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Chair: Mr. Bryan May



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• (1610)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on October 27, 2020, the committee is resuming its study of the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the financial health of veterans organizations.

Welcome to all of the witnesses who have graciously rearranged their schedules to appear before us. We greatly appreciate your patience and look forward to your contributions today.

I have just a few housekeeping notes.

You can speak in either official language, French or English, and there is interpretation for both. Before speaking, please wait to be recognized by name.

The time will go by really quickly. I will give everybody an opportunity to give their opening remarks. Because we're virtual, keep an eye on me on the screen. I will signal when you have one minute left. Don't worry—a minute is a long time. We're pretty good at not cutting people off too much. If I hear you going on and on, I may have to interrupt. I apologize. I do interrupt my colleagues on occasion if they're going long on their questioning.

We'll get started right away, first and foremost by introducing the witnesses. We have, from the Persian Gulf Veterans of Canada, Harold Davis, president; from the Multifaith Housing Initiative, Suzanne Le, executive director; from the Veterans Transition Network, Oliver Thorne, executive director, operations; and, from the Royal Canadian Legion, Bob Ankrett, Branch 60.

Welcome, all of you. Thank you so much for being here.

I believe we're going to get started with opening remarks by Mr. Davis from the Persian Gulf Veterans of Canada.

The floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Harold Davis (President, Persian Gulf Veterans of Canada): Good afternoon, Chair and members of the committee. Thank you very much for inviting me here today.

I am Harold Davis, retired master corporal and president of the Persian Gulf Veterans of Canada. I have been invited to speak here today. Please bear with me, for this is the first time that I've spoken to this committee and I'm just a little nervous.

I have been asked to offer my opinion on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the financial health of veterans organizations. I will offer my opinion from my experience dealing with Per-

sian Gulf Veterans of Canada and with the Royal Canadian Legion Branch 134, Shawnigan Lake, B.C. branch level, of which I'm a member of the executive committee for the zone of southern Vancouver Island.

The impact on Persian Gulf Veterans of Canada cannot be compared to that on some of the larger organizations, such as the Royal Canadian Legion, Royal Canadian Air Force Association, and Army, Navy and Air Force Veterans, for these organizations are very large compared to the Persian Gulf Veterans of Canada.

Persian Gulf Veterans of Canada is not a bricks-and-mortar organization and therefore, expenses are very small in comparison. The part that affects our organization is not membership. So many veterans, being out of work and having to watch every penny, don't want to indulge in any expenses that would place them in hardship, no matter how small. Small organizations like ours rely on two things: memberships and kit shop sales. With COVID-19 restrictions on many activities and a reduced income for a lot of Canadians, our kit shop sales have plummeted. Because of our size and our very small income, we do not qualify for government assistance; nor do we require it at this time.

The Royal Canadian Legion Branch 134, however, is a bricks-and-mortar organization and a completely different story.

I can't speak on what the Royal Canadian Legion Dominion Command requirements are or on how they are planning to help the local branches, for that is above my level of knowledge about the Legion. I do know and I can speak on how COVID-19 affects our local branch. The B.C. regulations on how businesses are allowed to operate while on restrictions have hurt our branch and how we operate. With zero income, we have to pay the bills every month for gas, electrical, insurances and so on. Let me tell you, the bill companies don't care if there is a pandemic going on; they still want their monthly bills paid in full. Our branch, to survive at all, resorted to having bottle drives on Saturdays and a scrap metal bin at the back of our branch into which people could drop off metal items. The branch, in turn, sells these items so that we can continue to pay our bills. Currently, in our branch we are barely able to keep our heads above the waterline. As you can imagine, COVID-19 did not help our Remembrance Week either. We were allowed to have only three poppy taggers out, and I was one of them. Our poppy fund didn't do as well as usual, to put it mildly, and that dramatically affects our bottom line—how we take care of veterans in need from our branch and provide branch support for the community. Our branch has, historically, continually helped the community. Currently, due to the pandemic, we are lacking the funding raised through our famous meat draws, which have not happened for quite a while. Our branch's financial support for the local community has, unfortunately, evaporated, which has had a harsh impact.

COVID-19 has effectively shut down most or all Legions across Canada, from what I've been able to read. That has placed a lot of veterans in need, in harm's way, in a situation of their local Legions being unable to help them. This has had a very troubling and dramatic effect on both the veterans in need and our branch members.

In closing, I would like to say that the support that the present government has given to veterans is slow but getting there for the bricks-and-mortar establishments. However, for smaller veteran groups, like the Persian Gulf Veterans of Canada, which work mostly out of somebody's home office, there is no support and no offers of assistance of any kind. In reality, for any actual assistance available, the government has placed so much red tape on it that it's virtually impossible to qualify for. It's not worth it for us to even apply. The grants that are starting to trickle in for the bricks-and-mortar organizations are slow and way too late in coming. It's as though veterans are an afterthought. It's only because of the organizations like the Royal Canadian Legion and such, which continuously lobby the government for support, that support was created. I'm not totally in the know about how governments make their decisions, but in my opinion, the decision process is much too slow.

I understand that veterans are just one group that requires help within Canada, but they are a group that served their country with pride and distinction, and their health and welfare were affected while they served their country. This government should be willing to ensure that veterans are recognized as an important group and also looked after.

Thank you very much for this time.

• (1615)

The Chair: Thank you, and thank you for staying exactly on time. That was fantastic. We very much appreciate that.

In my attempt to be efficient and get us going as quickly as possible, I missed a witness, and I deeply apologize for that.

Mr. Brian Wilkins, president of the Oshawa Navy Club, also is joining us today.

I thank you for your patience and ability to be flexible to join us. I will cede the floor to you now, sir.

Mr. Brian Wilkins (President, Oshawa Naval Veterans' Club): All right. Thank you very much for noticing me sitting here.

I want to thank you for this opportunity to speak to the committee. As Mr. Davis just said, this has been a very long process. I don't understand these meetings in particular. You've had several of them now, with the common denominator being the same every time: help. Is it going to be the last one and then action is going to start, because it is needed drastically right now?

As far as the Oshawa Navy Club is concerned, we're closed again now, of course, but we do a lot of community service. We have a home for battered women in Oshawa called The Denise House. We have Simcoe Hall Settlement House. We look after our own veterans. We look after their families, as well, with pension advocates and things like that. We recently got some money for our past president that he didn't realize he even qualified for, and we used the Legion for that help.

In Oshawa, probably the same as other cities, we all work together. We have eight service clubs in Oshawa, and we all work together. There's no animosity between any of them. It's just very unfortunate that we've been put in this position now.

As Mr. Davis said, we have bills that have to be paid every month. Since this pandemic started, we've put out over \$24,000 just to keep our building. We don't have a mortgage or anything, thankfully, but we still have heat, hydro and all the things you have to pay for regardless of whether you're open or not.

Last year, we lost over \$16,000 in rentals that were cancelled when the pandemic started.

This program we are all speaking of today is very important to the bricks and mortar, as Mr. Davis said, and the other groups as well. Nobody should be ignored. Nobody should be overlooked.

If you don't think this is very important to our veterans—what our government should be doing—then take a survey in the Netherlands, France, Poland, Afghanistan, and ask the people over there whether we deserve this or not. I think you'll find that there are a lot of people right now watching to see what decisions are made here and what help you are going to give to our service clubs and our Legions. The time is now to do it. It was time to do it eight months ago, nine months ago.

We did get some help. It kept our doors open in July. We were destined to close permanently in July. That is something that's hit me very hard. Recently I helped to close the Peterborough Navy Club permanently. They gave us some of their history off the walls and stuff like that. We've lost one in Burlington, in Sarnia. Windsor, Ontario, is a huge naval town. They've lost their navy club.

This is very important to a lot of people. You guys can sit there and wonder what help you can do. Well monetarily, yes, everybody needs the monetary help, but you have to keep in mind something. With CERB, there was a lot of fraud in the CERB program. I would hate to see them write off the money for welfare recipients who received it, federal and provincial inmates who received it, other people, and not allow enough to come to the Legions and the service clubs. That will not only keep our doors open, but will help us through the next year.

Who knows how long this thing is going to go on? This could go on for another six months or more. To us, that's another \$18,000 to \$20,000 that we have to put out to be closed. We simply can't afford that.

I'm asking you on behalf of all veterans clubs, Legions and all the other service clubs, to do the right thing. Get this started, get it started now; get the program started. Don't make it so difficult with the paperwork to sign up for it. We shouldn't have to jump through a bunch of hoops to get something that we strongly believe we deserve. A lot of these men and women fought for their country, and now they're fighting for their existence again. I think that's very unfair that we have to fight again for our existence.

• (1620)

I served in Afghanistan as a civilian. I've seen our guys in action. I've seen some of the things that they've done. I have family members who served years ago. It's very important to me—it's personal to me—that these clubs stay open.

Any help that you can give would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir. Again, my apologies for momentarily missing you on the list there.

Now we go over to Suzanne Le, executive director of Multifaith Housing Initiative.

The next five minutes are all yours.

Ms. Suzanne Le (Executive Director, Multifaith Housing Initiative): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My name is Suzanne Le. I'm the executive director of Multifaith Housing Initiative and the one who's ultimately going to be in charge of overseeing Veterans' House Canada. Thank you for the

invitation to appear before the committee to outline the implications of COVID-19 on our organization's financial health.

The Multifaith Housing Initiative is a charitable housing organization with a mission to provide safe, well-maintained, affordable housing and supports for individuals and families who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness. MHI has a proven track record for the development and successful delivery of affordable housing. We now own and operate 179 units in the Ottawa area, which house between 400 and 500 people.

As you know from your 2019 report entitled "Moving Towards Ending Homelessness Among Veterans", veterans' homelessness is an issue in our communities. As a result of that report, in June 2019 the government recognized the issue of veterans' homelessness and passed a motion with cross-party support, which was presented by MP Neil Ellis and called for a plan to end veterans' homelessness by 2025.

MHI is a key partner with the government for Veterans' House: the Andy Carswell Building, helping to deliver on that plan with the federal government's commitment. We wish to thank the federal government for providing funding to MHI for the building of Veterans' House in the summer of 2019 in the amount of \$6.5 million, which is made up of a combined \$4.8-million grant and \$1.73-million loan.

Veterans' House includes wraparound supports. This means immediate access to support services from a variety of partner agencies, some of which have been before this committee as part of this very study. Our list of partners is included in the information page I have provided to the clerk in both official languages.

Our goal is to provide stable housing with supports to recover from health, mental health and addiction-related issues and improve homeless veterans' overall quality of life, as well as the lives of their families who are unable to provide them with the support that they need.

Veterans' House construction began in September 2019 at the former CFB Rockcliffe Airbase in Ottawa, and is budgeted at \$11.5 million. Despite the pandemic, we have committed to completing construction. I am very happy to say on this very bitterly cold day in Ottawa that we are opening our doors today and have started moving veterans in off the street.

However, because of COVID-19 we had to pause fundraising. Lockdowns and other important public health measures impacted our planned activities and slowed our construction. As well, the pandemic's effect on the economy had a devastating impact on a large number of our corporate and personal donors. This led to our need to find alternative fundraising solutions, engage various contingency plans, and mobilize a variety of partnerships to ensure that we would stay on track and be in a position to complete a safe and secure space for our homeless veterans. I am very happy to report that we have been successful in that monumental task.

It remains important to make you aware of the impacts of the pandemic on the homeless vulnerable population, and more specifically on the realities of homeless veterans and the need to find a pan-Canadian solution that is viable and sustainable for the immediate and long-term future. We are currently in discussions with private donors to identify opportunities for the Andy Carswell Building, as well as for future Veterans' House buildings across Canada. We believe the federal, provincial and municipal governments are key partners to engage in these discussions. We hope that the federal government, in light of its cross-party commitment to end veterans' homelessness by 2025, will wish to become a funding partner to action this plan.

We have not sat on our laurels during these pandemic months. We are also in conversations with a number of possible new donors, and have pivoted to virtual fundraising initiatives. Most importantly, we have enjoyed an abundance of public support for our joint cause.

The Andy Carswell Building has demonstrated clearly that when working together we can leverage capital funding from all partners. The capital investment in future developments of Veterans' House communities across Canada will enable us to sustainably continue to care for our veterans well into the future and without the need for direct, ongoing financial support from the federal government. It will be something real and tangible that we can all feel proud of and will serve our veterans for many years to come.

MHI believes that Canada owes these men and women of the Canadian military service a duty of care. We are doing our part to respond to that. We also believe that there is strong federal support across all party lines for those former military members who are so desperate for our help. For that, we are very thankful to you.

Thank you very much for your attention today.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thank you for staying under the wire, timewise.

Up next we have, from Veterans Transition Network, Oliver Thorne, executive director of operations.

You have five minutes, sir.

Mr. Oliver Thorne (Executive Director, Operations, Veterans Transition Network): Thank you to the chair and to the members of the members of the committee for having me here today.

My name is Oliver Thorne, and I am the executive director with the Veterans Transition Network, which is a registered Canadian charity that delivers group counselling programs for veterans of the Canadian Forces and the RCMP.

Our program was first developed about 20 years ago at the University of British Columbia, where it originally existed as a research project. Eight years ago our organization was incorporated with the mission of expanding this program across Canada.

In 2013 we became a service provider to Veterans Affairs Canada. Currently one-third of the veterans who attend our programs are covered by Veterans Affairs claims. For the remaining two-thirds, we raise the funds to put them through the program at no cost.

Currently, after eight years of expanding, we're delivering in nine provinces across Canada for men and women in English and French.

I will provide a note in French, before I continue.

• (1630)

[*Translation*]

Respected francophone committee members, I apologize for my testimony today being only in English. If I tried to speak in French, not only would I go on for more than five minutes, but we would be here all day.

However, I would be pleased to do my best to answer your questions in French if that's what you prefer.

Thank you.

[*English*]

Bearing in mind the short amount of time I have today, I'd like to focus on three major topics, which hopefully will stimulate some follow-up questions: the impact of COVID-19 on our organization specifically; what I feel has worked well and what has not worked well with the government and community foundation response to support veterans service organizations; and our concerns for the future about the financial health of veterans service organizations as the pandemic continues.

First, before speaking of our experience, we deliver group-based programs that take place in person. They involve action-based interventions. These are not a good fit for the COVID-19 pandemic, obviously.

In late March of last year we made the decision to postpone all our programs that we had scheduled. This led to the immediate loss of almost all our organizational funding. Over the next few months I worked closely with our finance team to develop a pretty drastic financial measures plan that was designed to buy us six months, or at least see us through until 2021. Essentially this was a doomsday plan of at what point do we furlough staff, at what point do we cut salaries. In late March, early April, things were not looking good.

After that plan was in place, however, I worked with my clinical teams and with the rest of my team, first, to encourage members to fundraise, and second, to adapt the structure of our program so we could deliver a veterans program designed to support veterans specifically during COVID-19.

We relaunched with those new programs across Canada in July. Thanks to the work of my team and our clinical network across Canada, we have ended 2020 in a strong financial position.

Moving on quickly to what I feel has worked well and what has not, the CEWS program bought us the time to reinvent ourselves, and gave us the ability to move forward with these new programs.

The Chair: You have two minutes.

Mr. Oliver Thorne: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

What do I believe worked well? The Sioux program was relatively accessible. It bought us the time to reinvent our programs and to relaunch. I think the Sioux program was particularly important for charitable organizations. Because of their financial structure, we very often had difficulty raising overhead, administrative funding that pays for our salaries. The Sioux program was of particular benefit. Additionally, the veterans organizations emergency support fund was very quick and easily accessible. We received \$200,000 at the end of last year of a \$300,000 request. That application was very well aligned to the needs of veterans organizations.

What I feel has not worked well is the emergency community support fund, ECSF. Although it was obviously a gargantuan effort on the part of the government and the community foundations of Canada—I think it probably met the needs of the charitable sector in Canada quite well—this fund was poorly adapted to meet the needs of veterans organizations, both in terms of the amount of funding it gave the veterans organizations and in terms of how it was structured.

In total, less than \$250,000, from what I can tell, seems to have gone to veterans organizations, which is roughly 0.1% of the total funding. This is despite the fact that veterans organizations were listed as a vulnerable population in the application package.

In round one, the application was not well constructed to meet the reality of how veterans organizations function across Canada. This meant fragmented applications that had to go out to multiple different places in order to get small amounts of support to programs like ours.

However, I feel that I shouldn't be too hard on the program as our organization was lucky enough to receive a significant portion of the amount that did go out. We raised roughly \$75,000 through the ECSF.

Finally, I'll move on to my concerns for the future.

Both before COVID and during COVID, we have seen trends where the internal processes at Veterans Affairs are making it more and more difficult for us to receive funding for Veterans Affairs clients who attend our program. As of last week, they have completely disallowed funding for veterans who are attending our programs across Canada, even though we are a Veterans Affairs service provider. This threatens the stability of our organization because our partnership with Veterans Affairs helps us raise the funds

that pay for our administration and overhead, and allow us to use donor money specifically to put veterans through the program who are not covered by Veterans Affairs and who do not have a claim. This trend is quite worrying.

I have two final points.

I do believe that in the coming year we will see a contraction in the veterans service organizations space as this pandemic continues, with fewer financial resources in place to prop up organizations. In particular, I believe smaller organizations that do not have staffing resources to leverage the available supports will suffer a great deal more.

Finally, we are hearing from a number of funding organizations across Canada that they're setting an expectation that in 2021 they will start to reduce the amount of funding that they distribute because of the effect of COVID on their finances.

I'm probably over time, so I apologize. Thank you.

● (1635)

The Chair: I threw you off there for a minute, so I let you go on a little longer. I apologize.

Thank you very much, sir.

Last but not least, from the Royal Canadian Legion, branch 60, we have Mr. Bob Ankrett.

The next five minutes are all yours, sir.

Mr. Bob Ankrett (Member, Branch 60, Royal Canadian Legion): Hello all.

I'm going to diverge from my prepared statement and say thank you. It's nice to have everybody here, my colleagues from other Legions—thanks—and the rest of you. It's almost five o'clock on a Monday, and you've taken interest in this, which gives me hope. I doubt there's anyone I can see on this screen who does not have a relative or who does not know someone who has done service in the present or the past in this country. I think we have to remember that.

I'm going to go right into this then. Hopefully you received a copy of my presentation. I am the city and government liaison, and when I say that, I mean the federal, provincial and municipal governments. We work very closely with all of those people on behalf of Branch 60 of the Royal Canadian Legion in Burlington, Ontario.

To answer the question on how COVID-19 has impacted the Royal Canadian Legion, I think we have to look at some numbers, and I tried to keep this as simple as possible to make my point, as some of my colleagues have endeavoured to do, too.

During the pandemic times, the cost of maintaining the building that I'm in is about \$9,000 a month. Just like with your homes, that includes things like heat, hydro, insurance and all that sort of stuff. The revenue coming in each month from fish and chips.... It's a much more involved story than just saying it's fish and chips night on a Friday, but I can go into that later, as I did with my colleagues when we had some downtime last week that included a Las Vegas evening—but I digress.

The revenue that comes in from fish and chips is about \$4,000 a month—yes, \$4,000 in profit. Therefore, our net loss during COVID times is approximately \$5,000. I guess the reason I'm putting this in is that I want to give you the scope of it and put some numbers beside the Legion.

During pre-pandemic times, we had quite the programs going on. Hopefully, our costs would equal our revenue. Those times would be \$27,000 to \$40,000 a month, and I'll explain what that's all about later on, depending on the events. The impact, although financial, is much more than that, as you're going to see. The damage done to the community in Canada is more than money and bricks and mortar. To see that impact, you have to say to yourself that this was a business. What does it do? Now, some of you kind of know what it does, and I know my colleagues do, but I just want to make sure that you're fully aware of what you have here. It's not a place where you can buy inexpensive beer and throw darts on a Friday and a Saturday. It's much more than that.

For ease of analysis, I'm going to list, in sort of a general sense, what I've done and what the guys who work with me have done—who, by the way, are all volunteers—and provided to our country for almost, I guess, about 100 years now. Branch 60's poppy fund drive puts an average of \$156,000 back into the community in the form of grants and supports. Most of you, I hope, are familiar with the fact that none of these funds—none, not a dime—can go into paying for the Legion. We can't use them to pay insurance or electricity.

Here's the list: dinners and dances for various charity events; celebrations for veterans; meeting rooms for first responders, veterans and staff; a place for Veterans Affairs to meet people; social groups for seniors for dart playing, etc.; exercise and speech therapy classes; events with representatives from the government, including some of your ministers; a practice area for music groups; award events; cadet drills; Remembrance Day ceremony planning and execution—2,000 people tuned in last time; Victory in Europe celebrations; banners on the streets for veterans; networking and events with the Dutch association and the Minister of Defence; and a safe place if you want to come in and have a cup of coffee.

• (1640)

Finally, and I hope I can get this in, while most of our efforts are focused on the past and present vets and their families, the Legion maintains a national focus on our history that reminds us of what these men and women in uniform and their families waiting at home do for us and how they built Canada when they came back. If the Legion fails, all of those things that I ran through today at lightning speed won't exist. They won't exist next year or for the next 100 years. You have to make a decision; not a loss for the Legion but a loss for the community and for Canada.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir.

I believe those are all the opening remarks from our witnesses.

We will start off our first round of questions with the Conservative Party.

MP Colin Carrie.

Mr. Colin Carrie (Oshawa, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

First, Bob, you thanked us. I want to take this opportunity, on behalf of all of us, to thank you and all the volunteers with all the service clubs here today. I do want to apologize. I know that there's been some rescheduling. You can take it from the heart, though, from everyone around this table—this is a non-partisan committee—that we all have our hearts out there for you and we recognize all the great work that you do.

Brian from Oshawa, I will start off by asking you a few things. It has been about a year since this crisis started. One of the sad stories I heard you mention was the closing of the Peterborough Navy Club, a club that has been open for years. You had to go up there and help close it down. There has been some criticism about how long it took for the money to come out. You've raised the alarm for us, because this is lasting a lot longer than anybody thought. Do you think more clubs could have been saved if the money had been out there a little bit quicker?

Mr. Brian Wilkins: Well, definitely a lot of clubs could have been saved if the money had been out there quicker. The dilemma was that this was the first time anybody had been through this, so nobody really knew what to do. I know they had to look after the regular citizens of Canada first. I understand that. However, it wasn't very long after this pandemic started that the concerns started coming out from the Legions and the other service clubs, and there was a very extensive amount of time before any action was taken.

That's the part that's bothering everyone. Yes, we lost a lot of clubs, but it wouldn't have been necessary for a lot of them to close if action could have been taken a little bit quicker, for sure.

Mr. Colin Carrie: It was brought up a little bit about how much you guys actually do in the community. I know that you look after the cadets. There are local charities that you mentioned you support. Could you let everybody around the table here know what your club does, and the service it provides to the community, and what the effect would be if the club did close?

Mr. Brian Wilkins: The community is basically feeling that effect now, with us being closed just for the lockdown and the pandemic itself. I can't imagine how devastating it would be if it were for good. There's Simcoe Hall Settlement House. We have a lot of people who are looking for food in Oshawa. It's the same as any other city in Canada. Simcoe Hall Settlement House, Salvation Army, Denise House, United Way—they're all people we support. We also have veterans and their families looking for pension advice and stuff like that. We're doing that all the time.

As I said earlier, we work with the Legion with regard to that, because they have a pretty good program. It's actually better than ours. Like Mr. Davis mentioned, we're not associated with the Legion or anybody else. We are our own entity. We make our own rules. We decide what's best for us. Sometimes that's good and sometimes it's not, but we've always done community first. We can't get by without them. We have to have community. We have to have food banks, unfortunately. We do a lot of work with them.

• (1645)

Mr. Colin Carrie: One of the things I realized is how cost effective your clubs are in the community. Somebody mentioned that the fraud with CERB was billions of dollars. There was \$20 million put toward the Legions and service clubs.

You supply all these services and benefits to the community. You have year-round volunteers, but many people don't realize the service clubs are sometimes separate entities from the Legions as well.

Could you explain to anybody listening in, does your club receive any support, routinely, from the federal government?

Mr. Brian Wilkins: No, not at all.

In fact, if you remember the throne speech this year, there was no mention of service clubs. It was only the Legion that was mentioned. That came back to the Speaker of the House, and it was corrected. But that's the same attitude that a lot of Canadians have. You'll say the Navy Club, but what is that, and where is it? Everybody thinks Legion. Legions are a good thing, don't get me wrong, but if it wasn't for the navy and the ground forces, there wouldn't be a Legion. We all fought together, right?

As far as the impact would go, I can't imagine there not being all the other service clubs. As far as calling out the money with CERB, I was the one who stated there were a lot of problems with CERB. Just yesterday or the day before, it was mentioned on the news that \$636 million went to teenagers. Some of them were 15 or 16 years old, and they received CERB.

How are the authorities going to get that back? Are they going to go after their parents? Are they going to ignore it? Is the money going to be forgotten, like it was with federal and provincial inmates? How are they going to get the money back from them?

I find it very distressing that this kind of money was laid out, and possibly going to be written off. Yet, the service clubs are still here today fighting for some type of help. I don't quite understand this process.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next, we have Mr. Amos, for six minutes.

Mr. William Amos (Pontiac, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all of the witnesses. It is very appreciated.

I would echo Mr. Carrie's comment that this is a committee that is really focused on ensuring that we do right by Canada's veterans. We all share those values.

I want to focus my attention on the testimony of Mr. Thorne with respect to the Veterans Transition Network. I'd like to learn a bit more about some of the different services the organization provides province by province.

[*Translation*]

I would like to put my question to you in French to give you an opportunity to speak in that language, since I am a member from Quebec.

Do you provide services in Quebec? Are those services different?

• (1650)

Mr. Oliver Thorne: Thank you for putting this question to me in French.

I apologize in advance for my grammar. I'm sure it will be terrible. I will do my best.

Of course, we provide services in Quebec. Our expansion has been happening across Canada over the past eight years. In 2015, we provided the first program in Quebec. We currently have programs in nine Canadian provinces. The programs are the same in all the provinces. Their content is the same. We discuss the same topics and carry out the same activities, except that the programs are provided completely in French, of course. A coordinator based in Montreal ensures communication with veterans who want to participate in the program.

Providing the same quality of services to all veterans—be they anglophones, francophones, men or women—is a very important goal for our Canadian organization. It is especially important for us to reach that goal during our expansion in Canada.

The new program we created last year, during the pandemic, was actually available in Quebec.

Mr. William Amos: Thank you very much for your answer.

[*English*]

I also appreciate how you have a broad appreciation for the range of federal support programs that have been put out there. Obviously there's the \$20 million specifically for veterans organizations, but the wage subsidy is a huge one. I'm glad that you pointed that out.

With regard to your comments around the ECSF not being as helpful as it could have been, I'm very interested to hear what specifically your organization was asking for through that program. I understand that you got \$70,000.

I think that's an area of interest. I haven't heard that comment so far.

Mr. Oliver Thorne: Yes, absolutely.

Thank you for asking that question in English, because that would be significantly more difficult to answer in my broken French.

Specifically with the ECSF, as I said, I do think that looking... As a charitable organization, it seems to me that it was probably a very successful program for Canada's charitable sector as a whole. I think it was not well adapted to meet the needs specifically of veterans service organizations, for two reasons. The first, particularly in round one, was the way that the applications were structured. Because this money was disbursed through the community foundations, it was disbursed in very small, specific, regional pockets. We're talking about the Vancouver Foundation, Ottawa Community Foundation and Toronto Foundation.

We deliver programs that are province-specific, because registrations for psychologists and counsellors are province-specific. If we want to run a program in Ontario, then it's open to all veterans within Ontario, not only within the borders of Ottawa or Toronto.

However, those were questions that were specifically asked in the applications from the community foundations for the emergency community support fund. If we said, "Look, maybe of the people who are in the program only one or two of them will be within the boundaries of Ottawa", then all of a sudden that might have made our application not a good fit for the Ottawa community fund. Because of the way we deliver...and the geographical and regional realities of where veterans live, those applications and the way they were disbursed, particularly in round one, were not well adapted to how veterans organizations operate.

Am I out of time?

The Chair: Could you keep it under 10 seconds?

Mr. Oliver Thorne: Okay.

In round two, they had a national stream that was better suited to national organizations, but almost no money was given to veterans organizations in round two.

The Chair: Well done. Excellent.

Now we'll go over to MP Desilets, for six minutes, please.

● (1655)

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, respected colleagues.

I thank the witnesses for joining us and for answering our questions.

I would like to begin with Suzanne Le.

Ms. Le, we see on your organization's website that it is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. Congratulations on that! Unless I'm mistaken, your organization was founded in 2001.

I would like to know how your organization takes homeless women into account. Does it take them into account in the same way it does homeless male veterans?

[English]

Ms. Suzanne Le: If I'm to understand it correctly, you're asking me if I consider...regular homeless population to the homeless veteran population? Is that correct?

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I would like to know whether your organization takes into account homeless women as much as it does homeless men.

[English]

Ms. Suzanne Le: Thank you.

Veterans' House is open to both males and females. Our first offer that went out, on December 23, went to a female veteran who had been living in her car in the Legion parking lot since 2019. The Legion had certified her service.

Each unit is an independent living unit so that each person can live within their own space. They have their own washroom, their own little kitchenette and a bedroom. Then they have a lot of community space, where they can come together and create that unit...and also we can do a lot of programming. It is open to both males and females.

When it comes to men and women represented in the homeless population—and this is something you would know from the study that was done—female veterans make up about 3% to 10% of the homeless veteran population.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: That's very clear.

Are members of the LGBTQ2 community also taken into account and are they welcome in your organization?

[English]

Ms. Suzanne Le: Absolutely. We have a very open organization, very welcoming to LGBTQ, and we are aware that they might have very specific areas of concern and areas where maybe some of their trauma might be coming from within their veteran experience. That is being taken into account in our programming.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: That's great. I commend you for it.

An American study suggests that one of the good practices to use is the separation of homeless individuals by sex—in other words, keeping homeless men separate from homeless women.

Is that something you take into account?

● (1700)

[English]

Ms. Suzanne Le: No, each one gets their own unit. No one is bunking together. People have their own private space. Within the building, we have males and females together and that has to do with, one, creating a community; and two, we're talking about people who are coming from a military background. They have a bit of a different perspective in that it's more about that creation of the military unit, the brothers and sisters in arms, versus maybe a more civilian perspective. I would guess that the other study came from a civilian perspective.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I have one last question for you.

On your website, which is actually very well designed and very interesting, we can see that your communications are only in English.

Do you provide services in French?

[English]

Ms. Suzanne Le: Yes, all the services in the building and to our tenants are also offered in French. Right now, we do not have the resources to do translations on websites and such. It would be a tremendous amount of resources, which is something that's not within our budget ability at this moment in time. We do hope to be able to reach that capacity at some point in the future, but we can't afford it at this moment.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Up next, we have MP Blaney for six minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): To all of you, thank you for your testimony today. I represent 11 Legions in my riding. I know that during this time of increased uncertainty it has been very hard for many of them, and they've been so great at keeping me updated about what was happening. I think we all know that Legions and veterans' service organizations provide such a pivotal role to the community and I want to acknowledge everybody for the hard work they've done.

I know most recently, just talking about homelessness, one of the veterans in my riding, Bill Webb, has been working very closely with several Legions across Vancouver Island to try to put together a project and a plan to address homelessness for veterans in my riding. I'm incredibly impressed with the work he's doing and look forward to supporting that in whatever way I can.

Ms. Le, perhaps I could come to you first.

First of all, I don't agree with you. I've worked with many veterans, women veterans who have experienced military-specific sexual trauma who really feel the need to provide a more safe environment for themselves, so I don't know that it is just civilian research that talks about women specifically needing safe housing that may be women-specific.

I wonder whether you could speak to any research or work that your organization has done on sex and gender-based Canadian research to make sure that all the initiatives are safe and inclusive for all veterans.

Ms. Suzanne Le: There has been a good amount of research. For some women, this will not be a good environment, because we have serving military who will be coming in and out of the building in our community partnerships. For some women, the sight of a uniform is a trigger. Therefore, this is not a healthy environment for them.

We have 139 other units that are not Veterans' House that have different space for them that would be a better fit. Veterans' House is for people who will be very comfortable in this environment.

When we do an intake, every tenant comes in and is interviewed by our housing manager as well as the mental health supports worker. The kind of programming that happens in the house and the kinds of people who will be living in the house are explained to

them. They're taken on a tour of the building. Based on that, they are either made an offer or not made an offer. If we think this environment is an unhealthy fit for them, then we deny them the—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you. I think you've answered my question.

I want to point out that in the last Parliament, in the study we did around housing, we talked about how women veterans are one of the most increasing populations we see in veterans, so it's too bad there's an exclusive nature to the work you do.

I will go to Mr. Thorne. Thank you for your testimony today. I found it really informative. You talked about the ability for your organization to modify the program. I'm wondering if you can talk a little about what that looks like. As a member of Parliament who represents a more rural riding, I know sometimes we find the biggest challenge is getting people to a place where they can get the support and treatment they need.

I'm curious about how that's been modified.

• (1705)

Mr. Oliver Thorne: I'll compare and contrast our previous program and how we've modified the program for delivery during COVID.

The veterans transition program that we typically deliver, which we have been running for 20 years, is 10 days in total, but it's broken up into three workshops of four days, four days and two days, with roughly a two- to three-week separation between each workshop. That's constructed with the idea that the veterans are coming into the space, working on the challenges they're experiencing, developing skills and awarenesses, and then going home for two to three weeks to integrate those in their day-to-day life. The total duration of the program that we typically deliver is about four to six weeks.

The multiple instances of travel and the physical action interventions that we use on the program to address trauma are, again, not a good fit for COVID.

The delivery that we have adapted to is what we call the transition skills course. It's a single, five-day, in-person retreat. It's still delivered in person, but we've incorporated a COVID-19 protocol and safety plan, PPE that was provided by the Canadian Red Cross, and training to that effect as well. We've incorporated social distancing protocols into the delivery of the program.

Our typical program is a circle of 10 veterans and psychologists. It's now a bigger circle. We have protocols at the retreat centres so that meals are individual, taking precautions at every step to minimize contact among participants and among participants and staff.

In terms of the curriculum, the program has been adapted to address some of the challenges we're hearing about from veterans during the time in COVID. Obviously, many veterans are struggling with their transition or perhaps a traumatic event because of service.

I know I only have a minute here, so I'm going to try to go through this quickly.

A lot of their supports, informal or formal, have been reduced in terms of accessibility. They are at home, in close quarters with family, which is more challenging. We're working a lot around communication, emotional regulation and planning for the future. We've modified the curriculum to focus on that, because that's what we've heard from veterans that they're struggling with.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Yes, I've heard similar things.

I have only 10 seconds. When you say "the bigger circle", does that mean you have to get bigger space or rent that? Was that an added cost?

Mr. Oliver Thorne: Most of the spaces we typically use were able to accommodate us. We are seeing increased costs because there are fewer efficiencies, if you will, with this design of the program. Yes, costs have increased a bit.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now go over to MP Brassard, please.

Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to all our witnesses for being here today.

I want to go back to Mr. Thorne.

You mentioned something and I caught it briefly. You were concerned in large part with a contraction in veteran support services going forward. I understood that to be more broadly. We've heard concerns from the Legion, etc., about the closure of the Legions. You also mentioned something about an internal processing decision within Veterans Affairs to disallow funding for veterans, but you weren't specific on that particular part. I'm interested in hearing what that was.

Mr. Oliver Thorne: As I mentioned earlier in my brief introduction to VTN, we've been a registered service provider for Veterans Affairs Canada since 2013. Basically what that means is for veterans who attend our program through a claim with Veterans Affairs, or if their claim would cover an entitlement for our program to essentially be funded, then their participation is paid for by the department. It's a fee for service basically. It makes up in any given year about one-third of the clients who attend our programs. For the remaining two-thirds we raise the funding as a charitable organization to cover their costs to go into the program because either they don't have a Veterans Affairs claim, or perhaps their claim doesn't extend to cover that cost.

I think this is one of the roles that we play as a service provider specifically to Veterans Affairs Canada because we are reaching a segment of the population that is not engaging.

Mr. John Brassard: What reason were you given for this funding to be disallowed?

Mr. Oliver Thorne: Just that they have entered an internal review of the program. They flagged the new program for review. At the time that we launched the program we spoke to a number of people at Veterans Affairs, some people at Medavie, and they said as a registered service provider, which we were, we would be eligible to bill for this new program. We've had probably about 20 Veterans Affairs clients to through the program who have been funded, but just last week we were notified by somebody in the Manitoba office that the program has been flagged and they are now blanket

refusing all approvals until that review has taken place. We're seeing that response is being mirrored in other offices now because we are entering our 2021 program delivery and we're just hearing "no" from offices across Canada. The only thing we've been told is that it's under review and we're not sure why.

• (1710)

Mr. John Brassard: Okay.

I think there's more information that needs to come out on this but we don't have enough time in my line of questioning.

Mr. Davis, I want to talk to you. It's the 30th anniversary of the Gulf War. I want to thank you for your service. I know you represent a large group of Gulf War veterans. Speak to the impact that COVID is having on the group that you represent maybe a little bit more in depth.

Mr. Harold Davis: Thank you, sir.

COVID is having a big effect on a lot of them. During Christmas, for example, I was talking to three different veterans who because of COVID can't go out anymore. They have PTSD, high anxiety, and I'm trying to talk them off the ledge. That's where my Christmas was this year. COVID for my group of people, or veterans I should say, is affecting them, but in so many different ways. I have some guys who are watching every penny, I have some guys who are having a hard time just going out to get groceries if they can, or if they have to carry them in. I have other people who are having a hard time with some of their claims in trying to get through VAC before they have to make major decisions.

Mr. John Brassard: I know you and I have talked about that, and there's been a lot of movement in the United States with Veterans Affairs and other veterans government agencies around the world recognizing some of those claims. I know we only have about 45 seconds, so maybe talk to the difficulty in Persian Gulf Veterans getting their claims.

Mr. Harold Davis: To start with, Gulf War illness is not recognized by VAC. In many other countries it's starting, especially in the U.S. I keep sending the information and it's not really doing what it should be doing. The VAC sticks to its guns and says that it doesn't really exist. VAC treats individual ailments and that's great, but when you're talking to veterans who have been suffering for 30 years, the individual ailments now all roll into one ailment and they're having a really hard time with it. It's so hard for them to turn around and speak to anybody. Most of the people at VAC haven't got a clue because the Gulf War was over 30 years ago. Most of the Persian Gulf veterans have almost been forgotten on the world stage and within Canada itself. VAC tries to help in the ways it can help, but it is still falling short of what it can do for us.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we go for five minutes to MP Casey please.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to be directing my questions to the Multifaith Housing Initiative, but before I do, Mr. Thorne, this is my second tour of duty on this committee. When I was first on the committee in 2011 and 2012 we had the privilege of travelling and we visited the Veterans Transition Network. I got to meet Dr. Westwood and Mr. Laidler. In fact, as I open your web page, I see a photograph of our visit to your facility there with a couple of my colleagues who are no longer with us.

I remember at the time remarking how incredible the work was that was being done, and not only that but how scalable it was. I want to congratulate you, not having followed your organization in between, for the remarkable progress that you made. As I say, I'm going to address my questions to Ms. Le, but I have great admiration having seen what it came from and where you are now. If I get a chance to come back to you, I will.

Ms. Le, thank you very much for the work that you do and your presentation here today, and congratulations on the opening of the Veterans' House, I would say against pretty substantial odds. You talked about the support that you had been given in order for that to happen; I think you said \$6.5 million. I know that there is other funding available under the national housing strategy. Through the programs that are within your organization, have you been part of an application under the rapid housing initiative perchance? It seems to me that would be the sort of thing that would be aligned with the work you do.

• (1715)

Ms. Suzanne Le: The \$6.5 million did come under the national housing strategy, under the co-investment fund run by CMHC. The rapid housing money had very specific rules and timelines around it, and one of those rules was it could not be an already funded project. Veterans' House was automatically excluded from rapid housing money.

Mr. Sean Casey: Were you able to access the Canada emergency wage subsidy to cover some of the salaries through the pandemic?

Ms. Suzanne Le: We were able to access a very small amount, 10%, not 25%. Fundraised money doesn't necessarily count as income, so it makes it a little difficult when your organization is based on fundraising.

Mr. Sean Casey: You talked about wraparound supports. Can you talk a little more about that and whether there is a partnership with the federal government in connection with the delivery of those supports?

Ms. Suzanne Le: Veterans Affairs Canada has agreed to provide us with caseworker support for our tenants in the building. I'm going to give kudos here and a very happy wave to my Legion friends in front of me and my co-witnesses, because the Legion has come forward with \$100,000 a year to pay for the full-time mental health support worker in the building. That has been fantastic, to know we have that money and the mental health support worker. We also have the Legion doing work one on one with the tenants to help them make sure they're connected with all the services available to them through Veterans Affairs and make sure they get their Veterans Affairs card.

We have a group called Soldiers Helping Soldiers, serving military people, boots on the ground, and they will.... General Stu

Bearé is one of their patrons, so it might be known to some of you. They're going to be doing a peer mentoring service program for the tenants. As I said, we will have people in uniform in the building.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you, Ms. Le.

Mr. Thorne, you talked about the \$200,000 you received under the veterans organizations emergency support fund, and you said that the application experience was smooth. That runs counter to some of the other testimony we've heard. Can you elaborate a bit on that?

The Chair: Be very brief, please.

Mr. Oliver Thorne: Yes, absolutely.

I think I can elaborate. The experience was smooth compared to a lot of other applications, in particular, the ECSF. The advantage we have as an organization is that we have a dedicated grant writer and professional fundraiser. From our perspective as an organization that does this professionally, it was a smooth, simple process, but I can understand for those that perhaps don't have those resources, don't have the experience grant writing, it could be a challenging process.

I know I have just a couple of seconds, but I wanted to thank you, Mr. Casey, for your comments and echo that the Veterans Transition Network would not exist were it not for the Legion. It has been an integral part of piloting, developing and supporting the program for 20 years, our longest-standing donor. As much as I'm here to talk about my organization's experience, I have to highlight that it would not exist without the bedrock foundation of the Legion.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Thorne.

Now we'll move over to MP Desilets for two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Thorne, you alluded to the fact that you have received \$200,000 in emergency funding.

Can you tell us whether that meets your needs? More is always wanted, but does that minimally meet your needs during this pandemic?

Mr. Oliver Thorne: Thank you for the question, Mr. Desilets.

It meets our needs for the first six months of 2021. We began the year in a good financial position. We are ready to provide programs across Canada over the next six months, and we intend to do so.

• (1720)

[*English*]

I will switch to English; I apologize.

We are prepared and we have the demand to deliver a full suite of programs across Canada for the next six months. If the financial sector does continue to contract, if there is less money available, the CEWS is about to end, large funding organizations are telling us less money is going to be available in the next year and all our Veterans Affairs funding has effectively been cut.

If nothing on that front changes within the next six months, we will be in a very challenging position. We have the ability to forge ahead and deliver these programs because we're being asked to do so by veterans and we're going to do that, but we are going to have to reinvent ourselves and our financial situation again this year, as we did last year.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

I have a quick question for Mr. Davis and Mr. Wilkins.

How did the government set the funding level at \$14 million? Why did it not set it at \$20 million, for example, or a lower amount?

Before making this announcement, did the government consult you to find out what your needs are?

[English]

The Chair: You each have about 10 seconds.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Mr. Brian Wilkins: As far as the Navy Club is concerned, we found out about it three days before the application had to be put in, so we didn't have any time to prepare for anything. There was absolutely no mention prior to three days before.

Mr. Harold Davis: I echo that.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: We will now go over to MP Blaney, please, for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Mr. Thorne, I'm going to come back to you.

You talked about—Mr. Brassard also asked you about this—the funding from VAC that's going to be cut. From what I understand from your initial presentation, a third of the seats that you host are covered by that. It sounds like that's been cut completely.

I'm just wondering if there was a clear warning and a rationale. Are you still considered a Veterans Affairs service provider?

How many folks will lose their seat?

I have another one because I have such a short period of time. I saw on your website that you do have a COVID tiered peer support program. I'm wondering if that has any support from VAC as well.

Mr. Oliver Thorne: Yes, typically we aim to have a third of the veterans attending our programs covered by Veterans Affairs.

I talked earlier about the reality of charitable organizations. It's very difficult to convince people to give you funding to fund your staff, your rent or your Internet connection. The way we function as an organization is that with a third of our clients being Veterans Affairs clients, that funding is unrestricted. We can use it for any purpose we need. Typically, that's the funding that we dedicate to pay for our staff and our overhead.

The remaining two-thirds allows us to tell all of our donors that this money is supporting veterans directly and it is not being spent on our overhead. That's why it's so important.

We received no warning. As far as I understand, we're still a Veterans Affairs service provider, but not for the program that we've designed to run specifically during COVID. That is obviously a challenge.

Again, for the next six months no veterans will lose their seats, but that will change if we cannot find an alternative funding source or fix this with Veterans Affairs in the next six months. We're going to steam ahead, but it puts us at risk.

Finally, the tiered peer support program is not supported by Veterans Affairs directly. It is funded through a partnership with the Centre of Excellence on PTSD. We're currently developing that and rolling that out this year.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

Lastly, I'll come back to that Veterans Affairs service provider. You still don't know if you're included in that. If you are included in that still, will you be able to revise a different way of programming?

I ran a charity for over eight years, so I know a lot about those core funds. I appreciate you making that clear for the committee.

Mr. Oliver Thorne: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Seeback, please.

Mr. Kyle Seeback (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Mr. Thorne, you mentioned other offices. Are other programs being cut?

• (1725)

Mr. Oliver Thorne: Are you asking about programs within our organization?

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Yes.

Mr. Oliver Thorne: The core program that we deliver is, at first the VTP and now that five-day TSC. It is really our core offering, so that's really the only service that we deliver currently.

We are working on that new peer support intervention as well, but as of now that's our core programming. It's the only program to be cut, as it were. It seems for now it has been cut, or paused at least, by Veterans Affairs.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Thanks.

To any of the witnesses—because I know your statements were short and we're almost at the end of our time today—does anyone have anything that they want to add that they did not get a chance to add in their opening statements, which were very brief?

Mr. Harold Davis: I would like to say something here, please.

I've been listening to everybody talk here today and listening to where the questions are being directed. As I said in my opening statement, the smaller veterans groups that are not bricks and mortar have been almost totally ignored in this COVID-19 funding.

It's not right that these smaller groups... Some of the veterans out there don't want to be part of the Legion. They don't want to be part of other, different organizations. They're just the "mom-and-pop" organizations, as I call them, yet they're totally ignored as a group.

Of all the questions today, I didn't really hear one that said anything about the smaller groups out there and how they were being funded or anything.

That's just what I wanted to say. Thank you.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Mr. Davis, you did say that part of the challenge is the complexity of the programs, even if there are some that you can apply for.

Is that, again, because of the size of your organization? You don't have someone who is there to specifically look at and check every box and dot every "i" to apply for the programs that are out there.

Mr. Harold Davis: I heard today that we have grant writers, we have webmasters out there who take care and make all of these really nice web pages. The smaller groups don't have that luxury of having grant writers and webmasters, or can't afford to pay for all of these people who can do these jobs for us. We're all volunteers and our expertise is sometimes not in doing stuff like that.

I have a treasurer who is a serving member. He's trying to do the best he can. I have a vice-president who works on the civilian side. He tries to do the best he can, but we are not experts in the field. When our treasurer and our vice-president looked at all the process for applying for these grants, they saw that it was so complex for us, because we are a registered charity, but we're not at the point where we can hand out receipts for donations, because we can't afford that part of the CRA Act.

We have to rely on what we're doing, as it is, as the status quo. We can't answer all of these questions. We have the financial statements, but we don't have the big income tax filings that everybody else does.

For the little guys out there, the mom-and-pop veterans who work their tails off to try to help people out, they are overlooked very quickly, and I've just watched that here today. The bigger organizations, yes, they do great work, but there are some veterans out there who don't want anything to do with the big organizations. Of

the ones I am helping, a half to three-quarters of them won't even talk to the Legion.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Right.

Ms. Suzanne Le: Mr. Seeback, if I could take a moment, I would like to respond to Ms. Blaney's comment about Veterans' House being exclusive. Veterans' House is in no way exclusive to any one gender. It is open to all genders and all people who identify in any kind of gender.

The reality is, though, it is a place that is exclusive to veterans. You must have served and you have to be comfortable, in order to be in the building, with people in uniform coming into the building. If that is not a place of comfort for you, if that is going to do more harm than good, we do have other buildings and we have other units. We have 139 other units that I mentioned and we have supports that go into those buildings as well, and we will definitely house them and prioritize them, but this building is for a specific need.

Housing is a very complex issue and it will take complex responses to deal with it, and it requires a lot of tools in the tool box. Veterans' House is one tool that's in the tool box, and we need more. Maybe there will be, at some point in time, the need and demand and the ability for us to do a female-only space, but there would need to be the demand and the funding for it.

Thank you.

• (1730)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I see Mr. Wilkins has his hand up, but maybe we'll come back to you, sir.

Andy, you have a very short window for a question or two.

Mr. Andy Fillmore (Halifax, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I want to say thank you to all the witnesses as well for making time for us today.

Mr. Wilkins, I was listening to your making the point about the differences between Legions and service clubs. Here in Halifax we have three Legions and two service clubs and they all perform remarkably well. I've spent a lot of time at each one of them.

Mr. Ankrett, with your comment about the fish and chips night and the importance of alternate funding arrangements, I take your point that it's much more complicated than just fish and chips and it makes me think about turning to other creative sources of revenue.

One thing that was happening before the pandemic, at least in Nova Scotia, was that recruitment was tipping off and Legions and service clubs were having a hard time keeping their membership up. That was sort of a double-whammy.

I'm wondering if there is something the government could be helping with, perhaps a program around recruitment that would help to bring people back to the—

The Chair: A very brief answer, please.

Mr. Bob Ankrett: You have multiple issues here. You're covering Legions, you're covering service clubs, you're covering the guys coming back from Afghanistan and Kuwait. You're looking at huge issues. If you try to put them all into one basket, you won't get very many things done. You need subcommittees to look at different things, such as service clubs, Legions, housing, benefits, health care. You have to do it, and you have to do it soon.

Someone mentioned earlier that if you don't, from a financial point of view, you will lose all of those poppy funds that are into the millions of dollars across Canada that are put back into your community, whether it's hospitals or veterans who need wheelchairs that some of them can't afford, etc. You're going to lose that, but you've got 100 years of history here.

If anyone doubts me, go to a Remembrance Day, and look at the faces of the people in the crowd. That's Canada. You're going to lose that, and you're going to lose it on your watch, and you've lost some already. Whatever you're going to do, do it now. Do it quickly, because if you don't, they're gone.

The Chair: Mr. Wilkins, we're actually over time, but if you have one final point for us tonight, please go ahead.

Mr. Brian Wilkins: I was a civilian who served in Afghanistan. There are many civilians across Canada who also served over there. In the hospitality section, I actually drove far off the base. I fuelled up tanks and TLAVs, and stuff with dangerous jet fuel. When I came home, I had hearing loss from over there as a result of a rock-

et attack. There are many other civilians who have had problems when they've come home.

There are absolutely no programs available for us at all. I talked to Veterans Affairs. The first thing I was asked for was an ID number. I don't have a DND number, and I've actually been hung up on, because I've argued with the individual.

As a civilian who went over there, and put his life on the line to help our soldiers, I believe all the civilians across Canada should be recognized with different programs. Unfortunately, we're not.

You guys are all sitting here today, you're all MPs, maybe it's time that one of you guys decide that the civilians who were in every war that Canada has ever been in should be recognized.

The Chair: I want to take this opportunity to thank each and every one of you. This is the final meeting of this study. Each of you has contributed in a number of ways to help us with this issue.

I want to thank all my colleagues scattered all over Canada for staying on time, and getting in some really good questions that will hopefully result in a solid report that we will see in the coming days and weeks.

Thank you all very much. Thanks to all the technical people in Ottawa, the clerks and the translation folk, so that we can all be heard in this unique way.

The meeting is adjourned.

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