for the last question, I invite Mr. Sean Casey.

You have five minutes or less.

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

Minister, first of all, thank you so much for your kind words about the dedicated staff at Veterans Affairs. I was here during the Harper cuts. I distinctly remember Minister Steven Blaney coming to the national headquarters in the dark of night, unannounced. Everyone was scared to death that he was coming to shut her down. Your tribute to the hard-working folks at Veterans Affairs is very well placed, especially after everything that's transpired in recent months.

In his opening salvo, Mr. Richards made several statements without affording you an opportunity to respond to them. I want to bring that back and give you a chance to do that. He referenced a 16-week service standard and said that, when the veterans he talked to heard that, they laughed.

Do you know what 16-week standard he's talking about?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Of course I do. I think I've indicated that, over my years in Veterans Affairs, this is the goal to meet. As you know, it went from 23,000. We're in tune to meet that. We're in line to meet that national standard this summer to make sure we provide the funding for veterans.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Is that the backlog?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Yes.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Okay. Thank you.

He mentioned there's been a contract switchover, leaving veterans without services. Do you know what he's talking about?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** I know what he's saying.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** This is your chance to respond. He didn't give you a chance to respond. I'm giving it to you.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Thank you so much, Mr. Casey.

The fact is that we provided a contract for 14,000 veterans to access expert professional people in 600-plus areas. There will be more veterans and more sites for them to go to. The 600 can increase, and the veterans can increase. What we want to do with this contract is to make sure we provide veterans with what they need, where they need it. You know very well, yourself, that veterans, in certain parts of the country, might have to travel 200 miles. We want to stop that. We want to provide what's right for veterans.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Okay.

I want to come back to the staffing complement, for a minute. In the departmental plan for 2023-24, there's an indication that staffing numbers at Veterans Affairs Canada have gone up, but are scheduled, over the next two years, to go down by 20%.

Why is that?

• (1640)

**Mr. Paul Ledwell (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Mr. Chair, I'll indicate that those are the additional surge resources, which are there for the backlog. There's a commitment, through to fiscal year 2023-24, for those who are working on service excellence. There's a commitment, through 2024-25, with respect to case management. Beyond that, there's no further commitment.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Okay.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** It's important to note that this is the case at the moment. Things change.

As you know, we invested \$340 million to hire people to deal with this backlog, and we are succeeding.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Thank you.

Regarding veterans who go to an appeal board, there's an indication, in the estimates, that there's a 40% increase in the appropriation for VRAB.

Are these the 39 extra people who have been hired? Can you speak a bit to that, please?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Of course, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board deals with applications too. When they have a backlog, that's a backlog too. We have to deal with both of those issues, and that's what we're doing.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Is the increase in workload at the Veterans Review and Appeal Board directly tied to cleaning up the backlog?

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Yes. That will be a backlog if it's not dealt with too. As you know, the 40-some per cent increase in applications means there are a lot more applications that we deal with on the front end. Then, if things have to go to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, more applications will end up there. We make sure we deal with that. That's why.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** I want to take one more shot at this lapsed-funding business. It's my understanding that you never really know in any given year how much you're going to need at Veterans Affairs because everything is demand-based. The more demand there is, if every single viable claim gets paid, the more money you need to pay.

Is that what's behind the whole idea of lapsed funding: the inability to always pinpoint what the demand will be?

**The Chair:** You have five seconds.

**Hon. Lawrence MacAulay:** Yes, we always have to have the money to make sure our veterans receive—

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Mr. Casey.

I'd like to thank the minister for coming.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The minister indicated that he was hoping for a few more questions from me. I have some more questions for him if he'd like to stay five more minutes.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**The Chair:** Mr. Richards, we have work to do.

Minister, I thank you so much for your appearance today.

I'll suspend for two minutes, and we'll come back with the public servants.

• (1640) \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

• (1645)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Let us resume the meeting.

I would first like to remind committee members that, aside from the four witnesses in the room, we have the Associate Deputy Minister, Mr. Ken MacKillop, and the Assistant Deputy Minister, Commemoration and Public Affairs Branch, Ms. Amy Meunier, appearing via video conference.

Since there are no opening statements, we will go directly to questions.

I would ask committee members to please indicate who their question is directed to.

Let us begin with the first round of questions with six minutes for each member.

I would ask Mr. Blake Richards to begin.

[*English*]

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Thank you.

I think what I'll do is I'll start, at least, by going back to where we were with my round of questioning with the minister and with regard to the MAID investigation.

I'm still a little unclear as to what was done, other than asking employees to self-disclose if they inappropriately brought something up with a veteran, or doing a keyword search of files. I'm particularly concerned about the point I tried to raise with the minister a few times, which is the idea that, as you indicated, up to 19 additional veterans have come forward with some kind of allegation of inappropriate discussions related to MAID happening with them, but that, in all of the other cases, you determined that nothing was able to validate those allegations.

I'm still left very unclear on what was done to try to validate those allegations. Did anyone at the department actually speak to each of these veterans to determine...? It seems like you've decided that you don't believe them. That's the only assumption one can make when they've brought forward an allegation and you've decided it was not valid.

Did anyone speak to them in detail to find out what their side of the story was? What was then done that led to it being determined that their story was not, in fact, accurate?

• (1650)

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Thanks very much to honourable member for the question and the opportunity to be clear about this.

Let me say that, from the Veterans Affairs Canada perspective, there was no questioning of the validity of the issues as they're coming forward from the veterans. There was a desire to hear the details and to seek validation for what was being stated and what was being alleged in terms of the counsel they received.

In every case that was brought forward through suggestion or allegation, we sought to get that validation directly from the veteran

or from those who might have come forward, suggesting that they knew veterans. We asked them to encourage those veterans to come forward. As the minister has indicated and as we indicated the last time here at committee, if they're not comfortable coming forward to the department—we understand that some might feel some trepidation, if they had a bad experience, to come back to the place where they had that bad experience—they can come forward to the ombud, raise that issue directly with the ombud and indicate it.

It's very important to get to the bottom of the issue and the specificity of what was raised.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Can I then ask...? Are you saying that none of these veterans actually...? You heard about them third-hand in all cases. None of these veterans actually came to Veterans Affairs, because otherwise, I assume you would have spoken with them.

Is that what they're you telling me?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** None of these veterans have come forward directly to Veterans Affairs Canada nor to the ombud with any information.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Okay. You're saying what you would encourage.... I appreciate and I indicated myself that many veterans I heard from and whom I'd heard about from others indicated they're afraid to come forward to Veterans Affairs. I appreciate your suggestion that they come to the veterans ombudsman. Certainly, I would make that suggestion to anyone who feels that way, and I hope that some will take you up on that.

Can I ask, as well, did you look through...? It's one thing to ask someone, "Did you do something inappropriate?" I would think, in most cases, most people are going to be pretty reluctant to disclose that they have done something inappropriate. In fact, of the four cases you have, that you're aware of, one of them was almost stumbled upon accidentally by another employee. That's how it seems.

I'm left wondering what was done to try to dig up that information, and one of the things that occurred to me was that employees through Assystnet can request deletions from the files.

Did you do a search to determine whether there were any deletion requests for Assystnet about medical assistance in dying?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Mr. Chair, if I could, first of all, it wasn't just a keyword search. It was an analysis of greater than 400,000 files. All of those files are maintained by our professional staff for a reason, which is that it's important to keep a record of the interaction with the veterans they're serving. They can go back and refer to that and see what the progress has been and what kinds of issues were raised. These are detailed case files that are maintained in the department.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Specifically to the Assystnet part of it, did you...?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** We did a search on Assystnet too—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** You did.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** —to make sure that there weren't deletions, and we did not find deletions.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** You didn't find any evidence of any deletions or requests for deletions.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** That's correct.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Okay.

You've obviously referred the four cases that you have become aware of to the RCMP. Can you give us any indication as to what has occurred with that? Have you had any updates? Do you know what the status is of that investigation? Is it ongoing? Is there anything you can tell us about that?

• (1655)

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** It's an RCMP investigation, and it's really up to them. They have no obligation to inform us. They're undertaking the investigation, and we'll leave it to them to indicate what has transpired.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** You've received no update from them. You have no indication as to whether there is an ongoing investigation or whether they've even begun to undertake one.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** To our knowledge, there has been no closure on the file, but we don't know that for certain. Again, the RCMP is not obligated to report to us. Our understanding is that it is still an ongoing investigation.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Okay.

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

Now we will go to Mr. Darrell Samson for six minutes or less, please.

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

I want to thank my colleagues here today for being with us to share some precise information on key areas.

One area that I wanted to speak about is the backlog. The minister, in his opening statement, spoke about the backlog, with the backlog being 23,000 and now down to 6,800, which is very impressive in about a year and a half. Let's talk about where that backlog came from. I think it's important to understand. Maybe you can add to the understanding.

It is my understanding that two things have happened since 2015.

One is that, through consultation, the government felt that many other programs were required to support our veterans, so more programs were added, which allowed veterans to come forward. The second reason for the backlog—you can correct me if I am wrong—was that, prior to our forming government in 2015, there were major cuts made to veterans in 2013 or 2014 by the Conservative government.

For example, nine offices were closed across the country, nine offices that were serving veterans in their locations—I know of one in Nova Scotia, in Sydney—and, second, there were about one thousand frontline workers fired. I could understand that it's a challenge to have to build it all up again. Can you speak to that, please?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Mr. Chair, if I could, there are a few things.

First of all, as has been underlined and I'll repeat again, there has been a very significant increase in demand from the veteran community. I think we have to appreciate that there were many veterans serving our country in Afghanistan. More than 40,000 Canadians served in uniform there, many of those now having come forward

to Veterans Affairs Canada for support. We've seen a marked increase in demand.

We have seen as well a marked increase in the availability of supports and programs for veterans—necessarily—in areas like mental health and in areas like identifying supports for women and other under-represented groups who have served as veterans to ensure we are there for them equally.

There has been a diversity of program offerings as well as a demand on service, and that has built up a real pressure on demand. We are seeing that pressure continue. There was a little dip during COVID-19, a small dip, but this year we are tracking to greater than 70,000 applications to Veterans Affairs Canada for disability supports. It's a large demand. We have worked hard with what has been \$360 million in additional resources specifically for the backlog over the last three budgets to bring that down.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Thank you.

You mentioned the new mental health program that came out I think last April. I am hearing some very positive comments around that because it's immediate. When you have a mental health issue, you can't wait six months to get your application approved. Could you speak to that, please?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** It's very important. We've said...and I think everyone at this committee would underline the importance of getting mental health supports there early for our veterans—to identifying, once they have come forward with a desire for the support, for the service, and to getting access to that support and service where they are, where they need it. Since the first of April, we've seen greater than 9,000 veterans sign up for that benefit—

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** How many?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** It's greater than 9,000—

• (1700)

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** There are 9,000 already. Thank you.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** There are greater than 9,000 who have signed up for that benefit and greater than 2,500 who have actually taken up the benefit directly, which has led to almost 40,000 specific benefits to veterans in less than a year.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Thank you. That's is a clear sign of the need to support our veterans.

I have one final question as I see I only have a minute left.

**The Chair:** No, it's one and a half minutes.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Then I'll ask two questions and you'll get a chance to go at them.

I see an increase of 23.8% in funding for a caregiver. I'd like you to speak to that. Also, there's the very important program, VIP, for our senior veterans. Maybe you could speak to both in that minute and a half.

Thank you.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** This is a very important program. We know that it's important to support our veterans where they are, and especially those who are elderly and aging, to ensure they're able to age in place and provide them with some respect in their homes and support in their own homes.

I'll ask my colleague, Mr. Harris, to speak to that particular support, because this is an area that he is responsible for.

**Mr. Steven Harris (Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs):** I'll give you two brief answers to your questions.

With respect to the veterans independence program, as Deputy Ledwell indicated, it's very important to allow for in-home supports for veterans and survivors who need help with something like housekeeping, grounds maintenance, maybe in-home meals or in-home care. It has been particularly important over the COVID period. We've seen an increase in usage of the VIP, which helps keep veterans and their survivors safely in their homes during these periods.

In the caregiver recognition benefit, we've seen an increase there as well. This is a benefit that allows caregivers to get access to over \$1,000 a month tax-free when they are required to help look after their veteran. It could be a spouse. It could be a father. It could be whomever. It allows them to be compensated for some of the time and energy they spend caring for a veteran who is unable to care for themselves.

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

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

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

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

Mr. Harris, you're off to a good start and your voice is warmed up.

The minister recently announced that he would invest \$43 million to extend the contract for managers and service officers by three years. We all know that these case managers are very qualified and much appreciated. Recently, the committee even heard from a veteran from the Maritimes who said that it was hard to find a good case manager.

However, over the last few months, witnesses have told us that some of these managers still had to manage 40 cases each.

Can you confirm whether this is still the case?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** It is possible that some case managers still have to look after 40 files. The average workload is 30 files.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** All right, let's go with 30 veterans per manager. That's still far from the ratio announced by former deputy minister Natynczyk.

How many managers do you expect to hire?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** We have enough money for about 480 or 482 case managers. The hiring process is still ongoing. Some man-

agers will be retiring or leaving us for other positions. We would like to have a full team of case managers at all times.

We are always looking for and hiring and training new case managers. We are trying to reach our goal of 480 case managers by every means possible.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Is it realistic to think you can hire that many people right now—

**Mr. Steven Harris:** It's realistic.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** —despite the current state of the labour market?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Yes.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** All right. When will the ratio of 25 cases per manager be reached?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** That always depends on veterans' needs.

The number of veterans who turn to us and need a case manager is in flux. Some go from case management to guided support. It's a less intensive service for people who are more autonomous and want to improve their health and well-being. Some veterans will always need case management. At this time, about 14,000 veterans need that service.

We are always on the lookout to determine who needs a case manager and who needs less intensive help, such as guided support, which is dealt with on an individual basis.

• (1705)

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you, Mr. Harris.

I have another question for you.

A month ago, at our request, you provided us with the rehabilitation contract between Veterans Affairs Canada and the Partners in Canadian Veterans Rehabilitation Services consortium. When I read it, I was very surprised to see that the public servants' salaries had been redacted.

Was there a reason for that?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** They have a contract with each provider. In some cases, the fees are higher than they were in the past; in other cases, they are lower. These are partnerships between providers and the entity we do business with.

Moreover, the people who are already helping a veteran and who will be transitioning that veteran to the new service will be kept at the same rate.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Why redact their salaries? I don't see why the amount has to be kept confidential.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** It's not hidden at all. It's a contract between the supplier and the contractor.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I would have really liked to know these amounts, as we just found out from veterans' requests that the rate for a psychologist in Quebec is \$150 per hour, I believe. But elsewhere, it is \$225 an hour.

We are making connections between Quebec veterans' needs that are not really being met by psychologists and these rates, as the psychologists do not find it worthwhile to deal with complex cases.

When I saw that it was redacted, I asked myself why.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** These contracts are negotiated by the supplier and the contractor. They are in line with the fees established by the association. It is a contract between them.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Okay.

I have no further questions. Thank you.

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

[English]

Now I'd like to invite Ms. Barron for six minutes or less.

Please go ahead.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to you all for being here. I don't think I mentioned that in the last round.

My question follows my colleague's questions around Veterans Affairs Canada's investigation into medical assistance in dying being offered to veterans. This question is for Mr. Ledwell.

Can you clarify why the veterans you have on file were not reached out to and asked if they had been approached about MAID by a Veterans Affairs worker? Right now, the onus of responsibility is being placed on veterans to come forward, but how can we actually have a...? How could a thorough investigation be properly conducted if veterans on file are not being reached out to?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** The investigation was actually done in two ways. Yes, we invited veterans to come forward. We also verified, through our files, any indication of where an issue may have been raised inappropriately between a VAC employee and veterans. This was, again, by looking through and analyzing the case files, greater than 400,000 files, to determine whether there was any indication or evidence that such a conversation took place. The onus wasn't entirely on the veterans to come forward. We were identifying those cases.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Why weren't they reached out to, though? I understand what was done, but do you know the rationale as to why the veterans who were on file were not reached out to proactively to hear from them?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Just to clarify, do you mean the greater than 400,000 veterans?

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** That's right, yes.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** There was a general invitation for any veteran to come forward. That was made publicly. It was certainly underlined here at committee. It was stated by the minister. It's been stated by me and the department. There was an open invitation, yes, for any veteran to come forward. Again, as indicated before, if they're not comfortable coming forward to the department, they can come forward to the ombudsman.

• (1710)

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** I want to be able to move on to the next question, but how was this open invitation provided?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** I think it was very well documented here at committee and contained in the media. We indicated that very openly. It was known.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you, Mr. Ledwell.

To clarify, there was no letter sent to veterans. They had to be paying attention to what was happening within committee to get the information as to how to get in touch to provide their experiences.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** That's correct. I would say, in addition to the committee in terms of public discourse, there was a lot of attention on this issue, so it would be very surprising to know a veteran who might not have seen that. It was so well covered publicly.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you for your answers.

Before he had to leave, I brought up to the minister the issue of the clawbacks of disability pensions for women who won the Merlo Davidson class action lawsuit. The minister was not able to provide a thorough response due to timing.

Can you speak to whether these clawbacks will be stopping immediately for these women?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** As you know, the ombud wrote directly to the minister to raise concerns about these individuals, who were veterans of the RCMP. A response has come back to the ombud from the minister. There will be communication going out to all those who have been affected to ensure that the practice is stopped.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you.

We've spoken quite a bit today about the backlogs that are being experienced. I hear from veterans within my riding of Nanaimo—Ladysmith frequently, veterans who have been injured while serving and are having long delays in accessing even just responses to the claims they have submitted.

Can you speak to what the department has done to implement a plan to have a permanent, stable workforce within to start resolving some of this caseload?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Thanks very much for the question. It's an essential question. We've seen great progress on the backlog. We won't stop until we get to the service standard.

To be clear, the service standard is 16 weeks from application to payment in 80% of the cases. That's a standard that has been in place for several years, and one that we've sought to maintain. We've not maintained it over these past few years. Our objective is to get to that service standard.

In terms of ensuring that individuals can come forward, we want to make sure they feel confident that, when they come forward, they will get the information they need, that they will get the response that is required and that they will have an opportunity to be in contact with the department to get a sense of where their application is in the process.

We have more than 190,000 veterans who receive supports and services from Veterans Affairs Canada. It's important we treat each of them in terms of their individual circumstances. Our desire is to make sure they have a place to come, that they know they will get a response and that we're providing that response consistently to them.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you.

Less about the workload and more about the stable workforce within, what's being done currently around that?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** As indicated before, we have been able to succeed in getting a budgetary allocation for temporary resources. We have those temporary resources in place until the end of this coming fiscal year. We're working hard, within government, to ensure that those resources are there and are there permanently. We're finding a way to get to permanence. That's an active discussion and an active attention.

We're also seeking ways to improve the process, to make the process more direct and straightforward for veterans, and to make sure the adjudication process is more straightforward with permanent fixtures there as well.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

As you know, we are going to have to vote on the estimates at the end, but we still have time to allow three minutes for each parliamentarian group. After that, we'll vote on the estimates.

I would like to invite Mr. Terry Dowdall, for three minutes, please.

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

I want to thank all the witnesses for being here today.

I'm sure you're probably familiar that in 2019 this committee, which I wasn't on at that particular time, did a study focused on homelessness. A lot of it, at that time, was attributed to a range of issues. Addictions, mental health or whatever it could be was part of that.

Now, after the pandemic, home prices in my area are like \$700,000. I'm curious what came out of that study, because at that time, 3,000 to 5,000 was the number. They're saying now that 6,000 is probably more likely. I'm curious as to what happened to the recommendations the committee put forward at that time for the government to work with VAC to come up with some solutions, because we're basically double the number right now.

• (1715)

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Thanks, Mr. Chair.

It's a very important and timely question, so I really appreciate your raising it. I think the minister has indicated and we uphold that one homeless veteran is one too many. Our desire is to bring effective homelessness amongst veterans down to zero.

**Mr. Terry Dowdall:** Can you spell out exactly what the plan is, please?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** In the last budget, budget 2022, there was a commitment to augment the budgetary allocation that was there so that greater than \$100 million will be in place over the next five years to provide supports to veterans directly, and—

**Mr. Terry Dowdall:** How are you finding these veterans? I talked to an organization when I was at a meeting in Toronto, and there are individuals who are out there looking for these individuals who aren't really part your organization. I'm curious as to how you are doing it to actually make a difference, because I don't really see

it. I don't think people know where to go and I don't know where they look.

I'm confused, as part of this committee, to see exactly how you go about it. How do you find homeless people?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Our area offices across the country are active on this, first of all. They work very closely with local organizations that are also doing this in their own communities to try to identify and then help those veterans who may be homeless or house-insecure. That work has continued.

The funds that will be put in place and the programs that will roll out over the next five years and very shortly will ensure greater supports for those community-based organizations that are helping identify and support homeless vets right across the country.

**Mr. Terry Dowdall:** Okay. Just in talking to individuals, it doesn't seem like that's happening at this moment in time. They're doing it on their own. It's costing a lot of churches and just the vets who are out there who realize how tough it is. I'm just really extremely frustrated. I know that a lot of people in the committee have said everything is great and that's fantastic that some things are going well, but I think this is an area that....

Quite frankly, 2019.... It doesn't seem like there are checks and balances to show that we're actually succeeding.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** You're very right, and there's more to come. Stay tuned.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much. Three minutes can go by really fast.

I invite Mr. Sean Casey to go ahead for three minutes, please.

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

I want to ask you about the Last Post Fund. Back when the Conservatives were in power, it was extremely frustrating to try to get through to them the importance of the discrepancy between the cost of a funeral, which was paid for by the government, for a serving member as compared to a veteran. Finally, in about 2013 they increased the amount paid to the Last Post Fund, almost doubling it. This was after being almost shamed into doing it.

At any rate, I do see in the estimates that there is a decrease in the Last Post Fund from 2018-19 to 2021-22. Please tell me that the decrease is not because of the allowance but for some other reason.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** If I may, Mr. Chair, I will defer this question to my colleague Amy Meunier, who is responsible for commemoration.

**Ms. Amy Meunier (Assistant Deputy Minister, Commemoration and Public Affairs Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Thank you for the question.

No, it wouldn't be connected to that. It would be in relation to the number of veterans passing, as well as the need for their services. There's a lower uptake. We're working with the Last Post Fund in terms of grave markers and other areas in which we can continue to work with them.

• (1720)

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Okay.

I will cede my time to Mr. Samson.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** How much time would I have, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair:** It's a three-minute round, so you would have a minute and a half.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Yes. I'll take that last minute and a half, if you don't mind. Thank you, Chair.

I see in the estimates an increase of 5.8% in the education and training program. Can you speak to that? We had some witnesses here not too long ago who said that the program was expanding and had more uptake. I'd like you to share some information on that.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Thanks very much.

Very quickly, we have seen an increase in the number of veterans coming to use the education and training benefit. It allows them an opportunity to follow a short course up to a little over \$5,000, or to use an entire \$80,000 allotment for a more formal education program. It's an excellent tool for them to use for transition. It's also a tool that many members use after they've transitioned and maybe even after a second career to find something else they want to do that is of use to them and their well-being. It can be employment-focused or it can be more for their professional development and personal development. We have seen an increase in veterans coming forward to use it, as it is a valuable program, across the broad spectrum of veterans who have left the Canadian Armed Forces.

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** I know my time has run out, but I'm going to have to re-educate myself because it was a simple number of \$40,000 for six years and \$80,000 for 12, and now it's \$44,000, \$45,000 and \$86,000. I see an increase, so I'll have to go back to the drawing board.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets, the chair will give you three minutes. The floor is yours.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you for your generosity, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Harris, in September 2020, the Parliamentary Budget Officer felt that hiring temporary employees with contracts lasting about three years was not an effective method of eliminating the disability benefits backlog.

Do you believe that, had we followed the Parliamentary Budget Officer's recommendations, there would be no more backlog today?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I think there will always be a backlog. The normal processing of applications is 80% in 16 weeks. This means that about 20% of the applications could take longer than 16 weeks, even with a larger workforce in the department. Because those applications are complex, it takes time to obtain information, among other reasons.

There will always be some backlog, but we have made great progress in reducing the number of unprocessed applications. The waiting period for francophone applications has gone from 55 weeks to less than 35 or 30 weeks.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I agree that progress has been made and I have said so. I make a point of mentioning that when it is the case. That said, as of December 31, 2022, the backlog of benefits applications was approximately 8,365. That is a lot. There is progress, but, to me, the progress is never fast enough.

Will you offer permanent positions?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** I will use the department's budget to ensure that we have the people needed. I will maximize the flexibility I have in managing my budget to make sure that we can retain trained, bilingual, professional people, to ensure that the employees of Veterans Affairs Canada provide the best possible service.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** So, again, the positions are not permanent.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** There are permanent positions, and I am always paying attention to make sure that people with temporary positions can get into permanent positions. Whenever I can give a permanent job to someone who has a temporary one, I do it.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Mr. Harris, do you believe in the effectiveness and relevance of permanent positions in retaining employees and making them feel like they are part of the organization?

**Mr. Steven Harris:** There is no doubt that it is difficult to always recruit, train and retain experienced people. That's always a more positive and effective way.

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

[*English*]

The last three minutes go to Ms. Barron.

Please go ahead.

• (1725)

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** You saved the best for last. Thank you very much.

My question is for Mr. Ledwell.

Mr. Ledwell, currently there is no policy supporting service dogs for veterans. On February 13, this committee received a letter from the Canadian Foundation for Animal-Assisted Support Services announcing that it has completed the work on national standards for animal-assisted services.

Could you please let us know if the department will work with it to establish specific standards for service dogs for veterans?

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Mr. Chair, I've not seen the letter and would look forward to reviewing it. I think the department is certainly interested in supporting veterans and making sure that veterans have the supports they require. We've done everything we can to ensure that's the case.

We have sought a standard with respect to service dogs, and I know there is a lot of discussion in the community about that.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** I am assuming that's a yes to working with the Canadian Foundation for Animal-Assisted Support Services on this.

**Mr. Paul Ledwell:** Yes.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you.

My next question is for Mr. Harris.

Mr. Harris, I want to follow up on some of the numbers you were quoting. You were talking about a 30:1 ratio of veterans to case managers. We have information with those numbers, speaking to the fact that there are 90 case managers currently on leave, which as you can imagine, increases that ratio to 37:1.

I am wondering if you can clarify the current caseload at Veterans Affairs Canada and what's being done to address that.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** Thank you very much for the question.

The current caseload average across the case managers is 30:1. You're quite right. There are people who go on leave for any number of reasons. When they go on leave, we try to replace them and make sure there's a case manager, whether that's somebody who's acting in a position or someone else we've recruited in on a temporary basis to fill that.

Sometimes there are some gaps and there are some delays between somebody leaving for one reason or another—a new job, a new opportunity—and getting somebody else in, so there is a variability in the number on average. The average is about 30:1, however. We make sure we try to fill any position that becomes vacant by virtue of somebody moving.

**Ms. Lisa Marie Barron:** Thank you.

There was also some mention around the caseload not being maintained over the last couple of years and some of the struggles, which I and many of us around this table are hearing about firsthand in our offices. I'm wondering what you would suggest for us to share with veterans who are experiencing a lack of response, a backlog of cases, and are just waiting for an answer as to when they will, and if they will, be receiving the supports they need and deserve after serving.

**Mr. Steven Harris:** We have a couple of programs that run differently. If a veteran needs a case manager, they will get a case manager. There are some wait times that exist within disability benefits applications. We've been speaking about that and our need to improve some of our turnaround times on that front.

With respect to people participating in a rehabilitation program, the actual approval rate is quite quick in terms of getting people in the door and established into rehabilitation and focused with a case manager. There's not a backlog in terms of people waiting for case managers. There are backlogs in some other programs, such as our disability benefits, but no backlog for somebody who needs a case manager.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Barron.

On behalf of all members of the committee and myself, I'd like to thank all of you from the Department of Veterans Affairs: Mr. Paul Ledwell, deputy minister; Mr. Ken MacKillop, associate deputy minister by video conference; Ms. Amy Meunier, assistant deputy minister, commemoration and public affairs branch, by video conference; Mr. Steven Harris, assistant deputy minister, service delivery branch; Mr. Pierre Tessier, assistant deputy minister, strategic policy, planning and performance branch, by video conference; and Mr. Jonathan Adams, acting director general and acting chief financial officer, finance.

You can stay, but we have to vote on the estimates.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), the committee will now consider the main estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2024.

We have two options. We can vote in one motion on all of the appropriations, or we will have to vote three times on these appropriations. I am asking the committee members if I have unanimous consent to vote in one motion on all the appropriations.

The committee unanimously consents. Thank you.

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$1,338,917,705

Vote 5—Grants and contributions.....\$4,598,995,179

(Votes 1 and 5 agreed to on division)

VETERANS REVIEW AND APPEAL BOARD

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$13,837,908

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

● (1730)

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

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

In closing, I would also like to remind the committee members that next Thursday we will be meeting in camera to instruct our analyst concerning the study on the national strategy for veterans employment after service.

We will also begin the study on the impact of the new service contract, pending the start of our study on female veterans.

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adjourn this meeting?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** I thank our interpreters, our witnesses and the technical team.

The meeting is adjourned.





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