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Chair

Mr. Greg Kerr

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• (0845)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC)): Good morning, folks. Before we get into the witnesses and the discussion today, I will just point out that we've got business for about half an hour at the end, so we have about an hour and a half with these particular witnesses.

I'd like to start by welcoming back Bernard Butler and Charlotte Stewart from Veterans Affairs. As everybody is aware, we have determined that we will proceed with our next study, and as part of that study we've agreed that it's only appropriate that we hear witnesses from the department to discuss some of the issues that are forthcoming.

As you know, Mr. Butler, the standard is that we allow about 10 minutes for opening comments and then we get into questions and answers. I think you're quite familiar with that routine by now.

So thank you for coming this morning.

Mr. Bernard Butler (Director General, Policy and Research Division, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

[Translation]

Good morning everyone. It's a pleasure to be here today.

• (0850)

[English]

I'm delighted to be here again. As you may recall, my colleague, Charlotte Stewart, and I were last before the committee on September 29, at which time we provided a bit of a departmental overview. As director general of policy and research, I am going to lead off today on the policy framework for the new Veterans Charter, including recent enhancements that have been implemented. Following that, Charlotte Stewart, the director general of service delivery and program management, will speak to program implementation and service delivery issues.

As you are mostly aware, the new Veterans Charter includes a suite of programs and services that work together to support the successful transition of veterans and their families to civilian life. This suite of services is supported by case management, mental health services, and other Veterans Affairs Canada programs, such as treatment benefits and the veterans independence program. The focus of the new Veterans Charter is to support the veterans' transition from military to civilian life, to support his or her wellness and his or her independence throughout the move into civilian life.

The new Veterans Charter programming is based on principles of modern disability management, and includes comprehensive medical, psychosocial, and vocational rehabilitation services targeted to address the recovery and re-establishment needs of veterans and their families.

While participating in rehabilitation, veterans are eligible for income support in the form of our earnings loss benefit program, which is one of a number of financial benefits available to provide an income stream up to age 65 if necessary, and to guarantee a basic standard of living. The charter also includes a lump-sum disability award that recognizes and compensates for the non-economic effects of a service-related disability. It provides for access to the public service health care plan for those not currently covered, and it provides services to help with career transition.

In place since 2006, the new Veterans Charter aims to care for the men and women it serves in a more comprehensive manner than existed prior to 2006. Ladies and gentlemen, the new Veterans Charter is not perfect, but it's a strong foundation on which to build, as was done recently with the enhancements that were approved by this committee some months back, which came into force on October 3. These new Veterans Charter enhancements represent an investment of \$189 million over five years and will benefit approximately 4,000 veterans over that period.

These enhancements include the following. One is an increase in the monthly financial allowance under the earnings loss benefit, bringing the minimal annual pre-tax income to \$40,000 for those participating in rehabilitation or who are unable to be gainfully employed. The second improvement, increased access to monthly allowances, including the permanent impairment allowance, is essentially a taxable allowance worth up to \$1,632 per month, based on current rates. It is payable for life to seriously impaired veterans. There's a new monthly supplement of \$1,000 to the permanent impairment allowance, and it's intended for the most seriously disabled veterans who are unable to be gainfully employed. Finally, the enhancements provide flexible payment options for veterans who receive a disability award.

Ladies and gentlemen, these changes address the priority gaps that have been identified through consultations with a number of stakeholders, including this committee and its reports, and other groups. These changes are predicated on a defining principle, that those in greatest need receive the most support. With these improvements, our most seriously disabled veterans will be guaranteed a minimum annual income of \$58,000 per year. We have also taken other advice to heart. We are improving our outreach to CF members, veterans, and their families regarding programming that Veterans Affairs provides. In collaboration with our colleagues at National Defence, we have made 19 joint presentations now to more than 6,000 CF members, veterans, and their families on major CF bases across the country, so that they are fully informed about what the new Veterans Charter actually provides them.

In light of our commitment to ensure this is a living charter, evolving to meet the needs of CF veterans and their families, we will continue our efforts to understand the distinct needs of the younger CF population. The departmental programs and services, as such, must be evidenced-based, and we are using our research work, jointly undertaken with National Defence and the Canadian Forces, to help guide program and policy design.

Ladies and gentlemen, that gives you a little bit of context for the New Veterans Charter and for the enhancements to the charter. I'm now going to turn it over to Charlotte Stewart, who is going to speak to some of the service delivery and implementation issues.

[Translation]

Ms. Charlotte Stewart (Director General, Service Delivery and Program Management, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, Mr. Butler.

Good day. I am very happy to be appearing before you today.

● (0855)

[English]

I'm very pleased to have the opportunity today to speak to you, particularly about our transition process. Bernard has spoken about the new Veterans Charter in general terms. We have also had an opportunity in the past to speak to you about the enhancements and improvements that we've made to the new Veterans Charter.

Today, we'll build on that discussion, and speak in more detail about the new Veterans Charter, particularly the programs and services that are key to the successful transition and re-establishment of CF members, a transition process that is key. This is where members who are serving in the military begin a release process, and begin to take the steps needed for them and their families to make a successful transition to civilian life. Of course, in that process, they leave the Department of National Defence. They move and become clients of Veterans Affairs Canada.

We know that leaving the military and returning to civilian life is an incredible transition. It's very difficult for many members, and for almost all members it will have some level of challenge. Not only are they leaving behind their chosen lifetime career, but they're also leaving a lifestyle and a culture that is unique to the Canadian Forces. It's very different from what is experienced by most Canadians. They feel separation at times, and isolation. That's one of those issues that we are working to address, as well.

The new Veterans Charter was designed to provide the full suite of programs and services individually offered to releasing members to help them make that transition. It affords us the opportunity to provide a very individual approach, so that all members, as they take those steps, are given an individual case plan and can work with us in Veterans Affairs Canada to the greatest extent possible to achieve the most success possible.

Bernard gave you a quick summary of the new Veterans Charter. When I speak about it being a suite of benefits and services, it includes such things as career transition services. This is a program that allows all releasing members to get advice and guidance to assist them in making career choices, in understanding how their skills obtained in the military are applicable to civilian life, and then give them practical advice on how to get into the workforce, find a job, and be successful.

Bernard mentioned that the new Veterans Charter is based on modern principles of disability management, which is key. Based on research, and using great examples from other countries, for instance, we've developed programs that are specifically designed to support the needs of the individual. They include, for example, our cornerstone program, the rehabilitation program.

The rehabilitation program has three elements. The first element is to ensure that individuals receive the support they need to be stabilized in a medical sense. That's medical rehabilitation. Also, it can address, on a very individual level, any psychological or social issues. Then, as the individual moves and develops those strengths, the third pillar of the program is rehabilitation, where it's specifically designed to assist those in the transition process who need to successfully re-establish themselves in a career in civilian life.

What's key to us today—and you've heard this from other witnesses recently—is that the department is transforming itself, and that our best programs need to be delivered in the best possible service delivery model. I'll be able to speak a little bit about that today, too.

The department has almost 2,000 front-line staff across the country who are engaged with clients day-to-day. Right now, our transformation program, which is active under way and will continue until 2015, will see us improve our service delivery structure, reduce complexities, streamline our processes, and introduce more technology, so that our veterans can be served in the way they want, when they want.

These changes are not at all about cutting jobs or eliminating positions. These changes are about making ourselves more productive, more efficient, and getting the best answer as quickly as possible for the veterans, wherever they are and whenever they want the information. It's driven by the goal of ensuring that we have the right people and the right places to get the job done.

The shift has started, and one of the key launching points was in 2009 when the Minister of Veterans Affairs Canada and the Minister of National Defence announced the opening of integrated personnel support centres. This is a joint partnership with DND. Veterans Affairs Canada now has over 100 employees working on 24 bases and wings across the country, co-located with DND, so that we assist the transition.

We've already made other commitments to change. Our disability benefits are now delivered one-third faster. The time it takes for decisions to be made in our rehabilitation program has been cut in half, and we're providing more self-serve options on our technology platform.

[Translation]

We are constantly striving to improve our services so that our employees have the required tools and skills to give the best possible service to veterans and their families.

[English]

We've given case managers on the ground more authority to make decisions faster. We reduced the complexity of our programs. It's no longer hard to understand them, either for employees who are delivering the service, or for veterans who want to read about what they're entitled to on our website. We've introduced direct deposit. We shortened the turnaround time for many of our programs and will continue to do so.

In the last year, you've heard that Canadian Forces members comprise the largest single group, surpassing our traditional veterans. We know as well that our newer veterans have different needs and want to be served differently.

Our guiding vision is that by 2015 veterans and their families will be able to connect with VAC through multiple communication channels, and to trust VAC to correctly identify their needs upon release and ensure a smooth transition from the Canadian Forces to the care of Veterans Affairs Canada.

Merci.

● (0900)

The Chair: Thank you both very much. That was very straightforward, very comprehensive.

We'll go to Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you both very much for coming.

Mr. Butler, when you were with us before, we talked about the unfortunate release within the department of the personal information of Sean Bruyca. You said at that time that there were now procedures and policies in place to keep this from happening again. Well, unfortunately, it has happened in two other cases that we're aware of. We simply don't know how many other cases we might have. We have a fair number of veterans and their families now filing freedom of information requests to assure themselves that their personal information wasn't somehow made available.

So first, I'd like you to comment on the cases of Dennis Manuge and Sylvain Chartrand, regarding their personal information being released.

Second, the Veterans'Ombudsman issued a report, and I'm wondering if you have had a chance to see it. The ombudsman made some solid recommendations to assist the department, and I was wondering if you could do a quick survey of what your department will be doing to respond to what he has recommended.

Thank you for coming.

Mr. Bernard Butler: Thank you, Mr. Stoffer.

With respect to the privacy issue, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on any individual case. As I advised the committee the last time I was here, the department has implemented a 10-point action plan. It's a comprehensive plan to ensure the protection of privacy of information. It includes training as well as refined protocols and business processes. It limits access to information to those who have a need to know. So it's comprehensive.

Privacy cases may come forward that relate to circumstances predating the implementation of our privacy action plan, and we are sensitive to this possibility. I can't comment on the individual cases you're referring to. What I can tell you is that the issue of privacy within Veterans Affairs Canada is taken exceedingly seriously. It is something that all staff have been trained on now. They have been repeatedly reminded of their duties and obligations, and their control of information has been rigorously monitored.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Sorry to interrupt, but may we get a copy of the 10-point plan? Is it possible to get that copy of what the department has been initiating?

Mr. Bernard Butler: Absolutely. I think it should be available. We'll do that for you, sir.

The other question you raised was with respect to the report of the ombudsman. What I can tell you, Mr. Stoffer, without having it in front of me to go through the many recommendations here, is that the report has been shared with Veterans Affairs Canada. We have, in fact, gone through all of the recommendations and all of the concerns. We have responded by way of developing action plans, as required, or responses to the various recommendations.

We are aware of it. We are working with it. I can assure you that the department has a very strong working relationship with the ombudsman's office. We are very concerned, obviously, with any issues the office brings to us and are taking very serious steps in terms of addressing them.

Without the particular recommendations in front me, Mr. Stoffer, it's very difficult to speak to individual ones. But I can tell you that we have the report. We have responded to the recommendations, and we will be addressing the concerns he has identified.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Mathysen, if you have some questions, there's a little time left.

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you for being here.

Your brief indicates that the minimum annual income for disabled veterans is \$58,000 per year. I assume that is before tax.

• (0905)

Mr. Bernard Butler: That would be pre-tax income.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: It says here the “most seriously disabled Veterans”. Is there a threshold? How seriously injured does an individual have to be to receive this annual income of \$58,000?

Mr. Bernard Butler: Thanks very much for that query.

Perhaps it might be appropriate for us to look at the components of the \$58,000 reference point I made mention of.

With the recent enhancements to the new Veterans Charter, the first component of consequence is a minimum pre-tax income of \$40,000. It is for those whom we're releasing at low ranks. With respect to those who may have been out of the military for a period of years, what we realized through various consultations was that the earnings loss benefit was not meeting their basic needs. With the enhancements to the new Veterans Charter, they will receive a minimum \$40,000 through the earnings loss benefit program when they're in rehabilitation.

In addition to that, the most seriously impaired qualify for the highest grade of the permanent impairment allowance, which is currently roughly \$1,632 a month. Those who are receiving a permanent impairment allowance who are unable to be substantially and gainfully employed are the most seriously disabled veterans we have. They would then qualify for the additional \$1,000 per month supplement, which was introduced and implemented with the new Veterans Charter enhancements in Bill C-55. When you add those components together, those individuals in that category would, in fact, be eligible to receive \$58,000 in pre-tax income.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Butler.

We'll go to Mr. Lobb, for five minutes.

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): My first question to Mr. Butler picks up on what Mr. Stoffer was asking about with regard to the Veterans Ombudsman. Obviously, in his official capacity, part of his job is to produce reports and provide them to the department. Beyond that, though, how often would you or Ms. Stewart meet with Mr. Parent or any of his representatives of get ahead of the curve and ahead of the reports? How often would you meet with him?

Mr. Bernard Butler: I can tell you that the ombudsman has a regular series of meetings at our assistant deputy minister level. Those are with Mr. Gilbert and Mr. Hillier, both of whom were here a number of weeks ago. They meet quarterly. In addition to that, we certainly have contacts with the director general of operations, Mr. Walbourne, in the ombudsman's office, as issues arise. We deal with the ombudsman's office on a range of issues on a regular basis. A lot of them would be service delivery issues. That would be through Charlotte Stewart.

Mr. Ben Lobb: What about with the Royal Canadian Legion? Obviously they're a great advocate on behalf of veterans as well. How often would you meet with them on issues relating to, say, service delivery?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: We ensure that we have at least one annual meeting. We also have meetings during the year on an ad hoc basis as required. We have a good relationship and open communication with the Legion. Their service officers are working with our front-line staff across the country, so as issues arise they're elevated, often through Mr. Allard, into our organization as required.

Mr. Ben Lobb: Obviously, you made a great presentation. How often would you or Mr. Hillier go to individual bases and see firsthand that what you're saying is actually happening?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: I can speak on behalf of Mr. Hillier, and I'm sure I could say that he's been in every district and every integrated personnel support centre. If he's missed one, I'd be surprised. He makes it a very active part of his business to be on the ground listening to people. I do as well, but Mr. Hillier is personally very engaged in that.

Mr. Ben Lobb: In your comments, you talked about the vision for Veterans Affairs in 2015. To me that seems like a long time away—it's four years away. If you took the budget of Veterans Affairs, at a little over \$3 billion, in corporate terms and aimed to deliver on a vision or major goals for a business of this size, I'm not sure if four years would cut it. I'm just wondering why it is 2015. Is there a good reason why it's 2015? Why isn't it 2012, or halfway through 2013?

• (0910)

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: The transformation plan I was speaking about has milestones within every year. We're going to see a full transformation by 2015. This is a very significant transformation that is going to affect all levels of the organization. It's taking the organization from a paper-based, non-technology department into being, I believe, one of the leaders in both those areas.

Each year, we will achieve certain goals. We've already made progress. We're reducing the complexity and reducing the turnaround of our programs, and we've already achieved that with our disability programs. While 2015 is the end state, it is by no means the point at which all our accomplishments will have been achieved.

Mr. Ben Lobb: My last point is that in the next week or two, we're going to western Canada to tour a few sites. Before we head out there, would you like to guess what some of the issues might be that we might encounter or on which we might hear feedback?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: Are you speaking of visiting the integrated personnel support centres?

Once again, the opportunity there is around building the strongest partnership possible on the ground with DND. You're going to go into integrated personnel support centres where back staff and DND staff are co-located and where they are working to assist the veterans as they make the transition.

In terms of potential issues, I would say that at this point we have resourced those centres appropriately, and we're working through program arrangements with DND, because the centres were set up in 2009 and we opened about 24 of them quite rapidly. We're working through some basic operational issues that would be normal in any organization—firming up procedures, making sure the right staff are doing the right work. But overall, I can say that what you're going to hear is that it's a successful model, that the model is correct, and that the 18,000 or so walk-in clients using them speak very highly of the service.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now to Mr. Casey, for five.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and welcome back, Mr. Butler, and Ms. Stewart.

My first question for you is whether the department has undergone an administrative services review.

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: The administrative services review is government-wide. We've been a participant in working with Treasury Board, PCO, and others in our department. Part of what we've been looking at is possibly forming new service partnerships; and in other areas, as with other departments, we've been looking at moving towards a centralized service model for information services.

Mr. Sean Casey: So that's Shared Services, is it?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: Yes.

Mr. Sean Casey: If I understand your answer correctly, the administrative services review and the transfer of people from VAC to Shared Services Canada are one and the same. I understood them to be separate; that's why I asked.

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: The administrative services review was perhaps step one, and the more specific move to common shared services would be a second level.

Mr. Sean Casey: Okay. So they're related.

You say that this administrative services review was a government-wide initiative. Is it still ongoing?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: Yes.

Mr. Sean Casey: What are the expected impacts of this review on staffing numbers and front-line services? Do you have a handle on that yet, or is it too early to tell?

• (0915)

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: The opportunity from the administrative services review is to provide better service to Canadians. That is the ultimate goal. You mentioned one of the initiatives. Other initiatives could look at ways whereby Veterans Affairs Canada could participate with other departments that are providing front-line services.

But no, at this point in time, those discussions have not been completed or formalized. Down the road, the opportunity, I believe, is around efficiency and providing a better service; it's not about reducing staff.

Mr. Sean Casey: I just want to be clear on this. There is a bunch of things going on in the department: the transformation agenda, the

strategic operating review, and an administrative services review. Am I right that those three things are all going on right now?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: The department is participating in the administrative services review, as are all government departments. Yes, you are correct, we're also working on a transformation agenda; and as with all departments, the strategic operating review, now called the deficit reduction action plan, is under way.

Mr. Sean Casey: I understand what the transformation agenda is. I understand what the strategic operating review is. How is the administrative services review different? If there are three specific things going on, what is the administrative services review about? Could you help me understand that?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: It's a horizontal review of government service offerings and government programs. In particular, I would characterize it as looking for opportunities for the Government of Canada to serve the broader Canadian citizen client group in better ways. Changes may result from it, but it is a horizontal review of functions that all departments perform.

Mr. Sean Casey: You indicated that you had a chance to see the ombudsman's report. He commented that you were able to get your service standard from 24 weeks down to 16 weeks for the processing of disability benefits. He also commented that it's difficult to determine how much of that reduction was a result of starting the clock later.

Could you shed some light on that?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: Sure.

The changes that allowed us to reduce our turnaround times involved having more staff working on the files, as well as introducing some process improvements. Those process improvements will stay in place and will continue to reduce our turnaround time.

In terms of starting the clock, frankly what was happening is that files were coming in without complete information, and a decision was made to be clearer about what was required for an applicant's to be reviewed. This is advantageous to the client as well, because it clarifies that, "A complete file includes the following and that for us to begin our process, we require you to do..." this and this. They get a lot of assistance from our front-line staff to do that.

So yes, an element of that is potentially related to when we begin to measure the turnaround time. But I can say that the majority of the decrease was related to adding more staff and streamlining some of the surrounding processes.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Storseth, for five minutes.

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I hope you didn't call me Mr. Stoffer again. I thought I heard that.

The Chair: No, and even though he moves around, I didn't call you Mr. Dykstra either. I'm just trying to follow the list here.

Mr. Brian Storseth: I don't have the hair to be Mr. Dykstra.

Thank you very much for coming, Mr. Butler and Ms. Stewart. It was very interesting, as always. It was very educational.

As you know, when we started with the new Veterans Charter we wanted to ensure that we got rid of the patchwork of programs that always seemed to always creep up Veterans Affairs Canada. We wanted to make sure it was flexible enough that it would be able to adapt. The new Veterans Charter wasn't going to be perfect in the first place, so we needed to make sure we could make changes.

Have you witnessed that or seen evidence of it in the time the new Veterans Charter has been in place, and could you give me examples of that?

Mr. Bernard Butler: Thank you for the question, Mr. Storseth.

I think a good example of that would be Bill C-55. When the new Veterans Charter was implemented, it had cross-government, all-party support, and there was a clear recognition on the part of the Government of Canada that there was a compelling and pressing need for transitional support for the modern veterans who were releasing from the military. There was a need for promotion of wellness amongst that group, and there was a need to support their re-establishment into civilian life.

So the charter was adopted, and it was acknowledged at the time that it would require adjustment. There were some studies conducted, and this committee itself has looked at it. The recent enhancements, through Bill C-55, represent significant improvements to the charter, which are clearly indicative of the fact that there is a process to identify gaps and a process to adapt.

Bill C-55 and the enhancements we spoke of a short while ago, in our view, are certainly good examples of how it is adjusting to meet the evolving needs and gaps as they are identified.

• (0920)

Mr. Brian Storseth: You mean things like the lump sum disability payment and the changes that were made to that?

Mr. Bernard Butler: Exactly. The lump sum disability payment options that were introduced are a good example of that. If you recall, there was concern voiced by different quarters over the last couple of years that the lump sum payments being made to veterans were perhaps not being utilized as effectively by those individuals as they might be.

The response by the government at the time was to understand what the issue was and then to introduce payment options. Now, as some of you may be aware, the veteran has the option to receive either a lump sum—or some of the benefit in a lump sum and in annual instalments—or to receive it all on the basis of annual instalments over a period of time.

Mr. Brian Storseth: How well disseminated are these changes throughout the veterans' ranks? It seems to me that there are still a lot of regular force members and veterans whom I run into who don't necessarily understand some of the changes that were made.

I understand these are recent changes, but is there a communications strategy to make sure we reach out through organizations and the media to make sure that the veterans are aware of the changes made?

Mr. Bernard Butler: It's an excellent question, sir. It has become apparent to Veterans Affairs over the last few years that notwithstanding the improvements that we believe the new Veterans Charter has brought to Canadian veterans' programming, we were not as effective as we might have been in getting the message out.

Over the last year we've developed an outreach consultation and engagement strategy, and part of that strategy concerns the communication of programming and benefits to veterans. As I noted in my opening remarks, we've just finished a series of 19 visits to all of the major bases in Canada in cooperation and partnership with the Canadian Forces. We've met with the veterans and serving military members and their families for the very purpose of communicating the message about the program.

What we're finding, regrettably, is that there has been some misinformation in the public domain. There has been some lack of understanding by some of our veterans and serving members. Our outreach strategy is designed to get to that audience, and it includes aggressive changes in how we're going to be communicating with veterans and serving members through social media and other means.

We have developed quite a robust plan for that very purpose, which is to communicate messaging around veterans' programming and benefits.

Mr. Brian Storseth: I want to congratulate you on shortening the timeline from 24 weeks to 16 weeks. That has been noticed in the veterans' community.

What tools do you have in place to measure the satisfaction of your clients?

On top of that, you've given more authority to front-line workers. Could you give us an example of the types of increased authority they have been given to streamline the process?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: With respect to measuring the satisfaction level or feedback, we do client satisfaction surveys. That's a key element of our feedback methodology. With respect to front-line decision-making, our case managers now have the ability to make virtually all their own decisions around the rehabilitation case planning needs of an individual client. In the past, some of those decisions had to be escalated either to another level in a region or up to head office. We've changed the authority level for the front-line staff, so they can make those decisions, and we've also made sure they have the training required to do that.

• (0925)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Stewart.

We'll now go to Ms. Mathysen for five minutes.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And again, thank you.

I want some clarification. Ms. Stewart, you said that in order to mitigate problems in Veterans Affairs, more staff are working on more files. I understand that front-line case managers will be maintained, but I'm having difficulty in understanding how more staff can be working on more files if 500 jobs are going to be cut over the next five years. Now, I understand those are jobs in terms of facilitating the work of Veterans Affairs, but it seems to me that, with 700,000 veterans in Canada, there is a tremendous workload, and I don't see how you can manage it with a reduction in staff.

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: What we're working on in our transformation plan has many different elements, and they are happening at the same time. With respect to reducing our turnaround time on the disability program, in 2011 we added additional staff to make sure we cleared off any backlogs and moved towards reducing our turnaround time. That was a short-term opportunity we had, and at the same time, as we move forward, we're re-engineering the program. By re-engineering the program, that means we're looking at every step, every aspect in terms of people who work on it and how they work on it, and in the course of 2012, we'll have a redesigned program implemented.

With that redesigned program, we'll at the same time be introducing more technology, so some of our paper-based processes will be eliminated. Right now we have steps in the process that aren't going to be required in the future. We have paper-based processes that are fairly manual and require a lot of staff time. So in some cases, we'll be able to reallocate staff to other functions where they're needed more. And over time, with the transformation program there will be an overall reduction as we move forward from the paper-based system to a more technology-based one.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Okay.

I have been looking through the ombudsman's report, and one of his concerns was the requests for treatment and medication that were denied.

The ombudsman says that the letters sent to veterans to inform them of their request for treatment benefits and medication being denied don't always explain how and why the decision was made. It makes it very difficult for those veterans to gather the documentation they need to appeal the decision.

What steps are you taking to address this? It seems to me that's at the centre of a lot of the complaints I hear.

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: Yes, and I hear those as well.

The department has been working on two things. One is a plain language system, where all of our correspondence is being reviewed with the view to making the terminology clear. Sometimes we had a tendency to use terms that were government-centric or, frankly, not very user-friendly. Our plain language initiative is about putting things in letters that make sense so that someone understands what happened, and what the decision was based on.

At the same time, we are simplifying some of our procedures around treatment benefits in particular. Until fairly recently, until 2011, people who were receiving treatment benefits for the same condition and needed to receive that benefit over and over again had to apply over and over again. We've eliminated that. Now, if you're receiving a treatment benefit, the first time you apply, you will get

your approval and that's all you have to do. You do not need to reapply. So there will be fewer veterans who will be getting those letters with any description at all around the decision.

When there is a decision that individuals are not happy about, they can discuss that further with the department and have a review of that decision. And they can, of course, talk to an employee at Veterans Affairs Canada directly through our national call centre to have an interpretation of the decision and any follow-up action that's needed on it.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: One of the big concerns we hear over and over again is the unfair reduction of veterans disability insurance payments under SISIP. Are steps being taken to address that?

We heard from the government, before they were the government, that they wanted reforms in that area but we haven't seen them. What is happening at this point?

• (0930)

Mr. Bernard Butler: I think you are referring to the litigation that is currently before the courts. I have two comments. One would be that because it is before the courts, I would obviously want to refrain from commenting one way or the other on it.

The other issue would be that this is an issue largely within the domain of the Canadian Forces, because it relates to its service income security insurance plan. So you might want to put that question to National Defence the next time you have the opportunity to chat with those folks.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: I would enjoy that. Thank you, Mr. Butler.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dykstra.

Mr. Rick Dykstra (St. Catharines, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Butler, I don't want to interrupt the conversation. I just want to perhaps get a little bit more of an in-depth response to one of the first comments you made:

The charter also includes a lump-sum disability award that recognizes and compensates for the non-economic effects of a service-related disability. It provides access to the public service health care plan for those not currently covered, and it provides services to help with career transition.

Could you expand a little bit on exactly what that means?

Mr. Bernard Butler: Thank you for that.

Those are actually references to three separate benefits provided through the new Veterans Charter. At the time the new charter was developed, we were moving from a monthly payment or pension scheme to a different approach to veteran programming, founded on the principles of wellness and re-establishment. That program design was intended to ensure that rehabilitation services and transition services were provided. While the individual is in rehabilitation, as an example, there are income supports through the earnings loss benefit.

The lump-sum benefit was designed to compensate for the non-economic impact of an injury. So if an individual suffers any type of service-related injury that is permanent, they qualify for this disability lump-sum award. It's not taxable, because it's not considered income. It's simply paid as compensation and in recognition of the loss occasioned by, or as a function of, that service-related injury. It is paid basically up to about \$285,000 at current rates, I believe, for an individual is 100% disabled as a function of that condition.

The access to the public service health care plan was another element of the new Veterans Charter. At the time the program design was being done back in the mid-2000s, it was recognized that there were a lot of still-serving members who, along with their families, didn't have access to additional health care benefits when they were released. In the military they were covered for all of their health care through the Canadian Forces' spectrum of care. They were coming out of the military and all of a sudden they were finding themselves without adequate access to a health care plan, such as you and I might benefit from through the public service.

This element of the new Veterans Charter is designed to ensure that these individuals do have access, so that the transition from the military to the civilian context is as painless as possible.

The third issue you raised, sir, was related to career transition services, a program that was designed basically to support members in their transition to civilian life. For a lot of them, they have come to the threshold of release after 10, 15, or 20-year careers in the military, and they are challenged with how to translate those skill sets into the civilian sector and even how to go about finding employment.

The career transition services program was set up basically to provide job-assistance counselling on how to write a resumé or how to look for work etc. There are individual work-counselling elements to it. There are group workshops provided. It is all targeted to try to support that employment base need, which has been recognized as a fundamental factor in the successful transition and health of the veteran and his family, as they move on to the next phase of their lives after service.

• (0935)

Mr. Rick Dykstra: You mentioned the transition in your presentation. One of the programs that has had a lot of discussion is the helmets to hardhats program. I was wondering if you could describe how successful it is. How is that working right now?

Mr. Bernard Butler: Helmets to hardhats was announced in the spring budget and it's been reaffirmed. It's a commitment of the Government of Canada to partner with this American organization to basically set up a program to ensure assistance to members transitioning from military to civilian life. All I can tell you at this time is that the Department of Veterans Affairs is working with HRSDC and the Canadian Forces with a view to developing an implementation plan. That is progressing well. We anticipate that over the next while our minister may well be in a position to make a formal announcement with respect to the program's implementation.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: I've heard a lot of folks say that we're investing less in our veterans than we were five, six, or seven years ago. Would you agree or disagree with that statement?

Mr. Bernard Butler: It's always a challenge to respond to a hypothetical observations. What I would say to you is that the Government of Canada is committing a lot of resources to support veterans in their transition from military to civilian life and to their re-establishment.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Butler.

Now to Mr. Lizon for five minutes....

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good morning. Thank you for coming to the committee this morning.

I'll continue on this same topic of veterans returning to civilian life and job opportunities.

Mr. Butler, you mentioned the initiatives for counselling, offering workshops, and different options to the veterans. It would seem logical to me that some of the veterans would be a natural fit for the private businesses that have contracts with the military. Is there a cooperation in that respect, and do they hire veterans that enter civilian life? Maybe you can elaborate on this topic?

Mr. Bernard Butler: Maybe Charlotte will take that.

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: Certainly there is a lot of interest among many Canadian companies in assisting veterans in finding a job as they make the transition. The Department of National Defence has done more work in that area at this point, in terms of having conversations and providing information to still serving members who may be looking to transition, giving them information on Canadian corporations or companies that are interested in pursuing that path.

In Veterans Affairs Canada, we're also interested in that model. Bernard mentioned helmets to hardhats, which may be one way that we could also facilitate this.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Would you have any information on this very topic? There are companies and businesses that have contracts with the Canadian military. Would they hire veterans; and if they do, what are the numbers? Can you give some examples?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: I don't have that information. It's a question that may be best put to the Department of National Defence.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Okay.

You mentioned in your remarks that it's a big life-changing event for people leaving the military to return to civilian life. They are leaving their career and the lifestyle, etc. Generally speaking, this would be a case for anybody retiring, really, because the work environment is very special, especially for people who work at a certain place for a long time. This would be the case for police officers or firemen, if we're talking about service, and it would, generally speaking, be for civilians as well. How is this different from a general approach?

● (0940)

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: Certainly for those who've served in the military, the military culture and the military family have different characteristics from what you would have in civilian life. Those who have moved in civilian life have had different opportunities, moving between different employers and making career choices fairly independently of their employers. Within the military, your career is very much overseen and directed within the military culture and military personnel management system. The pride and affinity of serving members to their regiment is very profound. As young people enter the military, that becomes their home. They're given a lot of guidance and direction within the military. Those outside the military, as I said, would make more independent decisions, no doubt, over time.

I think what we have found is that over time, the military culture has a very large impact on individuals, and it's extremely important to them.

Yes, those who have worked outside the military culture obviously have had different life experiences. Obviously they've also had work opportunities that were extremely important to them. But I don't think you can underestimate the impact of the military culture. What we find is that as releasing members begin to prepare to move out of the military, there's a sense of wondering, "What's out there for me?" Within the military, it was fairly clear to them, throughout their whole career, what their progress might be, who was in charge, etc. Outside, there's a far greater requirement for them to take the steps needed to make independent decisions.

That's the cultural issue that we, in Veterans Affairs Canada, want to assist the member with. In Veterans Affairs Canada, for instance, all employees are working on taking cultural awareness and Canadian Forces awareness training. We're also working on ways we can reach out in a way that is culturally attuned to the military. We recognize that special element of serving in the military, which I do believe, from our findings, and certainly from speaking to the military members, is unique to that experience.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Stewart.

That ends the first round of questioning. As we start the second round, we have a fair amount of time. We're trying to be fairly expansive, I guess you could say, in allowing time.

We have two people on the list for the second round, so we'll start with them. If there are any others, perhaps they indicate so.

We'll start with Ms. Papillon, for four minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Annick Papillon (Québec, NDP): First of all, thank you for being here today.

I have a few questions concerning the New Veterans Charter. I know that you meet with the Royal Canadian Legion approximately once a year and as often as necessary, and that is a good thing. You have perhaps been made aware of the fact that, with the New Charter, there have been cases of mismanagement of the lump sum by new veterans. I have heard about a situation that, I am told, occurs quite frequently, much too frequently in fact. When returning from combat or from a mission, some veterans buy a house, get married

and, unfortunately, because they are veterans and face numerous problems, their wife leaves them perhaps a year later and gets half the value of the house. I hear about this.

Sometimes, this lump sum seems to create certain problems. Has this issue been brought to your attention? Will you be taking steps to ensure that the lump sum doesn't disappear too rapidly, as apparently, it does?

Mr. Bernard Butler: Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

Thank you. The issue of the lump sum being mismanaged in certain circumstances has been a concern for the department. About 18 months ago, the department looked at that question very seriously. We conducted a survey of veterans who were receiving the benefit to try to determine how it was being spent.

For the most part, it would appear that the money was being spent wisely. There were a few cases, particularly cases in which individuals may have been suffering from serious mental health issues perhaps or had other issues in their lives, where that might have put the individuals at risk.

The decision at the time, and what has led us to make enhancements to the lump-sum payment award, was basically predicated on the assumption and principle that veterans have the right to choose. It's a fundamental principle that veterans should be able to choose how they spend their money, unless they are not competent legally. If they are competent legally, they should fundamentally have the right to choose. That's one principle.

In that process, we determined that that some individuals would profit greatly from having financial counselling about managing the money. The department provides up to \$500 for any individual receiving the lump-sum benefit to receive counselling on how it is spent.

Another consideration is that these large awards are only paid at the point in time that the individual's health conditions supporting the award are stable. There are checks and balances in play to try to ensure that the money is used appropriately and that we don't find ourselves in the situation you described, which would be most regrettable and unfortunate.

● (0945)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Annick Papillon: How do you make sure that this competency exists? How can you be certain that the veteran is competent to make that choice?

[English]

Mr. Bernard Butler: It would depend, I would submit to you—and my colleague Charlotte may have an additional comment on the service delivery side—on the nature of the disability. If an individual is pensioned for a condition that would give rise to a question of their competence from a legal point of view, then we would have to inquire into that. But for the most part, it's simply a question of personal choice. What you might choose to do with your lump sum might be quite different from what another individual might do with their lump sum, without necessarily meaning that one is a wrong choice. It might not be the choice that you would make, but that doesn't make it the wrong choice for the veteran.

[Translation]

Ms. Annick Papillon: So, you take this competency for granted

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Papillon.

We now go over to Ms. Adams.

Ms. Eve Adams (Mississauga—Brampton South, CPC): Thanks very much.

Since the implementation of the new Veterans Charter, we have talked about that charter as being a living document. Of course, there were enhancements made to the new Veterans Charter, but we keep hearing from veterans who say that they're dissatisfied with the VAC's service or that VAC isn't meeting the needs of veterans.

Does VAC have the capacity to meet the changing needs of the veteran population?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: Yes. It is our mission to meet the needs of our veteran population. That is what we're all about. We take any concerns that are heard very seriously, and that is in fact the reason for our embarking on a very ambitious transformation agenda.

To bring it into real terms, when we ask veterans about their concerns, we find that they need to know they're going to be able to work with someone in Veterans Affairs Canada one on one. They need to know that they can have access to people in Veterans Affairs Canada who can provide them with professional counselling, case management services, etc.

We have taken steps to ensure that this access is in place. We have more than 300 case managers who provide this front-line service to those veterans who need the new Veterans Charter. They are well trained. They're located where they're needed, in areas of high demand. We put more on the bases, and we've taken steps to reduce their workload so they have the time to deal with complex issues and cases. We manage their workloads very carefully. The whole point of this, of course, is to make sure that when someone with a need comes to Veterans Affairs and is eligible for services under the new Veterans Charter, we have taken steps to ensure they will have access to the people who can help them get those benefits and services.

• (0950)

Ms. Eve Adams: Thank you.

Now, when a veteran does get ill, the family steps in and is a critical help to the veteran. What is VAC doing to support families?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: That's one of the cornerstones of the new Veterans Charter and one of the characteristics that makes it such a powerful program, because veterans can be part of the process. For instance, as I mentioned, when veterans are injured and need case management services, they'll meet with the case manager and get an individualized case plan. The spouse or common-law partner is encouraged to participate in that as well. Typically, the interviews, the discussions, and even the development of the plan would incorporate a family member.

Family members, depending on the needs of the veteran, can also receive direct support. If part of the veteran's need is to get psychological counselling to strengthen some element of their family life, the spouse or common-law partner can also participate in that if it's directly linked to the veteran's need. Beyond that, family members have access to operational stress injury clinics. They have access to our OSSIS network, which is more of a peer support and family support network across the country. That's where they can meet with people who are facing similar issues to their loved one's. We have a 24-hour help line. Family members can call at any time and voice a concern or raise an issue. Obviously, our protocols around privacy are clear in that regard.

There are a lot of supports for the family.

Ms. Eve Adams: What type of response time can the family expect if they call that 24-hour help line? How quickly are they hearing back?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: The purpose of that is to get the help very quickly. Once the call is made, if there's an issue for the client, it is directed to the district office that is closest at hand, and the individual would expect to receive a call back the next day.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Stewart.

Now, Mr. Genest, for five minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Réjean Genest (Shefford, NDP): Good day.

As you know, veterans are facing a whole new problem. In fact, today, our armed forces not only protect, they are also involved in wars, in particular, in Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan has been very hard on our soldiers. I know it because this situation has had an impact on certain members of my own family. One sees a physical wound, but it is hard to have a sense of the distress caused by post-traumatic stress. A soldier that has been two or three times in Afghanistan can have had enough and decide to give it all up. Usually, a military career lasts 10, 15 or 20 years, but a soldier can decide to put a stop to it because of the very difficult situations he has had to face. Very often, soldiers feel they don't have the right to demonstrate any kind of weakness, particularly on a psychological level. The army frowns upon any kind of psychological problem.

Do you have a service that allows you to determine if a soldier has a problem, particularly some form of distress related to post-traumatic stress? What kinds of services are available? Sometimes, soldiers in distress make bad choices when it comes to benefits. They don't know if they should choose a lump sum or a series of payments.

Provincial psychiatric hospitals aren't able to identify the problem. You are getting rid of military hospitals, but military psychologists are the ones who really have a handle on this problem.

Given all of these facts, how do you think you will be able to really help veterans, how will you ensure that they are able to overcome the problem and adapt to civilian life that is so different from military life?

• (0955)

[English]

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: Your question speaks to a very important issue facing those who are leaving the military today. The important element here is that mental health, including PTSD, is an issue that is very complex and the response to it and the way that we work with it is multi-faceted.

When someone is about to leave the military, even if it's a career that they've loved and enjoyed, as they begin to transition out, especially if they have a post-traumatic stress disorder or any other disorder, they typically would have been case managed within DND before they leave the department. As they are transitioning, the case manager, who is a nursing officer within DND, would have been working with them to give them the support they needed. For most of those individuals, that begins when they are in DND; it doesn't start when they come to Veterans Affairs Canada.

In the military they've made a lot of progress in opening up discussion around issues like this, as has society in general. Mental health is beginning to be treated more openly as an illness like any other. So in the military it will be recognized and they will begin to get case management services. When they transition, the partnership with VAC means that we will find out more about that person before they leave. We'll know a bit about their history and some of the issues they're facing. They likely will have been receiving treatment within the military. When they transition to Veterans Affairs Canada, we work with them in a transition interview to make sure that we bridge the services to the extent possible, so that they come to us in such a way that we're supporting them at the point when they leave. So, as soon as they leave, we're able to support them from that step forward.

Our case managers are trained to understand mental health issues and post-traumatic stress. If an injured individual doesn't want to share that, our case managers are trained to use certain cues and certain questions to try to elevate the issue or tease it out and find out more. It's becoming very much a part of the day-to-day work of our case managers.

Once they have identified that the individual is looking for help, the person will have access to a full range of treatment, be it from a psychologist, psychiatrist, clinical care managers, or people in the community who provide very customized service for post-traumatic stress. Beyond that, we can put them in touch with the peer support

network I spoke about a moment ago. It consists of about 26 individuals across the country who have gone through the same thing, who have had a military career, left it, and suffer from an operational stress injury—an umbrella term that includes PTSD and other anxiety issues, etc. They can have peers give them counselling and support.

At the end of the day, there's a rehabilitation program designed to help that individual become stabilized with their PTSD, to understand it, to get the support they need, and to engage their family fully in it because that's going to be key. Our goal is early intervention. The sooner we get access and conversation going with the individual, the greater the chance of success.

We have about 14,000 clients of Veterans Affairs who have mental health issues, and upwards of 10,000 of them have post-traumatic stress disorder. It's becoming very much front and centre in our world. With our research colleagues in Bernard's area, we're finding out more and learning from other countries about what they're doing. So this is all coming together to provide the kind of support that these individuals would need.

When they are in treatment for this in Veterans Affairs' rehab program, there's no time limit on that. It's not like they come into a rehab program and they have six months to get better. It's not like that at all. They take the time they need, and that's a cornerstone of the new Veterans Charter. That's a policy that exists now that was not available to us before this charter was put in place.

• (1000)

The Chair: Thank you very much Ms. Stewart. We let it go on a little long, because it's a very thorough answer. We appreciate that.

That ends the second round. We did say we had the witnesses until 10:15. If it's the will of the committee, we could go around and take a quick question from everybody before we go into committee business. I'm just going to go by a show of hands, and then I can sort the time out.

I see five people. We don't have time to have questions from them all unless it's a 30-second question.

Ms. Eve Adams: Okay. Who is on for the first round ?

The Chair: It depends how long.... We can go with one short question.

Ms. Eve Adams: Do you want to do four, two, and one, then?

The Chair: We'll do the same as in the first round, but we'll shorten the time so that we get out of here at 10:15. So you really have about a minute for a question and an answer, or a little bit more.

Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: First is Ms. Mathysen, and as I said, just one question, please.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Basically this is a request. A lot numbers are swirling around concerning pensions, benefits, and lump-sum payments. If possible, I would like to have a chart, please, outlining the monetary benefits and the criteria used to determine those benefits, so I can see the various categories and what is available by way of financial support and pension benefits.

If that's possible, I'd appreciate it.

Mr. Bernard Butler: Absolutely. Yes, it's certainly possible, and we'll provide it to you.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we go to Mr. Lobb for a quick question.

Mr. Ben Lobb: Thanks.

Most of the discussion has been on new veterans. I have a question about traditional veterans. If a veteran has a relationship established with Veterans Affairs and now requires a lift for his home, can you tell us how the procurement for that works or how he would go about getting it?

If I have time, I'd like a follow-up question.

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: A traditional veteran would in some cases have a case manager, depending on their situation. The case manager is on the ground—

Mr. Ben Lobb: That's correct, but for the actual procurement, how do they go about purchasing the lift and getting it installed on their property?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: Once a lift is approved, there are registered providers who can provide that service. The individual would procure it and, I believe, submit the claim to Veterans Affairs Canada for reimbursement.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Mr. Casey for one question, please.

Mr. Sean Casey: Ms. Stewart, if the Department of Veterans Affairs accepted the advice of the ombudsman and reinvested the \$226 million, putting it back into programs and service delivery, where would you spend it?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: The \$226 million is not a reduction in benefits to Veterans Affairs' clients.

Mr. Sean Casey: That wasn't my question. My question was, if you had an extra \$226 million over the next two years, what would be the areas of greatest need? Where would you spend it?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: Actually, we have programs and services that we're delivering. We're going to be doing them better. Any discussion or decision around additional money would not be within my purview.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Dykstra, please.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: I have an overall question. How many veterans are we serving today compared with the number we served a decade ago?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: I have the number from a decade ago, actually. I can get it for you.

I can tell you that today, we are serving about 216,000 clients.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Okay. I'll be interested to see how that rates against the situation a decade ago.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Are you going to provide that number to the committee?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Stoffer, you have a minute.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I have a quick question for you. We speak a lot about the military veterans, but we don't talk much about the RCMP veterans. And of course, their benefits and programs derive from DVA as well.

I was wondering what you're doing to ensure that all RCMP veterans and their families have access to these services and are fully aware of everything they are eligible for. What transition services are in place for the serving RCMP who become RCMP veterans, similar to those for the military?

•(1005)

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: We meet regularly with the RCMP. They're also part of our senior-level committee with DND. We work with them in the transition process in a very similar fashion. They have access to our district offices for information and guidance. Effectively, we can follow the same process with them, in terms of the provision of information to them and transitioning...

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Storseth.

Mr. Brian Storseth: At the end of my questioning, we were talking about tools used for monitoring the satisfaction of clients. You talked about the survey that is sent out to clients. I have two quick questions.

One is, do you use any social media as a tool, or are you looking at using social media to enhance your feedback mechanisms?

The other is, do you ever take a small group and survey the family members as well, and not only the clients?

I'd like to add a little point, if you can do something to fix the following issue: Many of my traditional veterans or new veterans from Cold Lake drive into Edmonton to receive benefits and have been doing so for years, but somebody at DVA checks Google Maps and says they're out 15 kilometres and, all of a sudden, their process gets held up. We're not sure what kind of construction they've faced. There should be a variance there.

Thank you.

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: The issue with respect to Googling has been addressed.

Social media is going to be used, and perhaps Bernard could speak more about that in terms of the outreach. It's key that we reach people in the way they want to be reached. For the new veterans, social media is a huge part of that. As for the timing of that, I don't know if we can add anything more in terms of when social media might be used for our client surveys.

Mr. Bernard Butler: I can't give you a time on the client surveys. But I can tell you that we are now very much engaged with what we're referring to as phase two of our outreach strategy. Family members are going to be part of that. We're going to be working through things like the military family resource centres and so on to try to connect with families to continue the discussion we've had over the last year on bases, and with members directly.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Butler.

Now to Ms. Adams, please.

Ms. Eve Adams: Thank you very much.

Can you tell me how much the VAC budget has increased in aggregate over the last six years?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: It's increased in a cumulative way by 3.1.

Ms. Eve Adams: Do you mean \$3.16 billion?

Ms. Charlotte Stewart: Yes. That's correct.

Ms. Eve Adams: Okay—not that I would know that number.

How much of an increase to the budget do the enhancements to the new Veterans Charter represent?

Mr. Bernard Butler: The enhancements to the new Veterans Charter are \$189 million over the next five years.

Ms. Eve Adams: Are these for services and benefits that will go to our veterans?

Mr. Bernard Butler: Absolutely.

These are actual dollars in the pockets of veterans who are benefiting from the services. The accrual costs of that over the lifetime of the program are \$2 billion, which has created some challenge for communicating the messaging around that. Certainly, that's the long-term cost of the program, which is a significant investment. But over the next five years, \$189 million is forecast to be spent. It could be more depending on the demand.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That concludes our question and answer period.

I want to thank our witnesses very much. I think we've received a lot of very helpful information. I understand that you are going to provide some additional information in writing to the committee. We appreciate that.

We'll suspend briefly while our witnesses have a chance to depart. I will point out that we are going into committee business and that it's in camera. Anybody who is not part of the committee process I would also ask to take the opportunity to leave.

Thank you, again.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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