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Chair

Mr. Neil Ellis

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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● (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Neil Ellis (Bay of Quinte, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Good afternoon, everybody. The committee resumes its study today on homeless veterans.

For the first panel, we're pleased to welcome, by video conference from Vancouver, Inspector Colleen Yee, Centralized Operations Services Section, and Constable Alyson Smith, Homeless Outreach Coordinator, Centralized Operations Services Section. They're from the Vancouver Police Department.

On his way, we have also Mr. Matthew Pearce. His flight is late, and he'll probably be arriving around four o'clock. He's President and Chief Executive Officer of Old Brewery Mission in Montreal. His train is late. We'll start the meeting, and when Mr. Pearce comes, we'll get into his testimony.

We'll start with Constable Smith. The floor is yours. You have up to 10 minutes for your opening statements, and a round of questions will follow.

Welcome, from Vancouver.

Inspector Colleen Yee, (Centralized Operations Services Section, Operations Division, Vancouver Police Department): Thank you for having us.

Cst Alyson Smith (Homeless Outreach Coordinator, Centralized Operations Services Section, Vancouver Police Department): Thank you. My name is Alyson Smith. I'm the Homeless Outreach and Supportive Housing Coordinator for the Vancouver Police Department.

I took a look at the statistics that we have in Vancouver in terms of our homeless veterans. It's a count that we do every year in March. It looks like our numbers are pretty steady, if not increasing a little bit.

In 2015, we had 95 people of that count self-identify as having a military background. It was 127 in 2016. We had a large jump in 2017, when 168 individuals self-identified.

Our homeless count in 2018 was 2,181, of which 111 people, or 8% of that count, identified as having served in either the Canadian Forces or armed forces from another country.

I find this quite interesting. I do outreach on a daily basis, and it's not something that I am necessarily asking people. I think we probably should be asking if they are veterans or have a military background. I understand that there are a lot of services available for our veterans, so it's certainly something on the forefront of my mind to start asking about.

Our homeless population in Vancouver is quite interesting. We have people from all over Canada due to our climate and the services we have available. We are in the process of getting 600 modular units of housing set up in Vancouver. I don't know if that's been a draw for people, but certainly we have a lot of services available. We have a large homeless population, and I'm certainly trying to put my mind to finding out if they are veterans or not.

I haven't come across anybody specifically who I can recall identifying as a veteran, but it is something I'm going to start asking a bit more.

The Chair: We'll go to questions now, starting with Mrs. Wagantall, for six minutes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Thank you, Alyson, for sharing with us.

How long have you been in this particular position doing this work?

Cst Alyson Smith: I've been in this position for about two and a half years.

● (1535)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay.

I'm curious: Why do you do your count in March?

Cst Alyson Smith: It's actually a count that's conducted by the city. Police are not involved in it. It's a count that's done within the metro Vancouver area every three years, and then Vancouver itself does a count every year.

I'm not sure why they do it in March, but they do count people who are sheltered as well, in our winter shelters and other kinds of housing options. They count those people as homeless, but sheltered homeless.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: In your role with the police services, what's the objective in having you do this?

Cst Alyson Smith: I think my role is one of relationships and partnerships. I conduct outreach every day. I'm out talking to our homeless population and trying to connect them to certain services. I'm a connection between those services and the police, in terms of just being a good contact and a go-between.

Insp Colleen Yee: Oftentimes our homeless are victims of crime, and they're reluctant to report. Alyson is the constant face on the street that they become familiar with and they feel comfortable with. When she is conducting her outreach, the chances are higher of reporting if they've been a victim of crime than if she wasn't there and there was no personal relationship established.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: That again affirms the need to build relationships with these individuals so you can be trusted, and be a source to possibly help them move off the streets.

In conversation do you get a good sense of why they are there or what they would like to do, and do you have those other organizations like VETS Canada that you can communicate with? What is the co-operative environment that you're working in?

Cst Alyson Smith: Certainly we do get life stories from people, and once you build that trust with them, it's a lot easier to be able to have those conversations. I am connected quite well with at least our city outreach teams, which certainly have the connections to things like welfare and housing. A lot of the social services are connected through them.

I recently attended a round table in Ottawa with Veterans Affairs, and I certainly heard about a lot of the available programs. How I can connect more people to these services has been on my mind. How I identify them is maybe one thing I'm not struggling with, but it's a challenge. It doesn't necessarily come up in everyday conversation, but I certainly think I need to be asking more people.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: VAC has indicated that they've created a poster that enables veterans to notice there is a specific place they can call if they are homeless, and they're putting it out in communities across Canada. Have you seen those yet?

Cst Alyson Smith: I have. I've noticed a few really large posters at bus stops.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you.

How much time do I have?

The Chair: You have two minutes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: This is interesting. You're mentioning to me that you're realizing you would like to dig down deeper and get more of a sense of how many veterans you are dealing with on the streets.

Has it been suggested to you that when you talk with them, you don't ask them if they are a veteran, but rather if they have served, as a means of getting that information from them?

Apparently a lot of our veterans who are on the street either don't necessarily want to admit it or don't think of themselves as veterans.

Cst Alyson Smith: Yes. That's a really interesting point.

I think maybe a barrier we have had is not wanting to identify as a veteran, but I hear what you're saying in maybe wording it as “Have you served?” I think that's a great idea.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you.

Cst Alyson Smith: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Bratina is next.

Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.): Thank you both for joining us.

Constable Smith, I applaud you for the work you do, because the homeless population is very complex to deal with. I'm wondering about homeless veterans, because we're dealing with this topic in this committee. Many veterans are displaying PTSD. You as a police officer will encounter people on the street, and I'll bet that whether it's a veteran or not in the homeless population, there must be times when there is potentially a physical crisis.

I'm wondering if it would be helpful to know they were veterans and that PTSD might be a factor in what they're doing.

How do you deal with street disorder when you're encountering the homeless population, veterans and otherwise?

● (1540)

Cst Alyson Smith: Yes, the mental health aspect is large. We're certainly dealing with that here in Vancouver, and I'm sure across the country.

It's always great to have as much information as you possibly can about the people you're dealing with to be able to have conversations with them or maybe bring something up that is meaningful to them or is important. That can ground them at certain times.

I think knowing if somebody has served would be useful for us. We do see a lot of street disorder, and we are well trained as officers in how to deal with the mental health component.

Again, it comes back to some partnerships I have with some of our mental health workers, Specifically, when I'm out on the road with them, I'll visit people who I know are struggling at that time and try to get some services to them that way.

Mr. Bob Bratina: One of the things we understand from our committee work is that veterans, whether homeless or not, are former military people, and they have a certain way of talking to each other that's not generally open to the public.

I'm wondering if it would be helpful to you if people with a military background talked to you and the people who work with the homeless in terms of what they might anticipate or how conversations might better move forward once you've identified a veteran homeless person versus a non-veteran homeless person. Do you get what I mean?

Cst Alyson Smith: I absolutely do.

I am not a veteran myself, but certainly in the police culture we have a certain way of speaking to each other. If that's what you mean, I do think it would be helpful and useful to be able to have that type of conversation.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Yes. As I said, we've encountered this quite often, and we need to bring more people from military backgrounds into case management and into other things dealing with veterans. With the mental issues that may drive a veteran to homelessness—certainly PTSD could be one—you'd be well aware of what that might entail in terms of behaviours.

Cst Alyson Smith: Yes, I think that's a really interesting point, having a case manager, potentially, who has a military background.

I can only speak from a police perspective, but there are certain things that you would say to the public and there are certain things that you would say to a colleague. I have a feeling that it might be similar with somebody who has served in the military. They might be embarrassed or have difficulty relating to the general public, whereas I think they can relate a bit more to somebody who has a background that's similar to theirs. I think case management—

Mr. Bob Bratina: Right. If you're trying to talk somebody down, if there's a suicidal event, you could have a set of terms that would make them feel more comfortable to open up to you rather than step back.

Cst Alyson Smith: Absolutely.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I think I've made my point.

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

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

Thank you both for the important work that you do. I know you have huge challenges there in Vancouver. I'm from the west coast myself.

Do you have an estimate as to how many or what percentage of veterans are represented in the Vancouver homeless population, even just a rough idea?

Cst Alyson Smith: At our last count it was 8%. Again, that's self-identified.

Mr. Gord Johns: Yes, it was self-identified.

How many were female veterans in particular? Do you have that number?

Cst Alyson Smith: That's a great question. I don't know.

Mr. Gord Johns: In your experience, what special needs do you feel homeless and vulnerable veterans might have that other homeless people might not?

● (1545)

Cst Alyson Smith: I think it's probably the trauma, the things they've seen and the things they've dealt with. I think that's quite different from our general population.

Mr. Gord Johns: Do you see any special needs that vulnerable female veterans might have that perhaps the other population might not?

Cst Alyson Smith: It's a great question. I can't think of a female veteran I've come across. It would be a guess.

Mr. Gord Johns: I'm from B.C., as I said. We've seen real estate go up about 50% in the last three years. Has the rapid appreciation of housing costs in our province over the last decade affected your work, especially around homelessness?

Cst Alyson Smith: Absolutely. Our numbers are skyrocketing. They are larger than we've ever seen before.

Mr. Gord Johns: I believe you. Even though I'm on Vancouver Island, a lot of people are migrating there as well.

On that question, are you seeing a local population or are you seeing a transient population? As west coasters, we've always had people come into our communities, but we're seeing a lot of people now come from the mainland to the island because of the challenges that we're all facing with the pressure on downtown Vancouver.

Are you seeing that population mainly localized, or is it still fairly transient?

Cst Alyson Smith: It's still quite transient. There certainly are our locals who have been around for a long time, but we do have a large population of people who are travelling across the country. Maybe they have warrants in other provinces. The west coast is the last stop, as is Vancouver, and maybe the island now. We certainly do see that.

Mr. Gord Johns: Are you seeing the demographics changing around the city? It was primarily Eastside-centric, right? Are you seeing that shift?

Cst Alyson Smith: Yes, I would say that we are not so localized anymore.

Insp Colleen Yee: There are homeless all throughout the city now—on the west side, in the south. They're popping up in small groups. They're maybe not as large as the Downtown Eastside.

Vancouver right now has a 1% vacancy rate for rentals, so that itself is a challenge for any person in the market for rental accommodation. The skyrocketing prices of rentals has marginalized those who need income-assistance kinds of support. That type of housing isn't available for them.

We're not seeing the same kind of homelessness that the States is in regard to being so poor that they can't afford a house, or the rent has gone up and they've been booted out. That is happening, but not at the same rate as in the States.

I was in the States back in September, and we visited Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco. We visited the heart of all of the homeless centres there. The problems there are similar in the sense of mental health, drug addiction, and a huge representation of veterans in the States who are homeless. We're not quite there yet back here.

In regard to housing the current homeless we do have—and because of the low vacancy rate and the high rent—as Alyson mentioned in the beginning, we have modular housing that we've been implementing, on top of the supportive housing, government-assisted housing. That seems to be helping to alleviate the immediate numbers right now.

How many of those get housed as veterans I am not quite sure. We haven't been keeping official records of that yet, but moving forward, I think that's a good thing to know.

Mr. Gord Johns: In the States, 30% of the caseworkers in their Veterans Affairs are actually veterans, so it's veterans serving veterans.

Insp Colleen Yee: That's right.

Mr. Gord Johns: We touched on that a little earlier.

Here in Ottawa, Veterans Affairs didn't have a target until June to have 10% veterans working for Veterans Affairs by 2020 so that there are veterans serving veterans.

You identified the importance of that and of that understanding, that speaking the same language piece. Can you speak about the importance of that? Maybe in your own department, are you seeing colleagues who end up on the street who are suffering from PTSD after their career, or if they're released early? What programs do you have as a city to help to support your own colleagues?

Insp Colleen Yee: It's ironic that you ask that. We have actually modelled a peer-to-peer support program from the military. With our own people, there are similarities, in the sense of some of the horrors we see in regard to human suffering and all that, and sometimes the use of deadly force.

When our members are identified as suffering from PTSD, the support is immediate within our own organization. I know that. Our human resources are in there. We have police officers helping the police officers, guided by mental health care professionals. It is almost a wraparound type of service.

With regard to those who have retired and are suffering with mental health issues, there is our pension program, our benefits. We still have medical assistance that goes into that realm of after-service care.

However, it is an important point. The ability to relate is huge. The ability to connect is huge. Veterans helping veterans can only be beneficial.

● (1550)

Mr. Gord Johns: I know your province is rolling out an aggressive homelessness housing strategy to build units right away.

We talked to someone from Ottawa on Tuesday who is building a project, and they can get only half of the funding for their project from Ottawa. The other half is reliant on local and provincial governments for funding, but because it's veterans, they won't accept the funding mechanism to fill the gap on that project.

Do you think it would be important to have housing just for veterans in Vancouver, supported with funding from Ottawa?

Cst Alyson Smith: I mean, any help would be great.

I think just identifying our veteran population would benefit that. Certainly if we have 8% of our homeless population self-identifying as veterans, then the need certainly is there for that housing. It comes back to being relatable and having the right supports in that building and on that site to support the veterans. I think having other veterans working there would certainly benefit them.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you for your services.

The Chair: Mr. Samson, you have six minutes.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Thanks, both of you, for your service and the work you're doing on the ground. I really appreciate it.

I'd like to learn a little more. Last year I had the opportunity to drive through the Eastside, to Hastings Street and that area. People told me that I couldn't leave without having a look for myself. It was just mesmerizing: the people, everything.... They were lying right in the street. I might have seen a hundred of them in four or five blocks.

The job you do is challenging. You indicated that this does happen in other areas throughout the city today, but it's quite evident there, and even scary to some extent.

Cst Alyson Smith: Yes.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I'd like to learn a little more about your outreach. What does a team look like in the city of Vancouver? Is it a one-person team? How many people are there? What's the link with various organizations that help homeless people?

Let's throw that out as a starting point. Go ahead.

Cst Alyson Smith: It is a one-person team. It's me right now. I am the homeless outreach team.

In terms of outreach, I'm certainly out in uniform and on the road every day. I do specific outreach with welfare services once a week, and then with a mental health nurse through our Coastal Health. If I've had conversations with people earlier in the week, I'm specifically able to take services to those individuals through my outreach.

In the city of Vancouver, we have an outreach team that's associated to the city, and I'm well connected with them. We talk all the time. I'm certainly able to connect people to those services as well.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I thank you that much more, because I don't know how you do it. I think you need some support, but that's me looking at it from my end. It's a task—

Insp Colleen Yee: Oh, but I agree with you. She needs support.

Mr. Darrell Samson: It's a task that's almost impossible.

I really appreciated it when you mentioned that you participated in the round table here in Ottawa. I understood from conversations with the minister that it was an awesome event where people were able to connect and to share best practices and whatnot. That's extremely important.

I don't know if you're aware, but the new national housing strategy has veterans as a priority. Are you aware of that program? If you're able to somehow identify the veterans, that's an area of support for them. Are you aware of that program and that veterans are one priority in that strategy?

● (1555)

Cst Alyson Smith: I'm not actually specifically aware of that, but having attended the round table, I do feel there is an emphasis now on veterans and those who have served. I can certainly see that it is a focus.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Maybe you could have conversations with the municipality around that.

Cst Alyson Smith: Absolutely.

Mr. Darrell Samson: The other thing, which I think my colleague touched on somewhat, is that if you're meeting with homeless veterans, is that they are very proud and they're not necessarily going to share. In terms of wearing your attire, if I could say that, do you think that may be a barrier for them to sharing?

Cst Alyson Smith: I think it can be. I think it could also be something that they might identify with, though, probably having worn a uniform themselves. I try to really be approachable. It is just a uniform; it doesn't define me. I do really try to make sure that it's something I'm presenting to our population that I'm speaking with.

I do hear what you're saying. I think it probably could go either way.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Yes. I very much appreciate what you said about how we approach veterans sometimes being somewhat different. I think you said that you weren't necessarily asking if they were veterans. That's a topic that maybe we can continue to dialogue on. It's important.

Also, the government lately introduced a new ID card for veterans. Their name and their picture, their rank, the number of years of service and the type of service will be on that card. That will greatly help them to have access to benefits. Are you aware of that card? Over time, we're going to be able to track much better as well, and maybe identify them. Do you have any comments?

Cst Alyson Smith: I think that's a great idea. I wasn't aware of that, but I think it's fantastic.

We certainly ask people for ID when we're speaking with them, if they're able to even provide that identification. Maybe we don't delve into that conversation yet, but if they're able to provide it, I can see that they are a veteran, somebody who has served, so now I can note that somewhere, and in further conversation, once I have a bit more rapport with them, that's something that can be explored. I think it's a great idea.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I guess a final question would be—

The Chair: No, sorry; you're out of time.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Do they have any ID, most homeless people? When you meet with them, do they have ID?

Cst Alyson Smith: Usually they don't. It's a challenge. ID is a challenge.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you, Mr. Chair, for your patient comprehension.

The Chair: You have to stay to the end of the meeting today.

Mr. Eyolfson is next.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia—Headingley, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you both for coming. It is quite valuable to get this input from people who are basically on the ground dealing with these issues.

You made reference to the homelessness round table last June and some of the things that were talked about there, and you mentioned there was a lack of awareness of the services.

Do you have any ideas on how we could increase awareness among police forces across Canada? What kind of outreach should we do to the police, so that you know to direct veterans in this way?

Cst Alyson Smith: That's a great question.

There was a video that was played at the round table that I've passed on to a few people here in Vancouver. I thought it was really quite a powerful video. There were several officers, but there was an officer in Calgary who kind of stuck with me. I think maybe that would be a great medium to get the message out, as well as probably connecting with those of us who do specifically have the homeless outreach roles.

I know that across the country there are certainly members who are involved in community services or something like that. Reach out to those officers, get the word out that way, and then have them kind of pass it on to the rest of the department.

● (1600)

Insp Colleen Yee: You could also—because it seems like this is a national priority.... The Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police has regular meetings. If someone from Veterans Affairs would present there, they would bring it back to their respective agencies and pass information downwards also, so that's another really good avenue.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you.

In some of the earlier questions, this was touched upon. We've had some veterans groups identify that there are some homeless veterans who, due to a number of issues—possibly mental health—sometimes have had such a bad experience that they just don't trust the government and don't trust Veterans Affairs. They actually don't want the help. Have you had any experience with that? Have you identified someone who is a veteran, who is homeless, but who just basically brushes off any help you might offer?

Cst Alyson Smith: I haven't encountered anyone who specifically identified as a veteran, but certainly on a daily basis there are certain people who don't want our help, don't want services from anyone. They're happy living the way they are, whether it is because of their mental health or other issues at play. They are fine where they are. I usually check in and just make sure everything's still okay, but there certainly are people who are not interested in our services.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you.

To the best of your knowledge, in your jurisdiction are there any veterans groups that are doing outreach in the street and helping to look for homeless veterans? I know there are some cities where they do that, where they will actually go out and try to seek out some of these homeless vets among the homeless population. Do you know of any groups like that in Vancouver?

Cst Alyson Smith: I'm not familiar with any, no.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you.

I have another minute, I think.

This may be difficult as well, because this is something that is very difficult to track. We've talked about the interplay between mental health and homelessness. We know a very large proportion of the overall homeless population has underlying mental health issues that have led to their decline and their homelessness. Is there any data in your jurisdiction on whether this is more so or less so with the homeless veterans?

Cst Alyson Smith: Not that I'm aware of. Our Vancouver Coastal Health services might be keeping track of it. There's often a challenge in information sharing between our organizations.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: All right.

That's my time. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd also now like to welcome Matthew Pearce, president and chief executive officer from Old Brewery Mission in Montreal. Mr. Pearce will give his testimony for 10 minutes, and then we'll swing back to questions.

If our other guests can wait, then we've still got about 20 minutes for questions. Mr. Pearce said he'll stay afterward for the next committee. His train leaves around 5:30, so he'll give us some more time to take some questions that he's missed.

Mr. Pearce, the floor is yours.

Mr. Matthew Pearce (President and Chief Executive Officer, Old Brewery Mission): Thank you very much.

First of all, thank you very much for the invitation to speak with you this afternoon.

[*Translation*]

I'll be happy to answer your questions, in French

[*English*]

or in English.

I plan to take about 10 minutes to go over a couple of things that I hope will be helpful to the committee.

First off, I'll perhaps just give you a very, very quick overview of the Old Brewery Mission. Some of you may not have heard of it, but it is Quebec's largest service for homeless men, and it's Canada's largest service for homeless women.

We began in 1889. We were founded then due to the growth of homelessness in Montreal at that time. I think we've realized now that we were kind of on the wrong track around homelessness for about 112 of those 130 years. We provided overnight shelter and we provided meals and a change of clothing. People could use our services for free for an unlimited amount of time. When you have no other alternative, it's a very important, even life-sustaining service, but we realized that if that's all we're offering, it's facilitating homelessness.

We realized we needed to do something more in our service offering than just offer those basic emergency services, and so we shifted our focus to moving people off the street. Today, housing is the single largest thing we do.

Getting to the point of veterans and homelessness, we responded to the federal study that came out, I think, in January of 2015 or 2016 —I forget the year—that revealed that according to that study, there were about 2,250 homeless veterans on the street. It had not been on our radar prior to that study coming out. Of course we knew about it, because we'd seen some come through our doors, but we weren't really familiar with the magnitude of the problem, so we dug into our database. We dug into the profiles of the people who were staying within our walls, both men and women. We realized that about 2% of our population were veterans, and that would mean about 45 people.

We put together a program idea to move homeless veterans out of homelessness and back into homes, and, in an adapted way, to the housing programs we already offered. We pitched it to Minister Duclos' ministry's homelessness partnering strategy, and it was embraced and accepted in the context of the innovation fund the ministry had created.

We put in place what we call the “sentinels of the streets”, a program that is intended to house about 18 to 20 homeless veterans. The idea was that it would be a project that, if successful, might play the role of a model for implementation across Canada.

We forged partnerships along with Minister Duclos' ministry of Families, Children and Social Development. We forged partnerships with the Quebec Veterans Foundation, with VETS Canada, and then through our other urban health programs through the hospital system. As you probably heard from the testimony you've already received, mental illness and serious drug addictions are a part of the profile of many of the people we serve and many of the people who are veterans and are homeless.

We set about not just finding a way to house 18 or 19 veterans; we set about ending veterans' homelessness in Montreal. We thought that if we were seeing about 45 a year and we're the largest resource, then there might be another five or six who aren't coming to our doors and are going to other doors. However, we're seeing the lion's share of the homeless veteran population in Montreal. We think that kind of number is quite manageable to eliminate.

If we keep veterans on our radar, as we will do, we'll see them when they come in, and they won't stay inside our walls for very long. We'll move them into housing.

● (1605)

I think it's important to understand that the idea is to end veteran homelessness, and that's what we pitched to the federal government.

Of course, we weren't experts in veterans matters, and we had to go on a fairly steep learning curve to effectively become responsive to the population we were serving. We underwent a number of lessons early on. One of the things that I think is interesting for this group is that there were a lot of false declarations: A lot of people said they were a veteran and had a veteran's experience and could even tell a fairly detailed story, yet we found out they weren't veterans.

We found out that having people vetted, if you'll pardon the pun, to see if they were in fact veterans by going through VAC was a long, arduous and time-consuming process. You have to understand that if somebody's homeless inside a shelter, whether they're a veteran or not, they may not linger in that condition for very long. If you can't respond to them very quickly, you'll lose them and they'll disappear. We had cases that took as much as two months to verify. We did lose some veterans in the process, who may have resolved their homelessness on their own, but they didn't participate in the sentinels program.

We learned that most of the people who were coming to our doors as veterans and were turning out to be veterans had not had combat experience. Only one of the 14 people we now house had any combat experience.

We learned that these are tough cases, that most of them had left the military perhaps a decade ago. These are not people with recent military experience.

We learned that the model works. We are able to house even these tough cases and we think it's a successful and highly cost-effective model, but it can be more cost-effective. If I have some time, I'll explain how I think that could happen.

A number of people who are veterans are homeless and do not use the resources. They do not come to the shelters. Mr. Eyolfson, I think you mentioned that point when you questioned my Vancouver colleagues. Many do not use those resources for a number of reasons that we've been able to discern, and they have a lot to do with both shame and pride in a paradoxical way. They're ashamed that they have fallen on these hard times when they were given so many skills and abilities that they thought would translate into civilian life and I guess didn't. They also learned survival skills. If anybody's adept at living out on the streets, it's probably our veterans, and so in some ways they employ those skills and stay out of shelters.

With the new VAC family well-being fund, we received funds to hire a person who will now go out beyond our walls, under those bridges and into those encampments, to meet veterans and develop a link of confidence with them and bring them to us. We've just received the confirmation of funding, so we'll be putting that in place as well.

I have a couple of recommendations, and that will conclude my presentation.

The first one is not to think of this as a homeless problem first, but as a veteran's problem first. This issue belongs at VAC. Homelessness is a symptom of someone whose life has fallen off the rails. It's not who they are; it's what they're dealing with right now. Obviously, the homelessness has to be resolved, but it's not the core issue.

I've said it before: I think we should be focusing not on better managing homelessness for veterans, but ending it. Even the national numbers are manageable, if they turn out to hold up at 2,000 to 2,250. Ask organizations like ours to transform our services such that when they come to our doors, they don't stay any longer in homelessness than they have to. In doing so, we can end homelessness.

● (1610)

Get good, reliable data. Expect impact from funds. Measure progress towards measurable goals, and adjust the goals and actions as our knowledge improves, because our knowledge isn't great around veteran homelessness. This committee is building knowledge, and it will be a very important mechanism to do that. However, we can't run on anecdotes; we should be running on good data, and we can obtain that.

Where funding is available, extend the funding horizons. Our project, the sentinels of the street, was funded for one year and then extended for another year, which is terrific, but when you are offering someone housing and you can't offer it to them for a long enough period of time....

As I said, these are tough cases. They don't resolve in 12 months. They don't end up in an autonomous situation necessarily in 12 months' time. There need to be longer funding horizons to allow the supports to stay in place and decline over time, not stay at a high level. However, over time, withdraw those supports to the extent that the person can live in autonomy, and don't withdraw them for those who won't survive without them.

Of course, there is not one response to homeless veterans. There are a number of them, as many as there are homeless veterans. There needs to be consideration given to extending funding horizons and funding support to veterans.

The final recommendation is obviously around prevention, around stopping veterans from becoming homeless in the first place. What we find, as I mentioned, is that most of them didn't have a combat background. What they had was a real hell of a time moving from military life to civilian life. I think we could better prepare our veterans for that experience. In moving from military life to civilian life, there's a cultural and a social shift that is really significant. At least for the people who are coming to our doors, it doesn't appear that they felt they were well prepared to do that.

Some vets are struggling and at risk of homelessness. Thinking of supports before they end up at our doors might be cost-effective as well—things like temporary rent subsidies to keep people housed and that kind of thing. There are ways to prevent homelessness in vets, especially since I mentioned that for most of them it's a 10-year trajectory of degrading circumstances that leads them to the street.

We can see it coming, in a way. If you can keep an eye on these people, you can see that they're on a trajectory toward the doors of the Old Brewery Mission. We should find a way to head that off at the pass. I think with some good thinking on your parts—and count on me to contribute—we can get there.

Thank you.

● (1615)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Kitchen, you have six minutes.

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

Mr. Pearce, thank you for joining us, and Constable and Inspector as well.

Mr. Pearce, I realize you're going to stay a little longer, so I may ask you one quick question and then concentrate with the people on the video conference, if you don't mind.

Quickly, you made a statement that there are a number of false declarations by people saying they are vets. Do you have any idea why that would be?

Mr. Matthew Pearce: There are a couple of reasons that we have been able to draw out. One of them is that obviously we're dealing in, as I mentioned, the largest resource in Quebec for homeless, so there are large volumes of people who hear about a housing program that's for vets. Some of them might say that they might be a vet in order to get into that program. There might be an angle there. I think that's probably one of the main reasons. There might be other reasons, but it has something to do with that.

It's such a detailed story. A lot of them had a brother who was in the military—the big brother that they looked up to—and they admired that story. There are a lot of stories that get created in the context of a shelter. It's a challenge for us to sort of peel away what's true and what has become true over time but isn't, and that kind of thing.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you very much.

Constable Smith, you're listed as the homeless outreach coordinator. I hear that coordination is as a team of one.

I'm interested in how many hours you put in per day. I'm putting your inspector on the spot here.

Cst Alyson Smith: Officially, I work a 10-hour day.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Is that seven days a week?

Cst Alyson Smith: I'm only four days a week.

Insp Colleen Yee: Aly is being very modest. She works a 10-hour day four days a week. However, she answers her phone endlessly. People are consulting with her after hours. She never denies any information or requests coming in. She's on the clock all the time.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: One assumes there's some budgeted funding for this. Do you keep that? Do you track where that funding goes? Is most of that just for hours, or is there funding given to assist you in your job?

● (1620)

Cst Alyson Smith: No funding's specifically given to me. My position falls under a larger umbrella, which Inspector Yee oversees. Certainly there's funding that goes towards that, but not a lot. For my position, it's just my role within the police department. I fill a box under the "homeless outreach" position, but there's no specific funding.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: As you indicated, you work with other organizations. I see that one initiative the Vancouver Police Department does is "Sox in the City", which donates socks to homeless people.

I come from Saskatchewan. I'm a chiropractor. The chiropractic profession in Saskatchewan has an annual drive called "Toasty Toes". Chiropractors get their patients to bring in socks for homeless people and to assist throughout the year. In Saskatchewan we get pretty cold at times, so it's obviously helpful for those in need.

Do you take time to try to make connections with an organization that would look at something like that to assist you?

Cst Alyson Smith: Often these organizations come to us. In two weeks' time we have a big sleeping bag drive. There's an organization centred in the Downtown Eastside that's able to obtain hundreds of sleeping bags. We, as a department, happen to be lucky enough to receive a large chunk of those. I personally will distribute them to the different facilities we have. I let all the other officers who are out on the road know we have sleeping bags. Our homeless population knows we have sleeping bags and that they usually come around December.

It's a great connection we have with our homeless population. It's a great way for our officers to also connect with those people and be able to provide them with something—some warmth, a toque and a pair of socks and things like that. It goes a long way.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you.

Inspector Yee, I heard you say that one issue that may pertain to some homeless people is that they're oftentimes victims of crime. We've heard as well that with veterans, there's an issue of shame and pride as to why they approach....

Do you see from your experience a lot of veterans who may have been victims of crime and who have that piled upon the shame they might have?

Insp Colleen Yee: Again, for us, the veterans we are aware of are self-identified. We don't even know if they're truly veterans or if it's mental illness that's coming into play and they're assuming that identity for whatever reason.

In general, my experience with the homeless, from working in operations, is that these people are a vulnerable sector of the population, and there are predators out there who prey upon them. For the ones I have met who have, in their past life, been of some stature of strength and ability, there is shame associated to that, to how somehow they've let themselves get to this point where now they are the person who's being beaten upon, the one getting taken advantage of or extorted or whatever. The victimization, whether it's reported to us or not, does contribute to a sense of self-degradation. It lessens their self-worth.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chen and Ms. Ludwig, you're splitting your time, I believe?

Ms. Karen Ludwig (New Brunswick Southwest, Lib.): Yes. Thanks, Chair.

I'd like to thank you all for your testimony today. I'm splitting my time, so I have to be really fast.

To the two officers, are service dogs allowed in the shelters that you're working with or that you're associated with?

Cst Alyson Smith: I'm not sure, specifically. Many of our shelters do accept pets, not just service dogs.

● (1625)

Ms. Karen Ludwig: You mentioned sleeping bags. Are the veterans who are homeless—not "homeless vets"—allowed to take their sleeping bags into the shelters?

Cst Alyson Smith: Yes. Most of the shelters themselves will also have bedding and sleeping bags, but certainly people are allowed. Their property comes with them.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Being in the Vancouver area, do you have a rough percentage—it doesn't have to be an exact figure—of how many first nations veterans have come forward who are homeless ?

Cst Alyson Smith: I don't know in terms of veterans. In terms of our homeless population, I don't have the numbers, but certainly a higher proportion are indigenous.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: You also mentioned that not all the veterans are Canadian. What would be their countries of origin, and is there an issue regarding language use?

Cst Alyson Smith: Again, just a general number was collected. It just said "other countries", so I don't know, unfortunately.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: I want to highlight another point you made. You mentioned that as the number of services increases, there tends to be an increase in the draw. Since 2015 we've introduced a number of new programs. Is that possibly why there's a bit of a parallel in an increase in the number of veterans or in the access to services?

Cst Alyson Smith: It could be. I think that, our housing crisis here in Vancouver is certainly contributing to our homeless population, but I also think it's kind of "if you build it, they will come". We have the services, so certainly people are coming to access those services. Yes, I would assume there's a bit of a connection there.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Okay.

Mr. Pearce, first, thank you for all of the work you're doing. I have just a quick question for you.

There's a study on the mental health of the Canadian Armed Forces. Regular forces members have higher rates of depression and generalized anxiety disorders than in the general population. Women, according to the 2013 StatsCan study, have higher rates than men. Do you find that as well within your shelter?

Mr. Matthew Pearce: Absolutely. The rates for women are much, much higher. Yes.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Thank you.

Mr. Shaun Chen (Scarborough North, Lib.): I want to start off by thanking Inspector Yee and Constable Smith for their work. It's really good to see that the Vancouver Police Department sees the issue of homelessness as one that needs to involve outreach. That's very important. You have a policing role but also a role to serve the community.

Mr. Pearce, you mentioned a very good point, that it's important to have a quick turnaround when it comes to providing service. Often homeless people who are coming in are then heading out very quickly. To build on what my colleague Ms. Ludwig said, our government has invested tremendously, with $10 billion provided over the past three years to provide services and programs to support veterans. One of those is the veterans emergency fund, through which an eligible veteran is able to get up to $2,500 per year.

Have you been able to connect any of the homeless veterans you come across with this particular fund, which can provide money for housing, food and other expenses?

Mr. Matthew Pearce: The turnaround has not been that quick, although I know that's been the intention. I know the intention of this minister. Quite frankly, he's been very vocal about a desire to shift the culture, I think, of VAC. As I think he said in a recent interview I heard, the shift would be from how can we not give support to how can we give support. I think that will see itself in the light of day, going forward, but we don't have a quick turnaround.

This is not something I mentioned, but almost to a one, for the veterans we meet, those 10 years or so of degradation also include increasing frustration and anger with VAC. VAC was not there for them. They don't feel VAC is responsive to them. I'm sorry to say it that way, but I think it needs to be looked into. They don't see VAC as a support; they see it as the opposite. They see us as a go-between. They see us not as a representative of VAC, as of course we're not, but as a go-between.

● (1630)

Mr. Shaun Chen: Our committee has met with veterans and has heard from many of them. I know for a fact that there's a caseworker assigned now per veteran, somebody whom they can contact, and that has been very effective in providing more direct service. A lot of these programs will hopefully, over the coming months and years, have that positive impact that we are all looking for. I know the veterans emergency fund became effective this past April. These changes, I hope, will bring about positive change to help complement the work that the police and organizations like yours are doing.

Mr. Matthew Pearce: I'm convinced it will.

The Chair: That ends our time for this panel.

On behalf of the committee, I'd like to thank Inspector Yee and Constable Smith for all you do for the homeless. Thank you for your time today in front of the committee. If there are any answers that you wanted to further elaborate on, you could just get them back to the clerk and she'll get them to the committee.

We'll break and recess for a couple minutes while we get the room changed up and our next panel in.

Thank you very much.

● (1630)

(Pause)

● (1630)

The Chair: We'll come to order.

In the second panel we're pleased to welcome, by video conference, Mr. David Howard, President of Homes for Heroes Foundation, and Tim Richter, President and Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness. Both will have a presentation of up to 10 minutes. We can start with David's presentation, unless Tim wants to go first.

Who drew the short straw?

Mr. David Howard (President, Homes for Heroes Foundation): I appreciate your taking the time to listen to what we have to say. We created the Homes for Heroes Foundation three years ago now. The goal was to develop a system through which we could help our homeless veterans across the country.

Our goal is to build villages of tiny homes across Canada in every major market where there are homeless veterans, with a full resource centre. It's not just the housing; it is the idea, the understanding, to make sure we have wraparound services.

We built this program by meeting with veterans and having a chance to discuss with vets living on the street what their needs are. They came to us and said that they'd like to be in a space where they're with like-minded individuals, people who are veterans. Some of them already had been in spaces that they found too big. Large apartments of 600 or 700 square feet were too much for them, and what happens is that they start hoarding. That's why we went to these tiny homes.

The resource centre is a very important key to this project in terms of the fact that there would be a resource officer assigned to it. The goal here, hopefully, is to work with Veterans Affairs, have a case manager assigned to the project, and have them work through the process.

What the veterans have told us is that they want to come into a place, make sure they understand that they have a home, and work on themselves. If there are issues with drugs and alcohol, they want to get support and treatment for that and get back on their feet and get full-time employment. They have said to us that they then would want to move out of the project, make room for the next person and be the mentor for that project.

That is our program.

We're working with municipalities across Canada. Our cost is roughly $2.5 million a project to build a Homes for Heroes project of 20 homes per village. That is for the homes and for the cost of putting $500,000 in trust. What that doesn't include is the land. We've gone to municipalities and said to them that they have an issue in regard to homelessness on their streets, with many veterans within that, and it is costing them money. We understand that the cost can be anywhere from $60,000 to $70,000 per person, so it's to their benefit to work with us and get land.

We have our first piece of land. We're building in Calgary. That is starting already. It will be open in July. We have another piece of land in Edmonton.

The problem we're finding is that municipalities and provinces are saying that they have a lot of homeless vets and that it isn't their problem—that it's Ottawa's problem and it's a federal issue. We're having a difficult time convincing them that they should give us land for this project. It's one of the obstacles we have. We understand that housing for homelessness doesn't fit within the Veterans Affairs mandate, and that is an issue for us. It's difficult for us to get any support on funding if it doesn't fall within their mandate.

Another key thing we found, I think, is in terms of the numbers that are being reported. The last I heard, what was coming from Veterans Affairs was roughly 2,200 to 2,500 homeless vets. Even their own Veterans Affairs people in Calgary with whom we've spoken believe the number is probably double that. The issue there is that these counts are being done in shelters, and veterans aren't self-identifying. They're not sitting up and saying that they're veterans. Also, a lot of them aren't using shelters, and a lot of them are couch surfing.

These are some of the issues we're facing right now in trying to get our project going, but we believe that we have a project that we can implement across Canada and that we can solve—if not end—the problem.

● (1635)

The Chair: Tim will give his testimony and then we'll open it up with rounds of questions for everybody.

Mr. Tim Richter (President and Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness): Good afternoon, everyone, and thanks for the opportunity. I'm pleased to be here speaking to you from Calgary, from the traditional territories of the people of Treaty 7 in southern Alberta. The city of Calgary is also home to the Métis Nation of Alberta, region III.

I'm here in my capacity as the President and CEO of the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness with some expertise in preventing and ending homelessness, including experience developing housing programs for homeless vets. I also served just over six years in the Canadian Forces and am a Veterans Affairs client myself. All that is to say that this is an issue that's really close to my heart, and I'm thrilled to be here. I'm really glad that you're studying the issue.

I think I have two main messages for you.

The first is that veteran homelessness in Canada is readily solvable. The number of homeless veterans in Canada is relatively small. It's unknown, but it's relatively small. We know what to do and we know how to do it.

Our American friends have cut veteran homelessness in half in just over eight years, and there are eight U.S. cities that have ended veteran homelessness altogether. To put the scale of that achievement in perspective, there are about 37,500 American veterans homeless on any given night, compared with all Canadian homelessness, which is about 35,000 people per night. That's a significant improvement and a significant achievement in the States, which shows that it's certainly possible.

I believe that with a focused effort and a sense of urgency, veteran homelessness in Canada could be eliminated within three years or less.

My second message is that we know what to do. We have a strong veterans network. We have solid expertise in communities like Homes for Heroes. We have proven models to follow, and I think we have strong public support. What's missing is federal leadership and decisive action. We need a federal government prepared to make a clear and unequivocal commitment to ending veteran homelessness and to invest the fairly modest additional resources needed to get the job done.

What would it take to end veteran homelessness in Canada? There are five things that I think are essential, and I'll go through these quickly.

First is prevention. We have to stop the flow of veterans into homelessness. There are tools being developed to assess veterans for risk of homelessness today, including some excellent work being done in the States by a gentleman named Dr. Dennis Culhane, from the University of Pennsylvania, who is a research director for the VA's National Centre on Homelessness among Veterans. If we understand who's at the greatest risk of homelessness—and I think we can understand that—and we understand a veteran's pathway into homelessness, then we can intervene before homelessness occurs.

The second is borrowing the old military axiom that time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted. Solving homelessness requires actionable, real-time, person-specific data on everyone experiencing homelessness. We can't gather the necessary information to house homeless veterans solely by counting them anonymously once every two years or by having information collected by a handful of agencies or Veterans Affairs. We have to document the names and unique needs of every veteran experiencing homelessness and have an ability to share that information among those in the community who can house and support them. We have to be able to monitor performance, notice fluctuations, identify problems and respond in real time.

This approach to homelessness data is being wired into the new federal homelessness strategy, Reaching Home, that will launch in April. So that you don't think that getting this level of data is impossible, as of today, there are already 11 Canadian cities with quality by-name lists on chronic homelessness, and another 23 actively working on it.

The third issue is paying the rent. A critical gap in our federal response to veterans homelessness, in addition to the point David made about having it within the Veterans Affairs' purview, is the absence of a veteran rent supplement program. We should carve out of the new Canada housing benefit a federally administered veteran housing benefit modelled under the U.S. HUD-VASH voucher that the Americans are using. Any person meeting the VAC definition of veteran, meaning anyone who has completed basic training and has been honourably discharged, should be eligible. This would be a powerful homelessness prevention tool and an efficient and very cost-effective way to move veterans directly off the streets and into housing.

The fourth is to use Housing First. This is a recovery-oriented approach to ending homelessness that centres on quickly moving people experiencing homelessness into independent and permanent housing and then providing additional supports and services as needed. Housing First is an evidence-based approach that has been proven to work with homeless vets and is at the heart of every successful effort to prevent and end homelessness.

● (1640)

I think Veterans Affairs should stick to what they're good at and partner with local organizations to do the housing and work with veteran service organizations and others to provide the outreach support.

The federal government already has the community-based infrastructure through the homelessness partnering strategy in Employment and Social Development, the new Reaching Home strategy.

I would use that infrastructure and presence in 61 communities in every province and territory. Ending veteran homelessness would require an additional investment in housing supports and coordination in those communities, but the infrastructure is there, and there's an opportunity to leverage provincial and community resources.

I'll wrap it up there, but I want to reiterate the point that veteran homelessness in Canada is readily solvable. We know what to do and how to do it. We have strong veteran networks, solid expertise in communities, solid infrastructure in place and proven models to follow. All that's missing is federal leadership.

We have a duty to these men and women, and I think we should get on with it.

Thank you.

● (1645)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll start with the questioning now.

Mrs. Wagantall, you have six minutes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thanks, Chair.

That's very informative; thank you so much for what you're giving us today. It gives a lot of hope to the situation to have you here.

Mr. Pearce, you named the things that need to happen and you mentioned one specifically, and these gentlemen did as well: the whole area of prevention. You said a number of them have great difficulty transitioning.

I brought that up in the past at this committee. How big a factor is that anger and frustration level in ending up homeless?

Mr. Matthew Pearce: As I mentioned earlier, the anger and frustration that's being expressed by the people we're serving is significant. Often when we talk about reconnecting them to VAC, they have a visceral opposition because of their experience. I think that can change, and I think some of the measures that are being planned and foreseen are going to change that, but it's a cultural, relational shift.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: David and Tim, when it comes to preventing it from happening in the first place, this committee is trying to help with that seamless transition model that we're looking at. Right now, these individuals are medically released from the Canadian Armed Forces due to service. They have no choice. Then they go to VAC and they have to go through this proving process again before they can begin to get the services they need.

Would anybody comment on how important it would be to simply accept DND's statement at that initial release that they are being released for medical reasons due to service, and get on with providing them with what they need to move forward?

Mr. Tim Richter: I'll start.

I think there is an assumption that there is a correlation between medical discharge and homelessness. That's not necessarily always the case. We need to have a bit better evidence to suggest that.

I also think that when people are released from the forces, there will be no indication that they're going to run into problems. They may be set up, and then a problem comes two or three or four years down the road. It's about figuring out what happens in the period between their release and when they become homeless so that we can intervene.

Again this is anecdotal and it's just what I've been hearing, but there seems to be about a five- to 10-year lag between their release from the forces and when they end up in homelessness. A lot of things fall apart for people on the way into homelessness, but they're interacting with systems all the way through that process.

It's understanding that trajectory. That's why I refer to the work that Dennis Culhane is doing in the States.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: For us to understand that process and why it's happening is a big gap, and of course part of it is that "soldier on" mentality. They fight that condition until they hit a certain point.

Mr. David Howard: I think the veterans we talked about are not all suffering medically from post-traumatic stress. A large group are, but we start to see post-traumatic stress a number of years after they've left service. In talking to them, we're finding they're disengaging from the family unit; that's usually the case. They're on the street. I think I agree that it is a 10-year period.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: David, do you know someone named Chris Lohnes?

Mr. David Howard: I do.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: He's a good friend of mine as well. I'm from Yorkton—Melville. That's my constituency. We're a smaller community. We're not a big city, which he says in some ways is an advantage when you're trying to work with these veterans to help them adjust. We have good education opportunities and those types of things.

Are there ways for communities, as you're talking about the need to have this done, to connect and develop a program with you? How does that work?

Mr. David Howard: I think there is room to build. At the same time, we found, in talking to our vets, that we can't take them away from their street family. There is a sense of security in having that. What we're finding—and Tim maybe would agree—is that a large percentage of our homeless vets are in the major cities. They're by bases. To take them out of that situation gets uncomfortable right away.

● (1650)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I can completely appreciate that. In that connection, I'm finding more and more, as I have this role, that there are a lot of veterans in Saskatchewan that you can't find. They are starting to pop up.

Mr. David Howard: There are a lot of veterans you can't find across Canada. I met with a gentleman on the border of B.C. and Alberta. There are vets who are living in the woods. They're bunkered down. Every so often forestry comes in and kicks them out, and they have nowhere to go.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Tim, you wanted to say something.

Mr. Tim Richter: It's important to know that there are a lot of assumptions loaded into how we're responding to veterans today. There's an assumption, for example, that their disability is related to service or whatever.

In my view, there are a couple of things that are really important. There are a couple of different generations of veterans. There are people who were in the forces and now are homeless, but the connection between their service and their homelessness isn't really there. These are 50- to 60-year-old alcoholic men.

Then there's a newer generation of veterans who are dealing with some of the issues you were referring to. They have injuries or disabilities related to service, such as post-traumatic stress or medical issues. There is a direct connection, and they are a lot younger.

It's also important that we don't make assumptions about what they want. We have to engage with them individually. Ask them what they want, and begin to tailor responses to them. I'm talking about getting this person-specific data to get a real-time understanding of who they are and what they need. We need to document that need and then provide a response. It is different.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Is that data specifically for veterans and that program, or just homelessness, and veterans would be identified as well?

Mr. Tim Richter: It's for homelessness. Veterans would be identified as well.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Ludwig, for six minutes.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Thank you, and thank you all for your testimonies.

I'm going to start with Tim and David.

Tim, you talked specifically about the collection of data. We've heard from a number of witnesses that a lot of it is anecdotal or self-reporting. The last witnesses we had do data collection once a year, in March.

Do you have a suggestion, or is there a program that you think would be the best for having a model nationally for organizations like yourselves to start tracking the data and to pool it? Is it maybe a CRM system?

Mr. Tim Richter: Right now we're working with 38 communities around the country through our 20,000 homes campaign. Part of that process is something called a by-name list. It is real-time, person-specific data on everyone experiencing homelessness.

That's an approach that has been used successfully with veteran homelessness in the U.S. Having that real-time data is really key to understanding not only what they need but how they move through the system, and to being able to respond, adapt and tailor responses. There's a lot of information out there on it that I'd be happy to share.

We have those systems in place now in 11 communities, and 24 others are working on it. Most communities can get them in place in about 18 to 24 months.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: That would be very helpful. Not that you want to be measuring and being that objective, but really, that's part of planning, programming and investment, as well as trying to track the success of not having a veteran returning episodically to the shelter so many times.

We've heard a number of comments about Veterans Affairs Canada. This would go to all three of you gentlemen. Maybe I will start with Mr. Pearce, because you're here.

Do you have a recommendation for a better role for Veterans Affairs that could be more amenable to what veterans are actually looking for?

Mr. Matthew Pearce: I think the rub is not with the role. The role it intends to play is a valuable one for veterans.

It's more how it rolls out, and the amount of red tape involved. As the minister had said, there was a previous culture of “how can we not provide support” as opposed to “how can we provide support”. I think shifting our thinking toward veterans.... To bounce off Tim's point, whether or not their homelessness is related to their military experience is almost not germane to this. It matters that someone at one point had a career and gave their readiness to put their lives on the line in the service of the country. I think we owe it to them after that, and that's the connection between Veterans Affairs and homeless veterans.

I think the role is fine. I think it's pushing obstacles out of the way, listening carefully to homeless vets, and asking them why they're so darned angry. You've probably heard that around the table if you've been speaking to some of them.

I'll stop there, have a drink of water and let Tim and David go ahead.

● (1655)

Ms. Karen Ludwig: David, would you comment?

Mr. David Howard: There is a lot of red tape involved with the process. Once you get through and into it with a caseworker and they're working with you, I think that Veterans Affairs is actually doing a good job. They have a lot of good programs.

Too many times, they were shutting down some of their offices. I don't think that was a smart move. Moving some of those programs into charity hands was not a good idea. Keeping those offices open and having that direct contact, to me, is a better way to handle it. You're dealing with people within Veterans Affairs who have that experience. You're moving into some charities that don't have the experience at all, and claim to. Not enough research is being done into those charities.

However, with Veterans Affairs there is that red tape, and people are getting frustrated with it.

The general public really has no idea of the whole umbrella of services that Veterans Affairs offers.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: In that regard, how do we better inform the public, veterans and organizations like yours of all the services that are now available? How we can make changes based on listening?

Mr. David Howard: One way that I proposed to the minister is to say that Homes for Heroes is a program that's going to go across the country. All we're asking them to do is stand up and say, “We back the program, and these are the different types of offerings we have for veterans, as they come in.”

They'll get assigned a caseworker and they're going to get help with education and physical health problems or mental issues they have. There is a whole bunch of resources there.

Partner with organizations, and advise the general public that's what's happening, as opposed to signing large cheques. People don't understand where those dollars are going.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: What about the national housing strategy? There is a priority for veterans within our national housing strategy. Are you familiar with that?

Has either one of you applied for that program?

Mr. Tim Richter: The national housing strategy has labelled veterans as a priority. I'm not sure exactly how that plays out in practice. It's still up to organizations like Homes for Heroes to apply for the funding.

I would really strongly suggest that there be some kind of carve-out from the Canada housing benefit for a veterans rent supplement, modelled on the HUD-VASH voucher. Honestly, paying the rent, getting the housing in place and building these partnerships with communities is the key.

Veterans Affairs should not be trying to end veteran homelessness on their own. There needs to be leadership from them, but the community resources are there. I would really rely on and partner with the communities.

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

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you for your important and selfless service in serving veterans.

I think I'm going to start with Tim. You talked about your five key action items on tackling homelessness. I really appreciate your laying that out. Certainly with some of the models in the U.S., they've been able to eliminate homelessness by 50%. I like your ambition of doing it in about three years. How we get there is what I'd like to ask some questions around.

You talked about, in your fifth item, partnering with local organizations. Do you get any funding from Veterans Affairs currently?

Mr. Tim Richter: Do you mean us? No.

Mr. Gord Johns: The reason I ask is that we had an organization from Ottawa in here on Tuesday that was building some housing specifically for Veterans Affairs. They got some funding through the national housing strategy. Of course, the municipality and the provincial government didn't come to the table with their portion, because they feel that veterans are a federal responsibility. As a result, they're not able to access the capital they need, so they're having to fundraise to supplement the gap.

Do you see this as an obstacle as well across the country? I really appreciate your talking about the rental supplement. I think we absolutely need to do that so you have long-term stable funding for these projects, but also, on the capital side, do you think they should accelerate to a 100% funding model to build veterans housing across the country so that you're not having to fundraise for projects?

As a former municipal politician, I can imagine that the downloading is already.... They're tapped out, and they will look to the federal government for 100%.

● (1700)

Mr. Tim Richter: It's maybe a better question for Dave.

I think that matching funding is not necessarily a bad thing, but in my view it is clearly an area of federal responsibility.

Mr. David Howard: Each one of our communities, as I said, costs two and a half million dollars, and we're publicly fundraising for that. We have something, hopefully, in place with CMHC for one of our communities. Outside of that, we have zero government funding.

Mr. Gord Johns: I really see the important role you play. I think you hit the nail right on the head there, David: Government can't do it all on its own. It needs to find partners that have experience and expertise in certain areas. I totally support that idea.

You probably heard recently that there was a motion passed here in Parliament by all parliamentarians to end lapsed spending. There has been money not spent, and the government hasn't been able to meet half of its service standards for veterans. You've also heard about the backlog for veterans getting benefits.

There was $148 million last year, $372 million over the last three years, and $1.1 billion left from the previous government. Do you see that as being money that could be carried forward and applied to dealing with this issue to help you?

Mr. David Howard: Certainly. If we took $30 million, we could build one of these in every major city across Canada.

Tim is saying we could end the issue in three years. I think we're looking more at 10 years. We think we could have veterans in our program, on an average of two years each, in 20 homes, and we can fix the issue. I think this is a partnership, though. I have to say that we can build a program and put counsellors in there and make sure they're working together, but having that case manager assigned to each veteran and making sure they get their support is important.

Mr. Gord Johns: Matthew, you talked about the short-term funding, getting these cyclical funding agreements. Can you again underscore the importance of long-term, stable funding for programs coming from Veterans Affairs?

Mr. Matthew Pearce: Yes. For example, the sentinels of the street program that we're running is working. We have people who are stably housed. You wouldn't think, if you had met them before we got them into the program, that they would be successful in that way, but they are.

They're facing a challenge. They're asking, “How long will these rent subsidies be there for me?” We're saying, “Our funding is good for a year”, and they're finding that destabilizing.

We're making an offer to someone and a leap of faith for people who have been on the streets for a while. If we can offer them some stable funding over a period of time, and I would even argue that for those for whom it's possible, a declining level of funding.... For example, the rent subsidy is *x* dollars one year, *x* dollars minus $100 the next year, and then *x* dollars minus $100 the following year. Over time, those who can survive in that way reduce their dependency and increase their autonomy.

The horizon for funding, when it's just one-year or two-year funding, just doesn't give us the room to breathe. It doesn't give promise to a homeless person that we're going to be there for them for a sufficiently long period of time. I think extending the horizon is a good investment in stabilizing people outside of homelessness.

Mr. Gord Johns: Do I have time, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Gord Johns: I'm going to ask Tim this question.

Are you getting referrals from VAC? Is VAC actually sending clients to you to help support them?

Mr. Tim Richter: We don't do that direct client service, but I know that in communities, Veterans Affairs is actually quite good about referring people into community-based programs. One of the biggest challenges is the sharing of information between VAC and the other services and systems. One of the things that are a feature of our by-name list approach and coordinated access systems, which will be in the new federal Reaching Home strategy, is an ability to share that information with the people who can help you get housed. VAC could have a bunch of information on a former soldier, but they can't actually share that information with the people they're referring clients to all the time, or vice versa.

● (1705)

Mr. Gord Johns: I just worry about VAC referring to external organizations without funding those organizations as well, and it's necessary. They're referring their clients and then not sending funding to those organizations that are picking up the slack.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chen, you have six minutes.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to thank Mr. Howard and Mr. Richter for joining us today in our meeting.

I really appreciate and value the optimism, Mr. Richter, that you shared. You said that we know what to do and we know how to do it. We pointed out in today's meeting the fact that in the United States, the number of homeless veterans has been reduced from 2009 to 2017 by a half. It was originally 73,000 and went down to approximately 40,000. In Canada we don't have data prior to 2015, but the 2015 report identified that there were 2,250 homeless veterans using shelters in our country.

Data collection, of course, as you point out, is very important. How do you think we can better capture some of the homeless veterans who are not using shelters? You've pointed out that some are out there living in parks. How do we get that data, in your experience, having worked with many veterans on the front line?

Mr. Tim Richter: I think it's important to build a network of outreach that's able to engage with people. What we find is veterans will often like to engage with other veterans, although some will try to avoid other veterans, to be honest. Some want nothing to do with their past military experience. They don't want to have anything to do with the military.

It comes down to the same strategies with all outreach—getting your boots on the ground, going out looking for them, and partnering with people. For example, here in Calgary there's a fantastic partnership between the homeless system and the police service and by-law services. The police and by-law services are out everywhere all the time. In fact, at one point the police helicopter in Calgary was helping us find people sleeping in the woods. All homeless people at some point or another will touch a service, and so we need to be ready to engage them when they touch that service, and we need to be looking for them. Again, it's thinking about the homeless system as bigger than just the shelter system and having a comprehensive approach to outreach.

Mr. Shaun Chen: That's an excellent point. I know, Mr. Howard, you talked about having wraparound services when you built those villages for the homeless veterans. Can you talk about what those wraparound services are? I think it aligns very much with what Mr. Richter just talked about in terms of having a comprehensive approach.

Mr. David Howard: Yes, I think that's important.

In Calgary, The Mustard Seed is a social service provider we have partnered with. A veteran would come into the program and needs analyses are done with them. Then in turn there has to be verification that they're a veteran. The minute that verification occurs, they're assigned a caseworker from Veterans Affairs. The sharing of that information in regard to.... There aren't groups across Canada. I couldn't go in and verify if somebody's a veteran. We can only do it through Veterans Affairs, and that's a difficult thing. Sharing of information, I think, is one of those points.

The goal in having those wraparound services is to arm them, get an understanding of who they are, get an understanding of what their needs are, and then arm them with the tools and the resources within the community to help them become better. That's what we've been told by the veterans themselves. If there are drug issues, if there's post-traumatic stress, a physical handicap, unemployment, retraining that needs to happen, education and so forth, we can offer all those services.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Mr. Howard, you would know that nine of the federal VAC offices that were shut down have been reopened over the past three years, and an additional office was opened in Surrey. VAC is working very hard to further their outreach into northern and indigenous communities as well. In terms of that federal leadership, we've seen the $10 billion in investments that have been made over the past three years.

What else do you see us doing? Do you feel there is a need for more VAC offices to be opened? Do you feel that the partnership with the various organizations needs to be expanded? I know that funding opportunities like the veteran and family well-being fund are available for organizations to apply to. How do you see us moving forward and working together to ensure that our veterans are well served and that those homeless veterans are not on the streets or living in the woods?

● (1710)

Mr. David Howard: First off, I think it's great that more offices have opened. I think that's important. With regard to the veterans well-being fund, just look at the number of applicants. There were 280 or 300 applicants across the country, and there were even more who applied for this and they extended it even further. That shows a lack of support and resources for the people who are trying to help.

I think Veterans Affairs can work more closely with organizations, whether they are funding them or not. I don't really understand why.... If Veterans Affairs isn't funding a group like, let's say, Homes for Heroes, there's no reason they can't do outreach to us, see what we're doing within the community, make a partnership with us and ask how we can help each other. Just because the funding isn't there doesn't mean that Veterans Affairs doesn't have the resource officers and case managers who can make that connection.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Eyolfson, you have six minutes.

Mr. Tim Richter: May I jump in on that point?

The Chair: Yes, if you can make it short.

Mr. Tim Richter: Really quickly, I think the first thing that's important is that there is an intent and a commitment to eliminate veteran homelessness and that this becomes a policy of the federal government.

The second is to fund that veteran rent supplement program.

The third is to partner with ESDC, which has that infrastructure in communities, like HUD partners with the VA in the U.S.

The fourth thing is to remember that we end veteran homelessness one person at a time. We have to have an individualized response. We make sweeping assumptions about veterans, but I can tell you that the 23-year-old female homeless veteran is very different from the 35-year-old Afghan veteran with a physical disability and from the 50-year-old peacetime veteran who has no service-related injury that can account for their homelessness.

Those are a few points, really quickly.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Eyolfson, you have six minutes.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you all for coming.

Mr. Richter, you mentioned that in Canada, particularly compared to the States, there are a relatively small number of homeless vets. Do you have an idea of what this number is? How many homeless vets, would you say, are there across Canada?

Mr. Tim Richter: I can tell you that I don't believe any of the numbers at this point, because there are varying challenges with each of them.

My guess would be that there are significantly fewer than 10,000. About 235,000 people experience homelessness in Canada in a year, and there are 35,000 on any given night. Veterans Affairs has identified 2,500. I wouldn't be surprised if it was double that, but I don't think it would be a whole lot more.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: You were saying that with modest additional resources, we could end this in three years. When you say “modest”, again, what's a ballpark financial commitment to do this?

Mr. Tim Richter: That would take a little bit more thinking than I have done up to this moment. In a typical Housing First program, for example, we can take a chronically homeless individual off the streets, put them into permanent housing and provide them with a rent support and some services for about $18,000 per person per year. That's somebody with fairly complex needs for whom we're providing a rent supplement.

You'll have to build some housing. There's just not enough housing infrastructure. There will have to be some supportive housing built as well, but I don't think you'll have to build housing for all homeless veterans.

Again, if I gave you a number, I'm afraid it would be wildly inaccurate, but relatively speaking—relative to the national housing strategy investment—it's a small number.

● (1715)

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: All right. Thank you.

Now we talked, again—and we've talked about this on a few panels—about veterans who've had bad experiences. They don't trust Veterans Affairs or they don't trust the government or, as you've said, they just don't want any reminder of their previous service. They'll even avoid vets. Again, we hear different ideas of the incidence. Is this something we see commonly? Is it rare? How big a contributor is that to the issue? Even just proportionately, would it be a significant proportion of the veterans affected?

Mr. Tim Richter: Again, I think it's tough to say. My gut would tell me the proportion of veterans who won't want to make a connection with Veterans Affairs or to the military would be the younger veterans. Matthew might have a better sense of that. I think it's where the experience is fresher and more visceral and more negative.

I also would not be at all surprised to find that female veterans would not want that connection either.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: All right.

Mr. Pearce, would you comment?

Mr. Matthew Pearce: To add, I could say that one of the things we see that is in common with all of the homeless veterans we're serving is they are not connected with Veterans Affairs. Were they, I think they'd be in better circumstances, and they're not. When we talk to them about that and try to suggest some of the programs that are available that might of an advantage, to answer your question directly, it's a very common thing they reject, first off, trying to reach out to VAC. They see VAC as bad news and inaccessible.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Okay. Thank you.

Something we talked about as well is that there are veterans who don't know they're veterans. They don't have an understanding of what it means to a veteran. Some of them, for some reason, have either assumed or they've heard you have to be in for five years and they were only in for two years. They don't understand that if you wore a uniform and you were honourably discharged, you are a veteran.

Do you find there are a lot of veterans out in the community you encounter who didn't know they were veterans? I know it's very hard to track because you have to identify them, but do you get the experience of finding people who will tell you that for a length of time they didn't realize they were veterans?

Mr. Pearce, I'll start with you.

Mr. Matthew Pearce: Maybe David and Tim could answer too, but I'll start.

There's a misconception generally in speaking about what a veteran is. Sometimes people think if they didn't serve in combat, they're not an *ancien combattant*, in French, a former combatant, so some of them aren't sure. I think that is an issue. I haven't found it to be so much the duration but more the nature of their service that causes them not to be sure if they qualify—and maybe this is a Quebec thing—simply because the common translation is *ancien combattant*. They may think that if they didn't have a combat history, it doesn't apply. That's an easy one to overcome through our caseworkers, who can help explain what they're eligible for.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Do you have anything to add, Mr. Richter or Mr. Howard?

Mr. Tim Richter: I would just say from my own experience that I was in the forces for six years, but I don't consider myself a veteran for the reason that Matthew illustrated. I was a peacetime soldier. If you asked me if I was a veteran, no. That's a cultural thing. However, if you were to ask if I have served in the Canadian Forces, I'd say yes. It really comes down to how you approach it, how you ask the question.

Mr. David Howard: I have a similar response in speaking with them. A lot don't consider themselves veterans if they weren't in theatre. I think that's the issue.

The Chair: Mr. Kitchen, you have six minutes.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Gentlemen, thank you for being here today.

Mr. Pearce, you mentioned, I think, that you roughly have seen per year about 3,000 men and women, and you identified that about 45 of them would be veterans. Is that correct?

Mr. Matthew Pearce: I'm not sure where that number of 3,000 is. Sorry.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: The bio that was sent indicated that last year you welcomed close to 3,000 homeless men.

Mr. Matthew Pearce: I see. Yes, that's right.

We did a homeless count, as has become a common practice throughout large and not-so-large Canadian cities. That count revealed that on a given night at the end of March in 2015, there were about 3,000 homeless people who were identified. Of those, 6% declared themselves as veterans. We took that data as true and entered it into the tabulation. What you would find in the report is that 6% of the homeless people were identified as veterans. What we're finding is there were a lot of false declarations, and so I don't think it's 6% in Montreal, and, like Tim, I don't think it's 10,000 across Canada. I think it's very much smaller. I just would endorse Tim's point that ending homelessness is a very manageable objective.

● (1720)

Mr. Robert Kitchen: I was a math major in my first year of university. Although I didn't stay in math, my 6% of 3,000 didn't come out to 45, so I was kind of—

Mr. Matthew Pearce: That's 6% all across Montreal. Not all of them come to our doors.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: All right. Thank you.

Of those 45, do you know how many were men and how many were women?

Mr. Matthew Pearce: I don't know the exact number, but the vast majority would be....

To guess, it would be something like 42 to three, or something like that.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: This question is basically for all of you.

David, you talked about your tiny homes project. When homes are found for people, are there requirements, rules or regulations, that they have to abide by in the tiny homes, or when you set them up with a home?

Mr. David Howard: Yes.

With our program, The Mustard Seed, when they come in, there is a needs analysis done.

There are rules to be part of this community, so this tool isn't for everybody. The idea is that they're agreeing to be a part of the community as an active participant. They agree that they'll share through peer-to-peer programming, that they'll work on themselves. The idea is that if they have drug dependency or alcoholism, they'll work on getting support on that as well.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: They're having to do steps as they go along to make certain they are basically following the guidelines, and as you talked about, using support services, getting back on their feet, looking for employment and that sort of thing.

Mr. David Howard: That is the goal, yes.

I think in—

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Sorry. Go ahead.

Mr. Tim Richter: I think in a lot of Housing First programs, one of the challenges in getting people engaged in the programs is the rules within them. Some will choose the path that David outlined, but there are a lot of others who won't.

In Housing First programs, the requirements are basically that people will pay a portion of their rent, so they'll pay the rent they can afford. They have to maintain the terms of a lease, like everybody else. They have to speak with a case manager once a week, depending on the level of need.

We try to remove as many of these barriers as we can. For a lot of people struggling with addictions, for example, in mental health, some will, as in Dave's program, say, “Look, I want to get clean and I need this structured environment, and that's where I want to go.” However, a lot of others won't. We bring them into these Housing First programs and we don't require sobriety or abstinence as a requirement of the program, but then we work with them over time to address those issues and build them toward independence.

Mr. Matthew Pearce: The sentinels program is largely as Tim described. There are no preconditions. They have to abide by the terms of the lease. They sign a lease, not with us but with the building owner. We have already created a link of confidence with that person such that the caseworker has a rapport with them. That's where we have our leverage to help them.

Our objective is not to create perfect human beings; it's to take people who are in a state of homelessness and give them an opportunity to sustain themselves outside of homelessness, in their imperfections and challenges. We try to reduce the potential for them to fall back on the street as much as possible.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Great.

Both of you gave us five points. They were excellent points to present to us, and I appreciate them.

With the one I keyed in on, both of them said exactly the same thing, which was “prevention”.

I'd love to hear a little more from you about your concept of prevention. Where do you see that going? We've talked a lot over the years on this committee about transition. We've had our discussions about that, but I'd love to hear from both of you, in the short time I have left, as to where you see that transition might be.

Tim, I'll start with you.

Mr. Tim Richter: Sure.

Often people will say that everybody is one paycheque away from homelessness and homelessness is random. I don't believe for a second that homelessness is random.

I think, for veterans, that homelessness is fairly predictable. As I said, the work of Dennis Culhane in the United States is giving the VA a screening tool to say which veterans are at greatest risk of homelessness. I would start by getting a Canadian sense of what those predictors are.

The pathway is also fairly predictable. We know that all people, including veterans, will touch public systems on their way into homelessness. We also know that their supportive relationships fall apart on their way into homelessness. It happens in a fairly predictable pattern.

Again, it's using data to understand patterns, and borrowing what's already been done in the States and other places to predict it.

● (1725)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bratina, we'll end with you. We have about four minutes.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Thank you.

You've all brought some great perspectives to our committee. Thank you all.

Mr. Pearce, I want to start with a couple of things that you said: The first priority isn't about houses. This has come up many times. The public discussion has been, “Oh, veterans who are homeless? Put some buildings up and get them in there.” I think what you were getting at is that you have to start the process before that, as Mr. Kitchen was discussing, and do the transition and so on.

Does the public discussion of this bother you? I did football broadcasting for 20 years, and it used to drive me nuts that after a game when the public would phone in to the radio station and say what was wrong with the team. They didn't know half of what was going on, which was not their fault, because what you're seeing from the outside and what's happening on the inside are two different things.

Would you agree that's similar to this kind of problem, in the sense that we're not going to get it solved until we really focus on the understanding of it?

Mr. Matthew Pearce: First of all, I'll be mindful of your comments next time I call in to the radio show after a Habs game because I thought I knew exactly what went wrong in that game.

Your question gives me an opportunity to bring something into clearer focus that maybe didn't come across: Housing is the cornerstone of any solution to homelessness. The sooner you can give someone access to housing and the supports necessary to make that a success, then the better it is.

We're not about a meritocracy that requires someone to demonstrate that they deserve housing. We're not about that, so if I gave you that impression, that's not it at all.

Housing—what was your question again? Sorry. It's just so I can —

Mr. Bob Bratina: Well, the point is that the general public discussion doesn't seem to bring into understanding the full nature of the problem. Is that fair to say?

Mr. Matthew Pearce: I think it's fair to say that we're in a public education process as well right now about what is possible. We're learning ourselves about what is possible and we can then convey that to the public.

I think there's still a pervasive sense that homeless people are almost lost souls and beyond recuperation or redemption in some ways, but I'm speaking in a very general sense here. A lot of people would not find themselves in that description.

Generally speaking, I think that we have to show the public that they should have faith in programs that can move people out of homelessness, because they work, and I think that's our job collectively.

Mr. Bob Bratina: That leads me to Tim and the notion of partnering organizations. There is a lot of knowledge out there, and we've heard other testimony like, “Don't reinvent the wheel. There are things that are working. Find out where they are and enhance them.”

Is there perhaps some sort of clearing house where there's a better understanding of what's out there and what might need a little topping up, just to make the system work better?

Mr. Tim Richter: Actually, this is something your hometown of Hamilton is doing really well, by starting with a basis of data. Once you've got a by-name list, you begin to coordinate all the different resources around the system. If you develop the by-name list specifically on veterans, you'll begin to discover who in that community is involved, or could be involved, in finding them, housing them and supporting them. That's the beginning of the coalition and that coordination in the community.

To your earlier question about awareness, the minister can promote all the great work Veterans Affairs is doing until he's blue in the face, but nobody will believe him, because he's the minister and it's from the government. Nothing will speak better and more powerfully than results. Get the numbers down and everybody will believe you.

● (1730)

Mr. Bob Bratina: Thank you very much.

Thank you both. Thank you all for being here.

The Chair: Thank you.

That ends the time for today. I'd like to thank all three of you for all you're doing to try to end homelessness for communities. On behalf of the committee, thanks for taking the time out of your busy day today.

This ends today's questioning. Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.