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Chair

Mr. Neil Ellis

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● (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Neil Ellis (Bay of Quinte, Lib.)): Good afternoon.

I'd like to call the meeting to order, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), a study on the needs and issues specific to indigenous veterans.

Welcome to the witnesses.

Please note that the National Defence and Canadian Forces Ombudsman, who was supposed to appear last Tuesday, is scheduled for October 16.

Today we are pleased to welcome as a witness Wally Sinclair, board member of the National Association of Friendship Centres.

Mr. Sinclair, we'll turn the meeting over to you for 10 minutes. Welcome, and thanks for coming today.

Mr. Wally Sinclair (Board Member, National Association of Friendship Centres): [*Witness speaks in Cree*]

I am Wally Sinclair, a member of the Sawridge First Nation in Slave Lake, Alberta, and I am honoured to be here. I am also a board representative of the National Association of Friendship Centres.

I'll have my colleagues introduce themselves, please.

Mr. Leland MacLeod (Representative, National Association of Friendship Centres): Hello. I am Leland MacLeod. I am the program officer at the NAFC. I am also a reservist in the Canadian Forces in the Governor General's Foot Guards.

Mr. Ruston Fellows (National Association of Friendship Centres): My name is Ruston Fellows. I am a research assistant with the NAFC. I am from southwestern Ontario.

Mr. Wally Sinclair: I am going to briefly let him share why we're wearing orange shirts today, please.

Mr. Ruston Fellows: We're a bit early, but the orange shirts are for remembering residential school survivors and particularly the people who are often forgotten. Today we're also wearing them to remember the veterans who are often forgotten and who we are supporting today.

Mr. Wally Sinclair: Thank you.

Greetings, distinguished members of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. It is an honour and privilege to appear before you today. I thank you for this opportunity to share with you the work of the friendship centre movement and the National Association of Friendship Centres relative to the issues of indigenous veterans.

Before I begin, I wish to acknowledge and thank the Algonquin nation, upon whose unceded and traditional territories we are gathered today.

My name, as stated, is Walter Sinclair. I never use Junior—that's my late father. I am a member of the Sawridge First Nation.

I'm going to talk briefly about my experience, because it's important with regard to the travels that I do and where I work with identifying and finding out that the veterans are there and they've never acknowledged themselves because of the history and where they're from in that area.

I have quite a bit of experience working within the federal and provincial governments, first nations and Métis, as stated here. I was a department program specialist. I managed indigenous issues and provided political and cultural advice to ministers and senior government officials. I did this on the basis of being hired by the province at the time. People were always wondering why I was working for four or five different provinces. It's not just the knowledge—what I learned from each one, I come forward to share. A lot of what we found lacking was within the veterans part of it, a very small portion.

I ensured that services for all indigenous communities were appropriate for their political, cultural, spiritual and social heritage by consulting and collaborating with all stakeholders. That's what we call “protocol”, making sure that everybody's respected in our community and introducing people. I always mention the fact that we are not paper people. We're people people. We shake hands and acknowledge each and every one. We know on the government side we need paper trails.

I volunteered for a number of local causes and served on a number of provincial and local boards, including the friendship centres as an adviser, as I'm sitting here today.

I served with the Canadian Armed Forces for 10-plus years and the Royal Canadian Signal Corps as a lineman, 052 trade. This experience gave shape to the person I am today. I'm also 35 years sober, and that makes a significant difference in my life today as I sit here.

As a young person growing up with my late uncle Sam Sinclair, a World War II vet, we were coached as kids in sports in Slave Lake, Alberta. He used the military approach of discipline and respect with us. It was the same with my grandmother, who understands Cree only, no English. I was the interpreter from a young age. I could speak Cree before English. As I went along, I learned a lot of the good things that she knew, and one of the things was respect. I always share that with our young people today, and people of all walks of life, not just young people, because that attitude today, it's up and down.

Basic training in Kingston was a real eye-opener for me. I was posted to 731 Communication Squadron in Shilo and was responsible for all basic communications. I was in the line trade. I earned my paratrooper wings in Rivers, Manitoba. Then I was asked to go to officer training in Chilliwack. I had a good talk with myself and my wife at the time. She was in university; she's a teacher. I said I wanted to learn what's on the ground first before I become a leader. I'd like to walk the walk before I go to that school. That's a learning curve that I took at the time. Then I went to Europe for four years, posted at Fort Henry, Soest, Germany, which was another eye-opener for me.

I was posted to 4 Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group in Lahr, in the Black Forest. After three years I came home to 742 Comm Squadron, in Cold Lake. At the time I was posted, I think I was drafted because of my sports ability. I played basketball, hockey, football, everything. I don't think I was posted, but drafted, I always tell the commanders, but that's my humour with them.

If you have a healthy mind, body, soul and spirit, the confidence you build from that lets your actions speak for you, not your words. We say this in our language.

In the military, you step forward and volunteer. That's why I still volunteer today. I have the utmost respect for those who are serving today. I call them heroes, just like my late uncles and mentors. I've always been proud to serve in the Canadian Armed Forces. I enjoyed those years and have used those experiences to meet the demands of my professional and day-to-day lives.

With our time together, I'd like to give you a brief overview of the friendship centre movement and the NAFC. I'd like to share some of the program support. Of course, time permitting, I'll do my best to respond to your questions.

● (1535)

I would like to share some facts to set the context for the work of the friendship centres movement.

They began in the 1950s. That's where I was helped, raised and born, where I worked—volunteered—as a young person: at the friendship centre in Slave Lake.

Friendship centres help urban indigenous people access the vital services that they need to succeed in urban settings across Canada. Friendship centres understand the challenges facing our communities are unique. I don't know if there is a picture in front of you of the 122 friendship centres in Canada and the north. Why we share this, that big picture, is that when we look at gaps in services, these small centres have that information, but who do they go to with it? An example would be when somebody knocks on the door and says, “I would like help.” We notice in the food banks they'll come forward.

Veterans, especially our indigenous veterans, sometimes don't want to speak about their past. They don't want to come in and talk about it. I'm going to jump the gun and just go on straight. My past work here recently is as the director of a treatment centre. I didn't know that I had two veterans. There's no sign that says, “Are you a veteran?” From a health perspective, all applications today should have that on them. We know that right away in the justice system because that's part of the history that goes with it, but with regard to the health and wellness and that, there's nothing that asks if someone is a veteran, be they indigenous or non-indigenous.

As the director of a treatment centre, I found that, through conversations and going through different holistic...whatever we're sharing, something will trigger him or her, and it will come out, “Guess what. I was there.” It puts us back focusing where we should be. I've lived this, I've survived this and we know about this from the communications and everything that's in the papers today.

The last one that I'll share openly is with regard to the jails, the halfway homes. I'm finding out later in my travels that there were people in there who never shared, and they're back on the streets. Two I met recently, one in Vancouver and one here.

I also do accreditation. I follow up accreditation programs and do evaluating and that. I asked the young man sitting there if he was veteran, and he said, “Who are you, a cop or a social worker?” I said, “You have to respect me, and just listen to me for two seconds.” “Why don't they build something right where we're sitting here? There are eight of us. Why can't they put a temporary residence here? We like this. It's where we grew up.” I said, “You'll have to talk to the city”, but who can I get to support and share this with? This is in Vancouver. I come to Edmonton, and it's the same thing over again. It's repetitive. I have to trust someone with what I'm doing, where I'm going and the decision I'm making within that, building that conversation as I go.

Across the country, friendship centres provide culturally appropriate services for indigenous people living in urban centres and have become a place for indigenous and non-indigenous people to come together and share traditions.

That's the other thing. We're all blessed with a skill. The Creator has given us some gifts. We've never really challenged people to find that gift, whatever it may be. It could be art. It could be singing. It could be music. You start building that relationship with people from the front lines. If they can survive there, they can survive anywhere. They've been through the whole process and how it's written and how it's looked at.

Friendship centres are a significant part of Canada's social infrastructure backbone, with more than two million client contacts. We do keep track of our traffic across Canada and in the north, of the people coming through our doors, and it's amazing the numbers that we get. We're supposed to be providing services for this, and at times we are lacking the resources ourselves, but we'll go out of our way beyond what we have and visit extra groups and parties.

We are a non-profit, rather than a politically representative organization, and we enjoy a productive relationship with many other indigenous organizations. We're not in competition here with our indigenous veterans in Alberta, in Saskatchewan. They're all over. I've just come back from Wainwright. This is my sixth year participating in a parade with the lieutenant-governors of Saskatchewan and Alberta. We're not in competition. We have to start working together. We have to come together for the betterment of all, not just the different organizations.

Many indigenous people prefer cultural and heritage-based services that are offered outside the mainstream medical system. This often includes harbouring a more holistic view of mental health and its treatments. We speak of mental health when we do an assessment, which I've just done not too long ago, and there is help needed. Right now, we're studying the psychological part of our indigenous way of getting our elders—they've been doing this for years—speaking in a cultural, holistic manner when it comes to psychology. We just have to do a little more work in doing that.

● (1540)

With Health Canada and Alberta Health we'll be presenting this again. I've been doing some presentations to Alberta. I'm a co-chair with another colleague from Treaty 6. I sit on the Alberta Health—it's a wellness group—elders group for Treaties 6, 7 and 8. I just went through a process with two other doctors of interviewing six doctors, for a doctor for northern Alberta to serve in that capacity.

In interviewing these doctors from all over the world who are coming in to understand our communities in the north, I'm not questioning all their learning, all their qualifications. “Do you understand the community, what it's all about? What do you have as resources?”

We have found that our people are sent out from treatment or anything else to go to see a psychologist and so on. That psychologist is 180 miles away. Who can afford it? We're building different capacities in our community now. This is where the friendship centre comes in. We're going to start doing this and we have started in many areas.

Quebec has a model up north that's awesome. We're trying to take off. Halifax will be working on their new facility and this will be part of it.

Many indigenous people prefer cultural- and heritage-based services offered outside of the mainstream medical system. Friendship centres support culturally safe delivery of these much-needed services in innovative ways.

Mr. Leland MacLeod: Are we doing all right for time?

● (1545)

The Chair: We'll give you another minute and then we'll go to questions.

Mr. Leland MacLeod: We have a few more pages. Maybe we should jump to the recommendations that we're going to provide.

In conclusion, senators and standing committee members, the NAFC makes the following recommendations.

We recommend that the federal government support the NAFC in partnership with other indigenous veteran associations for a national needs assessment of indigenous veterans; that the needs assessment determine the needs of veterans, both younger and older, and determine if these needs require all-nations indigenous veteran services to be offered to indigenous veterans across Canada; that the federal government provide financial support to friendship centres in the delivery of programs and services to veterans' widows and their families; and that through financial contributions the federal government enable the NAFC and the provincial-territorial associations of our movement to participate in veterans' policy and program directions.

The friendship centre movement and the NAFC look forward to working with the Government of Canada and opposition parties to improve the lives of indigenous veterans in Canada, which will be achieved through core funding investments in friendship centres so that they continue to have the capacity to operate and to meet the needs of their communities, as well as looking at ways their friendship centres can expand the current successful programs that support veterans and indigenous people.

Thank you for allowing me and Mr. Wally Sinclair the opportunity to speak. Mr. Sinclair and I look forward to addressing any questions you have.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll start with Ms. Wagantall for six minutes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): I want to thank you so much for coming today.

I want to mention that for me, as a new member of Parliament, this study was put forward by my colleagues in the NDP. It's an excellent opportunity for me to grow my understanding. I do appreciate that you said “people to people”, because I need a lot grace. You're going to have to put up with me while I ask you a whole bunch of questions. I really do appreciate that you're here.

Before I go forward with this, Mr. Chair, I would like to move the motion that I put forward and was handed out by the clerk, I believe, in a timely fashion.

I move:

> Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), that the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs undertake a study, over 18 meetings, regarding the anti-malaria drug commonly known as mefloquine, Mefliam, Lariam and other brand names. Beginning with the first use of the drug distributed to CAF members through to present day. The study will consider all aspects of the use of mefloquine et al. by the CAF, including but not limited to: distribution, pricing, clinical testing, dosing, follow-up, side effects, a review of the latest research, a comparison with the experience of our allies and other related topics. The findings of this study are to be reported the House.

With the testimony today by Lieutenant-General Roméo Dallaire at National Defence, he reiterated a lot of what he has said at this committee. He is on record with regard to mefloquine that as a commanding officer he had to take this drug when he was in Rwanda. He said outright that it damaged his mind. It damaged his gut. It damaged his ability to lead, to where he had his staff watching him. He requested permission to quit using this drug. He was contacted and said that the quickest response ever by the higher-ups told him to continue or he would be court-martialled for a self-inflicted wound.

At this committee, I then asked him if we should study this further? He said,"No, you should just get rid of this drug." We have him testifying again. We have had testimony at this committee from individuals who have suffered from mefloquine toxicity, and the rallies that have taken place on the Hill. We know what is going on with our allies with regard to this drug. It has impacted all levels of our armed forces. We hear from our veterans who have been required to take it right up until Afghanistan.

For that reason, this is a priority that we need to study. I request that we pass this motion.

The Chair: Mr. Eyolfson.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia—Headingley, Lib.): I move that the debate be now adjourned.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Can I speak to that?

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brantford—Brant, CPC): It's a dilatory motion. The chair has no choice. He has to call a vote.

The Chair: We'll have a recorded vote.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 5; nays 4)

The Chair: Mrs. Wagantall, you have the floor for the remaining part of your six minutes.

● (1550)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you.

As we still have this opportunity to go ahead, the friendship centres are a wonderful idea. Do you right now, within the friendship system, have a way of identifying veterans when they come to you?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: In Alberta we just started with that, interviewing the community and finding out where the elders are. With the Alberta portion that I'm part of, we have a list now of the communities. They're coming forward, but we're still missing those on the streets and wherever.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Right.

Mr. Wally Sinclair: We have a process, and we're going to make a motion at our national meeting to put it forward nationally. This was the first step here.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Do you have any kind of resource list from the armed forces as to who has served historically?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: Yes. I've been a member of the Legion now for just about 50 years. I still work in that capacity with our Lac La Biche branch and at different Legions in following up with that. Rarely do we see an indigenous veteran going into a Legion and participating or sitting at any table. I was our vice-president a few years back, I think because nobody else ran—just to make a joke—and I'm most respectful towards the Legion and their role across Canada. There are a lot of good things going on, but there are still gaps in the system.

There's a Legion paper out, and I'd like to see an indigenous Legion paper out, not to create more but to communicate in there on what some of the gaps in the system are. If we can get that rolling, that would be part of our agenda coming up at the national meeting.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay.

I just received a book written within Saskatchewan, and listed in it are all of the Métis veterans. Are you familiar with that book?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: Yes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I had two Métis women staying with me recently during the mefloquine rally, and I mentioned the book. They're from northern Saskatchewan, and they said it was probably all about just the southern part. When they opened the book, they were just beside themselves at how accurate it was. Their relatives were there. Is this a tool as well, then?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: I would add that in Alberta the Métis Nation takes a lead role in exactly what you're referring to, especially through Batoche. Going there as a regular force member and as a veteran after, I still participate when I can.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: With the recommendations you put forward, when it comes to creating that national needs assessment tool, I would assume you'd hope that you'd have a significant role to play in determining what that tool looks like.

Mr. Wally Sinclair: That was one of the things about coming here. How can we support what's being studied now, or, if there are gaps in the system, what role can we play? We're out there already, and especially with our friendship centres across Canada, it's a simplistic form of understanding that. We're still looking for the ones who are not speaking.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: That's the challenge across all platforms with veterans.

When you approach someone in a scenario where you're wondering if they're a veteran or not, we've heard from other groups that rather than asking them, "Are you a veteran?", to ask them, "Did you serve?" Do you find that makes a difference for you as well?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: If I'm new in a community and on the street and so on, I'll do a little walkabout. How long has he been sitting here? Who's his family? Who's his extended family? I work that way. Maybe there's a tap on the shoulder from an aunt or an uncle who's been concerned. This is when we open the conversation up and ask if they know of a member of their extended family living on the same street who could maybe be of assistance or be aware in that capacity. That's what we also do at the Legion within the same area.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Can I ask you a personal question?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: Sure.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: You mentioned that you've been sober for 35 years.

Mr. Wally Sinclair: Yes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Did your service play a role in your challenges?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: Yes.

Sorry....

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: No, I....

Thank you.

Mr. Wally Sinclair: I covered all my wounds in my.... I hate using the word "racism"—I think at the time it wasn't meant that way—but you were called "wagon burner", "chief", and everything like that. I had a little more hair than this, and there were some things that I....

When I'd come home, my wife, being a teacher and living with me, knew there was something bothering me. Then my daughter was born. When she was four, she said, "Dad, you always smell like this every Sunday when we going to church." That's when I decided to get out of the military and I proceeded to sober up.

I went back to university. While I worked full time, I went to the University of Alberta for seven years in political science and local administration. I lost two half-brothers to suicide. Instead of going to Fort McMurray as an electrician, I went back to university to study mental health, addictions and different therapy. From my own experience, I could write my own thesis, and I thought I'd challenge whoever was there. That's where that comes from, but I still need help on my own.

Can I just add one little thing to it? I still play baseball. I've been going to Phoenix for the last seven years to play baseball. I play for Team America. I'm this little Indian boy from northern Alberta, from Slave Lake. My father pitched semi-pro, close to it, and we have a Sinclair ball team at home in Slave Lake. We still play. This year our coach retired in Phoenix, and now I'm playing for Seattle. They did the best bidding for me, so I'm going to play for them. When that's done, after two weeks I'm off to the Pan Am Games in Australia. I'm pitching for Australia for the second year. I'm playing for the young guys, the 60 and under. I'm only 72.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Hear, hear!

● (1555)

Mr. Wally Sinclair: That's my self-care. I replaced the alcohol with my spiritual guidance, music and sports.

If I can help anyone by doing that.... I get very emotional about this because our young people today need help. That's why I'm still sitting here.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bratina, you have six minutes.

Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Before I start, Mr. Sinclair, I missed this at the beginning. Sorry about that.

Mr. MacLeod, what's your role in the big scheme of things?

Mr. Leland MacLeod: I'm a full-time program officer at the National Association of Friendship Centres.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Mr. Fellows...?

Mr. Ruston Fellows: I'm the research assistant for the National Association of Friendship Centres.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Okay. To go back to you, Mr. Sinclair, you had quite a history in the armed forces with your trade. What was your trade? Were you an electrician?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: I was a 052 lineman. I went back to school when I got out, apprenticing at NAIT to get my electrician's.... I got to my fourth year and was accepted at university, so I had to drop out of my apprenticing.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Were you a paratrooper?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: Yes, at Rivers.

Mr. Bob Bratina: You left planes before they landed.

Mr. Wally Sinclair: I was told that. I enjoyed it, yes.

Mr. Bob Bratina: When you began your military service.... How many years did you serve?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: I served for 10-plus years.

Mr. Bob Bratina: How did you relate to your first nations identity as a soldier?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: It wasn't a conversation. We are native. We are just a native person. That was it. There was no conversation after that. Left and right, you didn't look at colour, creed or language. You were a soldier first. That's why I enjoyed and loved it in going within that.

Later on, that came into play. You start building that with regard to "you're from a reservation" or whatever. To me, I didn't find that to be part of the military, so I just left well enough alone.

Mr. Bob Bratina: We heard much testimony like that—that it was great and you had each other's backs and that was it.

It's sad that we're having to deal with the fallout of, in our case, the issues we're looking at for indigenous veterans, the cases you're encountering and why the friendship centres exist, I guess.

In your mind, what would be priorities for us in terms of the funding? How should that be directed? What would you see as the activities that you would really want to fund?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: In relation to the map of Canada, look at the various distances and how far apart the friendship centres are. I would make a regional map that the unit can display in that circumference, within that. I've done this with the province for a lot of years and in the north for Canada.

We found that delivery of service was a core need. The formula that was bent depends on what and who is involved.... Look at the national research that's being done now—I believe it's this group that I was reading about—to see some of that. Look at a bigger picture and talk to some of the old-timers and the veterans. What do they see in their lifetime? What do they like?

We have a lot of history on paper, but to speak about it is a whole different avenue between Blackfoot, Cree, Dene.... There's a real language difference there. I could be saying one thing in Cree that means something different for another person. I'd say, [*Witness speaks in Cree*], and then they'd say something else over there.

That's not how it's presented, and that's always been in the system federally and provincially. That one paper is supposed to cover all of the agenda. It doesn't really work that way with the challenge you just spoke of. Some cases might be different. It just depends on what you're dealing with. This is a very sensitive one.

● (1600)

Mr. Bob Bratina: It's important to the first nations that their languages be preserved—

Mr. Wally Sinclair: Yes.

Mr. Bob Bratina: —and I would think that in your work you would probably want translation ability, which isn't cheap. You have to fund that.

Mr. Wally Sinclair: With regard to the level of competence today of our young men and women who are speaking our languages, it's coming back. The ones who spoke it regularly are the ones whose lives we celebrate. They have passed on.

There is still a bit of a gap there yet with languages, especially when you go up north. When you go up north, you still see that. The languages are very particular in their communications.

Mr. Bob Bratina: We had a tour in which we were visiting indigenous veterans. We went to Beauval. All of us talk about that time. I met a 98-year-old Second World War veteran who walked 110 miles to enlist and walked back again afterward.

The sad part, of course, was that in the day there were no benefits and there was no interaction. Would one of your tasks be to ensure that every indigenous veteran is registered with and knowledgeable about your organization?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: That is very much one of our tasks. That's key in our agenda. Once we have our national meeting—I think it's coming up here—that's what we're proposing. We've started already, but we just have to justify it by our governance.

We're not in competition with anyone, because there are other indigenous veteran organizations out there. Somewhere we have to celebrate together through this—through our feather.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Thanks for being here.

The Chair: Mr. Johns.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Thank you.

I also would like to acknowledge that we're doing business on the unceded traditional territory of Algonquin Anishinabe people.

I want to thank you for your service, and all of you, for the work that you're doing at the friendship centres. I have two friendship centres in my riding, the Port Alberni Friendship Centre and the Wachiay Friendship Centre in the Comox Valley. They play an important role not just for indigenous people, but for reconciliation and bringing our communities together. In fact, we have a lot of meetings at the friendship centres.

We had some town halls this summer and we listened to veterans. We had five town halls on veterans. At one of the town halls, a more holistic approach—you talked about it earlier—came to fruition. There was a lack of services that were holistic and health-related. Maybe you could speak to taking a holistic approach—a more natural type of approach around the needs of aboriginal veterans. Could you speak to how maybe some of the requirements at Veterans Affairs need to be relaxed or adapted to serve indigenous veterans and Métis veterans?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: Thank you for that.

The first thing that comes to mind is a celebration. First, it's your pow wows and grand entries in uniform. To me, that is powerful work, with the chief council and the RCMP and everyone there. That visual is a start, within that work and to that area.

Then we have cadets from the nation dressed up in uniform. That's a message right there on its own. They're dressed up proud, and everything else.

We concentrate on our youth with our elders. You put them in combination with the veterans and they're marching together. What more of a picture do you need to explain about reconciliation and truth? They're indigenous and non-indigenous, that's all. They're marching all at the same time. That's key to that.

For me, this summer, there were a lot of the grand entries in uniform. I was in the all-chiefs meeting here in Ottawa, or across the bridge over there. I'm asked to participate in different ones and I share. That's when I get my consultation going: Where are you from? Is there's anything we can do with our friendship centre? Here's a contact. That's what I do.

You talk about reconciliation. That's what we're doing now in Alberta. We're sitting at the table at St. Paul des Métis in Alberta and it's starting to work now. Two veterans have come forward from first nations. They had never talked, never shared. That's exactly what's starting now, what you just mentioned in that.

For my role, I always look at the physical, mental, spiritual and emotional. The elders.... Do you know what? They called me an elder one day, and I looked around and I thought, okay, I'll accept that from the youth and the children. My late grandfather said, “If you're walking on Jell-O all your life, in the physical, mental, spiritual and emotional, your journey is going to be pretty rough.” You have to have a balance in life today. We have the Creator, which we acknowledge every morning through our different ways. All walks of life do that. If we can sit next to everybody and ask for that forgiveness. We move forward with the knowledge base and everything else.

Concentrating in one area.... You need the big picture. Sometimes we're just focusing on that reconciliation. There's more to it, with family and extended family—whether the kids are coming home. Just recently in the newspaper in St. Paul—I don't know if you've seen it—there was something about the statement on residential schools. What did the kids learn? I'm sorry to say it, but we still have racism. We still have it.

I'm going to just share. I was sitting and they were talking about “the Indians out there”. I finally showed them my treaty card, and I said, “You're talking about me. Could you explain a little more, please?” I was not negative, because you have the right to do that in reconciliation. He came and shook my hand and gave me a hug. That's building that relationship, with what you're doing.

In B.C., you have some real models out there. They come back to Ottawa here and that's shared openly.

I graduated in Prince Rupert, B.C.. I lived there for two years. It was in the same area.

● (1605)

Mr. Gord Johns: On the thread of how we can better serve veterans and having a different approach.... In the United States, 30% of their case workers are actually former veterans serving veterans. The NDP would like to see more veterans serving veterans when they're released. The government has finally come up with a commitment to at least be at 10% by 2020. We're far off from that right now.

When you think about indigenous veterans.... I think 2.8% of the military is indigenous. Would you like to see at least 2.8% of case workers be indigenous veterans with that cultural knowledge? The friendship centres are a great vehicle. You understand the respect and you've earned the trust of indigenous people. Do you see a way to work that in?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: There's a document from Veterans Affairs that talks about preparing you for the civilian street. I wish that was there when I got out. If I had that support, maybe I wouldn't have went where I went in not dealing with my past issues.

You're going to hear the word “trauma” in your travels. That's key to that, but overall, it's training the people who are there to prepare them as service providers. I wish I had that opportunity.

I've been working in the health field now for quite a few years in different capacities, and that's what I try to bring on. If you come to treatment where I'm at, it's “Fill out this application. Come and work here for a while. You have skills that you haven't even touched yet. You learned them in the military and where you're from.”

That's key. You're hitting the key part.

Thank you.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you for the shirts, the story and for remembering. We greatly appreciate it.

The Chair: Ms. Ludwig, you have six minutes.

Ms. Karen Ludwig (New Brunswick Southwest, Lib.): Thank you all very much for being here today.

Mr. Sinclair, I certainly thank you for your service.

Mr. MacLeod, as a reservist, thank you for your service as well.

Mr. Fellows, I have a lot of questions for you about the research, so thank you for the work you're doing as well.

Some of the words I heard when you were speaking, Mr. Sinclair, were about trust, mental health, culture, spirituality and the emotional aspect. I'm wondering if we could work together with Mr. Fellows, in terms of the research you're going to be working on.

From a research perspective, a lot of what we do in government relates to Statistics Canada. How do we take the stories and experiences and put them in a comparable format with Statistics Canada? That's one.

The other one is on the language side. One of your recommendations was working in participation with all nations. Do you see an opportunity, in terms of the research, where there would be people from different first nations groups that would get together, to almost have a common language that could be comparable for the research?

Those are my first questions.

Mr. Ruston Fellows: I think most people are speaking English right now, so that could be a common language. It's a language of exchange.

● (1610)

Ms. Karen Ludwig: What about in the storytelling?

Mr. Sinclair talked about the experiences and that sometimes don't compare one to the other. An important part of your needs assessment would be.... It's general. Certainly each community is different, but it's trying to do some generalities so that we see some common ground there.

Mr. Wally Sinclair: Some of the areas we look at are also the stories you talk about. One of them is Tommy Prince. Everybody in our Legion has a big picture of him.

I did have a few beers with him one time, but that's another story.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: That was before.

Mr. Wally Sinclair: Yes, many years ago.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: More than 35 years ago....

Mr. Wally Sinclair: The area of communicating and how this is set up is important, because right across Canada everybody has something to share. We've not captured that. We haven't even touched close to it. For some reason, that's always been inner, but now it's coming out and it's open.

I mentioned trust. In the past, when you brought out a pen and paper and you were going to write something, it was either for the police or a social worker, because it was going to be used against you in court. That's one thing I learned from a young age.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Thank you, Mr. Sinclair.

On that, in terms of the first one, the needs assessment, how can we as a committee, and certainly as a government, help you, so that as the information is being collected—and not being insensitive—we try to make that comparable so that we can help you put it into policy?

After listening to you, part of the challenge that I foresee is that you have a wealth of experience and stories amongst all first nations, and we want to make sure that's reflected in terms of putting that into policy. What do you see in your role...?

Mr. Ruston Fellows: Having people put those into their own languages, using their own languages, would be one way to have people be able to tell their stories properly.

Mr. Wally Sinclair: At the friendship centres right now, we have youth groups interviewing people in this capacity, elders and we just added veterans.

On the same question that you're asking, in Alberta, we're doing this. The youth are going around now. I'm hoping to get it accredited in school as part of the program. They could be using this, but that's a whole other agenda.

That's what we're doing now. That history and story, we're bringing that together, and they can send it through us. They're going to bring it here to the national. That's one of my roles as rep. Once we meet, we can then get back to this table here somehow.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Mr. Sinclair, I know that you're one of a kind, but are there many people similar to you?

I really commend you for going back to your community, back to your roots, because I think that's where the connection of trust is in building that relationship. How can we help you, or how can you help us, understand how to encourage that more deeply?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: History always tells me when you feed people they all show up, but you never feed them until you're done speaking. That's what we do—we celebrate. There's a celebration for something in sharing this. We start in our schools. November 11 is coming up and I have five communities, before I go play ball, that I have to visit. I've been doing this for many years for Remembrance Day, and now I've tied in the indigenous part of our war heroes, the past and the present.

In Edmonton we have a good group there and we work very closely. I'm part of the health committee and that gap is there. That starts the conversation, as you converse and realize there's another person over there who needs your help, so that's the connection.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Are you seeing from your work, Mr. Sinclair, that the amount of engagement you have is actually encouraging more people, like Mr. MacLeod and others, to get involved as young reservists?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: I believe it is. I believe it, because the staff are important. I'll turn back to the them. Like today, I had 110 questions but we only had 10 minutes because I just came in last night.

The communication is so important in this, in what we're doing, but it's how it's written and how it's presented, and how—I'm going to use this word—the government would help us in its way. In our words....

That's where that partnership and celebration comes in. As veterans, we do celebrate. We come together in uniform and acknowledge. That's been passed on to us for years, the respect within that.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: I think that's all of my time.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Eyolfson.

● (1615)

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, all, for coming.

Thank you for your continuing service in this and what you do. It's quite valuable, and thank you for also.... It's often forgotten, when you mentioned all of the different services, sometimes the RCMP isn't mentioned. It was nice to hear you mention that.

I'm a RCMP brat, and I watched my dad dealing with some issues with Veterans Affairs. I actually lived in a detachment with my family until I was five years old.

As I say, giving back the way you do, after giving so much service and then continuing to give, it's important. It sounds like there's a great need for people who do what you do. Do you have any strategies as to how you can recruit more people who have done what you do, in your position, to keep doing what you're doing? It sounds like you're doing a lot and you're going to need some help.

Mr. Wally Sinclair: This is my fifth time on retirement, but we were told there's no such thing as retirement in our lifetime because what you learned back there has to be moved forward to the people behind you. I don't use the word “recruitment”. We find other ways.... It's [*Witness speaks in Cree*] in Cree. Come and sit down. We're going to talk. We're going to share.

Maybe I can do that. At first I said, the gift that you have here is what you're going to be paid. It's going to come back to life. All of that other stuff will come around. It's out there. I've done my soul-searching and I've had an opportunity to go across Canada. Just recently, I'm a member of the K Division in the RCMP. I'm an adviser for the commander who just retired. I just went to his dinner. I was just in Ottawa at the friendship centre, and we had all of the RCMP with the youth here. From that, I'm also building connections. I'm coaching. There are young 19- to 25-year-olds who are in their first and second year of college or university where I go share and say, come on over and do what we're doing.

There are so many opportunities, but they'll come forward. If you start forcing people at home, you won't see them again. You have to have incentive, some feel-good relationship to community within that. They're out there. We just have to do a little bit more door knocking, walking, round dances, powwowing, jigging and karaoke —that's a good one. That's my other job. I karaoke at the senior centre, so everybody gets to sing along with me. I give them shakers, because it's exercise. Anyway, I'm sorry to get carried away. That's another avenue all the same.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: That's okay.

It turns out we're soulmates on the karaoke thing.

Mr. Wally Sinclair: Okay, good.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: This next question might be a really difficult question. It's kind of broad. With your experiences with the armed forces, if you were to pick the top three issues that are unique to indigenous people who are in the armed forces, that affect their experiences, could you pick the three that are the biggest?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: I don't know if this is negative or.... I hate the word “cross-cultural”. It's been overused at times.

The non-indigenous people understanding us when we're in military and civilian life, I'd like to.... When we come in as the military, we're one unit. Somebody has to teach them to understand us and some of our past history. What has that got to do with being a soldier? It has a lot to do with being a soldier, big time. That's not on paper. That's one area.

Then, this is in basic training. The RCMP do a lot of this, that interaction amongst each other and building the team. It depends where you come from and what your family background is.

I've done this. I've asked a member of the RCMP, I think it was. I said, “When you shut your door at night, is it perfect?" We as Indian or Métis people, as soon as we do something wrong and we're veterans, we're headlines in the paper. I'm serious. This is our conversation. Maybe we have to work on something. I said, “Yes, how you communicate. Communication is vital”. Again, I mentioned the different languages not being the same.

Your topic is the very question out there now, as we speak, in different capacities and communities. At the Legion we even spoke about it briefly.

My thought is, how far were you going with this with regard to that? Maybe we're there already; we don't know.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you.

It was an interesting comment about making sure other people understood your people. You made an interesting comment at the beginning when you said you heard the term "wagon burner" and you thought maybe they were being racist, and that's right. Everyone should have known that's racist. That's the kind of understanding we have to get to people. They need to understand each other. That was a great point.

I believe I'm out of time.

● (1620)

The Chair: Mr. Kitchen.

Mr. Robert Kitchen (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Sinclair, you impress the heck out of me. I'm honoured to have met you.

Mr. Wally Sinclair: We have the same haircut.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: I was going to say, we have the same challenge.

You are saying things that I've been saying for years. Through spirituality, education and sport, that's how you get rid of your demons. That's how I got rid of my demons. I am honoured to know that someone else is saying the same things.

Mr. Fellows, has Mr. Sinclair taught you how to pitch so that you can carry on his legacy?

Mr. Ruston Fellows: Not yet.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Mr. Sinclair, you talked a little bit about the cadet program, cadets who come in in powwows. I've been with many powwows, and it's a great honour for me to go in powwows and to walk in on the grand march. I know and understand the order, and it's a tremendous thing. I still can't figure out how half of the dancers get through a whole hour of doing that and not have a heart attack.

With that said, you did talk about cadets. One of the things we've talked and heard about are the cadet programs that are being offered to indigenous first nations and some of the challenges they're having. I'm just wondering if you might be able to add some comment as to why or why not we're seeing these issues.

Mr. Wally Sinclair: An example is Wainwright. Every year there are about 120 or 110 registered. Say 100 will register, and 85 will make it. This year was the biggest, again, for indigenous veterans from across Canada, the north, I think as far as the Manitoba border to B.C. and up north.

In my conversations walking around, talking, introducing myself —I'm in uniform with my colleagues—and asking them about forward thinking. We live a day at a time in our traditional ways of how we pray or how we think.

On the side of concerns and that, the parents are there. The guardians and grandmothers are attending all of these graduations. That's your conversation right there. You get more from talking to the *kokums* and the *mushums*, the grandmothers and grandfathers, and the extended family than from the young man or woman. They're so proud to be there and proud to be receiving an award or something—no question. Out of respect, I always let them know I'm going to speak to grandma a little bit, and how are you doing?

We have a lot of support from Alberta and Saskatchewan. They're there full time. When they go home, I attend when they win that award. I'll go to it and be part of our Alberta society of veterans and that.

If there are concerns, they have a good team in Wainwright who dig into that and find that. They're not going to leave there with that. If they're not following that, they're going home. If they're going home, my question is, “Who's going to meet them at home?” They need help. That's where I ask the federal government to help in that capacity, be it NNADAP or any other program if it's drug related. There are triggers there, anyway. Those were some of the issues.

It's building trust with that whole group.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: One of the issues was retention in the force once they completed the program. When I was a CIC instructor I had parents come to me and say, “I'm pulling my kids out of cadets because you're not teaching them anything.”

My answer to them was always that I had two hours to teach them what I needed to teach, but what they needed was to have that same reinforcement when they got home.

Is that part of our problem? Do you have any suggestions?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: On retention, if they have a cadet program at home or where they're going to, sometimes they go back there; if not, they're off to a job or a career or something else. A lot of them will go home and do that. Acknowledging them is a gap in the system—not a big one. I can't really speak on each individual case that I have heard and listened to, but the lack of support for the volunteers who are coming forward and being the cadet leaders is another one.

It's put on their plate. How are they going to deal with it if they don't have the resources within the same process? We're happy they're there. There might be some there that are going to stay on. The 30 who registered for the regular forces, that's a number in itself. It's the most ever from that.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: I see your Canada 150 medal from the Legion, and comrade, I congratulate you on that. Those are not given out readily. I know you've stepped forward.

You mentioned being involved in the Legion. Is there something the Legion can do that would assist other first nations along the way, as they've helped you?

● (1625)

Mr. Wally Sinclair: It's challenging. It just depends. In our Lac La Biche branch, my supervisor's 92 years old, and she's been doing this from day one. She knows every veteran in our area, in the Lac La Biche northeast corridor, as far as Saskatchewan. Her husband passed away many years ago. Wardene keeps track of everyone. We have resource people, and she knows people and contacts. This is what I'm trying to put forward in the Legion, to have more contacts like that and to support them to bring them back into the Legion. Some do show up. Some don't. I can't force them. No one can force them.

It's brought up as a topic. To what extent and how far, I don't really know. It's a very sensitive area for a lot of us. I've been a past president of a Legion, so I know part of that.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you.

For your organization, the resources you have, you mentioned food banks and the friendship centres. Is that one small part of what you deal with within your organization?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: It's called wraparound services.

Maybe you can expand on wraparound services for him.

Mr. Leland MacLeod: The concept of "wraparound services" is a loose term to refer to making sure that we provide services not only for food security but also prenatal services for new mothers, sometimes addictions services for youth, sometimes diversion services for youth who are in trouble—essentially, something for every age group. You have youth programs, which are a huge priority because there are a lot of young people who need to be engaged at an earlier age. To support young parents, there's the prenatal programs, and especially also elders' programs. This is maybe where the gap is. We have a lot of elders' programs in the friendship centre movement, but they haven't necessarily focused on military service. I know that just in driving here, we saw a guy on Bank Street having a hard time, and we said, "He could be a veteran. How would we know?"

I've seen people I've worked with on the reserves disappear. Where do they live? He had a hard time. He didn't get along with anybody, and he left. People fall off the radar. If they go overseas and have a bad tour, they come back and they leave because they're frustrated. If they have a problem with the administration, they leave.

As Wally was saying, we have to keep track of where people are and where they go. As soon as you leave the forces you're a veteran. We definitely need to track and show proper respect for those who have served, through wraparound services.

Mr. Wally Sinclair: That's a connection we need. As soon as they leave the forces, where do we track that? Where do we find it? That's what we're skipping right now.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chen, you have six minutes.

Mr. Shaun Chen (Scarborough North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Mr. Sinclair and guests who are here before us.

I deeply appreciate the sentiments you have shared today. I was particularly fond of your statement that you are not in competition with anyone, that you are there to work together because the need is so immense for our indigenous veterans.

I believe most, if not all, Canadians would and should be outraged to know that veterans, and particularly indigenous veterans, given the history of Canada's colonialism and the ongoing challenges of racism that you have pointed out, are unable to access proper culturally relevant supports and services.

I'm new to this committee, but I know that in previous meetings there have been discussions on the lack of data on access to government services by indigenous veterans.

One grand chief, Steven Ross, said in a previous meeting:

> Regarding the quality of services received by indigenous veterans, the services may be there, and may be utilized by indigenous veterans, but we are unaware of the percentage of veterans accessing these services and the types of services being requested and provided.

Given the trauma experience and the trust that is needed, do you agree with such statements? What can be done to have better outreach to new indigenous veterans?

● (1630)

Mr. Wally Sinclair: I mentioned communication and how you do it with regard to this, because it seems as though everybody shows up when there's a funeral.

I will just make a side note. In my travels, I do visit cemeteries and I see who has the military thing there. That's where I find my evidence on that part of that when we didn't know they were veterans.

However, for logistics and models, I wish there was a place that was available and appropriate, or maybe something we could add on. Maybe we could monitor it and do that ourselves. We're in the communities. We're all over Canada. Maybe with resources we could collect the research we're doing and everything else. We have them, but sometimes we just lack some type of support to keep this going through all provinces within that.

I'm not sure if I'm answering your question, but I've listened to the chief before and in his statement he is right.

You're on the right track. If that was something that you could share publicly and give some feedback on.... Instead of you asking me, I could ask you what you think within that, because that is what we're looking for also: a two-way conversation.

Mr. Shaun Chen: To raise better awareness of the issues faced by indigenous veterans, education is so important. I do believe there is a lack of awareness and there can be better education around this for Canadians.

What sorts of educational initiatives do you believe are important?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: We were interviewing some past veterans. If you put a video up and you hear a voice you'll see, as I said, we're not paper-related. If we hear someone talking or knowing that language, that brings attention, whether it be the veteran or someone in that capacity.

It doesn't just have to be November 11, or I think now November 8. This has to be part of the school curriculum. In some areas it is, but only on November 11. Therefore, what part of social studies, or whatever, can be put into the school curriculum somehow, whether it be through the libraries or online? Everybody is doing this Facebook stuff, and so on. The communication has to improve in many ways.

Not too long ago I was here with the ministry. They were looking at a minister of languages. That would be ideal for all of this to come together and have that go forward, and have the communication in whatever language it may be, because it's needed in different ways.

As I said, we are picture people. Show a picture and it goes a long way. You get the youth and the elders looking at that and it brings back good memories—and some not so good, too, within the same thing.

Mr. Shaun Chen: We've talked about communication. You have mentioned culturally relevant service.

Can you speak to what that looks like? What does that culturally relevant piece mean and how can it help indigenous veterans particularly?

Mr. Wally Sinclair: We use the words “healing” and “wellness” a lot. The friendship centres now have what we call healing camps. We have a teepee in Lac La Biche. It goes 24 hours. There are people from all over the world coming, and we share our experiences. Once a couple of veterans saw that, they said this could be our contact point. When people come, we can sit here and talk. It has everything there.

We are partners with the Alberta forestry in that. We're starting to partner with everybody and celebrate the military, and show videos and pictures and communicate in that way. People of other cultures are also coming to the table, such as with reconciliation. We have a lot of things in common to share now, and it's working; it's coming.

We all have to be patient. It's not going to be fixed overnight, or whatever term you want to use with regard to getting there, to what that looks like.

Across Alberta, everybody has a different way to celebrate and bring communications forward. In the northeast, we've done it with camps. We have healing camps in small places. It's not that everybody is sick, but can you support your partner who is there with you?

My mindset is always one day at a time. You never know what's lacking in the system, but with that one word or one voice, you'll go away and never forget. That is key in this.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Perhaps those indigenous ways of knowing and healing would be beneficial to all communities and all veterans. Thank you for sharing that.

The Chair: Mr. Johns, you have three minutes.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you again for being here.

In British Columbia, the friendship centres have been struggling with lots of cuts in the last few years to their operating budgets, transfers from the federal government. It's straining the friendship centres and their ability to operate, especially the youth programs. They were totally cut, no funding for youth at all in Port Alberni.

They've been calling for long-term, stable funding just to operate core services, never mind more services. The Province of B.C. made a historic move and for the first time started partially funding the friendship centres on top of the federal transfers to fill the gap, to take some pressure off the friendship centres.

Is this something you're hearing across the the country, around the cuts and around the need for long-term stable funding? What resources would you need to support our veterans and provide new programs?

● (1635)

Mr. Wally Sinclair: In the scale that we looked at from social... within our resources and so on, they're lacking. In Alberta—no offence—we're the lowest-funded across Canada. We struggle. We create partners. We do a lot of work. We're intervening. We're shaking hands with the neighbours in Saskatchewan, and asking how they're doing it in B.C. We're communicating the big picture and focusing in our area.

I'm quite familiar with the funding cut in B.C. As part of our national agendas, we keep track of that whole area, and when we sit and meet together, we discuss this.

How are we going to fundraise? How are we going to keep the kids in school? Teachers have to be teachers, not social workers, and this is key to how we do it. As a veteran, can I come and sit in the classroom? As an elder, can I come and sit and be part of that?

They're doing it now. I know the different treaties are doing it. The Métis are doing it. We see it in our city schools. B.C. has two really good programs at capacity resources, but they're volunteers. You burn volunteers out.

The funding is needed. In terms of what capacity, we would have to look on a bigger scale in our logistics to see what we have now to expand on it. But we've been doing it all along anyway. We've been getting by from one door to the other and getting back. We ask them what they're going to do next, and they find another way to go about it. We're not going to sit on something. That's what the staff here, provincially and nationally, are good at, finding that place, wherever it is, be it monetary....

Now that the gas companies and all this in Fort McMurray, have cut down, we are suffering in our area. There are suicides. I'm sorry to say that. I've worked with a lot of them. It's sad. A lot of them are veterans who have come home, and what do they have?

But there are alternatives. We try to keep them busy in different capacities. I have a lot of partners out there who can hire this or that. I'm the side where it's "Wally, what can you do for us?" Then I'll think about it and say, "Let's go together, be a team and work on that."

We'll bring in a government official, provincial or national, and ask them to sit with us for two minutes to hear us. We will feed you that bannock and tea and whatever. Come and sit with us, and just talk. That goes a long way, that one little sound bite of communication. People don't realize that. If you're from that federal part, it's "Hey, guess who was here today". That gets around very fast, and it talks about our challenges of how we can support and get that support.

I'm on a lot of committees. There's a reason for that. You just ask... monetary and people-wise too.

The Chair: Thank you. That ends our time for testimony today.

On behalf of the committee, I'd like to thank all three of you for coming today and thank you for your testimony. It was very well received.

We will take a recess and come back for committee business.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]