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Chair

Mr. Royal Galipeau

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•(0845)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC)): Good morning and welcome to the 48th meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

Normally we meet in a more intimate room, so I don't have to exert my voice so much. We're very happy to be here today.

Before we begin, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank my friend from Sackville—Eastern Shore, Peter Stoffer, for the excellent work he did chairing the last couple of meetings of this committee. On behalf of the committee I'd like to congratulate you, Sir Peter. For the record, His Majesty, King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands, has recently knighted our colleague Peter Stoffer for his services to both the Netherlands and Canada.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

[Translation]

Today, it is our honour to welcome the Honourable Erin O'Toole, Minister of Veterans Affairs, and his deputy minister, General Walter Natynczyk (Retired).

[English]

Welcome, Minister. I remember when we both used to sit there, and I remember we both behaved when we sat there, so I want you to see that the work we did when we sat there is an inspiration to all members here, because they're all going to behave throughout this meeting, not just because I'm holding the gavel.

The minister will make a 10-minute presentation and then committee members will each have six or seven minutes to direct their questions to the minister and to the deputy who, obviously, also outranks him. I guess the record should show that we have here the minister, the deputy minister, and the parliamentary secretary; and the one with lowest rank is the minister.

[Translation]

Please note that Mr. O'Toole and Mr. Natynczyk will be with us for 90 minutes, after which we will adjourn the meeting.

•(0850)

[English]

Mr. Minister, you have the floor.

[Translation]

Hon. Erin O'Toole (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Thank you very much. It is good to be back here. I remember fondly, in my first year in Parliament, being a part of this standing committee. It's good to see you and the clerk. Some of the members of the opposition were at the committee at that time, as were some of my colleagues in the Conservative caucus. It is an honour for me to be back appearing before you as minister, particularly after a profound period of progress and reform in the last number of months.

I'm also joined, as you said, by my deputy, retired General Walter Natynczyk. You stole my joke, Mr. Chair, about the retired general being deputy to an average retired captain. I'm very fortunate to have Walt, and I have long known about his passion for military families and for veterans.

Also, from my department I have some senior leaders here who will have additional information should the committee require it. I have Bernard Butler, director general of policy; Michel Doiron, the ADM for service delivery; and, Maureen Sinnott, director general of finance.

I want to start my remarks by saying that my time on this committee was formative in my development as a parliamentarian and with regard to the knowledge base I'm working from as Minister of Veterans Affairs. Your reports, both those from the time I served on the committee and the report on the new veterans charter, have been formative in my consideration of legislation and reform. I want to thank all 54 of the witnesses who appeared before this committee as part of your intensive look at the new veterans charter. Some are here in the audience today.

Then there's my background before Parliament. As many people know, I did serve 12 years in the Canadian Armed Forces in the Royal Canadian Air Force. I'm proud of that time. When I left the uniform, I worked in the non-profit and "support our troops and veterans" area with my Legion, Branch 178, and with the True Patriot Love foundation, which I, along with some other passionate Canadians, helped create. I've also worked alongside amazing Canadians from coast to coast, some who have served and some who have not served, in groups organizing walks, with Wounded Warriors, Treble Victor—I'm wearing their pin today—and Canada Company.

This is the background I bring and this is why I was so honoured when the Prime Minister asked me to serve in this role.

[Translation]

My team has worked with veterans groups, the veterans ombudsman and the Department of Veterans Affairs. The work done by the deputy minister, the former Chief of the Defence Staff, General Walt Natynczyk, is really something to behold.

[English]

I want to thank all parliamentarians and all veterans groups for giving me your priorities and working with me going forward.

Your study on the new veterans charter was an important one, and the most important finding, beyond your 14 recommendations, was that the approach to wellness, transition, and support for the veterans and their families is sound. In fact, I think on page nine of your report you urged keeping the new veterans charter and its approach to transition, but you clearly said that there needed to be a better charter with fixes.

I'm sorry, it was on page two. It works for most veterans, as you said, but "most' is not enough", to quote your report.

I agree that most is not enough. The new veterans charter was brought in by the last Liberal government, implemented starting in 2006 by the Harper government, reformed in 2011 by the Harper government with the addition of the Permanent Impairment Allowance supplement, leading up to Bill C-58 now before Parliament, which was introduced at the end of March and is the most comprehensive update to address some of the issues in areas in which the new veterans charter was not meeting all needs. It was meeting most, as your committee report showed, but we need to fix gaps to make sure that it serves veterans and their families and strives for excellence in that regard.

[Translation]

I am very happy that Bill C-58, the Support for Veterans and Their Families Act, has been introduced in the House of Commons. It makes essential changes to the New Veterans Charter.

[English]

Bill C-58 builds upon the work of this committee in your study on the Veterans Charter and addresses some of the gaps that were highlighted over the last few years by the ombudsman, by several veterans stakeholders, and last June by this committee.

• (0855)

I'll go through those briefly, now; they are before Parliament awaiting approval.

The retirement income security benefit is perhaps the most urgent fix needed for the new veterans charter, highlighted clearly by the ombudsman, highlighted by the Royal Canadian Legion, naval veterans, and a range of other stakeholders. It was a problem on the horizon, Mr. Chair.

Very few to no new veterans charter veterans are 65 now. But it was clear that as some of them hit the age of 65 and lost their earnings loss benefit, they would have a steep decline in their income in their retirement years post-65. That was an unintended gap in the new veterans charter, when the income supplement of earnings loss ended. We've remedied that gap, particularly for those who served in

the military, were injured, and did not have pensionable time to provide them with pensionable income at that stage of life.

The retirement income security benefit will kick in at 65 to ensure that in retirement there's a predictable amount of financial security for the rest of that veteran's life, based on 75% of their pre-65 Veterans Affairs revenue. Important to note, the survivability is sound in this. The surviving spouse gets some financial security on the death of the service member, something that did not exist with the exceptional incapacitation allowance under the old system, Mr. Chair.

So we're learning. We are very proud that we've addressed that with a retirement income security benefit.

The second benefit in Bill C-58 is the critical injury benefit. That's a benefit that will pay \$70,000 to a veteran who has been injured in a sudden, traumatic event. This is another area in which the new veterans charter did not foresee all circumstances of men and women injured from service. The disability award in the new veterans charter—the so-called lump sum—is calculated when the recovery of that veteran takes place and their permanent disability over a lifetime is assessed.

What that disability award did not take into consideration was the pain and suffering of recovery: the multiple surgeries, time in intensive care, and time in recovery themselves after these surgical interventions. There was no recognition of that, and no pain and suffering compensation for it. It's a gap that the critical injury benefit will address.

Also in Bill C-58 we provide the family caregiver relief benefit for the most seriously injured. When a caregiver in the home—a spouse, or even an adult child—is really becoming the informal caregiver to that veteran. Veterans Affairs will often pay for a professional, contract caregiver in a home and for support. But we all know that those are nine-to-five accommodations. The new normal for families living with a serious injury changes their life. This will give relief by providing that family member almost \$8,000 tax-free per year to use in any way that helps them overcome some of the challenges of caregiver fatigue.

We know that all families bear the stresses of an injury, mental or physical, in the household. We've been trying to address that through additional counselling for family members for operational stress injury support for the families and use of the Family Resource Centres for veterans and their families upon release.

This latest family caregiver relief benefit is yet another benefit intended to help the families of the most seriously injured. This is an area I will continue to explore as minister, because I know the critical role that family plays in the wellness of a veteran.

We've also expanded and made eligibility criteria easier for the permanent impairment allowance, adding approximately 305 new veterans to that lifetime permanent impairment allowance payment. That's another element that was recommended in your standing committee report last June.

We've also implemented what I called respect for the reserves, to remind Canadians that without the men and women who serve in our reserve units across the country, we would not have the capability of the Canadian Armed Forces that we have today. We've ensured that class A and class B reservists earn the same earnings loss benefit entitlement as regular force, or class C.

● (0900)

It's about respect. Just a few days ago, it was a year from our National Day of Honour celebrating the 12-year mission in Afghanistan and honouring the sacrifice. Twenty-five percent of those people were reservists. We have also added at least an additional hundred case managers and a hundred benefit adjudicators to deal with some of the backlogs.

[Translation]

These changes represent fundamental improvements to many systems, services, supports and programs that veterans need in order to successfully make the transition to civilian life.

[English]

I could go on, Mr. Chair, but I see my time is up.

Colleagues, I urge support of Bill C-58. I want to thank the standing committee, the ombudsman, and the veterans. I appreciated that you came together with your recommendations. Since we've moved on many, I hope we can pass Bill C-58, and I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Mr. Stoffer, go ahead.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and it's good to see you are back in the chair.

I thank the minister and the deputy minister very much for appearing before us today. I thank both of you gentlemen for the fine work and representation you did on Canada's behalf recently in the Netherlands for the 70th anniversary. I thank you both very much for that.

Minister, I just received an email from Gord Jenkins regarding Bill C-58 and what you told him. Bill C-58 was introduced by the government, yet we haven't seen second reading of the bill yet. It

hasn't even come to this committee yet. However, in the email to him, you are implying that the opposition parties are delaying these reforms.

Mr. Minister, with great respect, you introduced the bill. The government introduced the bill. It hasn't been brought before this committee. In fact, this committee has had two cancellations. We have been asking for Bill C-58 to come to the committee. We have some amendments, and we have indicated to the parliamentary secretary that we could pass the bill fairly quickly, but we can't do that unless we actually have the bill come before the committee. We understand now that you have indicated that this bill will now be part of the budget bill, which means that this bill does not have to come to the committee. It will all be wrapped up in the budget omnibus bill, which basically means that no veteran, no veterans' organization, and not even the opposition will have an opportunity to debate this bill in committee.

Mr. Chairman, after 18 years in the House of Commons, I find it rather unusual that when a government, either Liberal or Conservative, introduces a bill and it doesn't come before the appropriate committee for us to do what we are supposed to do: review it, look at it, and pass it. If you wanted clear passage of this bill, we have already indicated that we like this bill. There are some changes that have to happen. There is no question that we have some amendments for it. I have indicated that before but, sir, we haven't seen the bill.

Can you explain to me how the opposition is holding up this legislation when we don't even have the bill before the committee?

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Thank you, Mr. Stoffer.

Certainly, you do have many years here in Ottawa, sitting both on SCONDVA and on this committee. In fact, you are the only member of this committee who voted for the new veterans charter.

I have made a commitment to veterans to get these reforms passed before this Parliament rises. That is my commitment. Most of Bill C-58 was recommended by this committee, so the substance of the bill actually came from this committee. The 54 witnesses I referred to all supported these reforms and want to move on them. Two years ago, the ombudsman recommended what has become the retirement income security benefit.

My concern, with all due respect, is that the committees have talked about this since your early years on the new veterans charter and the veterans affairs committee. We need action. It's a fair comment to say there is more to do. I have said that this is a living charter and there will be more to do, but these reforms are important. These are benefits and programs for veterans and their families that I've told them, including Mr. Jenkins, will pass in this Parliament.

My initial discussions, including emails you sent out that were sent to me by veterans, indicate that you would prefer more committee time, more study, and ultimately delay of these benefits before July. I won't allow that to happen. You can fairly comment that there is more to do, Mr. Stoffer, but since most of Bill C-58 comes from your recommendations, I hope to goodness we can get these passed. Bill C-58 is still on the order paper, but now with your opposition day motion yesterday, challenging the priorities of Bill C-58, I guess—that's the only thing I could see that that day really tried to do—it is clear you wanted to delay, and I won't allow delay to happen when I have made a commitment to veterans.

• (0905)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Minister, with great respect for the position you hold, that is simply not true. We in the opposition—I can't speak for the Liberals—have never indicated a delay of Bill C-58, and to indicate we have is simply not true.

I have another question for the deputy minister.

Deputy Minister, is Mr. John Larlee of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board still employed by the Veterans Review and Appeal Board?

General (Retired) Walter Natynczyk (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): I missed the question. Are you asking whether he's still employed? No. He completed his tenure a few weeks ago.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Very good. Thank you very much.

The last question for you... I know you can't give a complete answer right now, but is it possible to have from the department a complete analysis of how much money the government plans to save? Korean and World War II veterans are quickly passing on, and they are not using the facilities of these long-term care beds at Camp Hill, the Perley, Colonel Belcher, etc.

Can the government give us an estimate of how much money they plan on saving because of the fact that these individuals will no longer be using those services because they won't be with us? If it's possible in the future to have that kind of estimate, it would be most helpful.

I believe my time is up.

The Chair: You have another 35 seconds.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Then I'll end on a positive note. I wanted to tell the committee that last Monday, in Halifax, we had our 70th anniversary commemoration, and the minister was kind enough to send me his speech because he couldn't be there. He was in the Netherlands. I think it's the first time I can recall that an opposition critic read the minister's speech to a crowd of 400 to 500 people. I wanted to thank the minister for that opportunity, but don't forget we're not letting you off on C-58 by the way.

Thank you so much.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Thank you.

I'm not sure if I should refer to you as Sir Peter, or how you got the Prime Minister to grant you an exemption from the Nickle Resolution.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: No worries.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Certainly I'm proud of the Dutch Canadian community who in Canada have kept the memory of the liberation alive, and certainly going to the Netherlands, as you have in the past, you see how the Dutch people keep it alive, so I want to thank you for making sure there was a special event in Halifax.

I do think on Bill C-58, as I said, this is a living charter. I think C-58 and our reforms in 2011 show it's up to us to make sure we constantly meet the needs of veterans and their families today and in the future. It's fair comment to ask what our next priorities are, but C-58 needs passage in this Parliament. I've made that commitment, and that's why it's included in the budget implementation bill to make sure I have that backup plan.

The Chair: I'd like to advise the committee that the last six minutes lasted seven minutes.

Monsieur Lemieux.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you, Minister, for being with us today.

I'd also like to thank you for directing your comments to the legislation that is in front of the House. I want to thank you for your commitment to have it passed before we rise at the end of this session. I think that's extremely important. Otherwise, they are just promises never delivered upon. I think that's critical.

I would say to Mr. Stoffer that it's in the budget implementation act. In the past what's happened is the portions that pertain to a particular committee, for example the veterans portions in the budget implementation act that would pertain to this committee, will probably be sent to this committee. We have to wait to see what the finance committee decides, but I wouldn't be surprised if this committee will review the clauses in the budget implementation act that refer to the comments the minister made today about the new initiatives and passing them into law.

Minister, I'd like to ask you a question about Bill C-58, about the legislation in front of the House, and that has to do with the critical injury benefit. I think it's a great initiative, but I think it could be misunderstood for example when compared to the disability award.

There was a great example given at the time of the announcement of a soldier who would collect the critical injury benefit, but I'm wondering if you could elaborate for the committee on the difference between the critical injury benefit and the disability award.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Thank you, Mr. Lemieux.

The critical injury benefit was meant to address something that the disability award did not, which is those cases of someone suffering a traumatic injury, but because they made a full recovery, their compensation under the disability award, the lump sum as it's known, was very low. In fact, all members of this committee can point to veterans who would fall into that category, such as veterans who spent time in the role 3 hospital in Afghanistan, in Germany in intensive care, or sometimes had multiple operations, but because they had a positive recovery—because our role 3 hospital in Afghanistan was one of the best in the world—their recovery put them at a disadvantage under the new veterans charter disability award. I don't want to name names, but we can all think of cases where someone had that injury and got a very low disability award. That actually impacted their wellness because they took that to mean that the system did not acknowledge their traumatic period of pain, suffering, and recovery.

The critical injury benefit is meant to try to address that. At the same time, it also addresses some of the most seriously injured men and women from Afghanistan, but the critical piece is that it's now compensating for the pain and suffering of recovery. It's in addition to the disability award and it very much also could apply while the person's still in the Canadian Armed Forces recovering. It's a quick payment. The hope is that they recover and stay in the Canadian Armed Forces, but it's an inherent pain and suffering and recognition award.

It is meant to be very targeted. Regarding the new veterans charter, the biggest challenge that the ombudsman has pointed out is the myth that has developed around it that there's only this lump sum and that's all a veteran gets. We're all trying to dispel that myth because it's not fair to Canadians to leave them with that impression. What the new veterans charter does is focus on transition, so early rehabilitation and financial and medical support, and then for the more moderately to severely injured, it stacks benefits on top of one another. That makes it a little more complex.

So there's a disability award, there's potentially a critical injury benefit, and then the veterans will get earnings loss while they're doing rehabilitation, an earning loss benefit that is an income supplement. They may get the permanent impairment allowance. They may get a permanent impairment allowance supplement. For many of them, at 65 they will then get the retirement income security benefit. As you see, it's a stacking approach. What we're trying to do for the most seriously injured is to streamline those stacked benefits—the PIA, the PIAS and RISB—into a single pension for the most seriously injured.

● (0910)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thank you very much.

The example that was given of the critical injury benefit was a paratrooper whose chute doesn't deploy properly. He's injured upon landing and undergoes multiple surgeries, but after a one- or two-year recovery period, his disability is small. However, he went through one to two years of significant recovery and trauma. You're saying that the critical injury benefit would be of great benefit to him because of that traumatic period of recovery, whereas the disability award might actually be small because, if he recovers for the most part, then the disability award would be small.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: That's exactly it. Well put.

Apart from the payment itself, which is significant, in many ways it's less important than the recognition. The man or woman injured in service to our country, regular force or reserve, needs to know that their country respects and recognizes, not just that they were injured in service to their country but their road to recovery—as you said the two years in that example of a paratrooper—of surgery and of hospitalization. The physical and mental stress on the family through that period is not only compensated now, it's also recognized, and we're recognizing that it was a gap because of the way the disability award was calculated at recovery.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: I have just one last question, Minister.

This is not passed yet. In other words, it's in legislation. The budget implementation bill must pass for this to be implemented, this \$70,000 tax-free benefit.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: That's correct. The new benefits contained in Bill C-58—the critical injury benefit, the retirement income security benefit, and the family caregiver relief benefit—are all new benefits that require parliamentary approval. As of April 1, we've already expanded inclusion in the permanent impairment allowance, and we've fixed the earnings loss issue for class A and class B reservists. We were able to do those immediate fixes with regulatory changes, but these three benefits are new. They require parliamentary approval. That's why I made the pledge to veterans and their families that they would pass in this session.

They were all contained in this committee's report last June, which is why, when it seemed that there was not a willingness to move forward quickly on Bill C-58, we've included it in budget implementation so that I can keep my commitment to veterans and their families.

● (0915)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Valeriote.

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, and thank you, General, for appearing before us.

Minister, thank you for the wonderful program in the Netherlands that you included me in. It was remarkable. I was speaking to the general about it. Frankly, it was an overwhelming emotional experience.

While both of you certainly earned the respect of everyone around this table, it does not at all mean that we agree with your approach to the solutions that our veterans need to the issues that ail them daily.

You speak of Bill C-58. Mr. Stoffer has already addressed his concern about it not passing. My wager is that it's not going to get through this committee and then back to Parliament and passed, not because we're delaying it, but because I don't think it's going to happen in time before this Parliament rises, which is regrettable.

That said, proposed section 44.1 of that legislation—we've talked about this—defines those who are entitled to this benefit of the single lump sum payment as a result of a single injury at a moment. We've had the conversation about the fact that PTSD sufferers are essentially excluded from this because PTSD isn't that single event. PTSD often arises and manifests itself later.

I've been at briefings and, quite rightfully, I've been told that there are other benefits available to those who suffer from PTSD, but when you do not define PTSD as a traumatic injury, Minister, which it is, and do not provide for some form of lump sum compensation for those people later, then you marginalize those people—and there are thousands of them. In fact, I'll bet you that the ministry doesn't know how many people are suffering from PTSD out there right now. We've had people like Jenny Migneault having to chase your predecessor for help. I put it to you, sir, that while there may be other programs available to them, they are insufficient.

I have a question for you. You have indicated that while this legislation does not completely close the gap, it goes a long way in filling the gap. Even the veterans ombudsman appeared before this committee in April and said that while it is addressing some of the issues, it is not yet enough and it doesn't clearly meet all the needs of our veterans. Is it your proposition that this is all enough? If it is not all enough, and there is more to do, why aren't you doing it? We've given you, in many reports, the things that need to be done.

The only thing I can think of as to why you're not doing it is that your Prime Minister has said, "I'm sorry, Minister, this is all the money you're getting. I'm in austerity and I have to balance a budget in an election year, so we're not going to give you the money that's needed to complete all their needs."

What is it? Have you done everything that you can do, particularly for those suffering from PTSD, and if not, why not?

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Thank you, Mr. Valeriote. There was a lot there that I'll address in sequence.

Certainly I saw Madam Migneault here today and I look forward to speaking more with her. I've already learned quite a bit from her perspective as a caregiver and the compassion she shows, and I appreciate those in the home helping people with operational stress injuries.

Second, on your statement—is this enough?—and your pessimism about this bill not passing, I sensed that there would be delays in Bill C-58 so that's why it's in the budget implementation bill. It will pass. I've made that commitment.

Is it enough? As I said to Mr. Stoffer, fair criticism is to say, there is more to do. In fact, when your party created the new veterans charter—I know you weren't in the Parliament when it was created—

it was intended to be a living charter. I've said repeatedly since I became minister that that's what it will be. What I hope is that we pass Bill C-58, which addresses some of the critical items this committee recommended. That's why I was hoping for swift passage. Then this committee could do what it did last year, which was to look back and see whether the new benefits, the new reforms, the new programs in Bill C-58, and in the last two years on mental health have been having an impact, and then plan a new set of priorities. That's how this committee should run. As minister, I would count on that input to make sure that we're meeting the needs, not just today but in the future.

On PTSD, let me say this. In my work before I became a parliamentarian supporting military families, this was my area of focus. It is a huge priority for the government. By the end of this year, we'll have 26 operational stress injury clinics open across the country. The first one didn't open in Canada until 2002. This is trying to address a growing need.

When it comes to the critical injury benefit, what I've said to veterans is, this benefit is open to any type of physical or mental injury. There is the possibility of somebody suffering post-traumatic stress from a single occurrence. The issue with operational stress injuries is that no injury is the same and no treatment regime is usually the same. They're very individualized injuries, so this is inclusive.

But what veterans and parliamentarians should not do is start comparing physical injuries to mental injuries. If the critical injury benefit ends up being primarily for serious physical injuries, that's okay. We're trying to address the seriously injured. It's a tailored benefit that's not meant to apply to 700,000 veterans in Canada. At the same time, permanent impairment allowance is primarily paid to people with mental injuries from service. Is that inherently unfair to somebody with a physical injury? No, it is not. The new veterans charter tries to tailor financial support, medical support, and rehabilitation to the needs of the veteran, whether their injury is physical or mental. So it's not fair to compare who might qualify; it's about getting them the support they need.

• (0920)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Mr. Hayes.

Mr. Bryan Hayes (Sault Ste. Marie, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Formally, I thank you both for your service. I've really never had the opportunity to do so. To my colleagues here, all of whom have direct military experience on this side of table, thank you very much for your service. I'm the only one that doesn't have direct service, but my immediate family had 100 years of direct service.

I'm hoping, Minister, you can confirm my understanding of the misinformation that is out there with respect to lapsed funding. I've taken the initiative to print out the public accounts over the course of the past nine years, as well as the planning and priorities documents. My observation, as I'm looking at the figures, is that in 2005-06 we had a budget of \$2.85 billion, and in 2013-14, that was up to \$3.6 billion. Over the course of those nine years, our estimate of what we were going to spend, over nine years cumulatively, was \$30.6 billion, of which we actually spent \$30 billion. We actually spent 98% of our budget.

Then, during the course of the year, with the planning and priorities documents, I notice that every year we asked for additional authorities—every single year. As a matter of fact, in three of those years where we didn't ask for additional authorities, we would have actually exceeded budget, which I understand is not allowed. The reality is that all of those additional authorities weren't required. A budget is an estimate. We want to make sure we have the funds. We ask for additional funds because we want to make sure no veteran goes unserved.

Minister, in your opinion, lapsed funding doesn't mean lapsed services in any way, does it? Does any veteran go unserved because of a lack of funds within the veterans affairs department?

• (0925)

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Mr. Hayes, I'm very glad you asked this question because it has caused a lot of confusion for veterans and their families, and it's an issue that because of its moderate degree of complexity can be used to actually sow seeds of confusion.

You're exactly right. A department cannot spend more than its estimated budget, its estimate. In fact, it does have to go back to Parliament to get more funds approved, so every department needs to estimate what they will spend and try to do it as accurately as possible. Estimates that make it within 1% or 2% of the actual spend is very good budgeting.

We don't know what actually goes out the door until the public accounts come in, which is over a year later. Then you try to learn from the public accounts where you did not spend.

Veterans Affairs is a very unique department within the federal government, in that of the \$3.5 billion or so of a budget, 90% of that goes to payments to veterans and their families. With statutory benefits, once a veteran or their survivor is eligible for that benefit, in most cases it will be paid until the end of the life of that veteran.

In recent years we've seen some lapsing funds where in the public accounts cycle we don't actually spend what is fully estimated. The majority of that comes from the aging demographic of the traditional war veteran, World War II and Korea. As Mr. Valeriote so rightly noted, among these inspiring gentlemen we were with in the Netherlands the oldest was 97 and the average age was 91 or 92.

That generation where 1.1 million Canadians served in World War II is now in their late eighties to nineties. I'll give you an example of how challenging this is. The estimates do not anticipate veterans passing away over the course of the cycle. That will go into the estimates for the following year. When we assumed government in 2006 there were approximately 230,000 World War II veterans in Canada. In the last year it's around 90,000. It's the same with the Korean War. There were almost 15,000 when we formed government and less than 10,000 now.

We see most of the lapsed funds coming from the fact that, sadly, we're losing a large number of our World War II and Korean War veterans. That's why these commemorations, the 70th of VE Day and of the liberation of the Netherlands and Juno last year, are so profoundly important, but in terms of lapsed funds, this is why.

Other programs that are demand driven under the new veterans charter, for instance, in career transition or something like that, if those programs aren't being taken up as quickly or by as many veterans as we might like, that's where we actually have to learn and make changes. But with some lapsed funds it's due to the nature of the fact that 90% of our budget is statutory payments to veterans and their families.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[Translation]

The Chair: You have the floor, Mr. Chicoine.

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would also like to thank the minister and the deputy minister for coming to answer our questions.

Mr. Minister, a few weeks ago, you announced that 100 new case managers were to be hired in response to, or as a result of the auditor general's report, which criticized wait times, which really are too long for veterans submitting new applications for benefits.

How many of those new case managers do you anticipate hiring this year? How much has been set aside in the main estimates to accommodate these new expenses?

• (0930)

[English]

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Thank you very much, Mr. Chicoine.

I enjoy sitting on this committee. You've been here since my time here, and I appreciate that.

I made two specific announcements, one at CFB Valcartier, Quebec City, in relation to at least 100 case managers. It will be more than that, but you've hit the nail on the head. I'm getting final Treasury Board approval for the exact number, but it will be greater, hopefully quite a bit greater, than 100. It's the same with the benefit adjudicators. I've used a minimum floor number, but there will be more hired over the coming months.

Going back to the case managers, we are going to try to see where there's additional acute need throughout the country and build in more flexibility to how case managers are deployed. In my announcement I said we're going from an average ratio of 1:40 of case manager to clients and we'll be going down to 1:30, but we're going to try to build in flexibility.

The benefit adjudicators are directly related to what we learned from the Auditor General. As you said, there were some unacceptable delays in the processing of disability payments for those with mental injuries from service. That was unacceptable. What's interesting to note is that we asked the Auditor General to look specifically at this issue: were our investments meeting our targets? In terms of the processing of benefit claims, they were not. So our hiring of those adjudicators will try to bring down the wait times identified by the Auditor General to meet the departmental targets. Once we get through that backlog, we can then get to a point where we can start meeting our targets of having a disability claim processed within six to eight weeks.

The Auditor General did say that vocational rehabilitation: the retraining, the re-education, that sort of thing, was proceeding okay. But in terms of the financial benefit processing, we were not meeting our expectations. All these positions will be hired in the coming months and there will be more than 100 in both categories.

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: It's 100 over five years, but for this year you don't have any numbers of new case managers.

[Translation]

Is that right?

[English]

Hon. Erin O'Toole: By June we hope to be hiring and then putting them in acute areas of need geographically as quickly as possible.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: For three years, the date set for transferring the Sainte-Anne Hospital has always been postponed from the date announced. Do you have any news for us about that? How many people will be affected by the transfer of the hospital to the Government of Quebec? Do you have any news about the transfer?

[English]

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Thank you.

As you well know, for many years, for many decades, there have been discussions with the Government of Quebec with respect to Ste. Anne's. We have an agreement in principle with the government in Quebec. From our standpoint, what's positive is that veterans will continue to get exceptional care in that facility. As an added benefit after the transfer date, for some veterans who have a partner or

spouse in a long-term care facility elsewhere in Quebec, now that it will be a provincial facility, we'll be able to reunite some couples who are spread out right now because of the nature of the facility.

Quebec will be in the position of gaining a very modern, advanced, and world-class centre for geriatric care that has been developed at Ste. Anne's over the last few decades, and they will be able to incorporate that into the provincial health care regime. It's a huge asset that I know many in Quebec are looking forward to. Our primary goal is to make sure that the veterans receiving care there will continue to get the world-class care they're entitled to and they deserve.

● (0935)

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: So there is no news about the date of the transfer. There have been no developments on this for three years now. Is it about to be done, or not? Do you have no information for us?

[English]

Hon. Erin O'Toole: The agreement in principle is set with the Government of Quebec. As you know, the provincial government in Quebec is, at the moment, also restructuring their governance of health care and health care administration across the province. That will be part of the conversation leading up to the actual transfer date in the future. But an agreement in principle has been struck, and I think both sides are satisfied that the needs of the veterans will be met. At the same time, Quebec will be gaining a facility that is world class and will integrate well into their provincial and regional system of health.

The Chair: Mr. Hawn.

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to both our witnesses for being here.

Minister, I want to thank you especially for relating your presentation to the actual legislation. I do fully expect, as Mr. Lemieux has said, that as part of the BIA, when that rolls out, that section will come to this committee for discussion. That would just make sense.

I want to follow up a little bit on Mr. Hayes' point. As you said, the process is entirely normal. Every government has followed the same process. In fact, in the last year that the previous government was in position, they lapsed \$116 million for Veterans Affairs by exactly the same process. This is absolutely normal. The analogy I've used is that it's like a line of credit. You get a line of credit, and if you don't spend it all that year because it didn't get drawn down for whatever reason, then the line of credit gets renewed the next year.

Is that a fair analogy?

Hon. Erin O'Toole: That's a good analogy, absolutely.

You draw upon it. Your goal is to clear exactly what you need. You then go back to Parliament if you think there's some special allocation needed, but your goal is to actually estimate exactly. You should always estimate a little more so you don't have to go back to Parliament.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: To suggest that somehow veterans have been shortchanged by \$1.3 billion over the last year is just plain false. Is that fair to say?

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Absolutely.

This is a story that every once in a while, in a slow news cycle, comes up with all departments. They will say where the government didn't spend money. It's actually a case where there was an estimate and that estimate was not met. When it comes to Veterans Affairs, on average, compared to when we formed government, about \$700 million more each year is spent. It's just spent, in many cases, in different ways.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Any government department that budgets within 2% is actually doing a pretty darn fine job. Is that also fair to say?

Hon. Erin O'Toole: I think Treasury Board and the process of the public accounts looks at this closely. I think 1% to 2% is the gold star that departments try to shoot for. As I said, you always want to be a little bit over so that you don't have to go back to Parliament for funds. But you don't want to be too much over, because then it really isn't a solid estimate. If it is way too high, you should go back and ask where the forecasting, as part of the estimates, was off. You should always learn from the estimates process and the public accounts. But in some cases, particularly—as I mentioned to Mr. Hayes—the demographic changes of our WW II and Korean veterans, you really can't build those into the process. At each estimate cycle you have to try to readjust.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Thank you for that.

I want to follow that with the whole issue of this being a work in progress. We're always going to be changing. In 1938 we didn't know we'd have hundreds of thousands of World War II vets. In 1949 we didn't know we'd have thousands of Korean War vets. In 2000 we didn't know we'd have thousands of Afghanistan vets. It is a work in progress and we're always trying to adapt.

To a point that was made earlier about the ombudsman briefing the committee in April about some of the things that weren't done, as I pointed out in the House yesterday, that was in April. In June we tabled the report from this committee, which contained 14 recommendations, all of which are being addressed. You have brought in more measures beyond even what the committee had recommended, which is certainly laudable.

The Chair: On a point of order, Mr. Valeriote, go ahead.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: That report of which I spoke was in April of this year, well after our recommendations were filed—the report of the veterans ombudsman.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Valeriote.

Go ahead, Mr. Hawn.

● (0940)

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I will, to that, point out that the ombudsman also had praise for many of the things that were happening. Just as the Auditor General, as you pointed out just a few moments ago, pointed out some deficiencies but also pointed out where things had gone well.

My point is that it's always going to be a work in progress. We're always going to be trying to adapt. We're always going to be playing catch-up of some sort.

Can you put a little ministerial frame around that, the challenge that you have, that the Department of Veterans Affairs has, with the constant changing, the constant unknowns? In 10 years we'll be saying, gosh, we didn't know we'd have thousands of veterans from some other conflict.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Absolutely. I think the new veterans charter was created to try to focus on wellness. Each year we have about 1,200 men and women in the Canadian Armed Forces who are released from service for medical reasons. In some cases it's from a service injury. In a very small number of cases, thankfully, it's a very serious injury. It could be in a theatre of operations or in training.

In the old system, it was very important to be in a special duty area and injured. That's not the case now. At the end of the day, the goal has to be getting those people to a good place after their military careers. The more ability they have to recover, to rehabilitate, and to find new purpose and meaning in a second career, the more we have to facilitate that. The goal of the new veterans charter was to focus that financial support and rehabilitation quickly to help with transition. Because if transition goes well, they leverage their military careers into great careers after service.

There are some who will have a very difficult time transitioning, whether from physical or mental injury from service. Those people need additional supports, clearly. That's why in 2011, our government introduced the permanent impairment allowance supplement. It's why Bill C-58 has the retirement income security benefit. It's why we're looking at the critical injury benefit.

This committee, in its report last June, said that there should be a focus on moderately to seriously injured veterans because they have the hardest time transitioning. I have essentially followed the advice of this committee, of the ombudsman, and others to try and target that. The less serious the injury, the greater the ability of the vocational rehabilitation training, up to \$75,000, to get that person into a new career.

As I say to a lot of veterans, there are three pillars of recovery. There's the health of the veteran, the wellness of their family, and the second career. I put family in the middle because it's critical. If the second career doesn't go well, it affects the other two. The living charter concept we built into Bill C-58 with the purpose clause in proposed section 2.1 is very similar to recommendation 2 of your report in terms of our ongoing obligation to our veterans and their families.

The Chair: Mr. Minister, I know that you're anxious to hear the questions that Mr. Lizon will ask you. He has the floor.

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

Thank you witnesses for coming here. Thank you for your service.

Minister, I would like to ask you a first question to clarify something. Yesterday, during the debate, I listened to the speeches from the opposition. The government was accused of slashing funding for veterans. Could you clarify this? Is this true? Has our government decreased the funding for veterans?

Hon. Erin O'Toole: No. As I said in an answer earlier, in comparison to spending when we formed a government in 2006, we're spending on average about \$700 million more, but we're spending it in different ways.

All parliamentarians, including Mr. Stoffer, who I think has been here longer than anyone else, has seen the attention paid to mental health. When I was in the Canadian Armed Forces, there was very little discussion of operational stress injuries or post-traumatic stress disorder. In fact, as I said, the first operational stress injury clinic opened by the Canadian Armed Forces wasn't until 2002.

This is an area where we've been expending a lot of time and resources because it's a new area. If somebody gets support with a mental health condition or injury, they can get back on the road to wellness. We need to reduce the stigma. These clinics didn't exist even 15 years ago. We'll have 26 by the end of this year and we will need to do more. We're spending more but we're spending in new ways. We're trying to build flexibility into the system.

As someone who comes from the private sector, I say that our department has a challenge we're rising to meet. We have seriously injured veterans who are clients of Veterans Affairs in their late twenties and early thirties as well as clients in their mid to late nineties. They have different needs and they expect to draw their services from Veterans Affairs in different ways. It's an immense challenge and that's why we're trying to build flexibility into the system by expanding access points through Service Canada for basic support, offering more home visits, and developing the My VAC online account, as well as mental wellness apps for PTSD and operational stress. Older veterans—and I've even heard some parliamentarians—might mock an app for a phone, but the reality is that a lot of our young veterans from the Afghan war have never had a bank book in their lives. They've done everything on their smartphones. We have to appeal to what they expect in terms of service delivery.

It's a challenge, but we have an incredible team and we're going to try to meet that challenge with flexibility

● (0945)

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Minister, can you explain to this committee how the family caregiver relief benefit will help the family members of veterans? You addressed this yesterday during the debate, but maybe if you could explain it to this committee it would really be beneficial to us.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Thank you, Mr. Lizon.

This is an important benefit, and it's part of several reforms we've done in recent years to try to provide more support for the family. This is a living charter. I want to do more in the future because the family is so critical to the wellness of the veteran. We've expanded to allow veterans and their families to use family resource centres, and we've expanded psychological counselling and support to family members, not just the injured service member.

The family caregiver relief benefit is targeted at the most seriously injured to provide flexibility for those people who are informal caregivers in the home. I hope it will serve as the model for doing even more in the future. It's a little under \$8,000 annually in terms of payment. We're trying to build it with as little administrative burden as possible because we don't want to make it paperwork intensive. It serves to provide flexibility for caregivers if they need to attend a child's graduation or summer camp, have their own surgery, get some extra professional help, fly in a family member, or just recharge their batteries. It's there as a tax-free grant just to provide some flexibility.

Does it solve all problems? Absolutely not, but it's recognition that there's caregiver fatigue. I talk regularly to military spouses, the Caregivers Brigade, a range of people, and we're trying to do a number of things to support the family.

Rehabilitative experts also say that the more you can provide supports that do not require the spouse or partner to leave their vocation or job, the better. This is so that they make that choice on their own, because their wellness is important. You don't want everyone leaving their career and part of their personal wellness to support someone who's injured in the home.

I think it's an important first step.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: My last question would be about the impairment allowance, the expansion of the benefit, if you can address that.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Yes, this committee, in its report last June, did say that the eligibility criteria for the permanent impairment allowance were too rigid. We've listened and loosened the eligibility requirements in terms of the assistance to daily living and some of the criteria factored into the qualification for this benefit. We did that as of April 1. The result will be approximately 305 new people receiving this lifetime permanent impairment allowance benefit, likely in addition to other supports they are receiving from Veterans Affairs. We listened to this committee, and I want to thank you for it.

• (0950)

The Chair: Mr. Donnelly, go ahead.

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank both the minister and the deputy minister for being here at committee. I appreciate that.

It has recently come to my attention that some military families are being told that they are no longer eligible for the Canada child tax benefit while they are stationed abroad. Not only that, but they are being put in arrears by the Canada Revenue Agency for the CCTB amount that they have already received. I am hoping that you will talk with your cabinet colleagues to rectify this situation.

Given that the government has signalled its intention to vote in favour of yesterday's NDP opposition motion to recognize the social covenant that exists between veterans and the government, does this mean that you plan to instruct the government lawyers to stop fighting veterans in court and reach an immediate settlement with those veterans who have launched a legal lawsuit against the government seeking this recognition?

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Thank you, Mr. Donnelly. It's good to see you here at the committee.

I've spoken to my deputy, and we will look into the Canada child tax benefit issue. Obviously, that would be a Canadian Armed Forces issue, not a Veterans Affairs issue. I am not familiar with the specific issue, but we will look into it.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Thank you.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: I'll go to your motion from yesterday. In my speech that followed your speech, I thanked you for bringing the motion. I think anytime we have a substantive debate on care for veterans and their families in the House of Commons, that's a good thing. As I noted in my debate, my first day as minister in the House, in response to my good friend Peter Stoffer, I quoted Robert Borden's words in relation to the just appreciation that Canada owes the men and women who serve us. This is an almost 100-year-old statement of the tremendous obligation, as I describe it, that we owe to our veterans. It is not an obligation frozen in time, so we need to constantly look at the needs now and in the future.

The motion you brought forward yesterday, I think, stimulated some good discussion in the House. As I said, it falls short, actually, of proposed section 2.1 of Bill C-58, our purpose clause, which builds in the specific language from Robert Borden that specifically speaks to all veterans, not just the injured, and then says that the act itself must be liberally construed. In fact, that was a recommendation this committee made last year, so I was a little surprised that your motion yesterday did not have that same construction in terms of the

fact that the purpose clause, the obligation, must be liberally construed to promote a "benefit of the doubt" approach in terms of support for veterans and their families.

I think that what we have in Bill C-58 is superior, on a few levels, but I am glad we had almost a day of discussion in the House of Commons. We had some great personal stories from members of Parliament who have served, have bases in their ridings, have travelled to Vimy Ridge, and have spent time with veterans. That was a very positive development. It is also a key reason why our government will be, I believe tonight, voting in favour of your motion, Mr. Donnelly.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Okay, thank you. I work closely with Equitas on the development of that motion, and they are still interested in knowing where the class action lawsuit is going to go.

In the remaining time, I have two questions. Will you commit, Minister, to separate Bill C-58 from the budget implementation act, so that this committee and the opposition can deal with this and move it forward in a timely manner, as opposed to bundling it with an omnibus budget bill? If that is the case, I think you'll find a speedy passage, and perhaps there is a possibility of getting it through, as opposed to putting it in with the BIA.

You mentioned earlier in your remarks those veterans who have passed away and that those funds have not been reinvested back into veterans programs. Could you comment on why that isn't the case? Why aren't they reinvested in existing programs?

• (0955)

Hon. Erin O'Toole: There are a few questions there.

In terms of Bill C-58 and the budget implementation act, the budget implementation act will ensure that I meet my commitment to veterans and their families about passing these benefits, these reforms, before Parliament rises. I've made that commitment. I think it's important. Since most of Bill C-58 came from this committee, I would love our House leaders to work together to have quick passage of Bill C-58 standalone.

My early feedback, and what I heard in terms of comments on some of these new benefits, is that this was not going to be achieved. Even yesterday, your opposition day was really the first substantive response—if I could call it a response—to Bill C-58 by your party, that was six weeks. As I said, the debate was a good one, but I can't allow delay, whether intentional or not, to fall into place to delay these benefits.

As I've said, fair comment would be that there's more to do, but that's not a reason to delay the benefits that are in Bill C-58. I won't let that happen.

The Chair: Mr. Opitz.

Mr. Ted Opitz (Etobicoke Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, for being here. General, it's always a delight to see you, sir.

Just to follow up on something that call sign "Hawnski" said earlier in terms of this being a living document—and it is—as we've seen between the wars over the last century, but also in just the last 30 years, a lot has changed. As the general will remember, back in the seventies and even eighties, if you had a Cyprus Medal, a CD, and a set of wings, you were fully decorated.

Nowadays, to look at the soldiers, with the number of missions that they have, so much has changed just in three decades alone. This is something we definitely need to bear in mind. That's why this is so much a living document. We have to address the concerns of our veterans as they go along. Things do change and you need that flexibility to be able to adapt to it, so, Minister, I congratulate you on implementing and instilling that flexibility into the plan.

Minister, as you talked about benefits and awards, you also used the word “pension”. I'd like you to equate those words together and define what all of this adds up to in the end for a veteran on a program of benefits and awards.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Thank you for the question, Mr. Opitz, and thank you for your service for many years in the Canadian Armed Forces, and the work you've done with veterans on transition and hiring programs. It's appreciated.

When I unveiled the retirement income security benefit, which was a key priority of this committee, of the ombudsman, of the Legion, of NATO vets, and of a number of organizations addressing this issue at 65 for moderately to severely injured veterans, at that time I said that I wanted the department to move toward a predictable and understandable lifetime payment for our seriously injured. People understand what a pension is in terms of that permanency.

With the new veterans charter there are a lot of supports and benefits, but because they're stacked on top of one another, we have potentially three or four lifetime benefits. They're different things stacked on top of one another: permanent impairment allowance, permanent impairment allowance supplement, retirement income security benefit. We need to streamline those into a single payment that's understandable for those veterans that are eligible. That will give them peace of mind. It will also allow Canadians to know that support is there.

As you slide down the scale of serious injury, mental or physical, the focus truly has to be on the rehabilitation piece, income support through earnings loss, vocational rehab, retraining, and re-education to get into that second career; all of this whether or not they have accumulated pension time in the Canadian Armed Forces.

If you joined at 18 and wanted to be a soldier, sailor, or airman for the rest of your life, and an injury changes your plans at 32, what is the best option if you can physically and mentally get into a new role that's good for you, your family, and your future? Let's facilitate that. With these fixes, we're going to start getting the balance, as the committee said, not just working for most veterans because most is not enough.

● (1000)

Mr. Ted Opitz: I know you've worked through True Patriot Love and other organizations, such as Canada Company, and you've focused on PTSD, but I don't think a lot of people really understand the work that's going forward in terms of wellness and the collaborative efforts we have with groups like CIMVHR. In fact, the DRDC itself is doing scientific work in trying to identify markers in individuals who may be prone to operational stress injuries. There's collaboration happening to try to address these issues but yet get ahead of that curve and address it ahead of missions as opposed to post-missions.

Could you comment on some of that work that's being done?

Hon. Erin O'Toole: I can. I have to say without hesitation that the most rewarding part of the months I've been minister has been in meeting other veterans helping veterans. As you said, I worked with some great organizations of Canadians: True Patriot Love, Canada Company, Treble Victor, Wounded Warriors, all doing great things. Some of them served; some of them didn't.

In Esquimalt I met a young master seaman who got out from an injury, Bruno Guévremont, and within a year he was already giving back and helping veterans. I met Fraser Holman helping elderly veterans in Sunnybrook. He was a former fighter pilot wearing a smock that says, “Volunteer” and helping veterans he never served with. He is a retired general.

CIMVHR, the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research is run at Queen's University and RMC but has a network of, I think, 24 universities across the country. It is also run by a veteran, Alice Aiken. Alice and Stéphanie Bélanger, who run CIMVHR, are pulling together the resources. The University of Alberta is doing some great physical rehabilitation work. Other universities, such as the University of British Columbia with Dr. Marvin Westwood trail-blazed the veterans transition program.

We need to reach out and try a total approach to wellness. On mental health we're really doing that. We recognize there is not a one-size-fits-all solution. With CIMVHR we have a pilot right now on service dogs, which they're helping us lead; 50 dogs are being deployed. We're also working with Paws Fur Thought with Medric Cousineau, a decorated Sea King navigator. So we're reaching out to some of this expertise and exploring pilots to see if we can bring more flexibility into programming to meet the needs of veterans. It's similar with equine therapy with Can Praxis and the guys in Rocky Mountain House, Alberta.

Once we know of programs that offer some support for the veteran and the family, we then try to evaluate and see if we can make this available to more people beyond the pilot. Is it helping not just symptom relief but helping the underlying condition? CIMVHR and the research element is critical, so that we can really learn from these programs and learn how we can help more veterans as a result.

The Chair: I notice that when witnesses don't want to look at the chair, they don't look at the chair.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: It's a fine looking chair, too.

The Chair: The minister has agreed to be here for 90 minutes. I know some of you have obligations immediately after the meeting. But since the 90 minutes aren't up and to be fair, I'd like to propose another round of questions. But each one has only one minute, and one minute means 60 seconds, including the response.

Mr. Stoffer, you have the floor.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Very quickly, then, on Bill C-58 with the \$7,000 grant for caregivers, would you be willing to revise that to match it to the attendant allowance with the five grades to at least give someone who has to leave their place of work some sort of liveable income and respite care while they have it, because \$7,000, in my estimation, Mr. Minister, as nice as it is, is simply not enough for those who have to quit their jobs to care for people. A higher allowance to the attendant allowance would be better appreciated, I believe.

Would you accept that amendment?

Hon. Erin O'Toole: What I think your question recognizes, Mr. Stoffer, is everyone's desire to plug new benefits and new programs under the new veterans charter into the old system. The attendant allowance and the family caregiver relief benefit are two different things—

•(1005)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I realize that.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: —trying to accomplish different things. This is not intended to be an income support for somebody to leave their career.

What the veterans charter also recognizes is that in the 1950s and 1960s military members, and then veterans, would usually have a spouse, usually a wife, going from base to base, not working or—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: This is just about temporary relief.

The Chair: Mr. Lemieux, you have 60 seconds.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Minister, you referenced your consultations with other stakeholders, for example, through this committee, with the committee, with the ombudsman, and with witnesses, etc. You held a very important summit where there was further consultation. I'm wondering if you could inform the committee about the summit and about those types of consultations you've done that have helped lead to the legislation in front of Parliament now.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Absolutely. Thank you, and I will try and keep it short because I see that the chair is holding me to it.

We had a stakeholder summit that, I think, was probably the largest of its kind. It involved traditional membership-driven organizations as well as online peer support organizations. We had working groups. We actually developed ideas that came from the stakeholders that were very well received. We talked about Bill C-58. It was well received.

I want to do this twice a year so that we can hear from them. The online peer support groups like Send Up The Count and brigade wellness groups are the new eyes and ears. Also, we're trying to help find a way they can work with other—

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Valeriotte, you have the floor.

Mr. Frank Valeriotte: Minister, I have two quick questions.

First, you didn't tell us exactly how many case workers are being hired this year, not 100 over five years, but this year.

Second, I was able to determine that last year you spent \$4 million more than previously estimated in the spring on advertising and \$5 million more than previously estimated in advertising in the fall. Will you undertake to tell this committee in writing to the clerk—because I couldn't find any estimates—how much money you're going to be spending, more or less, on advertising this year.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Valeriotte.

Mr. O'Toole.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: You're making this hard in one minute, Mr. Valeriotte.

We estimate \$3.5 million in advertising. That has a commemorative aspect, but it also has an important goal of advertising benefits. Some of the new veterans charter benefits are not being taken up. We have to make sure that more veterans take them up. I'm a strong defender of the last ads we ran because they also had the benefit of showing Canadians a young veteran, a young father, and we need more employers hiring veterans.

On the case managers, hiring will commence very shortly and quickly, post-Treasury Board approval, and we will start working on a targeted—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. O'Toole.

Mr. Hayes.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Thank you very much for your role in hosting and organizing the second annual Sam Sharpe breakfast. If you'd care to make any comments, fine. If not, I just want you to know that I enjoyed being there. It was a tremendous experience. Thank you.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Thank you.

The Sam Sharpe breakfast was started last year by Roméo Dallaire and me, long before I became minister, where we allowed some veterans to come to talk about their own path to wellness after an operational stress injury or a mental health injury. Sam Sharpe was the MP from my area over 100 years ago. He died as a sitting MP as a result of his operational stress injury from World War I. We're using him as a teaching aid to say that we've come a long way since Sam Sharpe's time, but we have a long way to go, and we need to talk about these things and get veterans who are suffering into good programs to promote overall wellness.

[Translation]

The Chair: You have the floor, Mr. Chicoine.

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: For access to the Last Post Fund, a member's family must have less than \$12,000 in assets—you know the numbers. If I recall correctly, that amount was \$24,000 previously, but, in 1995, it was lowered to \$12,000. That criterion for eligibility means that almost no families can access the Last Post Fund in order to get a decent funeral.

Are you prepared to bring the threshold back up to \$24,000 so that more families can have access to the fund?

[English]

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Thank you for the question.

I'm very proud that a few years ago our government extended the last post fund, which traditionally was for World War II and Korean veterans, to all veterans, modern veterans.

It's critical to note that I believe the \$12,000 threshold you talked about is fair, because the \$12,000 threshold does not include their house or car. So you're actually talking about a veteran who could have an estate worth far more in excess of \$12,000 because those are carved out. When you factor that into it, you realize that it's not as unreasonable as some people make it sound.

• (1010)

The Chair: Mr. Hawn.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just want to follow up on the advertising a little bit. It was actually brought up by an opposition member yesterday in the House that some veterans just don't know about the benefits, so advertising is important. Where better to advertise than where veterans actually will be watching, like the Stanley Cup playoffs?

Could you comment on that?

Hon. Erin O'Toole: As I said, when you look at the estimates and the public accounts, particularly in areas where there are benefits that are demand driven and that aren't being taken up, we need to educate men and women in uniform about that. We're trying to work with the Canadian Armed Forces to close the seam and let more of them know about these benefits before they leave the military. We also have to advertise to make sure they take them up.

The added benefit of the imagery chosen in the last ads was to also facilitate the hiring of veterans. We put in priority hiring as a federal government. I'm proud we did that. We need more people seeing these men and women leaving the military as positive additions to

their workplaces, not just as a nice thing to do but as very good for their bottom lines. That's the tone those ads have.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Minister, you just came back from the Netherlands with your deputy where you commemorated and celebrated the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Netherlands.

Can you inform us about the upcoming events to honour veterans?

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Thank you.

It was an amazing journey to accompany these living heroes. We had 67 veterans and a caregiver on our excursion, and to see the Dutch people continue their love affair with Canada because of the liberation was truly very special. We also have commemorated major milestones from World War I, including my friend from Guelph who knew we had just passed 100 years since *In Flanders Fields*, and there was a coin and stamp issued.

We're also looking at—and I was just talking to my staff yesterday—about 20 years since Bosnia and how we can mark and educate Canadians about the important role our Canadian Armed Forces played. Commemoration and remembrance is a critical part of our department, and we work on a one-year plan and a five-year plan making sure we mark and educate.

The Chair: Mr. Donnelly

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Regarding the Equitas class action lawsuit, with respect, you didn't answer my question in debate on this, and you didn't answer it today in committee. I'm wondering if you will immediately instruct your lawyers to negotiate a settlement on this.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: I have tremendous respect for the people that make up the Equitas Society and for Jim Scott, Major Mark Campbell, and Aaron Bedard. I've met and spoken with several of them. As I've said, I never like to see someone who is frustrated to the point of going to court. I feel that a lot of the reforms in Bill C-58 have been the result of me not just listening here, but listening to their concerns and their demands.

I sincerely hope they see Bill C-58 as progress and they see our purpose statement, and our fulfillment of the obligation that they've talked about, as a positive step.

The Chair: Mr. Opitz.

Mr. Ted Opitz: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The reserves have under you, Minister, gotten a lot because I think we've realized how much the reserves contribute to missions abroad, up to 25% and sometimes more. Key capabilities in reserves are, in fact, things like CIMIC, PSYOPS, and some of these other things. I'd like you to elaborate a little further on some of the benefits and awards that are now offered to reservists on a parity level with the regular force.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Thank you.

As someone who has served with some fine reserve units yourself, Mr. Opitz, you know the critical importance from coast to coast. Naval, air, and army reserves have always been...we had a militia before we had a standing military. The respect for reserves, which was the day we described.... Minister Kenney and I both did events talking about the reserves, talking about fixing that gap, the earnings loss benefit for class A and class B, and injury and death benefits. We tried to talk on a larger scale to educate Canadians on just how critical they are for our domestic and international operations. We were fixing a narrow gap by calling the day "respect for reserves". I met the father of a reservist in Vancouver a few days later, and he said, "Thank you for talking about respect for our reserves". It was very well received and it's because I know the tremendous impact they make in our country.

• (1015)

The Chair: Minister, I want to thank you very much for your participation in today's meeting.

General, that was a tough question they asked you earlier.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

[*Translation*]

The session is just about over.

[*English*]

I would have liked to call a vote on the estimates, but because of the clock, we'll do it on Thursday.

[*Translation*]

The 49th meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs will be held on Thursday, May 14, in room 112-N, from 9:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.

[*English*]

This will be a one-hour, in camera meeting to prepare for the end of the session.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for your cooperation.

[*English*]

I'll see you next Thursday.

The meeting is adjourned.

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