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Chair

Mr. David Sweet

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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• (1105)

[English]

Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC): When will the bus be back?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Jacques Lahaie): The same day. It's a two-hour drive, so if it left early in the morning, we could take the bus around 2:30 or three o'clock from Montreal to be back here.

Mr. Greg Kerr: Okay, that would work.

The Chair (Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC)): Monsieur André.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy André (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Mr. Lahaie, would a Tuesday have been possible?

The Clerk: I believe so. We were told that it would be very difficult before Easter. I suggested Thursday. I thought Committee members would prefer Thursday.

Mr. Guy André: It's just that we are going right past Ste. Anne's Hospital on Tuesday around 8 or 9 o'clock.

[English]

The Clerk: If it's agreeable to all members, we could do it on Tuesday the 13th.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy André: Is that all right with you?

[English]

The Chair: Are there any concerns about a date?

The Clerk: A Tuesday or a Thursday.

Some hon. members: Tuesday.

The Chair: As long as we decide on a Tuesday that can work for the majority of members, then we'll go with that.

Are there any questions around the budget?

Mr. McColeman.

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): I'd like to know approximately where in the journey you'll ask me to step off this bus.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: On that note, Mr. McColeman, it's probably good that we discuss that a bit. The last time we had some issues that transpired in the House that, how would I say, required whips to begin to diminish the population on the bus. I hope we'll be able to avoid that this time. I did mention to Mr. McColeman that it was one

of the less savoury things that I've ever had to do. Let's hope we can make the trip all the way there.

I'm not seeing any questions on the budget. I'm not seeing any questions on the fact that it's a Tuesday. So can I get a motion that the proposed travel budget to Ste. Anne's Hospital, in Montreal, in the amount of \$2,587, be adopted?

It is moved by Mr. Stoffer.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The clerk has been so efficient that we'll actually be presenting this budget to the liaison committee today. We'll be able to get back to you at the next meeting and let you know whether that's arranged.

I asked a question to the clerk regarding whether the staff and all the stakeholders of the hospital were ready to receive us. After Easter is best, because then they will be ready.

If there is no further business, we will suspend for five minutes until the minister arrives, and then we'll continue.

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_____ (Pause) _____

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• (1125)

The Chair: We will resume our third meeting of the veterans affairs committee, in the third session of the 40th Parliament.

[Translation]

I would like to welcome the Minister of Veterans Affairs.

[English]

And welcome Madam Tining.

Minister, I understand you have some opening remarks. We will get to those immediately, and then we'll continue with our regular questioning.

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Members of the Committee, good morning. As you know, there was a Cabinet meeting. Sometimes discussions go on longer than expected. That is why I was a few minutes late. Please accept my apologies. There was no negative intent on my part.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, this is the first time I have had the pleasure of appearing before you since I was appointed Minister of Veterans Affairs on January 19—at most two months ago. Like you, I am honoured to work on behalf of those who have given so much to Canada. I look forward to working with you, the members of this Committee, to foster a clear and open dialogue because, as I am sure you agree, Canada's heroes deserve nothing less than our full support.

I would like to introduce Ms. Suzanne Tining, who is the Deputy Minister of Veterans Affairs. I am happy to have her by my side. There is excellent cooperation between us and things are moving forward in a positive manner. I wanted to mention that.

Veterans Affairs Canada is going through an exciting, yet challenging time, as the face of our veterans' community continues to change. Of course, you are aware of this already, but I am happy to be here today to discuss this with you and, hopefully, to give you a better understanding of where my priorities lie.

Veterans Affairs Canada's mandate is twofold. First, the Department endeavours to offer client-centered services and benefits that meet the needs of our veterans and their families. Second, the Department works to ensure that the victories and sacrifices of those who have served Canada are remembered and celebrated. I'm sure those of you who are here today will agree with me that, in Quebec, we have to pay particular attention to the Department of Veterans Affairs. There is less appreciation of its importance in that province, whereas in other provinces, its role is very prominent in the media, as well as in day-to-day events.

I would just like to cite the following example. Two weeks ago, I spoke of April 9, which is the memorial day scheduled to take place at the Canadian War Museum in honour of those who fought during World War I. The next day I checked the media coverage. In practically all the English-language newspapers, this was reported. In French-language newspapers, it was referred to in only one newspaper, *Le Droit*. Do you see my point with respect to differences of perception? We have work to do in that area. I intend to take a personal interest in this.

● (1130)

[English]

Our government remains deeply committed to providing our veterans with the highest quality programs and services. We continue to do all we can to improve their well-being and the well-being of their families as we ease the transition to civilian life for all those who have served in the military.

Our clientele is made up of veterans from the Second World War and the Korean War, and former and active members of the Canadian Forces. We also serve the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, civilians who are entitled to benefits because of their wartime service, as well as family members and dependants.

[Translation]

Recently, I had the sad duty to announce—including to some of you—that our country had lost the last known Canadian to have served in World War I. I would now like to take a moment to pay my respects to Mr. John Babcock, who passed away at the age of 109. Jack, as he was known to his friends—although to me, he is

Mr. Babcock—was an extremely kind and generous man whose unbridled affection for Canada never waned, despite the many years he lived outside its borders. Several days after Mr. Babcock's passing, I announced that April 9, the 93rd anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, had been chosen as the day on which we would honour all Canadians who served during that war. I know I join all members of this Committee in encouraging Canadians to participate in this very special day, either at events here in Ottawa, or in the provincial and territorial capitals across the country.

[English]

Mr. Babcock's passing is symbolic of the significant changes taking place within Canada's veterans' community and within the department tasked with serving them.

Veterans Affairs budget of 2010 takes into account these evolving demographics and the changing needs that result from it. As a result, I am targeting our priorities, and our spending will be focused on the areas of greatest need for both our traditional and modern-day veterans.

[Translation]

The Supplementary Estimates (C) for 2009-2010 included new funding for programs that support our allied veterans of the Second World War and the Korean War, and for activities to recruit and retain the necessary health care professionals in order to successfully treat and support our veterans.

The Department's Main Estimates for 2010-2011 are set at \$3.41 billion. This is an increase of \$50 million from the 2009-2010 budget. The greatest increase will be in the financing of disability awards and allowances. The increase will be \$86.2 million. Additional funding will also be reallocated to health care benefits.

As a result of the changing demographics of the veteran community, some programs will see a reduction in spending due to the decreasing number of traditional veterans.

Ladies and gentlemen, as you are aware, approximately 2,000 Canadian veterans die each month. We know that the average age of those who fought in World War II is approximately 86. Many of them are clients of our Department. But, as traditional veterans pass away, ever-increasing numbers of modern-day veterans, many of whom have various and complex needs, require our services. So, we're talking about two inverse curves—for traditional and new veterans—which are intersecting.

And just as we have responded to the evolving needs of our traditional war veterans over the past 65 years, today we are adapting and responding to the needs of these modern-day veterans. Therefore we will also see spending grow in some programs.

• (1135)

[English]

The number of new veterans grows daily. We estimate a few years from now Canada will have more modern-day veterans than Second World War and Korean War veterans. In 2015, *donc dans cinq ans*, there will most likely be three times more modern-day veterans than traditional war veterans. We must continue to adapt our programs and services to meet that reality.

Our department offers modern-day veterans and their families the support they need to move back to civilian life. This range of programs includes: rehabilitation services, health benefits, a job placement program, financial help, disability awards, and also death benefits.

[Translation]

Working closely with the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces, Veterans Affairs Canada offers current members of our military, our veterans and their families many services through the network of integrated personnel support centres, or IPSCs, located throughout Canada. Each of these 19 centres is a one-stop shop for current and former members of the Canadian Forces who are sick or wounded. And each of these centres helps these brave Canadians get the services and care they require.

[English]

Our government has doubled the number of clinics that treat operational stress injuries, for a total of ten. Furthermore, the official opening of the residential treatment clinic for operational stress injuries at Ste. Anne's Hospital in Montreal will take place next week.

[Translation]

The new Veterans Charter has brought many important changes to the ways in which we have assisted our veterans for the last 65 years. In addition to safeguarding financial support for modern-day veterans, the Charter takes a new approach by focusing on their overall well-being and readjustment to civilian life. Previously, veterans who were wounded as a result of service to their country received a disability pension and medical benefits. Even though these have been shown to be an important form of compensation, they do not necessarily ensure an easy return to civilian life.

Compensation in the form of a tax-free disability award opens up additional financial possibilities. It is extremely important to recognize that this payment is only one of the many elements that are in place to help. The disability award recognizes that a person was injured. It recognizes their pain and suffering. Veterans can use it to buy a house or make some investments. And, if they like, they can receive financial counseling on how to best make that money work to their advantage.

[English]

In addition, they can receive monthly financial support if they have rehabilitative needs, whether these be physical, medical, psycho-social, or vocational. This income lasts as long as it is needed to ensure the veteran gets back on his or her feet.

Once they have completed rehabilitation and are physically and emotionally well enough, they can get vocational training and they still receive that monthly supplement. And if a soldier is so severely injured that he or she cannot support their family after all, that monthly income continues until the age of 65, when the old age security kicks in.

[Translation]

Earlier this week, you heard from departmental officials about the new Veterans Charter. If you read the case studies that were distributed to you then, you can see how effective this new approach is. These are real life examples that compare how individual clients would have fared under the old system, as compared to the new. Up to now, more than 20,000 clients and members of their families have benefited from the advantages provided by the Charter.

Even though our work is not done, and improvements are always possible, the Charter is generating positive results. Of course, I am listening to what Canadians have to say. We are, and will continue, evaluating and trying to improve the services we offer to veterans and their families. External stakeholders and organizations such as the Veterans Ombudsman, the Advisory Group on the new Veterans Charter, hearings such as the ones that brought us here today, and initiatives such as the study on life after military service all contribute to the pursuit of this goal. I recently asked the Department to contact a number of veterans who have received the disability award to determine how that payment has helped them.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I visited Quebec City at one point, and specifically Valcartier, where I heard some veterans complaining about this single payment. I have asked the Department to determine whether, in actual fact, the individuals who received these lump-sum payments had wasted the money, used it inappropriately or, on the contrary, had put it to good use. The research that we have begun in this area is not far enough advanced for me to be able to tell you what the overall result is. However, 90% used our advisory services on investments and 56% of them said they were satisfied. That means that 44% were not satisfied. There are many different avenues that we will want to look at more closely in the coming months.

I also attended a town hall meeting with the Veterans Ombudsman to hear first-hand his views on the new Charter. I must admit I am impatient to see the results of your current study. It would be very valuable for us if you could also hold consultations on the lump-sum payment. At the present time, we give them a single payment—for example, \$100,000. In actual fact, the payment may be as much as \$276,000, depending on the person's disability. The comment that I heard was that, at some point, people would like to have a choice. After that, some were saying they were not able to properly manage the lump-sum amount they received all at once. It was a thought they felt incapable of doing so. If they are incapable of managing it, should we be thinking, for example, of spreading the payment over five annual payments, rather than a one-shot deal? There are many different ways of approaching this. You might want to consider conducting such a study, if you deem it appropriate.

• (1140)

[English]

Behind the programs and services provided by Veterans Affairs Canada lies a duty to never forget what our veterans mean to this country.

Thanks to partnerships with local and regional organizations, as well as to social networking sites like Facebook and YouTube, we are working to remind Canadians of the importance of remembrance.

During Veterans' Week last year, we saw just how successful these tools could be in engaging Canadians in remembrance. Now, I am pleased to report, we are exploring new ways to use them to reach out to and engage our clients.

[Translation]

So, as you can see, this government remains committed to serving veterans and their families. One million dollars was set aside in budget 2010 for a new memorials program. This is just one more way Canadians can honour the sacrifices and achievements of our veterans.

We are taking the best practices of the past—in caring for our traditional war veterans—and applying them to the future care and remembrance for those who are giving us so much for this country today.

I am pleased that the Department is writing a new chapter in the constantly-evolving story of how it serves those who have so bravely served Canada. The recent passing of Canada's last known First World War veteran reminds us more than ever of our moral obligation to remember.

In closing, even though I was only recently named as Minister of Veterans Affairs, I like my new responsibilities and have learned a great deal from meeting with the men and women we serve about their needs, their hopes and their desires. We have a moral obligation to recognize their sacrifices in a meaningful way. Each conversation reinforces that obligation; each discussion gives it new meaning.

I would be pleased to talk with you about the work my Department is doing and any particular issue you feel is important. I look forward to hearing your comments and suggestions about how we can better serve Canada's veterans in the years to come.

Thank you very much.

• (1145)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Blackburn.

[English]

Now we're going to try to do two rounds of five minutes, as agreed to earlier.

We'll go over to the Liberal Party and Mr. Oliphant for five minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you, Minister, and congratulations. I wish you the best of luck in your new post. I think it is the best job in Canada. In my

opinion, it is an incredible experience to work with the men and women of the Canadian Forces.

Now, I do have a few questions for you. First of all, I believe you met with Ms. Matteau, of Quebec City, or that you will have an opportunity to meet with her soon. You may have met with her son, Corporal Nicolas Magnan. She says that a monument is not something you can eat. There must be compensation—not only in the form of a lump sum amount, but also a monthly pension.

What are your views on the situation of our “new” veterans returning from Afghanistan? Is there funding available to meet their needs?

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: That is a good question. When I was in Valcartier, I did in fact have an opportunity to meet Ms. Matteau. Am I right that it is Ms. Matteau and her son, Mr. Magnan? I haven't mixed up their names, I hope?

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Yes, he is her son.

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: Some of that information is public and I can therefore share it with you.

First of all, imagine that you are a soldier returning from Afghanistan. Let's suppose that you were wounded. For the first three years after your return, you remain under the responsibility of the Department of National Defence and you receive your full salary, as usual. Furthermore, during that period, you will be assessed as to the extent of your disability and, based on that, you will receive a lump-sum payment.

But it does not stop there. When these individuals come back to Veterans Affairs, we encourage them to enroll in a rehabilitation program. The idea is not to leave someone to fend for himself, but rather to ensure that he is rehabilitated and transitions to civilian life—particularly since our “new” veterans are much younger. We don't want them to be sitting at home watching their life go by. I think we would be remiss in our duties were we to do that. So, we encourage them to enroll in a rehabilitation program. While they are in that program, they receive 75% of the wages they were receiving when they left the military, until they are rehabilitated or have found a job offering comparable wages to what they were previously receiving. So, there are both of those things—not just a lump-sum payment and nothing else. The two are linked.

It is important for us to give these individuals an opportunity to be rehabilitated, to return to civilian life, to continue to grow and live an active life based on the plan that is developed. If a person is not able to do that and is permanently disabled, at that point, 75% of his or her wages will continue to be paid until the age of 65. So, those are the facts.

At the same time, it is also possible that these individuals, when they are given a single lump-sum payment, end up making poor use of it. I won't give any specific examples, but this is something we must assess. If that is true, then we have a responsibility to find a solution. If we determine that some people are misusing this money, we may have to review our process and our way of doing things. I do not yet have that information, but that is where we are at present.

• (1150)

[English]

Mr. Robert Oliphant: I just have a little bit of time. I don't believe you're saying that Mr. Magnan used money unwisely; I would argue that perhaps the money is not enough.

He is one example. Is there an estimate your department has on the costs for the aftercare for soldiers like him coming back from Afghanistan? Do you have a way of segmenting that money to say what the cost is for aftercare for all veterans returning from Afghanistan, segmented out from the other costs of your department? It's impossible for me to read that in the estimates, so I'm just trying to look at the cost of the Afghan mission and the "people care" that we owe them when they come back.

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: I would like to ask Ms. Tining to respond since you are asking a more technical question. Ms. Tining may be in a position to clarify that.

Ms. Suzanne Tining (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, Minister.

[English]

Thank you, Mr. Oliphant.

The way we account for expenditures in the department is by program. That's what you see in the main estimates and the supplementaries, so it is very difficult to read through the estimates the question you're asking. We could attempt to give you an estimate of what that would be, but we have to recognize that many of the veterans who are serving or have served in Afghanistan are not yet our clients.

As the minister said, the National Defence way of doing things is that even if the member is injured, they will keep the member within the Canadian Forces for three years. That's their *modus operandi*. If we take into account the mental health, the post-traumatic stress, or the operational stress injuries that could arise, or that the member could realize as an issue, only a few years after he's left the Canadian Forces, I would say that we haven't fully seen the impact of the Afghanistan returnees in the department.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: I guess my hope would be that the department starts doing that—

The Chair: Mr. Oliphant—

Mr. Robert Oliphant: —to add it to the costs of the mission.

The Chair: Mr. Oliphant, you're way over your time, sorry.

Thank you very much.

Now on to Monsieur André *pour cinq minutes*.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy André: Good morning, Minister. Congratulations on your appointment.

I have been a member of this Committee for two years now, and I must say that the former Minister, although he was very good, did have some trouble in French.

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: Well, I have the same problem in the opposite direction.

• (1155)

Mr. Guy André: Well, I am still pleased to see that you speak both languages, at least partly. It is important, when the Minister goes to France or to other places where people speak French, that he or she be able to use both languages. That is very much to your credit, Minister.

I would like to come back to Mr. Oliphant's question. I am currently in touch with Ms. Matteau with respect to Mr. Magnan. Some young people returning from Afghanistan or very difficult missions have been traumatized or seen things that are not necessarily very pleasant. Everyone does not have the same ability to move on from such events. It depends on each individual's sensitivity. When they come back from Afghanistan, they are entitled to a lump-sum payment. However, a young soldier who is only 22, 23 or 24 years of age is likely to end up spending the entire lump-sum amount. After that, it is often the family that has to take responsibility for his reintegration and financial support. I guess that is the case with Ms. Matteau.

I don't know whether you or Ms. Tining can answer my question. I would like to know whether the new Veterans Charter, compared to the old one, provides for higher or lower amounts for this type of payment. Overall, is it less expensive to pay out lump-sum amounts, compared to a monthly allowance?

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: I will try to answer your question, and I will also provide clarification with respect to our "new" veterans. This will probably be of interest to you.

We have 4,200 veterans who served in Afghanistan. The number of veterans in receipt of a disability award directly connected to their service in Afghanistan—in other words, who were wounded—is 2,200, or one in every two veterans. The number of veterans receiving a disability benefit for psychiatric disorders connected to their service in Afghanistan—particularly for post-traumatic stress syndrome—is 513—in other words, one in eight. The number of veterans who sustain serious injuries in Afghanistan—in other words, with more than 70% injuries—is 200, or one in twenty.

In seeking information as to whether it was better before, if there were more benefits previously, and that sort of thing, the focus must be on rehabilitation and the transition to civilian life. We will not be any further ahead if we give someone money and he stays at home, rather than being able to continue to grow as part of society. That's why two factors are critical. If we were only to pay a lump sum to these individuals—the maximum payment is about \$276,000—and then leave them to fend for themselves, we would be making a mistake; but that is not the case. They receive 75% of their salary until they are rehabilitated. If that takes 15 years, they will continue to receive that amount for 15 years. The same applies if it takes five years. That is the goal.

Mr. Guy André: I don't know whether the Deputy Minister can answer my question.

Was the amount of the award under the former Charter higher or lower than under the new Charter? I imagine that it would be easy to get these figures—for example, for 2005 and 2010—accounting for inflation and the indexation rate.

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: This week, we even sent the Committee some real-life examples.

Mr. Guy André: Yes, we received all of that.

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: You can see the difference in the amounts.

Mr. Guy André: Minister, that does not answer my question. I would like to receive an answer.

Ms. Suzanne Tining: We are obviously comparing monthly pension amounts to lump-sum payments.

Mr. Guy André: For example, amounts paid in the form of an award in 2005, prior to the Charter, and amounts in 2010.

Ms. Suzanne Tining: Yes. The pension amount under the previous system is higher than with the lump-sum payments, because of the number of clients. I think that's relatively simple. There was a decrease in the amounts under the former system because of demographic data. Indeed, the older clients are, unfortunately, no longer with us. The trend is towards lower monthly pension amounts under the former system and increased lump-sum payments to "new" veterans.

Mr. Guy André: It is difficult to ascertain that based on the number of veterans. Could you provide those figures to the Committee?

Ms. Suzanne Tining: Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Guy André: In closing, I would like to ask the Minister to provide data on Afghanistan.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. André.

We'll go to Mr. Stoffer for five minutes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Minister, again, congratulations on your new posting, sir. As Mr. Oliphant has said, I believe you have the number one cabinet post in Canada. If I may say, sir, you have surrounded yourself with some very good staff members. My wife always says, "If you're in trouble, just listen to the lady to your left, and she'll be able to straighten you out."

I have some basic questions for you, sir. I am going to ask you three or four questions, and then you can answer at the end.

First of all, we know that Ste. Anne's Hospital is talking about divestiture. My concern is that right now, hospital beds at the Perley, at Belcher, at Camp Hill, and so on across the country are available for World War II and Korean veterans under certain conditions. Once the last Korean and World War II veterans die, what happens to those veterans who are now in their late 60s and early 70s who served in the Suez, in Bosnia, or in Afghanistan? What hospital beds will they be eligible to have in the future? Right now they are not eligible for these beds. What is the department's long-term plan for them?

Second, the Agent Orange Association sent me some figures the other day. I don't know if they are accurate. They have indicated that the Government of Canada has so far spent over \$2 million in legal fees fighting the Agent Orange class action suit. If indeed they are correct, that would mean that instead of fighting them, another 1,000

veterans or their families could have received the \$20,000 *ex gratia* payment.

Of all the cases like the SISIP court case and the Agent Orange court case, how much money has the Government of Canada, on behalf of the Department of Veterans Affairs, spent in legal fees fighting veterans cases? I know it is not in the estimates. It probably comes from the Department of Justice. Could we get those figures?

This is my last question for you. I really appreciated your announcement about April 9, not just because it is Vimy Ridge Day but because we are going to be honouring all those who served in World War I. I'm just wondering, sir, if you could elaborate a bit more on what the government is planning for commemoration across the country. Are legions advised of this? Are the army, the navy, and the air force? Are the provinces involved? Can you give us a little more detail on the government's preparations for this significant day?

Please and thank you, and again, welcome.

● (1200)

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: Thank you for your questions, and I will try to answer them one by one.

With respect to Ste. Anne's Hospital, as you may recall, we had several hospitals across the country and, following the war, health care was not organized based on provincial structures. It is the federal government that set up these hospitals to support veterans. Over the years, the government has divested itself of these hospitals and transferred them to the provinces, Ste. Anne's Hospital in Montreal being the last of these hospitals.

Having said that, our World War II veterans have access to Ste. Anne's Veterans Hospital. It provides geriatric and psychogeriatric services. People can go there depending on their needs, particularly if they are not able to receive the necessary care in their community.

As regards our "new" veterans, they are not cared for in a geriatric centre, because they are not old enough. At the same time, it has been proposed that the Government of Quebec purchase Ste. Anne's Hospital. The Quebec government has shown some interest in acquiring it. You may recall that one or two years ago, an entire floor at that hospital had to be shut down because of the smaller client base.

As a general rule, people are like you and me, in that they prefer to be hospitalized close to where they live, if they can, rather than be sent to a hospital 300 kilometers from home. Their wives and family also want them to be hospitalized close to their place of residence. We have in fact reserved beds in a number of provincial hospitals, in order that veterans who so desire can receive services close to where they live, rather than being sent to Ste. Anne's Hospital.

As well, you have also heard people saying that they would like their wives to be with them. For example, if you have Alzheimer's disease, but your wife has another health problem, it may not be easy to accede to your wishes.

In addition to that, under the legislation, Ste. Anne's Hospital is reserved for veterans only—not their spouses. It is only for veterans. However, once that hospital has been transferred to the Government of Quebec, if we are able to agree and if the Government of Quebec is willing to acquire it, veterans will obviously take priority. That is the situation as it currently stands.

So, the new veterans do not go there. It is completely different for them.

[English]

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Sir, with great respect, I think you may have misunderstood my question. I know there are contract beds across the country. When the last World War II or Korean veteran dies, what happens to those contract beds vis-à-vis those veterans who are now in their late 60s or early 70s who did not serve in World War II or Korea? They served in Bosnia. They served in the Suez. They served in Haiti. They served in Cypress. They're now in their late 60s or early 70s. In a few years they may need hospital beds. What will happen to those folks when they request those beds? Will those beds be available for them?

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: Once again, these hospitals have been transferred to the provinces. The only one left is Ste. Anne's Hospital. Veterans are now sent to provincial hospitals where beds are reserved for them. We pay the provinces. When a veteran is hospitalized in a hospital under provincial responsibility and takes a bed we have reserved, we pay those costs, which are refunded to the province.

• (1205)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Stoffer and Mr. Minister.

We now move on to Mr. Mayes for five minutes.

Mr. Colin Mayes (Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the minister and Madam Tining for being here.

There are only three of us here who are original members of this committee from four years ago when the government chartered a new direction for the delivery of benefits and care for veterans and veterans' families. At that time the government added \$740 million over five years to expand and improve benefits for veterans and their families.

In the year 2007 budget, \$130 million was allocated. I just want to know whether this budget amount has met the cost of providing the

expanded services to the veterans. Further to that, as we develop the Veterans Charter and identify more issues around the provisions of benefits and care for our veterans and their families, can you foresee that those added funds will cover those costs?

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: Of course, we always base our estimates on the number of “new” veterans and the new Veterans Charter, which has been in effect since 2006, and was unanimously passed by the House of Commons in 2005. That is our policy direction. Correct me if this figure is off the mark, but \$741 million has been added to the budget over the last four or five years. Is it four or five years?

Ms. Suzanne Tining: Some \$741 million in funding was announced over a five-year period, but the cost was \$831 million in the first four years.

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: I will start over. An amount of \$741 million was earmarked for five years. In reality, it cost us \$841 million over four years.

[English]

Mr. Colin Mayes: Thank you.

In reviewing those benefits and comparing what happens in other countries and how they treat their veterans, does the department look at the cost per veteran and do a comparison with countries like Australia, the United States, or the U.K.? Do you have any of those comparisons available?

Ms. Suzanne Tining: We work very closely with a number of countries: Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and the United Kingdom in particular. We have meetings on a regular basis. The minister and I just came back from New Zealand, from a ministerial forum of these countries.

We do have, and we could provide to the committee, the comparison on the cost per veteran, but I would quickly add that it is a very skewed picture, because in this country, as you well know, health care is a provincial jurisdiction, so our cost per veteran will not account for the amount of money the provinces are putting into the care of veterans.

Different countries have different organizations, constitutionally and otherwise, so it's a very imperfect picture, but we could provide you, with all of the caveats, a comparison of at least these five countries.

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: I would just like to add this. We travelled to Wellington, New Zealand, for the International Forum of Veterans Affairs Ministers. The other countries at the table were very interested in our new Charter. They saw it as progress. They are monitoring what is being done in this country. They are assessing the progress we are making and how we have achieved that progress. Of course, a charter is constantly evolving. We have pledged to monitor that evolution. As gaps appear, we will need the necessary insight to correct the Charter on behalf of all our veterans. In terms of what it offers, Canada is very well thought of by the other countries.

• (1210)

[English]

Mr. Colin Mayes: Considering what is happening in Afghanistan, the veterans we're seeing today, do you see a spike in the cost of providing those benefits and care to veterans, maybe because of some of the more catastrophic injuries, and especially around mental wellness, mental health?

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: Logically, our presence in Afghanistan means that military personnel return with injuries following our operations over there. There are more of them, because of our deployment to that country, or when conflicts arise elsewhere in the world. That is a reality.

And then there is post-traumatic stress syndrome. That is new, as it has only been around for a few years. It is recognized scientifically. Now a lot more people suffer from it, but not all at the same time. This is a new reality we have to deal with. That is why I was giving you examples of numbers earlier, just so that you would have an idea of the way it works, depending on the individuals returning to Canada. Whether they've been in Haiti or somewhere else, images of what they have seen stay with them, whether they like it or not.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blackburn. Thank you Mr. Mayes.

Now on to Mr. Andrews. I believe you're going to split your time with Madam Crombie, for five minutes.

Mr. Scott Andrews (Avalon, Lib.): Thank you so much.

A question, Ms. Tining, regarding the community war memorial program. Is it different from the cenotaph monument restoration program?

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: It is not the same thing. This is a new program we are introducing to allow communities who are interested to pay tribute to their veterans—of course, there is a good chance that some will want to honour those soldiers who died in Afghanistan—by building or erecting a cenotaph in their memory.

If we have a budget of \$1 million a year over two years—some \$2 million altogether—we will not be providing \$1 million for a single monument. We will try to distribute the budget envelope proposed to Cabinet based on certain expectations for the country as a whole.

In the last three years, we have received 50 requests to erect a cenotaph. At that time, there was no program. That gives us an idea of the requests we could receive. Such requests have also been addressed to Canadian Heritage.

[English]

Mr. Scott Andrews: Okay. I'm familiar with the number of requests.

How much money has gone into it, Ms. Tining? What's budgeted for the monument restoration program this year?

Ms. Suzanne Tining: If you want to just....

Mr. Scott Andrews: Okay, my other question is this. Minister, will the community war memorial program be administered through your external review committee, the outside independent committee that monitors the monument restoration program? Will that committee be the committee that allocates the funding for that particular program—yes or no—or will you commit here today that that committee will administer that money?

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: If you are referring to the new program, the answer is no. The decision regarding the awarding of that money was a decision for the Department and the Minister. It's important to remember the specific parameters that apply. First of all, the community must be involved. The government must not be the only one providing financial support. We don't have a large enough budget for that. There was no committee looking at this. At the Department, our people are involved.

[English]

Mr. Scott Andrews: Why wouldn't you let the external review committee administer that funding? You just said the minister would decide. Is this going to be a political program where you decide which war memorials get placed where?

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: So, you are not talking about this standing committee, are you?

[English]

Ms. Suzanne Tining: Maybe I can try to answer—

Mr. Scott Andrews: No, no, I'm talking about the external review committee that administers the monument restoration program. Why wouldn't the community war memorial program be administered by that committee? They apply to that committee for funding and then that committee decides which war memorials get the funding.

Ms. Suzanne Tining: Let me provide clarification, and I'll let Minister Blackburn finish the answer.

We had a program where we had money to help restore cenotaphs and monuments that you just talked about. We now have a new program that allows us to provide some funding for the construction of new cenotaphs. That's the distinction. For the restoration program, we had a technical committee reviewing the requests for funding for restoration of monuments, so that is very much part of the way of doing business in the department. Our own staff and external experts were looking at the proposals for funding, to make sure they were sound from an engineering standpoint and from every other technical aspect of the restoration.

For the new program announced in the new budget, we are working as we speak on the governance of how to implement this government's decision on funding.

• (1215)

Mr. Scott Andrews: Could that committee do that work?

Ms. Suzanne Tining: It certainly could. We are just working on how to administer and manage this new program, with due regard to a certain way of being nimble—in order to approve as many requests from community groups as possible during a year.

Mr. Scott Andrews: Okay, I'll let my colleague ask—

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: I would like to make an additional comment, if you don't mind. At the Department, staff will be reviewing the files. However, the Minister will be making the final decision.

[English]

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.): Thank you. My question is on the VIP, the veterans independence program, which has been steadily growing since 2007-08, when the decision was made to extend the benefits to the veterans of World War II and the Korean War.

Now, even with the steady increase, \$11.3 million less is allocated to the program in the main estimates than had been in the 2009-10 budget. We are wondering why the funds allocated to the VIP have been reduced by \$11.3 million, given that the expenses have increased significantly in the last three years.

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: Do you care to add anything, Ms. Tining?

Ms. Suzanne Tining: I think I can provide assistance.

[English]

The sad reality in the veterans independence program is that we are losing more traditional war veterans than we are gaining new clients. That is the main reason for the difference in the costing that you have there. There is no reduction in the services that we provide. There is no reduction in the eligibility of people who could access this program. It's the sheer result of the demographics that we are facing.

The Chair: Now we go on to Monsieur Vincent for five minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Vincent (Shefford, BQ): Thank you.

Good morning, Minister. As you already know, the Veterans Affairs Department has no register and no data with respect to how many veterans have committed suicide. What does the Department intend to do to address this situation?

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: Thank you for your question.

You are correct in saying that the Veterans Affairs Department has not collected statistics on suicide because, given the nature of the services we provide, this was not the kind of information that affected the benefits available to veterans through the Department.

However, I do want to say that an analysis was done recently—the Canadian Forces study of data relating to suicide among CF service personnel. One of the findings of that study was that rates are lower than in the general public. The study shows that, over the last 14 years, the number of suicides among Canadian Forces active personnel has fluctuated between 7 and 13 a year. At the same time, they do issue a warning. That is why we decided, in cooperation with the Department of National Defence, to conduct a study on the period from 1972 to 2007. National Defence has provided a list of all Canadian Forces personnel over that period. We then asked Statistics Canada to look at the data and identify the number of Canadian Forces personnel who had committed suicide. At the same time—

Do you still have the little blue pamphlet you showed me this morning? You'll see that it's very interesting.

Mr. Robert Vincent: Don't give me too many numbers, because I won't have time to ask any other questions!

• (1220)

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: No, no.

Mr. Robert Vincent: I have reviewed your numbers, and in 2006, 2007 and 2008, approximately 26 people took their own lives. However, our research through Access to Information identifies 56 individuals. The figures you have, and even the document you provided recently, are not up-to-date and do not reflect the current reality. We can try and make them say whatever we want, but the reality is quite different.

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: You assume that the reality is quite different—and you may be right—and that is one of the reasons why we want to look at this. It will not take forever; we will have that information by the fall. Then we will be in a position to modify or improve our approach. I think it is important to consider that information, which is extremely relevant for all of us. At the same time, our study will deal with four aspects that are interesting and that I would like to tell you about now. One is the transition to civilian life—we will also be asking questions about that. As well, we will be seeking to identify the number of Canadian Forces personnel who have died of cancer. So, there are a number of different elements that we will be looking at.

Mr. Robert Vincent: In a somewhat different vein, when a veteran applies for an award payment, the processing time for the application is 132 days, or about four months. It is unacceptable for a veteran to have to wait that long to find out how much support he will be receiving.

What does the Department intend to do to ensure that these applications can be processed in a reasonable timeframe?

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: That is an excellent question and, what is more, I agree with you. Currently it takes 24 weeks for a decision to be arrived at, as to whether you are going to receive a disability award. After that, a further 16 weeks are needed to determine how much you will be receiving. That represents 40 weeks in all—almost one year. I have asked the Department to try and correct that. A preliminary plan will soon be presented with a view to shortening our process by at least 12 to 14 weeks.

I could give you a very simple example. If I have lost a leg, why should I have to wait 24 weeks to be told that I am entitled to a disability award? That is an obvious one, it seems to me. However, if I have back problems and have to consult 12 different physicians, that is another matter. Some processes are lengthy, but others can be improved. That is my concern. Indeed, I had the same concern in other departments previously. This was the case at the Economic Development Agency of Canada, for example, where I told them it should not take six months for a company to find out whether or not it is going to receive money. So, the same applies here, and we are currently tackling the problem.

Mr. Robert Vincent: Will you be giving priority to people who have seen a physician and have been given a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress syndrome? In actual fact, if there is a diagnosis and you do not provide support to these individuals as quickly as possible, there are former Canadian Forces members who end up committing suicide subsequently, because the process takes too long and they need treatment when they ask for it.

Will you give priority to people who have a medical certificate confirming post-traumatic stress syndrome?

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: I will have to rely on my memory and proceed by deduction. For example, if the person is sick, we do not wait—

Mr. Robert Vincent: Yes, but you have the file.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Vincent, we're way over time, so let the minister answer the question.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Vincent: You can answer the question; you are entitled to do so.

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: I am pleased to answer your question.

For example, if someone has a health problem, the Veterans Affairs Department assumes manage of the case and will provide that individual with all the other services. Now with respect to whether or not there is a mental health issue or post-traumatic stress syndrome, of course, the doctors will be the ones to make that scientific determination. The Minister is not the one who decides if someone has post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Mr. Robert Vincent: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: So, we will really try to shorten that waiting time. I should soon be able to provide additional details in that regard. I will even try to make them public at the appropriate time.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[English]

I made an error in the order, so the punishment is to my own colleagues. We have about four and a half minutes left. I understand that it will be Mr. McColeman, who is going to exchange them with Mr. Lobb.

Mr. Phil McColeman: First of all, Minister, I want to thank you for being here. I want to thank you as well for following in the footsteps of what I perceive to be a very passionate view for veterans and the welfare of veterans, which you're exhibiting here today.

My question has to do with honouring our vets. In my community we have two very excellent examples of how we honour vets. Once is the Thank-A-Vet Luncheon, at which we get over 800 vets of diverse ethnic backgrounds, including many aboriginal vets from the Six Nations, who are in my riding. We also have a very rich Canadian Military Heritage Museum. Just as a plug, Minister Thompson visited on two occasions over the last three years, and I'd like you to consider it.

Nonetheless, here's my question. Often, because of the diversity of the backgrounds of some of our vets, some of them—and specifically to your own self, French Canadians, in the Second World War especially—are unfortunately not recognized as much as they should be in our history books. Could you discuss what you are contemplating or might be doing to ensure that Canadian heroes of all linguistic and ethnic backgrounds are remembered for their contributions to this country?

• (1225)

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: Thank you for your question. First of all, our program is always available to communities interested in organizing a commemorative event to honour our veterans. So, the answer is yes; the program is still there. Indeed, recently I have signed a number of letters awarding contributions of \$5,000, \$6,000 and \$7,000, for example, for just this kind of event.

In fact, here in Canada, we are placing more and more emphasis on ceremonies that pay tribute to our veterans—the people who risked their lives as well as those who died for us.

I would also like to make the following comment. You talked about the previous Minister, Mr. Thompson, and I have to say he was an excellent Minister. He is a wonderful person and I want to pay tribute to him here. It is not easy for me to be wearing his shoes here today. When he was in Cabinet, I remember that, when he presented an item, he always did it with a great deal of conviction and force of character. He was a very strong supporter of veterans and was well loved. I at least wanted to mention that.

I forgot the other part of your question; my apologies. Could you remind me what it was?

Ms. Suzanne Tining: What are you contemplating in terms of enhancing Canadians' remembrance of veterans, either in historical terms or in terms of a physical presence?

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: First of all, I had an opportunity to attend an event in Quebec City in February—I mention this example because in my own province of Quebec, there is a gap in that regard. We held an event, as well as a press conference, under the banner “The Francophone Force”. We invited former soldiers who had fought in World War II; I'm thinking, in particular, of Mr. Lamontagne, who was the Mayor of Quebec City and Lieutenant Governor of Quebec. On that occasion, many former members of the Forces agreed to tell the story, on our website, of what they did during World War II and what their contribution was, so that this all becomes part of our collective memory.

And, as you can see, public events of this type are becoming more and more frequent, where people come together to honour those who died for us. It is a growing movement. I recently saw the boomers, for example—those who fought in World War II. They asked to have their own distinctive symbol—not quite a medal, but something to honour them. So, we are currently looking at the feasibility and cost of such an initiative.

If, in my time at the Department, I can do something to better serve the veterans of World War II, whose numbers are shrinking at a rate of 2,000 a month, and to give them a better quality of life, I think that we in the Department will have done something fitting for them in this last phase of their lives.

At the same time, it is up to us to adapt our services to these “new” veterans returning from Afghanistan or somewhere else, or from missions abroad. So, we are facing two challenges—two different challenges. As I say, if we don't give these people a chance to return to an active civilian life so that they can continue to grow, we will have missed the boat. It is critical that we succeed. That is our challenge, in the current budgetary context, as it is for any department.

• (1230)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. McColeman.

It's 12:31 now. I understand that the minister needed to leave two minutes ago.

It's up to you, Minister, if you have some closing remarks. It's your schedule that we're trying to respect. I will allow you to make any closing remarks you like right now.

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I do not have a monopoly on truth. You can all assist the Minister and the government, by helping us to improve our services. Of course, everything must be reasonable, because we all know that budgets are finite.

However, we have a responsibility to our armed forces, to those who defend us, and to whom we owe our quality of life today, because they fought for us; they went to war. We know that their spouses and their children as well make sacrifices because of the fallout from that. So, it is our responsibility to try and help them as much as we can.

If you have any suggestions, we welcome them.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Go ahead, Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: If you could kindly send the answers back to the committee, it would be great.

Thank you.

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: Are you talking about Agent Orange?

A voice: Yes.

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn: No problem.

[English]

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Could you also tell us the preparations for April 9?

Mr. Scott Andrews: I'd also like to know the amount of money that was in the monument restoration program as well.

The Chair: We'd also like to know the current budget.

Merci. Bonne journée.

I will be transmitting the new work plan to you by the end of the day today or tomorrow.

The meeting is adjourned.

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