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• (1835)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 34 of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[English]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on Monday, October 3, 2022, the committee resumes its study on the national strategy for veterans employment after service.

[Translation]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, so members may participate remotely using the Zoom application.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I ask that you wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself.

Please keep in mind that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

In accordance with our routine motion, I wish to inform the committee that the witnesses completed the required connection testing prior to the meeting. I also want to let committee members know that my coloured cards are back today, so I will signal when you have a minute left and then when your time is up.

[English]

Yes, I said that myself, but I am going to be a little more strict on the time because I know members know the routine. Members are preparing questions, and they would like to ask questions of the witnesses, so I am going to be a bit more strict on the time in order to help. When I say it's over, be ready to....

[Translation]

Without further ado, please join me in welcoming our witnesses.

First, from the Canadian Corps of Commissionaires, we have retired Captain(N) Paul Guindon, chief executive officer, Commissionaires Ottawa, and retired Captain(N) Harry Harsch, chief of staff, Commissionaires National Office.

Also with us is Debbie Lowther, chief executive officer and co-founder, Veterans Emergency Transition Services.

Mr. Guindon, please go ahead. You have five minutes.

[English]

Please go ahead.

[Translation]

Captain(N) (Retired) Paul Guindon (Chief Executive Officer, Commissionaires Ottawa, Canadian Corps of Commissionaires): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Members of the committee, we appreciate the opportunity to appear before you to participate in your study on the national strategy for veteran employment after service.

[English]

Commissionaires has been employing veterans since 1925, when the Canadian Corps of Commissionaires was established to ensure that veterans returning from the European battlefield had work if they needed it. We have always understood the value, skill and experience of those ex-soldiers, sailors and aviators.

[Translation]

While the Corps of Commissionaires is often associated with guarding federal government infrastructure, our social mandate guides us to employ veterans in whatever capacity that best advantages them and their families.

The Corps of Commissionaires employs some 4,400 veterans at all levels, from security guards to CEOs, and has been the largest private employer of veterans for decades. We also have a national program for hiring military spouses, providing flexibility and job security even if they relocate every few years.

We recognize that improving the economic well-being and opportunities for veterans is about more than simply offering a veteran a job. It is about continually innovating and expanding the services we provide to our clients—so that we can offer more technical and highly specialized jobs to veterans and their families.

[English]

Beyond traditional security guarding, the spectrum of innovative employment offered to our commissionaires includes work in threat risk assessment, computerized monitoring and surveillance, outsourced police services and bylaw enforcement, comprehensive security training programs, security system installation, software and simulation solutions for the defence and public security sectors, cybersecurity and the operation of the largest criminal background check infrastructure in the country.

What makes us different is that we meet the unique needs and experiences of veterans by providing the military and RCMP culture and camaraderie that veterans do not find in civilian life. We are veterans serving veterans. Board directors and senior management are overwhelmingly veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces, the RCMP and police services.

The fact that we are led by veterans is a critical element in understanding the unique experiences of veterans and their employment needs as they transition to civilian life.

Over the years we have augmented that inherent understanding by conducting research surveys to better understand the needs of veteran commissionaires, as well as the broader veteran community. These surveys show that veterans join the commissionaires at various points in their lives. Many served in the armed forces for only a few years and then moved on to something else before joining the commissionaires. These veterans have no military or RCMP pension at all and rely on their wages to live. They have not always found a good match for their skills and interests. Frequently they are underemployed or unemployed when they come to us, so we offer a safety net. We also provide temporary employment for releasing military personnel until they find another job in the public or private sector.

That is all to say that our experience shows that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to employing veterans, simply because veterans have multiple needs in transition.

- (1840)

[Translation]

The Corps of Commissionaires offers many programs and services consistent with a national veteran employment strategy. We believe these offerings could be enhanced, and added to, with great benefit to Canada's veterans. We have several initiatives to support veterans and their families. We are prepared to step up and do even more.

[English]

As a not-for-profit, we are fully committed to serving our people. In fact, about 90% of our revenue goes to veteran employees in the form of wages and benefits.

We are also dedicated to supporting veterans' causes. Last year we donated over \$2.3 million to veterans' charities and causes, including getting homeless veterans off the street; respite programs for military parents, teens and children; and Canada-wide health care research for seniors and veterans. In the last decade we have donated over \$10 million.

[Translation]

We would welcome an opportunity to play a larger role and work with government in designing and implementing beneficial and innovative veteran employment services and programs.

[English]

Our bottom line is that any veteran who seeks employment will be hired.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Guindon. You stayed within your allotted time.

[English]

Now let's go to Ms. Lowther, for five minutes or less, please.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Debbie Lowther (Chief Executive Officer and Co-Founder, Veterans Emergency Transition Services): Mr. Chair and committee members, thank you for the invitation to speak with you this evening regarding a national strategy for veterans' employment after service.

At first I wasn't sure that I would accept the invitation, because I didn't feel I would have anything to contribute here today. In addition, I didn't think I knew enough about the employment programs and services already offered by Veterans Affairs Canada. When asking case managers about these programs, we receive little to no information, and it's usually conflicting information.

When I expressed my hesitance to my staff, who are on the front lines working with veterans, they felt that our challenges in finding accurate information regarding employment services for veterans are the exact reason I should attend, so here I am.

I watched the committee meeting on Monday with the officials from Veterans Affairs, which I found very interesting. They spoke about their services and initiatives around employment and career transition, which was an impressive list. However, it was the first time I had heard about many of the initiatives. For example, my staff and I were not aware that VAC had an entire veteran employment unit. We weren't aware that VAC had a "Hire Veterans" LinkedIn page. We weren't aware that VAC hosted a webinar series focused on employment opportunities for veterans, and we also were not aware that VAC had a one-stop job bank for veterans.

We are a national organization that supports veterans who are homeless, at risk of becoming homeless or otherwise in crisis. The majority of the veterans we support are referred to us by Veterans Affairs case managers. This means that we regularly speak to case managers from across the country, and they have yet to mention any of the initiatives that were talked about on Monday. If we asked 50 case managers about employment supports offered by VAC, we would receive 50 different answers.

The point I am trying to make is that it doesn't matter what significant initiatives and services VAC provides if veterans aren't aware of them. Most veterans rely on their case managers to be the experts on the benefits and services to which they may be entitled, but what if the case manager has a limited amount of knowledge of these benefits and services? Veterans might go to the VAC website to look for information, but in looking at the website myself, the information is vague and may leave a veteran with more questions than answers. Who answers those questions if the case managers aren't 100% knowledgeable about the suite of services available?

I am not trying to make it sound like all case managers are incompetent, because that certainly isn't the case. There are many outstanding case managers, but when we or the veterans we support ask questions and get a different answer every time, that indicates to me that something isn't working.

This committee heard on Monday that the webinar series that VAC hosted saw 2,500 people participate. We also heard that the HireVeterans.com LinkedIn page has 3,000 members; however, I don't recall hearing any numbers to support the success of those initiatives. How many veterans were able to gain employment as a result of those initiatives? The success of such initiatives must be measured to determine whether or not they are hitting the mark.

We've been talking about veterans' transition, of which career transition is a part, for such a long time now, and it seems there have been little more than baby steps taken to figure it out. I understand it's a complex issue, and no two veterans' experiences and situations are the same. An employment strategy or a strategy addressing transition overall can't just be a one-size-fits-all solution, but we have to start somewhere.

There is a saying that we see the world from where we sit, and from where we are sitting, despite efforts made by the department, many veterans—and even stakeholders like us—need to be better informed on benefits and services available from VAC. The same could be said for many case managers.

We are also seeing, as are many Canadians, that we are currently experiencing a labour shortage, so the time for a national strategy for veterans' employment after service is now.

I look forward to your questions.

• (1845)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Lowther, for your opening remarks.

[*Translation*]

I would also like to thank Mr. Guindon and Mr. Harsch for their service, as is our wont on the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

We will now move into questions and answers.

[*English*]

I invite Ms. Wagantall, for six minutes or less.

Please, Cathay Wagantall, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Thank you so much, Chair.

Thank you, all, for being here this evening. We're looking forward to questioning from this side of the House, but we're going to split that up.

Ms. Lowther, I'm going to ask you a number of questions, if that's possible.

You've mentioned that the majority of your referrals come directly from case managers within Veterans Affairs. I know you're national in scope. I've been to British Columbia. I see your amazing services here on Besserer, and of course you're in Halifax. You have a proven track record, and in fact you are doing so many referrals from VAC. Are you a recognized and preferred provider by VAC?

Ms. Debbie Lowther: No, we are not currently a registered service provider with VAC. We were at one point in time, but that status was removed at the end of the contract that we had. Now we receive our funding from the department through the veteran and family well-being fund. While that provides us with some funding, it does not mean we are recognized service providers.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: When did that contract end?

Ms. Debbie Lowther: It was in 2018.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Are you comfortable going into why it ended or what the potential is to become one of those registered providers again?

I know that's a significant opportunity for you as an organization of veterans helping veterans.

Ms. Debbie Lowther: We would love to be considered as service providers again.

When our contract ended, we were told by the minister at the time that the contract couldn't be continued because the government does not do sole-source contracts. That was the reason we were given for that contract ending.

We were told we would have to apply for our funding through the veteran and family well-being fund.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay, so there was not an opportunity not to be a sole-source contract?

How would you go about trying to access those funds?

What were you told regarding the potential to access funds?

• (1850)

Ms. Debbie Lowther: We have been told over the last several years that the department is working on it. They are trying to figure out a way to provide us with some sort of ongoing funding. Currently, applying for the funding on an ongoing basis from the veteran and family well-being fund is stressful for me, my staff, the volunteers and the veterans that we support. It would be nice to have a little more security as far as funding goes.

We're not asking for a lot, just enough to help provide us with the finances we need to support the veterans who are being referred to us by the department.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: In that process, are you basically looking for more stable funding that wouldn't require constant requesting?

Ms. Debbie Lowther: Yes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I remember you being here some time ago, and you talked about the veterans emergency fund, which was set up by the government—a million dollars to assist them in emergency circumstances. They were having trouble getting it out the door.

Can you tell me a bit about how you were requested to assist in that way, and how much of that you did?

Ms. Debbie Lowther: The veterans emergency fund allows for veterans to receive up to \$2,500 a year for things in an emergency situation, to help maintain safety and shelter. The issue we have with the veterans emergency fund is that it's not consistently administered across the country. The case managers administer it themselves.

If there are 400 case managers, they each interpret the policy differently. We have some case managers who will tell a veteran that they don't qualify. Then the next case manager will approve it for the exact same thing for another veteran. There's a real lack of consistency there.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: On the funding side of things, we heard recently in the news about a lot of money, a billion dollars being given back to the government from VAC. Part of the explanation is that they always ask for more than they need, not knowing how many programs are going to be approached.

That's a whopping amount of money.

Ms. Debbie Lowther: It is a big amount of money. The first thing that popped into my head when I read that article was that the billion dollars would go a long way to clear up the backlog. That money could be spent on that.

Honestly, hearing that all of that money was returned was a bit disheartening for us because, as I've said, we've been told regularly that the department is looking at ongoing funding. They just have to figure out where it's going to come from. To find out that the money was there is a bit disheartening.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: All right.

Basically you're saying that you've been told to wait and wait because they are looking for funding, and yet, at the same time, there is funding here. Perhaps it's designated a little differently, but obviously there's that need there to enable our veterans organizations to do the work they need to do.

Just briefly, then, this is about a comprehensive employment strategy, which sounds good and is good, but then again, it's all about the ability to succeed in rolling this out.

What is your feeling about the education and training benefit, and the opportunities it provides to be prepared to be employed?

Ms. Debbie Lowther: It's a great benefit for the veterans who know about it. Again, as I mentioned in my remarks, a lot of veterans aren't aware of what they're entitled to, and the education training benefit is no different. We had a veteran last week who was go-

ing to school. He was three terms into a five-term program, and he was doing it through employment insurance because he had no idea about the education benefit—

The Chair: I'm so sorry. Thank you, Ms. Lowther.

I have to go now to Mr. Darrell Samson, for six minutes or less, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Thank you for being with us here today as we work through how we can improve strategies and supports for veterans. Everybody needs a purpose, and if they would like a job, that's probably a very important way of supporting them. I thank you all for being here.

[Translation]

I have two very quick questions, Mr. Guindon.

First, what would you say the challenges are when it comes to hiring veterans?

• (1855)

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: Of course, the demographic realities we are seeing right now are a factor, but they go back quite a few years. When I joined the Royal Canadian Navy in 1971, the Canadian Armed Forces had twice as many troops as they do now, which meant that a lot more members retired every year. That number is significantly lower today. We are nevertheless able to hire a high percentage of those veterans.

One of the other problems we have—and Ms. Lowther touched on this—is how difficult it can be to reach out to veterans at the source. It would probably be a good idea to provide a better gateway to the Department of National Defence so that we and all employers could promote our services to future veterans at the department level.

[English]

Mr. Darrell Samson: Then, Ms. Lowther, if you don't mind, I have a few questions. Before I start, I want to thank you and Jim, of course, and all your volunteers for the work you do across the country. It's extremely important. I don't know too many organizations that can support people 24/7, and I know we were able to reach out a number of times to help veterans through your organization, so I thank you very much for that.

You work a lot with homelessness and homeless individual veterans. Do you feel with those individuals that it's a job that's missing? What are their skills? What can we do? You're dealing with individuals who are in crisis, so can you describe what background they're coming with and how long they've been out, in general, on average? What are the supports that we could put out for them?

Ms. Debbie Lowther: For the veterans we support, we've analyzed the stats that we keep, and we've learned that the average amount of time that passes from the time a veteran releases from the military to their first episode of homelessness is about 10 years. The majority of veterans who come to us for assistance have served 10 years or less, so they don't have access to a lot of benefits unless they're seriously injured.

Most of the veterans who come to us are from the combat and arms trade. They do have transferable skills, but sometimes they're not recognized by employers, and the veterans themselves don't think their skills are transferrable. If they're infantry, they can't see how that translates to a civilian position.

The majority of the veterans that we support are underemployed, I would say. Employment is not necessarily what led them to become homeless. In some cases, yes, it is, but that's not the most common reason.

Mr. Darrell Samson: What resources or tools do you think we could support them with to help them?

Ms. Debbie Lowther: There are some tools and resources out there, but veterans just aren't really aware of them. The education and training benefit is a really good benefit, as I said, as long as the veterans know about it. Unfortunately, they're not always told by their case managers about these benefits. We've had case managers say to us, "Well, he didn't ask us about it." Well, you don't ask about what you don't know about.

Mr. Darrell Samson: That being said, I think we started the program in 2018, and the uptake was very slow, but at the last meeting it was said that we had an uptake of about 2,200 this year, which is outstanding. When you look at the numbers, you see that there were a couple of hundred two years ago. Somewhere there has been some good work done—a good uptake—or some salesmanship on that front.

We all have a responsibility to educate ourselves around what programs can match with some of the challenges out there. I truly believe that if you have a purpose in life, if you have a job, if you want to work, and you're able to facilitate that process, it's really big, but for the challenging individuals you probably deal with, it is more challenging on that front.

• (1900)

[Translation]

Mr. Guindon, which of your employment programs seems to interest veterans the most? How do you promote your offerings to attract veterans?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: We use just about anything that involves word-of-mouth advertising.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Guindon.

We will now go to the second vice-chair, Luc Desilets, for six minutes.

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

Good evening to my fellow members and to our witnesses.

Mr. Guindon and Mr. Harsch, thank you for your service.

Mr. Guindon, the Canadian Corps of Commissionaires has been around since 1925, I believe. The organization really took off in a number of cities, including Montreal, where the corps provided services. Does it still?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: Absolutely. The Canadian Corps of Commissionaires has 15 divisions across the country, so from St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, to Victoria, British Columbia. We had two divisions in Quebec, but they merged, so there's only one left. The Montreal division is actually one of our largest. It's similar to the one in Ottawa, with the same number of people.

Mr. Luc Desilets: If I'm not mistaken, you have 4,500 people working for your organization. Do they all work in security?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: In Montreal?

Mr. Luc Desilets: In Montreal or anywhere.

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: They all work in security.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Great. Why do you think veterans do so well in security positions?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: Organization, leadership, management, training, and the ability to give and follow orders are all in the DNA of former members of the armed forces. It's the same with police officers. It's part of who we are.

Mr. Luc Desilets: What do you know about the national strategy that Veterans Affairs Canada expects to bring forward? Are you in contact with the department? Have you had contact? Has the department reached out to you?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: For a few years now, we have been in regular contact with the Department of Veterans Affairs. In the past, the vast majority of veterans we worked with did not have dealings with the department because they didn't have any medical issues or require support. They were looking for a job. Only 20% of veterans were also in need of support through the department.

For that reason, we weren't really plugged into the department. However, now that the department is focusing more and more on employment, not just on service delivery, it's looking to us for help.

Mr. Luc Desilets: What would you recommend Veterans Affairs Canada do to help veterans transition successfully to civilian life?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: That's a very good question, but I don't think Veterans Affairs Canada is best suited to answer that. I think you should put that question to the Canadian Armed Forces. I know for a fact that the armed forces has programs in place to help members with the transition.

Mr. Luc Desilets: A lot of us have questions about the fact that Veterans Affairs Canada has very few veterans in its workforce. We all have a hard time wrapping our heads around that.

It does a veteran good to speak to another veteran, someone who understands their situation, someone who's been on missions, for instance.

Do you know why so few veterans work at Veterans Affairs Canada?

• (1905)

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: That's an excellent question, but I don't think I'm the best person to answer that.

When the department posts jobs, it needs to encourage veterans to apply and recognize the skills they bring to the table. That said, more and more members of the department's workforce are veterans.

The difference between Veterans Affairs Canada and its U.S. counterpart is that the United States has set targets.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Do you think the department has targets?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: I can't answer that.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: Actually, I could answer, but it's not for me to say.

Mr. Luc Desilets: What would you say?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: It's just my impression, so I don't know whether it's true or not. For that reason, I prefer not to answer.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Very well.

Thank you, Mr. Guindon.

I'm done, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

Mr. Guindon, thank you for choosing your words so carefully.

[English]

To close the first round of questions, I invite Ms. Rachel Blaney to go ahead for six minutes or less.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Chair. Through you, of course, I thank all the folks who are here today testifying. It's been very informative so far.

I'm going to come to you first, Mr. Guindon. You talked in your testimony about the culture that is there and how it feels very familiar to veterans and retired RCMP who come to work there. It sounds as though people settle into the job fairly quickly. I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about what that culture is and why you feel it's so appealing. That would be helpful.

The other part of the question is around numbers. How many veterans do you have working and how many RCMP? If you have any numbers around those things, that would also be very helpful.

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: Well, first, on the culture side of things, the armed forces are a multitude of small families from coast to coast that make this big family at the end of the day. The commissionaires are very similar to that. Veterans come with this understanding that teamwork is very important, that it is crucial. In fact, not only do veterans enjoy the environment, but non-veterans in our workforce become very accustomed to this way of thinking of things, looking at things and delivering as a team and not as an individual.

In terms of the number of veterans, as I said in my opening remarks, we have about 4,400, which is down quite a bit from what we had a decade or two or three ago, and as I said, there are reasons

for that. However, we seem to have stabilized and we recruit about 700 a year. We knew we had this demographic bubble—that was recognized about 18 years ago—and that a lot of veterans were reaching retirement from us.

As an aside, when veterans join the corps, the vast majority will work for many years. In fact, about a month ago I celebrated a commissionaire who had just completed his 50th year with the commissionaires. That's after having served three and a half years in the military, and he's only 72 years old, so he's been working since he was 17 or 18. We have a recognition program, which is also part of our culture. We recognize employees. We recognize longevity. We recently launched a national program under which we recognize the best supervisor and the best guard across the country.

There are a multitude of things that create this environment that is very similar to the military. It's no big secret that the corps is led overwhelmingly by veterans as well, so we bring that to the table.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you. That was very helpful.

We've also heard from research that some of the veterans who have the greatest challenges finding employment are newer veterans. You've talked about this particular group. They don't have as much experience and they don't bring a pension with them, so sometimes there can be challenges there. There are also challenges for those who are medically released and for women veterans.

Could you talk a little about what you think it is that leads to so much success in bringing brand new veterans in, and how that assists. I'm also wondering if you have any other information specifically around medically released veterans and women veterans.

• (1910)

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: I'll pass the mike to our chief of staff here, but before I do that I'll just say that you're quite right. Roughly 70% of veterans do not have a pension, because the average retirement age is 36 years old.

Captain(N) (Retired) Harry Harsch (Chief of Staff, Commissionaires National Office, Canadian Corps of Commissionaires): The other part of the question is that a number of veterans don't join just after their military service. Many of them will leave the service, and we see that a lot. You get a young corporal who does four or five years and says, "It was great, but it's time to move on. I'm going to go do something else." Then they do something else until they can't do it anymore, and that's often when they come to us, in their late 40s to late 50s. Because they served for only four or five years, they don't qualify for a pension. These are the folks who are the most important to us, because we provide a living for them and their families.

To get to the point of your question, though, for a number of veterans who leave the armed forces—which can be at different stages, including some who leave after 20, 25 or 30 years—they have a pension, so the work itself isn't as important, as Paul mentioned earlier on, as the ability to work with other veterans and to have that sense of camaraderie, belonging and mission.

Young veterans who are leaving are another group that we're trying to recruit. We spoke earlier about the veteran education and training benefit. One of our offerings is that individuals who take advantage of that can come to us for part-time work while they're studying, and we will go out of our way to make sure we give them enough shifts to help them along the way. Speaking of the benefit, two of my staff have taken advantage of the benefit. One of them is actually using it right now, in partnership with us, to get an MBA.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, sir.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Harsch.

[*Translation*]

We are now starting the second round of questions. I would ask everyone to please stick to their allotted time.

[*English*]

Therefore, the last two members, Mr. Dowdall and Ms. Valdez, won't be able to ask questions in this round, but maybe they will with the next panel.

Now I'd like to invite the first VP of the committee, Mr. Blake Richards, for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Thank you to all three of you for being here.

Ms. Lowther, I hope I'll have some time to get to a question or two for you, but if I don't, I want to thank you for the work you do with veterans. It certainly is appreciated. We appreciate your being here, and I hope I'll have a chance.

I want to start with our friends from the commissionaires. You mentioned something in your opening remarks. Ms. Blaney asked about it, but I don't think I heard the response, because she asked you a multi-part question. You said you have 4,400 veterans employed currently. Is that correct? I don't know what your total workforce is at the commissionaires, but what percentage of that is veterans?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: Our workforce from coast to coast is approximately 21,000 to 22,000. As I said, we employ about 4,400 veterans.

Mr. Blake Richards: It's about 25% then, roughly?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: Yes. Keep in mind that this may seem like a low ratio, but veterans work for us in many places, in fact, in about 1,200 communities, many of which do not have a federal building to work in.

Mr. Blake Richards: Right.

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: For example, about 10 years ago in Kirkland Lake we had three veterans who needed work. We found a contract but we needed about eight or nine people. Well, we had to hire non-veterans as well to service that contract in order help the veterans in need.

Mr. Blake Richards: Gotcha.

You brought up the federal buildings. I know you have the right of first refusal for all federal buildings in terms of the security contracts. That's what you were referencing, I think, when you men-

tioned the federal buildings. I think it's supposed to be that 60% of the employees there are veterans. Is that right? What percentage is it in terms of the federal building themselves?

• (1915)

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: First of all, we are not in all federal buildings. The government has a multitude of contractual vehicles. Yes, we have a contract called the NMSO, but there are others. For example, CRA went to a tender, as did CATSA and you name it. There's a huge amount of security work that is not done through that vehicle.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. I understand. I appreciate that.

What percentage of those you employ in those security positions in the federal buildings are veterans?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: In the federal government, it's not about the number of veterans; it's about hours of work, and it's about 38% or so.

Mr. Blake Richards: It's about 38%.

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: Keep in mind, for example, that this past quarter, 1.3 million hours were worked by veterans. In all of those 1.3 million hours, 450,000 hours were worked in commercial settings, because there's no federal facility.

Mr. Blake Richards: Understood.

It's appreciated, you know, that we want to see veterans employed where they can be and where they are. Obviously, not being able to meet that 60% means you're not getting to the goal you would like to reach. I'm sure you would like that to be at 100% if it could be.

I'm just curious: What are some of the challenges you're facing with respect to reaching that 60%? Is that an unrealistic target? Is there something you think you can do better to get to that 60%? What are the challenges you're facing with respect to being able to employ more veterans in those roles?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: It's not easy to recruit, of course, as I said earlier. You asked whether that is an unrealistic target.

It sure is. It's not needed. It doesn't bring anything to veteran employment at all. The two are mutually exclusive.

Mr. Blake Richards: Just to follow up on that, is that number increasing or decreasing for you now? Is there anything you're doing to try to bring that number up? Can you give us some examples of things you're doing to try to do that?

Obviously, I'm sure we all want to see as many veterans as possible employed. I know you do. That's what your organization is all about.

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: Yes, the percentage has stabilized, as we expected, for many reasons. The demographic bubble has sort of deflated now. The economy is such that more people are looking for work. Also, we are recruiting extensively, using all available recruiting means you can think of.

Mr. Blake Richards: You mentioned that you have a program for military spouses. Can you tell us a little more about that and what it entails? How many spouses do you have employed currently?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: It's also family members of veterans.

Do you have those numbers?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Harry Harsch: I do.

As it stands right now, we have 180 veteran spouses. This figure is low, because we just started to try to get to the bottom of how many veteran spouses we actually have.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm sorry we didn't get a chance to finish the thoughts on that, but maybe we'll get a moment or two after the panel is done.

The Chair: Yes. Thank you.

Now I would like to invite MP Sean Casey for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

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

I'm going to start with you, Ms. Lowther.

In July 2019 your organization was awarded \$840,000 from the veteran and family well-being fund to support your operations for a Beacon of Hope program. I have a couple of questions.

First of all, could you tell us a bit about the Beacon of Hope program?

Second, are there lessons to be learned from that program that should be incorporated into a national veterans hiring strategy?

Ms. Debbie Lowther: The Beacon of Hope program is actually just what we do every day. Unfortunately for us, when we're applying for funding, we are asked for a project or a program. Our entire organization is a project, so the Beacon of Hope is basically what we do regularly: supporting veterans to help maintain their housing, to get into new housing or during any other forms of crisis. In doing that, we have had the opportunity to realize that there are a lot of veterans who have the ability to work, but they have difficulty getting there. There are organizations out there that help. There is Forces@WORK. There's Helmets to Hardhats.

They don't work for every veteran. It's important to realize that no two veterans are the same, so the strategy is going to be complex and difficult, and I know that, but I think there should be a component of the strategy to address those who are maybe not less employable but who are more difficult to employ. There should be something included for them.

• (1920)

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you.

I hope at some point in this we're going to have a chance to talk more about the Helmets to Hardhats program. Where I come from, in Prince Edward Island, we have 1,200 vacant construction jobs and a vacancy rate that is one-half of the national average. Getting

more people into the construction trades from whatever corner we can look to, including veterans, is something that's a win-win.

I'm going to go to the gentlemen from the commissionaires. You recently published an article called "What veterans want in their post-service career". Can you tell us a bit about that?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Harry Harsch: Last year, commissionaires partnered with an independent research company, Environics, as you no doubt saw, to learn about the characteristics, values and motivations of veterans. When it comes to making career choices, the research found that most veterans prioritize work-life balance, the opportunity to help others and stability. Being involved in work that makes a difference was the common theme in the interviews with veterans, and that certainly was what drew me personally to commissionaires as well. This is something that veterans have valued in their military career and something they're looking for as they retire.

This research was helpful for us in the sense that it helped answer questions about the types of employment veterans are looking for, what's important to them and how we can continue to meet the evolving employment needs of veterans.

I could go on. I would be happy to share the report with you, if that's something you'd find interesting. It was very illuminating with respect to the different categories of veterans and those who are seeking leadership positions versus those who are seeking a more stable, quieter life. That actually mirrors life in the military very closely as well.

Mr. Sean Casey: Our job at this committee is to make recommendations to the government in terms of what should be incorporated into a strategy. That's why we've invited you to help inform that. Can you go to the next step? What is it that we can take from your research, and how can we take it, to maximize the impact of a veterans hiring strategy?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Harry Harsch: I think—and this is consistent with what Debbie has been saying as well—that there is no "one size fits all" when it comes to veterans. Veterans are very diverse. They're very unique. You can categorize them to a point, but in my view the strategy has to be incredibly flexible and has to understand the point at which veterans become veterans, because there's a big difference.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harsch.

Thank you, Mr. Casey.

[Translation]

The next two turns will be very short. Each member will have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Richards, did you have a question?

[English]

Mr. Blake Richards: In response to Mr. Casey's question, the commissionaires indicated that they would be happy to share the report. I'm just going to suggest this. Could you send it to the clerk of the committee so it can be distributed to all members? It would be really helpful to us in our studies.

[Translation]

The Chair: Very good. Thank you.

Over to you, Mr. Desilets. You have two and a half minutes.

• (1925)

Mr. Luc Desilets: It was two minutes before, and now, it's two and a half minutes. That's wonderful, Mr. Chair. On we go.

My question for the witnesses is similar to the one Mr. Casey just asked. I'd like them to take turns answering.

Once we've had all six of our two-hour meetings on a national strategy for veterans employment after service, our job will be to write a report. What would you like to see in the report we draft at the end of the study? What would help your organizations?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: What would help the Canadian Corps of Commissionaires provide more jobs to veterans is better information sharing, which would ensure that armed forces members nearing retirement had the information they needed to make better choices.

Mr. Luc Desilets: While they are still in the Canadian Armed Forces?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: Absolutely.

Mr. Luc Desilets: That doesn't happen now? It doesn't happen enough. Is that correct?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Paul Guindon: In my humble opinion, it doesn't happen enough. Currently, it's tough for us to reach out to men and women in uniform because we have limited access, even when we know they are retiring soon.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I see.

Mr. Harsch, are there any recommendations you would like to see in our report?

[English]

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Harry Harsch: Much to the previous question, I think it's understanding veterans and inherently knowing or trying to find out what they want. Certainly we have been trying to be as innovative as we can be to offer different opportunities beyond just traditional security guarding, because that's what most veterans, but not all, are looking for. Some veterans are looking for a quiet life, and again it gets back to the point that veterans are very diverse.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Ms. Lowther, do you have anything to add quickly, before the chair cuts us off?

What would you like to see in the committee's report on a national strategy for veterans employment after service?

[English]

Ms. Debbie Lowther: I have to agree with what Harry said, that the strategy would have to be very flexible, because veterans come in all shapes and sizes. We've supported veterans who are indigenous, they're African Canadian, they're from the LGBTQ community, so the military has the same demographics as Canadians. Just picture trying to make an employment strategy that fits all Canadians. It would be the same sort of thing. It needs to be quite flexible because the needs of every veteran are different.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

I invite Ms. Blaney, for two minutes and a half please, to close this.

Go ahead.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

I'm going to come to you, Ms. Lowther.

One of the things I heard clearly from your testimony and some of the responses you gave is that perhaps one of the best ways to move forward is to have a clearer system of VAC providing information to service providers and veterans about the resources and services that they have.

I'll ask you two questions. The first is how you would see that working more effectively. The second is how your organization measures success in the work that you do in terms of connecting veterans with employment.

Ms. Debbie Lowther: The way we measure success is that basically, when it comes to employment, we refer veterans to different organizations. I mentioned Forces@WORK and Helmets to Hardhats, but to be perfectly honest, the most success we have had with getting some of our veterans employed has been with the commissionaires, because they are flexible and are willing to meet the needs of different veterans. That's been our biggest measurement of success, I guess.

As far as getting the information out there goes, we currently do receive emails from VAC stakeholder engagement, but we have never received emails regarding what the department is doing around these career transition programs and services. I think putting those out to all stakeholders would be helpful.

I also think that when veterans make their first contact with Veterans Affairs, they should be advised about all benefits and services that are available, whether the case manager thinks that they apply to that veteran or not. As I said, if veterans don't know about the services, they don't know what to ask. If it were standard protocol right from the get-go that they were advised about all the benefits and services, I think that would be very beneficial.

• (1930)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I have only a few seconds left, so I'll give those back to the committee, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Ms. Blaney.

[*Translation*]

That concludes our first panel.

On behalf of myself and the members of the committee, I want to thank you for your participation.

Joining us from the Canadian Corps of Commissionaires were retired Captain(N) Paul Guindon, chief executive officer, Commissionaires Ottawa, and retired Captain(N) Harry Harsch, chief of staff, Commissionaires National Office.

[*English*]

From the Veterans Emergency Transition Services, VETS Canada, we had Ms. Debbie Lowther, chief executive officer and co-founder.

Thank you so much.

We're going to take a short break of two minutes in order to invite the next panel to come forward. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The meeting is suspended.

• (1930) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1940)

The Chair: We are back.

With us now is the second panel.

[*English*]

I remind our witnesses that before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name, and if you are on video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself.

Now I'd like to welcome our witnesses, but I'd like to inform the committee that we have a little problem with the Zoom connection for one of our witnesses. For the interpreters, we're going to try, because I think he has five minutes of opening remarks. If it doesn't work, I will invite him to either send us his opening remarks or try to come at another time to physically be with us.

First of all we have, from the Army, Navy and Air Force Veterans in Canada, ANAVETS, Mr. Gordon MacEachern, dominion vice president and chairman of the advocacy committee.

From the Royal Canadian Legion, we have Carolyn Hughes, director, veteran services at national headquarters.

I'd like to start with you on Zoom, Mr. Gordon MacEachern. The floor is yours for five minutes. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Gordon MacEachern (Dominion Vice President and Advocacy Committee Chairman, Army, Navy and Air Force Veterans in Canada): Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I would like to thank you for inviting me here today. My name is Gordon MacEachern. I'm the newly appointed chair of the advocacy committee for the Army, Navy and Air Force Veterans in Canada.

Since the new veterans charter was enacted in 2006, there have been many contracts and programs aimed at assisting veterans in transition to civilian jobs.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: On a point of order, Chair, it's not working.

The Chair: Mr. MacEachern, I'm so sorry. The interpreters are having a lot of problems hearing you well enough to do their job.

You can stay and listen to the committee questions and answers and, as I said, you can also send your opening remarks to our clerk.

I know members can hear, but the interpreters cannot translate. That's why we are so sorry. It's important for us to do this, because we don't want them to get injured.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Is it the mike that's the problem?

The Chair: No, it's the Internet connection. The Internet connection has...it's disabled. I'm so sorry, but I have no choice.

I'd like to invite Ms. Carolyn Hughes.

Just wait one second. There is a point of order.

• (1945)

Mr. Blake Richards: Mr. Chair, would it be possible, if members can hear, that the witness could give his testimony and then it could be translated and submitted in both languages after the fact?

The Chair: No. It has to be simultaneous.

Mr. Blake Richards: It would be available in both languages that way.

The Chair: No. It has to be simultaneous for colleagues.

Mr. Blake Richards: Well, could he be offered the chance to submit a brief that could then be translated, so that we could at least get his testimony that way?

The Chair: Do you mean right now?

Mr. Blake Richards: Well, what I mean is he could submit a brief and then it could be submitted to the committee.

The Chair: Okay, yes, and if it's not translated, we will translate that and distribute it to our members.

[See appendix—Remarks by Gordon MacEachern]

I'd like to invite Ms. Carolyn Hughes to go ahead for five minutes or less, for opening remarks.

Ms. Carolyn Hughes (Director, Veterans Services, National Headquarters, The Royal Canadian Legion): Honourable chairman and members of the parliamentary Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, it is a pleasure to appear in front of your committee again on behalf of our 250,000 members and their families.

As you mentioned, I'm the director of veterans services at the national headquarters of the Legion, and I am also a medically released military health care administrator. I have been assisting veterans, including still-serving members, those who have retired and their families for over 16 years now, in various roles in and out of uniform.

Since 1926, the Legion has been assisting veterans and their families with representation for disability benefits and appeals and for treatment. Our 27 professional and government security-cleared command service officers and assistants are located across the country and provide free assistance to thousands of veterans and their families every year.

We often hear their fears about employment post service, their ability to contribute to their families' finances, and their confusion as to the next steps to take. Therefore, we can speak confidently and with credibility on this subject.

First, the education and training benefit announced in budget 2017 helps veterans to achieve their education and employment goals to position themselves to be more competitively employable after service. This benefit has been well received by veterans. However, the government can do better.

The government recently renewed a contract for \$10.3 million with Agilec to continue to help military members transition into civilian work after leaving the military. Despite their having assisted veterans for the past five years, there is no public data about the number of veterans they have helped or whether their program has been successful, whether it is satisfying their needs and whether it is doing what it was mandated to do. There's not enough data out there yet to speak on that.

In 2015, when Parliament passed the Veterans Hiring Act, to amend the Public Service Employment Act with respect to priority hiring, the average age of military members who were medically released was about 37 years of age. The act mandated that they be given the highest level of priority in the public service. It has recently been reported that Veterans Affairs does not have the specific number of veterans it has hired. Indeed, we have also not heard any detail regarding how many veterans have been hired as a priority in other government departments.

The federal government public service is vast and has the capacity to hire many veterans in a variety of roles across departments. Now, at over seven years since the act was mandated, there is no data that we are aware of with respect to how effective the act has been nationwide in terms of hiring medically released veterans across the government.

It is important that all government departments acknowledge veterans. They have served our country with honour, and the majority expected to have a full career and to retire later in life. They are now struggling to find employment at an age at which they had no idea they would be unemployed, and they deserve better. It would be helpful to have this information to help determine where improvements can be made, whether new strategies should be implemented and, essentially, how effective it is.

Mr. Chairman, we would like to thank you for the opportunity to make this presentation, and I would be happy to take questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Hughes, for your opening remarks.

We're going to start the first round of questions. I'd like to invite one of our colleagues, MP Fraser Tolmie, to go ahead for six minutes.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate getting the time to speak with these panellists.

I'd like to say thank you very much for what both of you do, Mr. MacEachern and Ms. Hughes.

I'm sorry about the technical issues, Mr. MacEachern. I was actually looking forward to hearing your presentation. I believe both organizations serve very well those who have served our country. I'd like to explore that a bit more and get your thoughts on some of the things that have been transpiring recently in the news and within Veterans Affairs itself.

Ms. Hughes, I'll start with you. Obviously the Royal Canadian Legion plays an important role for vets. Where do you see that your organization intersects with Veterans Affairs and can help those who are looking for employment? Where do you see your organization best helping Veterans Affairs in that role?

• (1950)

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: Well, without more data, it's really hard to say where there are improvements to be made.

Regarding how we work together, we have partnerships with a lot of the transition centres, and we're there to help with disability claims. We also interact and help in the other ways that we can.

When I hear about a job across the country, whether it's in one of our provincial commands or here at Dominion command in Ottawa, I always send that information out to the transition centres to see if there's anybody who would like to have a job with the Legion. We have employed very many veterans. There are four that I know of just from the transition centre here in Ottawa.

We do hire veterans, and it would be nice to see what the government could do and how it's working so far.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Thank you, Ms. Hughes.

One of the issues we've seen for veterans trying to get care after service is that data, information, seems to be lost. Is that what you're talking about, that you're not able to get data from Veterans Affairs itself?

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: We've never asked, to be honest, but in the news lately they've been saying that records have not been kept on the number of veterans who actually were successfully hired at Veterans Affairs, and I have heard of none in other government departments. That's regarding the Veterans Hiring Act.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: This was actually not a question I had before, but could you explain to me what transition centres are? Those are new to me.

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: Transition centres are a joint collaboration between Veterans Affairs and the CAF. They have changed names several times, so I'll just refer to what they were in the past. In the past, they were basically just for ill and injured military members as they transitioned out of the military and became civilians. Now they're open to all veterans. They're a stop on their way out of the military where they can get help, whether that is to get in touch with a case manager, to put in disability claims or to make sure their pensions are straightened out when they're going to get out of the military. They're sort of one-stop shops. Everything is there for questions to be asked and answers to be gotten.

Basically, right now, there are only two or three across the country, but they're planning on expanding them right across, on all the major bases. In the past they were on every base, but the services weren't as extensive as they are now.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Thank you.

Obviously, as you pointed out, in the media there has been growing concern with MAID, and there are poor service standards for delivering for vets who are looking for care afterwards. Now we're dealing with jobs and trying to get employment for vets afterwards. Recently we've been hearing about \$1 billion of funds that have not been disbursed to vets who are waiting for service.

What are your thoughts on those concerns? Are there any other concerns you have, or do those nail what we're dealing with?

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: With respect to the issues regarding MAID, we have been watching very closely for the outcome of the RCMP investigation, and we have our ear open for any other complaints we may hear.

I personally have not been contacted with any more complaints. I have put the word out to all my service officers across the country that if they hear from a veteran complaining or indicating that he or she was offered that, they should get in touch with me right away. I would know about that if any of our service officers had been approached.

• (1955)

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: When you say "any more", do you mean you heard about some beforehand? Are there other ones—

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: No, there were just the ones in the news.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Thank you for that clarification.

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: Regarding the.... I've lost my train of thought here.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: It was on the \$1 billion and poor service standards.

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: What was your other question?

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: There was MAID, the billion dollars, poor service standards and jobs. The list keeps growing. We could be here for a while.

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: Okay. On the billion dollars that was not spent, our president put out a statement asking why that money hadn't been spent and saying that we would like to know what programs maybe didn't receive the funding they should have.

Why couldn't that money have been transferred to other areas of the department in which veterans need more help, such as the backlog and things like that? Veterans have a lot of programs and benefits, so we could be talking about that for hours.

The Chair: Thank you so much. I'll have to stop you right here.

I invite Mrs. Rechie Valdez to go ahead for six minutes.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also want to thank the witnesses for joining us. I too was looking forward to speaking with Mr. MacEachern.

Through you, Mr. Chair, I'll direct the questions to Ms. Hughes.

In my riding of Mississauga—Streetsville we have Branch 139, and I really commend all the work that the Royal Canadian Legion does for our veterans in the larger community. Thank you so much for all that you do.

February is Black History Month. Can you share how the Legion supports under-represented veterans when it comes to their transition back to civilian life?

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: For us, a veteran is a veteran is a veteran. We make no distinction between race, sex or gender: A veteran is a veteran. We treat them all the same, even so far as to say whether they're a U.K. veteran or an American veteran. We help all our allied veterans, sometimes in different ways because of the policies in government.

I know we will be having some media releases, but that's not really my department at work. We have a marketing and media section that does that.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you.

I had the opportunity to meet with the Legion on my most recent trip to the Yukon. What I'm curious about hearing from your perspective is more around what you have been hearing from veterans across all the different provinces. Are they going through similar challenges when it comes to employment and their transition back? If you have any insights, I'd love to hear about that.

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: The difficulty, I find, is just knowing where the jobs are. Some of them have been in the military for 20 years. That's been their whole life. They've never had to look for another job, so some guidance, maybe something similar to a case manager, like an employment guide.... I'm not sure exactly what the new contract does and how far in depth they go with helping veterans, but I know that if somebody has just gotten out of the military, it would help them with that—not just with their skills transfer, but to know where to go, to know how to do an interview, to practise. There are different things like that.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: We heard just recently, in the previous panel, about the need for the national employment strategy to be flexible. What other recommendations can you put forward to our committee that can assist with their transition?

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: It definitely needs to be flexible. The needs of each veteran can be unique. Some need a bit of help, and some need a greater amount of help. Also, it needs to keep in mind diversity, as you mentioned. We need to understand the challenges that different veterans experience. They face different challenges in the workplace, as Canadians do generally—different genders, races and minorities—and it's no different for the military when they release. They have the additional thing that they've been in the military for a very long time, and sometimes they don't have the skill sets or the knowledge about where to go for a job.

I also would like to see the progress they're making regularly reported back, and more communication for the general public about what the programs actually entail. I'm sure they're made aware when a veteran gets in touch with a third party contact, but it would be nice to know in the general public, because it would make more veterans aware of the benefits of this. Also, in the transition interview, I would love to see that discussed in detail. When I had my transition interview, it was probably about 15 minutes long. I was handed a whole bunch of paper, and that was about it. I know it's come some way since that time, because I work with the transition groups, but more could be done between the CAF and Veterans Affairs.

• (2000)

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you. That's really good feedback.

In this committee, we've had the privilege of hearing from spouses and family members of veterans. Is there anything you can include for supports for them? We're talking about being inclusive here. What recommendations can you put forward?

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: Is that for spouses and survivors?

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Yes, just family members.

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: Yes, for support for their loved ones, it would be to make sure they go and get the help they need, because a lot of veterans are proud, and they will not go out or want to show any vulnerability or weakness. It's not a weakness to reach out for help—don't get me wrong on that—but it's perceived that way in some cases, when you're told to be tough and to do your job and not complain. It's different when you get out of the military. You have to be your own advocate, and that's where families can step in.

I see a lot of couples who come to my office for help. It's generally the wife who will come—in some cases, it is the husband who is the spouse of a military woman—but it's often the spouses. You watch their faces and you can tell when something's not honest with the veteran—you know, whether they're trying to downplay an injury or say, “Oh, I don't need that benefit.” Sometimes you have to shame them a bit and say, “Well, maybe you don't need that right now, but you have to think about your spouse in the future. If something happens to you today, maybe your spouse can benefit from something.”

I think it's about taking families into consideration. They're the ones behind the veteran, supporting them every day, day in and day out, 24-7, and they could be given greater support on their own for that.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you, Mrs. Hughes.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

The next six minutes are yours, Mr. Desilets. Go ahead.

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

Ms. Hughes, the last time you were here, my assistant told me that my tone may have been a bit aggressive, so I want to start by apologizing.

[*English*]

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: I'm sorry to interrupt, but the translation's not working.

The Chair: Mrs. Hughes, you have to select not the floor audio or translation, but English on your computer, and you will be able to.... Let's do a test.

[*Translation*]

Please start over, Mr. Desilets.

Mr. Luc Desilets: It was hard to say what I said, Mr. Chair. I can't start over.

I'm kidding, of course, Ms. Hughes. I wanted to apologize because the last time you were before the committee, my assistant told me that I may not have taken the nicest tone and that I may have been somewhat aggressive in my attempts to get answers.

[*English*]

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: It's no problem. I didn't find it aggressive.

[*Translation*]

M. Luc Desilets: I appreciate your response. Thank you.

Other than your appearance today, were you consulted on a national strategy for veterans employment after service? Did the department ask you for your opinion?

[*English*]

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: They did. I spoke with, I believe, Matthew Mann. He works at Veterans Affairs, and we had a consultation last year, just a conversation, and then I attended a stakeholder engagement on the subject of veteran hiring.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I'm glad to hear it.

What's your impression or perception of the strategy the department wants to put in place? What might it look like? What would you like to say on the subject?

[*English*]

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: I'm not sure, actually. I haven't seen the strategy in its totality yet. It was still being worked on the last time I saw anything on it. I think the important thing is communication and getting it out there and, if there are problems with it, making sure we're finding out about them and correcting them.

I haven't actually seen the strategy, so I can't speak to the final product.

• (2005)

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: All right.

When you say communication is the important thing, does that mean that there isn't any communication now?

[English]

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: There is some communication, but I think more information can always be beneficial to veterans. Sometimes you have to say things in different manners, because not everybody is computer savvy and wants to hear things through the My VAC account or emails. Some people need to hear things in person from case managers. I think the more ways we can get the word out to veterans, the better.

When we hear about the benefits of programs, we will also put that out there in our social media and on our website. For example, the mental health benefit that came out not too long ago was a great initiative by Veterans Affairs, and I'm still finding veterans who do not know about it. They're still asking who's going to pay for their treatment while they're waiting for a decision.

There needs to be constant communication. There's never enough. That's all I can say.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I quite agree.

Clearly, some of the biases out there can prevent employers from hiring veterans. Would you say the main or only way to overcome that is to provide employers with information and raise awareness among veterans, or do you think other measures are needed?

[English]

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: There definitely needs to be awareness raised among them, and perhaps some trials. I don't have the answer for that, because it's such a vast area out there that you're talking about in terms of employers. It could be a small company. It could be a large company. It could be an individual owner hiring a veteran, so it's really hard to say how to get over that prejudice, but I think the third party contract should be able to help with that, if what they're saying they're responsible for is going to happen.

For example, I know they're doing outreach to a lot of different companies and seeing about hiring veterans, so I'm hoping they're also educating them at the same time. I know departments like Veterans Affairs and National Defence are well aware of veterans—they've hired them for many years—and know what they've done in their service. I'm hoping all government departments can be educated about that, because there are some jobs out there that are transferable between departments. It's not just Veterans Affairs or DND that can hire veterans. I think it needs to be widespread.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: You talked about hiring veterans. In the past few days, the committee learned that the Department of Veterans Affairs' workforce included very few veterans. Is that the sense you have as well?

[English]

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: I've read the article. About the news article, I can't speak to the details as to whether they're accurate, honestly.

Could they do better? Of course—

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Whether they're accurate or not, how do you explain that the department has hired so few veterans?

A veteran would always prefer to deal with someone who knows a bit about what they've been through. Obviously, Veterans Affairs Canada would do well to have a whole lot more veterans working there as agents. That would help and support veterans.

[English]

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: Yes, I'd like more research done into that and why they haven't been hired. It could be a combination of things.

I'm not defending the department, but are there location problems? We know that a lot of jobs are in Charlottetown and Ottawa. Are there are other locations where there just maybe are not Veterans Affairs departments, and veterans cannot get jobs there? So—

• (2010)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hughes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney, the floor is yours for six minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much, Chair.

I thank you for your testimony. I appreciate that you're all on your own in dealing with all of us today. Hopefully, you have some water there to help you through this.

I have a couple of questions.

We've seen from the research that there are different groups of veterans who are struggling, particularly in terms of employment. The top three that I have in mind are those who are medically released, women veterans and veterans who have served for a short period of time. Those seem to be particularly vulnerable groups.

There have been some recommendations through this process that the government and VAC are still going through. They did "Let's Talk Veterans", and they're on the second stage and taking in that information. I'm wondering if you feel there should be a specific outreach and targeted approach to talking to these veterans who seem to have slower outcomes, struggle financially a lot more and are not getting to the next step that we would like to see veterans get to.

With your many years of expertise and knowledge, I'm wondering if you think there should be a more targeted approach to making sure those voices are heard, and whether whatever system is put in place by VAC really includes strategies that will enhance their opportunities.

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: Regarding the medically released, if the priority hiring actually worked the way it should, more veterans who are medically released would be hired. As to women, I can't speak to why there's a lower number of them, but I am attending the women veterans forum on February 16, and I will raise that topic there to see if maybe there's something in that organization that we can look at from that angle too.

The veterans with a short period of service are always the most difficult to help. When there's a severe injury, it's easy, because it's easy to see. They get the help through Veterans Affairs, and they're entitled to different benefits, but when veterans leave the forces after three or maybe six years, maybe they too have an injury. Maybe they have a mental health injury, and they just never identified it before they left the military. That happens quite often.

It's harder for them, I think, to get back into the system to get help, because they've been away from the military. They're not dealing with VAC, so they're kind of outside.... That's where we try to catch them also, just to make sure our services are aware of them and our services are out there, because we can be the conduit to get them into Veterans Affairs and to OSISS and other benefits. They are always a challenge.

What comes to mind for me, too, are the reserve forces. There were many of them who went to Afghanistan. They came back and basically went back to their civilian jobs and were kind of forgotten about. Those are the ones who are really hard to get to in terms of outreach.

I can tell you some sad stories. I remember a young veteran who had been to Afghanistan three times as a reservist, and who came home and got into trouble with the law and with alcohol. That's how he came across my desk. Somebody knew of me and said to him, "You need to go and see her and get the help you need." It was sad. At that time, that young soldier was younger than my kids. It broke my heart. There are still some of those who are being lost. Not only are they not getting back to work or getting gainful employment, but some of them are not getting the treatment they need.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

We've also heard some testimony that when veterans and their loved ones go to get services and supports, even to service providers, they're not being provided the resources and services that VAC has. We heard testimony earlier today that there were services that VAC was overseeing in terms of connecting veterans with employment, but none of the case managers had informed the people who were working with veterans to provide support. That was concerning to me.

I'm just wondering, in terms of going through this process, whether you feel that it would be effective if that were a little more streamlined and, I would say, just based on my work with veterans, repetitive, so that they would hear it multiple times? Depending on the day and the level of trauma or the concern, they might not be able to absorb that information, but if they hear about it regularly, just so they can consider it, that might assist them in accessing those programs later on.

I would just love to hear your thoughts on that.

• (2015)

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: Yes, absolutely. The more repetition and methods of delivery, the better. Often, when I sit and talk to a veteran, I try to explain the different benefits they may be eligible for and the disabilities they might want to apply for. A lot of people still don't know the conditions for which they may be eligible to apply for benefits.

After I sit with them and talk to them about these different things, I send them an email saying, "These are the things we talked about. When you're ready to discuss them in more detail, give me a call." Often there's too much information all at once, but if they have it in writing, they can look at it at a later time, when they are in a better frame of mind or when they are with their spouse or another family member who could help them go over the details. I often include attachments.

It's a lot of information, but it's a resource for them to use as I help them through different things.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we go to MP Blake Richards for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

I'm going to start by apologizing to you, Ms. Hughes. We get only certain opportunities to speak in committee, and I have a motion I need to move related to something, so I apologize to you that I'm going to have to do that in the spot in which we would have had a chance to chat. You and I have had a chance to chat about this briefly before, so I hope you'll forgive me for that.

I hope we can pass the motion quickly, and then we'll be able to come back to you and have a few more opportunities to chat with you. I hope that will happen.

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: That's okay.

Mr. Blake Richards: I have two motions related to the documents we received on January 26. I'm going to move one of them, but before I do that I'm going to give notice of the other one. I didn't have it translated in time the other day, so I'll give notice of it now, and I can move it at a future date.

I'll read it into the record, and we can provide it to the clerks to distribute to the committee.

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(1)(a), the committee order that Veterans Affairs Canada provide and, if necessary, create a transcript of the recorded telephone conversation of July 21, 2022 (providing for the redaction of any personal information that would identify a veteran), referred to in the document referred to on page 230 of the documents submitted to the committee on January 26, 2023.

I'd also like to move the following motion:

That the committee:

(a) Recognize that Veterans Affairs Canada did not provide all the documents ordered according to the following motion, adopted on December 12, 2022:

—and then I have the text of the motion that was adopted, which can be referred back to, and then—

(b) Demand that all briefing notes, memos, emails and text or other electronic messages from Veterans Affairs Canada officials prepared for or sent to the Minister of Veterans Affairs regarding medical assistance in dying, or MAID, including related to the internal investigation into the matter, be provided to the committee within seven calendar days of the adoption of this motion.

You'll note, Mr. Chair and other members of the committee, that part (b) simply mirrors exactly the first portion of the motion we passed back on January 26. I suspect that nobody in this committee would have any disagreement with the motion, because we all agreed to it in the past. Unfortunately, it wasn't complied with entirely. I think some misunderstanding or miscommunication may have occurred, so I'm not blaming anybody at Veterans Affairs. I think it was an honest mistake, but it was a mistake, and the documents weren't all provided.

What we're asking for is just the rest of the documents. I think they apply to the date range in the second part of the motion, which is January 1, 2019 to December 7, 2022. Obviously, there was no limitation on that portion of the motion, so we're asking for the documents that would be outside that range.

You'll note that I've given a very short time frame, seven days. That's mainly because they should have provided them before, and I think that needs to be recognized. As a result, it should be done quickly. However, I'll also point out that it's quite unlikely there was any communication about medical assistance in dying prior to January 1, 2019, within Veterans Affairs. I would think that if any existed before that, it would be pretty limited, so we'd be talking about a pretty small date range—basically everything after December 7 last year. There shouldn't be a lot of records or require a lot of effort, but it is something that I think is important to this committee. We can see in the documents that there are some email chains, for example, that have been cut off. Obviously it would be important for the committee to be able to see the remainder of those chains.

I move that motion. I think it's pretty self-explanatory, and I'll leave it at that. Hopefully we can just vote on it and get the rest of the documents the committee has already asked for anyway. All we're doing is asking that this be followed through with. Hopefully we can pass it and get back to Ms. Hughes.

• (2020)

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Richards.

I'm sorry also, Ms. Hughes. We have to discuss this motion.

I'm open for debate.

Are there any interventions?

Mr. Casey, go ahead, please, and after that will be Mr. Samson.

Mr. Sean Casey: Mr. Richards indicated that there may have been some misunderstanding. That's certainly borne out by the document that was produced, in which the department indicated that it had received assurance or some information from the clerk that the date limit referred to in part (b) of the motion was also applicable to part (a).

I think it's incumbent upon us to hear from the clerk as to exactly what the communication was between the clerk and the people col-

lecting the documents. It matters to me in terms of the tone of the motion.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Casey.

I know the clerk has an answer for that.

Please, Ms. Dallaire.

[*Translation*]

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Aurée Dallaire): The committee adopted the motion on December 12. On December 14, the department contacted me to ask what the deadline was for section a. Since I hadn't received any instructions from the committee on the matter, I asked the chair, and he decided to make the deadline the same for sections a and b, in other words, use the deadline in section b for section a, as well. I got back to the department the same day with the chair's suggestion.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. I'd like to finish with Mr. Casey.

Is that clear?

Mr. Sean Casey: I understood her to say that it came from you.

The Chair: Excuse me. You understand that...?

Mr. Sean Casey: I understood her to say that it came from you.

The Chair: Well, as she said, I discussed it with her. When you ask for documents, you have to specify the date and how long.... The minister was dealing with that. I said that this was the time of interest.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you.

The Chair: You're welcome.

Before I go to Mr. Richards, it's Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you, Chair.

I'm going to touch on the tone of the motion. We're making the assumption that Veterans Affairs did not produce something that we asked of them. Based on the information that was provided, Veterans Affairs provided exactly the information that was asked for, based on the interpretation that was left there.

If we changed the contextualization of the motion, then I could support it. It's obvious in my readings here that Veterans Affairs didn't do anything on purpose, and the hours they spent through the Christmas holidays preparing all these documents.... If you had been more specific in your first part of the motion—or if we had, as a committee, because we all voted for it—then we could have expected to get all the information. Based on what was submitted through a motion, however, and the interpretation that was given to them, it's obvious that Veterans Affairs did what they understood was the requirement.

I feel that the opening comment about recognizing that Veterans Affairs did not provide the documents.... They provided the documents that they understood they had to provide. That's very important, I believe, to be fair to everyone around the table who voted for that motion.

• (2025)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Samson.

Mr. Richards, you have the floor.

Mr. Blake Richards: I just wanted to address the comment around tone. I was aware of the context when I drafted the motion, because I'd had that conversation.

My attempt here was to not throw anybody under the bus. Since I now have to address it, I think the chair made a mistake in his interpretation, and therefore provided that advice to Veterans Affairs.

This was an attempt to provide a factual statement. They didn't provide all the documents. I'm not saying it's their fault that they didn't provide all the documents. I'm not saying they intentionally didn't provide all the documents. It's just a factual statement. All the documents were not provided to the committee.

I'm open to suggestions, if you think there's something that would make that more clear. There's no malice intended here. I'm very open to that, because that's not the point. The point is to get the information.

I just didn't want to throw anybody under the bus—the chair, or anybody else for that matter. It was simply an intention to state the fact that the documents weren't provided. You have to state that fact. Otherwise the motion doesn't make sense.

That's all it is. There was no attempt to place blame on Veterans Affairs. If you think there's something in there that does, I'm very open to hearing an amendment that would remove any doubt about that. The point is that we just want all the documents.

Mr. Darrell Samson: With all due respect, I think you threw Veterans Affairs under the bus. If I worked for Veterans Affairs and I read that, I would feel personally that I didn't deliver publicly.

Mr. Blake Richards: That's amended.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Yes, that's amended. That's what I'm saying. I think the best way around that is to say that the intent of paragraph a. of motion 1 was.... Then there's the date and so on.

I know how hard they worked to produce all of this throughout the holidays. I would like to try to work together as a team to make that happen.

Thank you.

Mr. Blake Richards: If I might make a suggestion, we could take Veterans Affairs right out of it, then. It was not an attempt on my part to do that. I can assure you of that.

We could just say “recognizing that the committee did not receive all the documents ordered according to the following motion”. That's not saying who was to blame or why it didn't happen. It's just saying “recognizing that the committee did not receive all the documents ordered”, etc.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Recognizing that the committee did not specify the dates or whatever, then. It comes to the same thing.

Mr. Blake Richards: We did specify the dates. It's just that the chair misunderstood.

Mr. Darrell Samson: We didn't specify the date of the 18th.

The Chair: Yes. There is a back and—

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm open to something else, but I'm just trying to take Veterans Affairs out of it. I'm open to whatever....

The Chair: There is a back-and-forth, so now I would like to listen to the arguments of Mrs. Wagantall, please.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you, Chair.

I think the lesson to be learned here is that when a motion is put forward and there's some ambiguity, it needs to be taken back to the person who presented the motion, to ask, “What was the intent here?”, because I feel that in this circumstance it was taken advantage of. I'm being really honest here.

The reality is that we need to make an adjustment here, because it didn't go through the proper process, I believe. Let's simply change it to sound appropriate. The truth of the matter is that there was no date. There was no date, so, “Give all the information you have,” would be my interpretation of that. There was a change. I would encourage us to do that.

The Chair: I will respond to that, but now I would like to invite Ms. Blaney to speak about it.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I just want to note, as a person who always keeps time, that we're at 12 and a half minutes now, and I'm a little frustrated that we have somebody who's a witness here, and she gets to watch us do our work. Maybe we could find another way to be more respectful to our witnesses. I want to put that on the record.

I also want to thank the clerk for trying to figure out what we wanted and her hard work to try to clarify that. I think we should always remember that people are always patiently working behind us without any partisan views, just doing their work. I want to acknowledge that.

I have no problem with changing the tone. I hope we can get this through and out the door, so we can get on to other business that is really important.

I know there are members of this committee who have been waiting a long time for this study to get done, so let's get on with it.

I would recommend, if there's a change in tone wanted by Mr. Samson, that he give us something, so that we can get on with this.

● (2030)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

Sean, before you go, just to let you know, in the motion we have in front of us, like I said, at the first paragraph we are talking about “all briefing notes, memos, emails” and text or electronics being given to the committee “within 45 days”.

The minister asked, “How long would you like me to go back?”, and so forth. That was the discussion. Maybe if we didn't tell them to keep the second date, between January and December, maybe we will receive anything.... It's about the same thing. If we look at this motion right now, in paragraph (b) we ask for “briefing notes, memos” and everything, and “within seven calendar days”, but they have to have that information and it has to be translated, so even though here...maybe they will come back to us and ask, “Seven days to give that, is it reasonable?” That's why we are discussing the motion.

Go ahead, Mr. Casey.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have an amendment to propose to the motion that I think will get us all to the place where we want to be, but before I introduce the amendment I will say that there's a presumption here that Veterans Affairs has not produced all the documents. Mr. Richards indicates that it's likely that there are very few documents that fall outside the date range. I would suggest that it's also possible that there are none, and that they have produced all the documents. On the suggestion that they haven't produced all of them, maybe it's true and maybe it's not, but it shouldn't be taken as true. That's one of the problems I have with the tone.

The amendment I would propose is that the motion, starting with the word “Recognize” and ending at “December 12”—those are the first two lines before the quote—be deleted and replaced with the following: “Whereas Veterans Affairs had reason to believe that the entire request for documents made by the committee in its motion of December 12, 2022 was subject to the date range contained in paragraph (b) of the motion, specifically January 1, 2019 to December 7, 2022”.

I also propose that the motion be further amended by deleting everything inside the quotes and going right to paragraph (b), and that the word “demand” be replaced with the word “order”.

If the amendment is accepted, the motion would read:

Whereas Veterans Affairs Canada had reason to believe that the entire request for documents made by the committee in its motion of December 12, 2022 was subject to the date range contained in paragraph (b) of the motion, specifically January 1, 2019 to December 7, 2022; that the committee order that all briefing notes, memos, emails, text or other electronic messages from Veterans Affairs Canada officials prepared for or sent to the Minister of Veterans Affairs regarding medical assistance in dying, or MAID, including related to the internal investigation into the matter, be provided to the committee within seven calendar days of the adoption of the motion.

I think this takes account of the possibility that there are no documents, and it takes some of the rocks out of the snowball.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Casey. It's a very long one, so let's see....

Go ahead, Mr. Desilets.

[*Translation*]

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

The clock is ticking and our witness is still waiting. It doesn't seem like we'll be able to finish questioning the witnesses. We are dealing with a motion, and a second one is coming. I will have comments.

Would it be possible to let Ms. Hughes take her leave and thank her? We could bring the meeting to an end.

• (2035)

The Chair: I quite agree, Mr. Desilets. Let's conclude this panel.

Ms. Hughes, thank you for appearing before the committee. As a reminder, you are the director of veterans services at the Royal Canadian Legion, national headquarters.

[*English*]

I imagine Mr. Gordon MacEachern is still on the line. What I would suggest is that he send us his opening remarks. We will translate them, but I will ask members to table a motion if they want to have the opening remarks...if they want the analysts to take consideration of the opening remarks. We can do it next week, you know. We'll discuss that too.

Ms. Hughes, thank you so much.

We will continue with our members here and see you next time. Thank you so much.

Ms. Carolyn Hughes: Thank you very much for having me here.

The Chair: Its our pleasure.

Mr. Richards, I know that we don't have a copy of the motion presented by Sean Casey, so how would you like—

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm comfortable going to a vote on the amendment, and I'm willing to accept it.

The Chair: Okay. That's perfect.

Would anyone like to discuss the motion?

[*Translation*]

Seeing no further comments, I'm going to call the vote on the amendment. The clerk still hasn't received a copy of the motion, but it will be handed out later.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0)

The Chair: Now we are voting on the motion as amended.

(Motion as amended agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Richards.

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards: We indicated that we needed a motion to be able to have the briefing be considered testimony, so I move the motion that we allow the brief of—

The Chair: Gordon MacEachern to be taken as testimony.

Do we all agree?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Do you see the time?

I'd like to tell you that for next week, on Monday, we have two witnesses in the afternoon and no one yet...because the three that we have are unavailable. That's why, for the last hour of our meeting next week, we can have what you want in committee business.

Go ahead, Mr. Richards.

• (2040)

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

I mentioned this earlier, and I know there are other members of the committee on both sides who believe this would be a good witness for the study. I think it's called the National Association of Career Colleges. They have some good information about programs they have in place for veterans.

However, the unique and interesting thing they have—which I haven't heard from anybody else that we've heard from yet, and it is a new and fairly novel thing to me—is programs to assist with training for veterans' spouses as well. This is recognizing that they face a lot of the same challenges that veterans do, being moved around the country, having employment interrupted and things....

I think they would be a very good witness to have, if we don't have anybody. They told me they could come on very short notice, so perhaps we can invite them for the second hour of the meeting.

Mr. Darrell Samson: We would agree as well. I visited the college last year. It's an exceptional story. I meant to invite them, but we missed the deadlines.

Absolutely, let's bring them in.

The Chair: Okay. That's great.

We will deal with that. If not, maybe we will have an hour for committee business on Monday, because we have to plan our workload.

[*Translation*]

Thank you to the interpreters and all the technicians, as well as the analysts and clerks.

The floor is yours, Mr. Desilets.

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

I always feel terrible when we argue amongst ourselves like that. It wasn't improper or uncivilized, but instead of doing it in front of a witness, we could go in camera for the discussion, or perhaps the motion could be put forward once we've finished with the witnesses. Isn't there some procedure that would allow for that?

Procedure isn't my strong suit, but Mr. Casey may have an answer for us.

The Chair: Mr. Desilets, I was going to ask the clerk about that.

It's not a matter of procedure. The committee can do what it likes. Members can make all sorts of comments, just as they can move to adjourn debate in the middle of a discussion. As long as the motion was put on notice 24 or 48 hours prior, as procedure dictates, it's fine. Members have the right to—

Mr. Luc Desilets: If I want to propose a motion that the committee will want to discuss, as was the case today, can I do it at the end of my turn?

The Chair: Yes, but procedurally, if you put a motion on notice, you have to wait until the next meeting to debate it.

If a motion has already been put on notice, however, it can be debated at any time. That doesn't prevent a member from putting forward a motion to adjourn debate in order to carry on the discussion with the witnesses.

We'll discuss it.

Thank you everyone. The meeting is adjourned.

Speaking Notes
ANAVETS PRESENTATION TO ACVA COMMITTEE
ON CAREER TRANSITION AND VETERAN EMPLOYMENT (2
FEBRUARY 2023)

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee;

I would like to thank you for inviting me here today. My name is Gord MacEachern and I am the newly appointed chair of the advocacy committee for The Army, Navy & Air Force Veterans in Canada, or ANAVETS as it is more commonly known.

Since the New Veterans Charter was enacted in 2006 there have been many contracts and programs aimed at assisting Veterans transition to civilian jobs. Initially there was the Job Placement Program in 2007 which was aimed at providing job finding assistance, job search training and career counselling. It was replaced by 2012 to direct reimbursement of up to \$1000.00 for Veterans to hire their own companies to provide the same support. In 2016 Economic and Social Development Canada (ESDC) contracted Canada Company who created the MET and MET Spouse programs to complement the assistance offered by Veterans Affairs. It included a job bank for Veterans and Employers and developed relationships with over 200 employers nationwide. This program ceased when the contract was given to Agilec in 2018, who then launched a redesigned Career Transition Services program to again assist with career counselling, job-placement and job-finding assistance and was renewed in 2022. I give you this history, to show that in the past 17 years, while many things have changed in the job market and technologies, there hasn't been much change to what we offer Veterans to support their career transition. This is why we are excited to see the creation of a new National Veterans Employment Strategy. This is not to say that there haven't been improvements along the way.

Understanding the transfer of military occupations to civilian is a key component to transition and while the creation of the MNET program, which converts military occupations to a civilian equivalent is certainly a helpful tool to link transferable occupations. However, it needs to be one of many tools being incorporated into a holistic approach to career transition.

We have learned from research and engagement that a large number of those leaving the forces are not interested in the same type of career they had while in service, as in

some cases it was a job the military required and not what interested them. In other cases, performing similar tasks can become triggers for those struggling with operational stress injuries and we need to take these factors into account, as well as what the Veteran believes will bring them a fulfilling second career when creating strategies to assist them.

We also need to help Veterans and employers translate the skills and values gained by military service into those that they can employ in their new career. Along with how to highlight skills like time management, teambuilding, and mentoring others.

Thankfully there are many supports to gain the additional skills necessary for such a career change. Certainly, education and training are the most beneficial resources. The Education and Training Benefit has given many of them opportunities to afford pursuing these goals. Due to its design based on service time instead of current skills it allows many to undertake a more fulfilling goal than simple translatable employment

We have seen a number of Veterans who were either utilizing SISIP Vocational Rehab or VAC's Vocational Rehab programs turn to the Education and Training benefit due to its lack of constraints on current skills. In addition, the Legion's Military Skills Conversion Program with the British Columbia Institute of Technology, (BCIT) created an Advanced Placement and Prior Learning (APPL) module which evaluates and recognizes the skills and expertise acquired through military training. Block credits or advanced placement into the second year of educational programs has allowed Veterans a fast-track to credentials or certifications required. Having this program nationalized with over 30 additional educational institutions would give Veterans a boost in their educational goals based on their real-life knowledge and experience.

There are many other external partners that should be considered as we develop a robust Veterans Employment Strategy. Programs like Operation Entrepreneur run by The Prince' Trust could potentially link with a small business grants program through Industry, and Science and Economic Development Canada (ISED). Also Leveraging members of the Treble Victor Group when creating Veteran job fairs could increase employers interested in participating. A Veteran hiring initiative for Canadian companies could also be a strategy to assist Veteran employment. If we are to consider a holistic approach to assisting our Veterans to gain meaningful civilian employment, we also must utilize a whole of government approach.

The Veterans Hiring Act for public service jobs could improve outcomes of those looking to continue to serve Canadians. Veterans Affairs Canada does have a Veterans Public

Service Unit (VPSU) that assists Veterans in applying for jobs in the public service, however the last we heard the Unit only had two employees and was not very well publicized, By developing a more robust outreach to government departments, HR managers and translating militarily acquired skills to public service hiring language we can hopefully increase departments hiring Veterans. Simplifying the eligibility requirement for priority status also could give all Veterans an equal opportunity when applying to public service positions.

In conclusion, we believe that creating this new employment strategy for Veterans provides an opportunity to change how we have been viewing career transition assistance and create new opportunities to collaborate with other parts of government, external stakeholders and employers.

When a recently transitioned Veteran who asked their career transition agent to assist them with creating a professional LinkedIn profile, they were told, "we don't really do that, but I can send you different resume formats" it shows that we need to engage in new and relevant ways to support those who have put their lives on the line to protect us to give them the best possible opportunities for fulfilling careers after service.

Thank you.

Gord MacEachern
Dominion Vice President
Advocacy Chair
The Army, Navy & Air Force Veterans in Canada

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