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Chair

Mr. Greg Kerr

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC)): Now that we have a quorum I'd like to introduce our witnesses today and thank them in advance for coming. Some we've met before and have had chats with.

From the department, we have David Robinson, and also Maureen Sinnott. From the Legion, we have Gordon Moore, who it's nice to see again, Brad White, who we've hardly ever seen, and Andrea Siew.

Thank you very much.

I think both sides know the routine. We look forward to a 10-minute presentation from each side and then we'll go to questions. Since there is just the one panel, we certainly won't be pushed for time today.

Having said that, you're both ready to start. Do you want to flip a coin or are you both ready to go? Okay?

Thank you, David.

Mr. David Robinson (Director General of Transformation, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this session.

It's an honour to share this table with the senior leadership of the Royal Canadian Legion, and it's a pleasure for me. It's the first time I've met Mr. Moore.

[Translation]

My name is David Robinson. I am the Director General of Transformation at Veterans Affairs. I am joined by my colleague Maureen Sinnott, the Director of Strategic and Enabling Initiatives.

[English]

We are here today to discuss the department's cutting red tape initiatives, which are a key part of our departmental transformation agenda that I had an opportunity to describe in my first visit with you back in May.

When I describe transformation, I refer to the department's deliberate, project-based work-plan to fundamentally change the way we do business and measure our progress along the way. From the point of view of veterans and their families—and this is the ultimate measure of performance—it means the department will cut red tape,

veterans will get help faster, and we will provide them with better information in terms of both quality and accessibility.

My colleague Maureen is going to describe some specific recent initiatives that I believe really illustrate how we're doing this and how these changes are benefiting veterans and their families.

Before we talk about specific initiatives, I'd like to say a little more about how the department is approaching this important work. We are midway into the second year of a five-year work-plan. We've built a solid foundation in the first 18 months of our transformation. Improvements are building and will build over time. We are measuring and reporting progress along the way. We're involving staff and stakeholders.

Even though we still have three and a half years to go to complete our plans and before we can say the department is transformed, the improvements made so far are starting to make a difference. Since we started this improvement effort 18 months ago, turnaround time for disability benefits has been reduced by 30%, and the time taken to make decisions on rehabilitation benefits has been reduced by 50%. We are testing additional processes that we hope will result in continued improvement.

We have reduced the number and length of forms veterans have had to complete to obtain many of the health benefits provided by the department. We continue to work to improve response time on our national call centre network. We're improving our online services. As well, the department will use new technology to provide better tools and training for case managers so that veterans continue to receive the best support possible.

This is good progress for today, but we're focusing on key improvements that we'll put in place for tomorrow. Our goals for the rest of this fiscal year include: having at least 80% of treatment benefit transactions processed through cost-effective reimbursement systems, reducing staff involvement; rendering decisions on disability benefits within 12 weeks; providing veterans, employees, and suppliers with 24-7 access to Internet-based services; and instituting digital imaging technologies to replace our current cumbersome system of mailing paper-based records back and forth.

Veterans Affairs has an incredibly dedicated workforce. I know that they want to work for a department that is on the leading edge of service delivery, one that does business in the most efficient and logical manner, and one that is free of red tape for veterans and their families. The improvements we will make will enable employees to work more efficiently and effectively.

[Translation]

We are only in the second year of planned service improvement. We realize that a lot of hard work lies ahead.

[English]

I've been asked what success looks like. To answer the question, I'm going to use Minister Blaney's words, when he says that we will make life simpler for veterans; we'll reduce the paperwork and red tape and provide veterans greater access to the services of the department, where and when it is needed.

[Translation]

Thank you again, Mr. Chair.

I will now give the floor to Maureen Sinnott.

[English]

Ms. Maureen Sinnott (Director, Strategic and Enabling Initiatives, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, David.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am the director of strategic initiatives at Veterans Affairs. I'm happy to be here today to discuss the department's ongoing efforts to simplify our processes and improve our services to veterans.

The department is committed to cutting red tape to ensure that veterans receive the support and services they need, quickly and efficiently.

I will outline three recently announced initiatives that demonstrate this commitment. I will also describe how they tie into our larger organizational goals, and how they will be of benefit to veterans and their families.

I'll begin with improvements to a tool that you have likely heard about in the past: "My VAC Account". My VAC Account is an online tool, available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. It is already used by 2,700 veterans.

Monday the minister announced improvements that will allow our user base to connect more easily with VAC. With one simple and secure sign-in, veterans will now have at their fingertips the ability to go online, access their accounts from mobile devices with Internet access, securely communicate with the department through secure messaging, submit and track the process of their disability benefits application, see that a decision has been made on their application even before a letter has been mailed, update their contact information, change their direct deposit information, and see a summary of their current services and benefits. My VAC Account is a fundamental piece of the department's online infrastructure. It represents a secure, direct link between veterans and the department.

The initiative supports the department's transformation agenda by increasing online access to services and benefits, something that modern-day veterans and their families have told us they want.

It's important to note that the protection of veterans' privacy was taken into consideration during the design and implementation of the enhancements to My VAC Account. Technologies similar to those used to protect online banking transactions have been tested and have been incorporated in this tool. I'll provide quick statistics. I was advised just before I came here that, since the minister made his

announcement on Monday, 300 additional veterans have signed on to My VAC Account and are currently using it. It does work.

The minister also recently announced "My VAC Book", a print-on-demand booklet that provides personalized information about VAC services and benefits. It can be accessed via the homepage of the VAC website. The new My VAC Book provides veterans with faster and more convenient access to information on programs and services. It's very simple to use.

Based on answers to a short series of questions, an individual booklet is developed. It's customized for the individual. It's immediately available electronically with a hard copy arriving in the mail a few days later. It's a tool that both modern-day and traditional veterans will benefit from because it is user-friendly. This is a tool that supports transformation by contributing to the overhaul of service delivery mechanisms, and by providing services that reflect the desires of a changing veteran population.

Finally, the department has created a centralized mail system that is going to have a direct impact on a number of service standards. By 2014, in a phased approach, the department is going to consolidate several departmental mailing addresses into one receiving point in Matane, Quebec. Their incoming mail will be scanned electronically and electronically distributed to the proper destination. Because of the modernization, a number of VAC employees will be able to process the same information and work on the same file simultaneously. Veterans will not be required to re-submit documentation again and again. The centralization will contribute to faster decision-making and turnaround times for veterans and their families.

This is an example of cutting red tape. It's a cost-effective way to increase the speed of service. Veterans will no longer worry about where to send their mail. This is a fairly common-sense solution; it's not as flashy as other initiatives, but it does result in an improved system that will provide immediate and evident results to veterans.

These examples are part of the department's long-term goal of overhauling service delivery and reducing the complexities of processes and practices.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee, Mr. Chair.

• (1540)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Sinnott.

Now we'll go to the Legion, to Mr. Moore.

Mr. Gordon Moore (Dominion President, Royal Canadian Legion): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Good afternoon. It's a great pleasure to appear in front of your committee. As the dominion president of the Royal Canadian Legion, I am pleased to be able to speak to you this afternoon on behalf of our 330,000 members and their families.

The Royal Canadian Legion is well situated to provide advice on Veterans Affairs Canada, cutting red tape, or the transformation agenda. As the only national veterans service organization, the Royal Canadian Legion has delivered programs to all veterans and their families since 1926. The Legion is an iconic cornerstone of Canadian communities and at the forefront of support for military and RCMP members and their families.

Today a new generation of veterans is coming home, and veterans and their families will continue to turn to the Legion for support and affordable housing, representation, benevolent assistance, career transition, counselling, trauma relief, and recognition. The Legion provides representation to assist veterans and their families with obtaining their disability benefits from VAC. The Legion's service bureau network, with over 1,500 branch service officers and 25 command service officers, provides representation from the first application to VAC through to the appeal and reconsideration of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. Through legislation, the Legion has access to service health records and departmental files to provide comprehensive yet independent representation at no cost, irrespective of Legion membership. Therefore, we are an active participant in the VAC transformation agenda.

VAC has embarked on a five-year transformation agenda to cut red tape and approve services to the almost one million veteran community. This is a diverse community: age, RCMP, wartime, regular force, reserve forces, families, male, female, and all with diverse needs. The complexity of this community cannot be overstated. This is no simple task.

The vision for the VAC transformation agenda is to be

...responsive to the diverse and changing needs of veterans and their families by ensuring relevant programs and policies, fast and easy access to benefits and services, professional service by employees who understand the military experience, and seamless transition from military to civilian life.

The Legion is watching closely the implementation of the transformation agenda and the impact it will have on the veteran community. Is the transformation agenda meeting its vision?

While the demographic of the veteran population is changing, there remain approximately 118,000 war service veterans; however, only half of these are clients of VAC. They are the most vulnerable of our veteran community due to their age and increasing needs. Every day these veterans and their spouses continue to come forward needing immediate assistance. We are concerned with some of the specific red tape initiatives that will directly impact this group.

With regard to the veterans independence program, in April of this year the government announced that for housekeeping and grounds-keeping services, veterans will receive an up-front grant for this service with the responsibility to disburse and coordinate with the service provider. For some veterans, this is probably doable; however, there are a number of veterans where the service provider bills VAC directly. For this group, they do not engage or contract with the service provider. Now the onus and burden is being placed on the veteran. There should be a choice.

Additionally, some of our lower-income or fixed-income veterans will be given a seemingly large sum of money and are expected to put it in the bank and disburse it on a biweekly basis. However, should an emergency situation arise, they'll be faced with the

decision to use this money or not. This is an unnecessary burden placed on a fragile group.

The purpose of the veterans independence program is to keep the veterans in their homes and independent. Will this goal be met? Is this transformational or is this about deficit reduction?

With regard to district office closures, the closing of district offices to respond to the changing demographic is of concern. The Legion has been told that eight district offices will close in 2014, all at the same time. This will be offset by an increase of staff at the integrated personnel support centres and a consolidation of VAC resources in major centres.

The Legion fully supports the increase in case managers at the integrated personnel support centres to ensure a seamless transition from military to civilian life, especially for complex cases; however, there still needs to be sufficient resources to meet the needs of our wartime and aging veteran population, whose needs can very quickly go from independent to complex with a simple fall or infection. This remains a large group of approximately 118,000 veterans.

● (1545)

How will this impact the RCMP located in small communities across the country? Are there two standards of service—Canadian Forces and RCMP?

On the Service Canada initiative, the government announced in July that services will be available through Service Canada outlets, enabling veterans to drop in, obtain information, and get assistance with applications from many of the 600 outlets across the country.

We are carefully monitoring the implementation of this new service. Have the staff been provided with sufficient training to advise on disability benefits and services available to veterans?

We know that only half of the approximately 118,000 wartime veterans are in receipt of benefits from VAC. Our service officers across the country report that wartime veterans who were previously not in receipt of VAC assistance are coming forward every day in need of VAC services.

The process is complex, and time is critical. If turned away, will they get the help they deserve? Is this transformational?

With respect to the business process, since VAC embarked on the transformation agenda, the time to process a disability application has significantly improved. This has been the result of a significant change to online forms, the introduction of electronic insurance and health records, and simplifying the application process for service officers and VAC disability benefit officers. Once the application is submitted, the turnaround time, especially for aging veterans, has been counted as just a few weeks.

We've also seen adjudicators follow up with service officers to ensure the decision can be made quickly. This is a tremendous change, and it took place over a short period of time.

VA staff, at all levels, should be commended for their effort and commitment to reducing the application processing time. This is transformational.

With respect to reducing complexity, this is a key theme of the transformation agenda and cutting the red tape. The Legion continues to advocate on behalf of wartime veterans and their spouses, including wartime allied veterans, to simplify eligibility for the veterans independence program. This was first raised by the Gerontological Advisory Council report, "Keeping the Promise", in 2006.

Please remove the artificial barriers and complexity to ensure our wartime veterans and their spouses have access to the veterans independence program. The program is essential to keeping our veterans safe and independent in their homes. This would be transformational.

On eligibility for services and benefits, attached as an annex to the VAC eligibility grid you will note there are 18 categories of eligibility for services and benefits. How will a Service Canada employee interpret this table? Will a veteran or a family member searching online be able to determine if mom or dad has eligibility? Simplifying accessibility and eligibility to VAC health benefits and services would be transformational.

With regard to strengthening partnerships, the Legion, through its legislative mandate, works side by side with VAC. While this relationship has been going on for over 86 years, there's room for improvement and strengthening.

The long-term care surveyor program, in which the Legion provides trained surveyors to visit veterans in long-term facilities across the country to administer a client satisfaction survey on quality assurance at the request of VAC, has been in place since 2003. It is an example of our partnership and outreach capability.

There are approximately 154 active surveyors. These are trained and security-cleared volunteers. In 2010, the surveyors visited 4,230 veterans in 868 facilities, and VAC paid approximately \$180,000 for mileage, reports, and training for the same period.

The value of the program to meet with a veteran and his or her family in a facility cannot be understated. The volunteer has visibility in the facility and can hear, see, and smell the environment. They are the boots on the ground. The capability of this program ensures that no matter where a veteran resides, a visit will be conducted at very low cost.

As district offices are downsizing and realigning, the continuance of this program will ensure that veterans in long-term care facilities are not forgotten. The Legion is well positioned as a national entity to continue this valuable program with reliable and trained personnel. We are concerned that transformational priorities will eliminate this program.

In June of this year, at our 2012 convention, the Legion approved \$1 million in new start-up funding to ensure the rollout of the national homeless veterans program. This program will be developed from the ground up and will reflect the unique needs of each community. It will build on partnerships with VAC, social service agencies, first responders, and other organizations.

● (1550)

VAC needs to have the resources and staff to partner at the local level in communities across the country. How will closing district offices impact local initiatives and the ability to provide timely response to these veterans clearly in crisis?

This year the Legion will commit almost \$1 million to the veteran transition network, an operational stress injury treatment program that grew out of the University of British Columbia's Faculty of Medicine. This is truly a success story. Our new funding will assure that this new network has the capacity to establish a national not-for-profit treatment program and will deliver much-needed programs across the country.

I must emphasize our concern that VAC has not recognized this program as a treatment option for our veterans, despite its more than ten-year history. This is an opportunity to partner and ensure that proven treatment options are available for our veterans. This is transformational.

Next, with regard to sustaining the new Veterans Charter, the new Veterans Charter has evolved since its introduction in 2006. Bill C-55, implemented in October of 2011, introduced improved financial enhancements, especially for seriously ill and injured veterans. Proactive consultation with veterans groups will be important to evaluate the impact of these changes and the gaps and priorities for future change. This is a dynamic piece of legislation, and there's no mechanism in place for veterans groups to address performance measurement and change management in a transparent and holistic approach.

In terms of outreach, over the last two years VAC's outreach has focused for the most part on delivering briefings to the Canadian Forces on bases and units. The outreach to the RCMP has been even less. We know that in recent deployments, 25% of those deployed were reservists. How are they being connected with services that they may require?

The Legion has an extensive outreach program to inform veterans and their families on health promotion, independent living, community resources, and healthy lifestyles. We offer information on our programs, representation, and financial assistance, as well as other government programs and initiatives. Strengthening our partnership with both DND and VAC, and exporting our capacity to communities across the country, would move the yardsticks, fill this gap, and perhaps lessen the impact of district office closures. This is transformational.

A national veteran's identification card would not only provide the recognition of veterans but also a national veterans database. We're surprised that between DND and VAC there's not a single or complete veterans database registry to reach out to the community. This would facilitate communications and benefits and services for both DND and VAC. A veteran's identification card would be transformational.

The Royal Canadian Legion is committed to the transformation process. However, the cutting red tape agenda needs to be monitored. It should not be about budget reduction.

The vision for the VAC transformation agenda is to be

...responsive to the diverse and changing needs of veterans and their families by ensuring relevant programs and policies, fast and easy access to benefits and services, professional service by employees who understand the military experience, and seamless transition from military to civilian life.

This vision should not be forgotten. Each initiative should be evaluated to ensure it achieves the vision. This is significant and complex.

I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to address the members.

Thank you.

• (1555)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Moore.

We will now turn to the members of the committee for questions, and we'll start with Mr. Stoffer for five minutes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Chairman, thank you.

Thanks to each and every one of you for being here today.

To the Legion, again, for the continuous work you do on behalf of all veterans, not just war veterans and their families but RCMP members and their families right across the country, thank you.

I have a question on the privacy aspects of the VAC accounts. Obviously, medical information and very personal information will be in there. I guess everyone has a concern about privacy and who has access to this information. Obviously, members of the department would need to have access to it as well, especially if the veteran is entertaining further benefits, further enhancements, or something of that nature.

What processes have been put in place to ensure that the medical privacy of the veteran is secured so that nobody but the specific people who should know that have access to it?

I say that because of the case of Sean Bruyca; that case was very well known in terms of what happened to his privacy issues. We've heard from others who feel that they had very similar concerns.

What assurance can veterans have that their medical files are securely protected and that only the relevant people will get to see them?

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: With the new My VAC Account, veterans can submit a first application for disability benefits. It is a secure method of submitting an account. Only the individuals within the department who would use the information to adjudicate the claim would have access to the account. For instance, I would have access to no information at all.

The veteran population needs to be assured that it is secure. It's as secure, if not more secure, than sending in a paper disability application that would move through the department. This way, it would move through the department electronically and only to the appropriate people, who are notified that they have to work on this case or on that account.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I guess it's fair to say that you're fairly confident that this is guaranteed or assured. Anything can happen, of course, but to the best ability of the department, those issues will definitely be protected.

• (1600)

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: We took privacy very seriously when we looked at what were we doing with My VAC Account and whether we were able to respond. That's possibly why it took us a certain amount of time to develop it, so that it was secure.

People bank online. People do all kinds of things online. We would use similar technology so that what veterans submit online is secure from the time it leaves them to the time it leaves us.

I would encourage veterans to make sure that they're not using computers at public locations. It's very similar to banking activity.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: With respect to veterans who are suffering from severe post-traumatic stress disorder or severe psychological concerns, I've spoken to some who say that sitting in front of a computer screen just doesn't do it for them. They have great difficulty trying to manipulate how to do all that, because obviously they have various concerns.

Can people from the department go to their homes and assist them in the process? Or can they still revert to the system from before, whereby they can get one-on-one counselling and help, either in their homes or where they're comfortable? Maybe they could go to a local Legion and get help there with a VAC representative who can assist them in this process.

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: Do you mean to sign on, or to make an application?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: No, no, in order to... They might say, look, I don't want to deal with a computer, I just want to deal with a person.

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: They can deal with us by telephone. They can deal with us in person. Case managers do go out to visit veterans. The Legion has a number of service officers who actually assist. I don't want to speak for them.

You can obtain services online. You can obtain services by telephone. You can obtain services in person.

Mr. David Robinson: Mr. Chair, I might add two thoughts to the question.

First, as the dominion president just shared with us a few minutes ago, the Department of Veterans Affairs has an extraordinarily complex group of veterans they're trying to serve, and not everyone fits one particular mould. We have to look at trying to customize our service offering to provide the services where and when and how the client requires. We take it into consideration. If someone has very special needs, we take that into consideration in terms of our service offering.

Taking a step back, I mentioned in my remarks that as we go through the transformation process, we are using a project management approach. We have some number of independent projects we're working on to transform the department. In some of those projects, particularly where there's automation involved, we want to make sure that there's a privacy risk analysis done. If we are introducing some new business process or some new step in automation, we are tightening the bolts on security to make sure that we're not inadvertently or accidentally creating some possibility of opening up people's personal data in a way that wasn't envisioned and advised. And we test it.

This is something we're going to be going through as we continue in the next three and a half years of transformation to make sure that these bolts continue to be tightened and that we're restricting information access to only those who absolutely need to have access to it.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Robinson.

Now we go to Ms. Adams, for five minutes, please.

Ms. Eve Adams (Mississauga—Brampton South, CPC): Thanks very much.

I'd like to thank the members from the Legions for joining us today, and for those veterans who are here today, thank you for your service to our country.

In particular to the Legion folks, I am sure that every member of Parliament can speak to the wonderful occasions they've had when they've gone to visit their local Legions. Certainly in Mississauga, the Streetsville branch or the Malton branch or the Port Credit branch provide excellent service to our veterans and also a wonderful opportunity for a sense of community and camaraderie. Thank you very much for that.

To Mr. Robinson and Ms. Sinnott, could you explain to me in some detail the benefits of the new health care receipting procedure that veterans would experience? You've now eliminated the need for veterans to submit travel expense claims for their health-related procedures. Could you explain how that works and what a veteran would feel and see?

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: The initiative that you are asking about is reimbursement to veterans for their travel related to medical appointments. In the past, we required individuals to submit receipts for every health-related travel claim that they submitted to the department. As of recently—a matter of months ago—the department no longer requires health-related travel receipts to accompany a travel claim.

At this point, a veteran could simply sit down at his own computer, pull up through My VAC Account—or pull up through our VAC forms—a health-related travel claim form, fill out the form, print it off in the comfort of his own home, or save it to his computer and wait until he attends another medical appointment, and add that one to the health-related travel claim. He could print it off and submit it. We no longer require receipts submitted with every claim, and the claims would be reimbursed—

● (1605)

Ms. Eve Adams: What is the average claim? How much does it amount to?

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: I can't answer that, sitting here, but I could probably find you an average claim. We have claims that are very small because people will submit them more frequently, or very large claims because some veterans will retain all of their health-related travel information for a period of six months to a year and then submit it at the end of that time period. Some could be very large, and some could be every few weeks.

Ms. Eve Adams: I have some numbers here. Perhaps you can tell me if they sound right to you, or if you could let our committee know afterwards.

I see that we have about 5,500 travel claims submitted each month. They average about \$274. Does that sound about right to you, that in 2011-12, about \$18 million will be disbursed for these purposes?

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: Yes, those.... We do average about 5,500 claims per month.

Ms. Eve Adams: When it comes to the veterans independence program, perhaps you could highlight for me the red tape reduction that has taken place there.

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: With the veterans independence program, it was announced that we will no longer be requiring people to submit receipts, and we will have contribution arrangements established for the grounds maintenance and housekeeping services so that people would receive the funds up front. They would be provided an annual grant, and it would be paid in semi-annual payments.

Ms. Eve Adams: What is the amount that they are receiving, generally speaking?

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: That would depend on the individual.

Ms. Eve Adams: I appreciate that, but is there an average?

Perhaps you can send that to me afterwards.

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: I can provide an average for housekeeping and grounds maintenance.

Essentially, the message for the veterans is that they not be out-of-pocket. They don't have to be out-of-pocket. They don't have to wait for us to reimburse. It's a grant. They don't have to keep the receipts.

Mr. David Robinson: Sorry, I just wonder if this would be helpful to add.

We're aware that a lot of people who use our services in the past have found the bureaucratic paperwork—submitting receipts and continually being in communication with the department—to be extremely onerous. They have other things to do. Our minister has asked us, in every line of service, to look at ways of removing the bureaucracy that just doesn't need to be there in order for us to provide services. Make it simpler; be less burdensome; place fewer demands on people who already have an awful lot on their plates.

This is the sort of philosophy we try to take when we do these things: simplify the process and make the services offered better and faster for our veterans and their families.

Ms. Eve Adams: This is an issue, not only of the hassle of having to fill out the paperwork and to retain the receipts, but also of the indignity of having to do that. These people have fought for our country, have stood up for our country. Perhaps we could take them at their word that in fact they did disburse \$20 to have their lawn cut. Maybe they don't need to submit each and every one of those receipts just to have a civil servant on the other end go back, verify, and check all of that at great expense to the taxpayer. Perhaps we could send them their \$20 and allow them to stay in their homes and age in their homes as hassle-free as possible, and with as much dignity as possible.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Adams. We are over time now.

We now go to Mr. Casey for five minutes.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Sinnott and Mr. Robinson, thank you very much for being here. I hope you won't be offended, but you can take the next five minutes off. I want to talk to the gentlemen from the Legion and Ms. Siew.

Thank you very much, first of all, for your submissions. Many of the questions and the issues you pointed out in your submissions we've been trying to raise, both in committee and in the House of Commons. If I may, I'll get you to expand on some of the things you said in your submissions. I have some specific questions in relation to them.

Also, Mr. Moore, congratulations on your ascendancy to high office. I was in Halifax when that happened.

You talked about district office closures. I don't know whether you're aware of this, but when all of the district office closures have been implemented, there will be one province in this country that has none. We had a witness from Veterans Affairs here last week who could offer me no assurance that when that district office closed, the case managers wouldn't be leaving the province as well.

So I'm interested in your comment with respect to two standards of service as between the Canadian Forces and the RCMP, although you'd probably talk about two standards in another context.

Now, after that line of questions, Mr. Moore, that night I got a pretty pointed communication from the press attaché to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, pointing out to me that the one point of service that Prince Edward Island would be losing in its district office was going to be replaced by five, presumably the Service Canada locations.

That brings me to the part of your report where you asked the question, "Has the staff been provided sufficient training to advise on disability benefits and services available to veterans?"

That is the question you asked, and now I want to put it right back to you, sir.

What's your sense of the answer to that question?

• (1610)

Mr. Gordon Moore: My answer to that is no.

You take a person who works for Service Canada, who's never dealt with a veteran, who all of a sudden gets a phone call; within minutes that individual is totally lost, because they're not understanding what the veteran wants or needs.

You take a 92-year-old Second World War veteran; do you think he's going to pick up the 1-800 number and call Service Canada? Absolutely not. Do you think he's going to go on the website and try to check out information? Absolutely not.

And take his family; if they don't understand his needs, they turn around and phone Service Canada and ask the same questions. Now you have two individuals on each end of the phone not knowing what they're talking about.

We need the case workers—case "managers" is the word I like to use—at the ground-roots level looking after veterans in the communities.

It's very unfortunate with P.E.I. that this is going to happen. Whether we can change the minister's idea on this, God only knows. But we will definitely try.

Mr. Sean Casey: You let me know how I can help with that.

Mr. Gordon Moore: Okay.

Mr. Sean Casey: Staying on the subject of district offices over on....

Sorry, before I get into that—I might run out of time before I get to ask you this—your service officers assist clients in front of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, right?

Mr. Gordon Moore: Yes, sir.

Mr. Sean Casey: Okay. Would your service officers, in your view, have some perspectives that would be of value to this committee when we're looking at what changes are necessary at VRAB?

Mr. Gordon Moore: Very much so.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you.

Over on page 6, you talk about district offices “downsizing and realigning”. You're concerned about the impact of that downsizing and realigning on a specific program. Reading from your second paragraph, you are concerned that “transformational priorities will eliminate this program”.

Have you been given any assurance that the program will be able to continue once district offices are eliminated in Prince Edward Island and closed in other provinces?

Mr. Gordon Moore: Nothing at this point.

Mr. Sean Casey: Okay.

Down at the bottom of that page, you talk about the veterans transition network. On that, this committee actually travelled to Vancouver and got to see the work of that program first-hand. It is formidable. I compliment the Legion on their support of the program.

You criticize the department for not supporting the program. What discussions, if any, have you had with the department to change that?

Mr. Gordon Moore: I'll be meeting with the minister tomorrow morning at 8 o'clock, and this is one of the items that's on my agenda with the minister. We're hoping that he will be willing to take a look at the whole program, especially on being able to pay the initial cost of a veteran going into the program. My understanding is that's in the neighbourhood of about \$15,000 per veteran, and it's over a three-month period. Then there's follow-up after that. So we're hoping the minister will be able to grab ahold of the whole program.

The Legion, itself, has committed that \$1 million to get the administration end of it across the country so that all veterans, from coast to coast to coast, are able to be part and parcel of that program.

I guess, Mr. Casey, the bottom line here is that I'm not going to go away. I'm going to be in the face of the minister every opportunity I have. Of course it will be on a good note, but it will also be letting him know that the veterans need everything that we...

Everything that they gave, we have to pay back twice. They put their lives on the line. Some didn't leave Canada. I was one of them. I didn't leave the country. And I've been treated very well. But we have veterans right now who are 23, 24, and 25 years of age who are sitting with PTSD. They may have a physical disability that they're hiding at this point in time. They're afraid to go to their commanding officer and say, I've got this and I've got that, because what's going to happen is their military career is over. And they don't want that.

•(1615)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Moore.

We are over a bit, so we're going to move now to Mr. Hayes for five minutes, please.

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

I'm new to this committee.... I'll use that excuse for only about six months, then I'll stop using it. We've talked a little bit about grounds maintenance and housekeeping, but as a new member, I really want to focus on health-related benefits to veterans. I'd just like to get some clarity on what exactly we are offering our veterans in terms of health-related benefits.

This is to whomever cares to answer the question.

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: There are a large number of benefits for veterans. Veterans are able to access treatment benefits, veterans independence programs, health-related travel, and long-term care across the country.

In terms of the treatment benefits programs—and I may miss some of the programs as I'm speaking about them—individuals are able to attend or access their own physician, nurse, psychiatrist, psychologist, chiropractor, and orthotics, all manner of special equipment, depending on what they require.

If they're eligible, they receive the veterans independence program, which includes housekeeping and grounds maintenance and a number of other services, which may include, depending on their needs, personal care, patient support in the home, home adaptations or modifications in order to make the home accessible or able to be continued to be lived in by a veteran who has disabilities, long-term care, care in community, or other beds in various facilities across the country.

It's a very broad spectrum of programs and services that are available.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: In the event a veteran passes and his spouse is still alive, are these available to the spouse as well, in the same capacity?

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: To a certain extent, the housekeeping/grounds maintenance program is available to spouses when a veteran is deceased. But the health care and treatment benefits programs are programs they would access through their provincial health care, as they would have done when the veteran was alive.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: You made reference to the fact that we all want things to be less burdensome to our veterans in terms of paperwork. I just want to get a sense of what happened previously versus what is happening now to streamline the process in terms of applying for health-related benefits, the claim process.

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: An individual is eligible for health-related benefits depending on his own circumstances. For various benefits, the department had always required authorization in advance of receiving the benefit. So in certain instances an individual or the health care supplier or provider would have had to first contact the department to determine whether or not the individual was eligible for the benefit, and then get formal approval for it. Then every subsequent time they would be receiving the benefit they would also have to make a contact with the department to say, “I have exceeded my 20 physiotherapy treatments this year. Can I have another 20 of them, because my physician is prescribing it?”

One of our transformation or simplification activities was that if someone is prescribed something and it's authorized, he doesn't need to come back for a subsequent authorization. If it's already authorized, then the individuals are able to carry on with their treatment. So we've removed the need for subsequent authorizations when people have already been authorized to receive a benefit. They don't have to contact us again if they don't need to. The provider, in many cases, submits the bill to the department, so the individual is not paying out-of-pocket for it.

•(1620)

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Mr. Robinson, you mentioned in your comments that one of the key initiatives is that we have to measure our progress along the way. We're two years into the five-year plan. Do you have some evidence that the process has become more streamlined, and some indication of how you are measuring and what you are measuring against?

Mr. David Robinson: We're only 18 months into our five-year plan. But we've established service standards that are available on our website so that you can see what it is that we're measuring. We're going to look at those continually to see if we can improve our service standards.

We do things like surveys and research to validate the findings. In due course, there will be evaluations of the various service elements of our plan to make sure we're actually delivering what we said we were going to deliver.

In the departmental performance report that Treasury Board tables for our department, there will also be a breakdown of how we're doing in improving our services. I think the first report will come out in November.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're over our time, Mr. Hayes.

Now we're back to Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Just very quickly, I just want to tell the committee members what a soccer player Mr. Lizon is on the MPs' team.

For the Legion, Mr. Moore, this is sort of outside our conversation, but there is a fair number of people asking if it's possible, on the National Cenotaph, to put the words "in service of Canada". This would encompass Boer War veterans, and those who served in Bosnia, Cyprus, Egypt, Afghanistan, etc. It would be one phrase to encompass all veterans, not just World War II, World War I, and Korea.

I'm not sure what the Legion's position is on that. Could you say if you're in support of that initiative? If not, they can always ask you in the future.

Mr. Gordon Moore: The Legion's position is exactly what you said. We came to an agreement over a year ago that the Seventh Book of Remembrance, for those who have served, should go on the National War Memorial. You don't need anything else. That way, you've covered everyone, and well into the future.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: That's it. Yes, sir.

Thank you very much.

Sylvain.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP): My thanks to the witnesses for being here and for their efforts to provide good services to our veterans. The services are well-deserved.

I have some questions about the production of My VAC Book. You say that everyone has a personalized book. Now, I have looked

at five different books for different types of veterans—unfortunately, there are variations depending on the type of veteran—and it seems to me that the information is rather general in nature. I do not see a lot that is personalized. You do not find services that might be offered in a veteran's own region, for example.

So could you tell us what is personalized, in your view, and what distinguishes one from another?

[English]

Mr. David Robinson: You're speaking of "My VAC Book"?

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Yes, absolutely.

[English]

Mr. David Robinson: As you've heard, we are providing services to a wide variety of clients from a number of different timeframes and ages, and from the Canadian Forces and the RCMP. So there are different services available based on different types of service. When you go onto My VAC Book, you are asked a series of very short questions that help arrange the information for your particular circumstance, so that's the element of personalization.

Maureen, I don't know if you have more to add.

•(1625)

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: No, I think that would pretty much state it very succinctly, David.

It's not personalized to you as an individual, but it's customized to what you've asked for, with respect to your answers to the questions that are on there. If you're RCMP, or if you're Canadian Forces, and if you want information on health, health-related travel, disability pensions, and so on, the book that you would request is built that way.

Mr. David Robinson: I might add that because we're trying to serve such a broad population, it's a lot of information for people to go through, so this is partially an attempt to try to reduce the information down just to the information that we think, based on the questions that the veteran asks, is to their particular circumstance.

Of course, once they call us or once they engage with Veterans Affairs, however they do that, we can broaden out and see if there are other things that they need to know, but that gives them a good starting point.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Would you be interested in personalizing it to the extent of the services offered from region to region? I would like to know what you think about that. For example, in the book for a Quebec veteran from the reserves, it does not say that he is entitled to CSST benefits. Would there be an interest in putting that kind of information into this personalized book, so that the services are tailored to each person?

[English]

Mr. David Robinson: One of the processes of transformation is that we think we've created a solution to a problem, but we have to go back and verify it and test it.

We are quite open to suggestions like yours for improvements to the service that we can implement over time. I'll take that back; it's an interesting suggestion.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Let us talk about the red tape initiative. If I understand correctly, first of all, a veteran will type his information into the computer. Then his VAC Book is mailed to him via a subcontractor. Is it worth the trouble to send the book through the mail? Is there a real need for that? Could it not just be done by computer?

[English]

Mr. David Robinson: Well, they do have access online for those who wish to have it, but some people prefer to have material provided to them in a written format. They have the option of having it mailed to them or seeing it right there on the computer.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Okay. We have to...

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we go to Mr. Harris for five minutes.

Mr. Richard Harris (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, folks, for your presentation.

I guess it's just human nature that whenever change of some sort is happening, there are people who become a little fearful of change for whatever reason. That's to be expected. There are also those who are quick to criticize change or paint some sort of a "sky is falling" scenario before change has a chance to prove itself.

But that's what change is all about. It's what the red tape and the transformation is all about; it's change. To use Mr. Moore's words, it's improvement and strengthening: improvement in delivery of services and, I suppose, strengthening in the relationship between the case workers and the clients, the vets.

Sadly, Mr. Casey has suggested that in P.E.I., with the closure of some offices there, in effect the vets who are seeking assistance might somehow be left out in the cold. I know this cannot be the case.

Maybe you'd just like to address that for us, and go over once more the mitigating programs that you have to allay any fears of this.

Mr. David Robinson: I might say, to start, that our philosophy, by working with Service Canada, is to provide 600 new front doors to the Department of Veterans Affairs, and to give a broader range of possibilities for engagement, either through the telephone, through our website offerings, or by someone walking through the front door at Service Canada. Our veterans are Canadian citizens, and they might be interested in knowing more about services that are available to them than just what is offered by VAC.

There are other services that the Government of Canada offers that can be obtained through Service Canada. We think it might be an enhancement for the whole citizen to be engaged, if you could say that, and reassured that we have a very comprehensive program of

training the people we're working with at Service Canada, our colleagues in the federal family.

They're doing a very good job for us by providing intake and answering basic questions. If the basic question cannot be answered by Service Canada, it is very quickly turned over to someone at Veterans Affairs to provide more in-depth information. It's a kind of triage, so that we can get more people getting more service faster. If more detailed information is required, then they deal with VAC.

• (1630)

Mr. Richard Harris: Great. Thank you.

In talking about change, before the red tape initiative what was the timeframe that a veteran could expect for a decision on, say, a disability benefits submission? What was the general time they would have to wait?

Mr. David Robinson: I'm not sure I have that.

Maureen, do you remember?

Mr. Richard Harris: Maybe Mr. Moore has it.

Mr. Gordon Moore: It was up to as long as 18 months at one time, and even longer before. From first application until the time of the award, going back about 15 years ago, a veteran would wait anywhere from 36 months to 48 months.

Mr. Richard Harris: Okay, so with the red tape program, what steps of that progress have been removed to make it more streamlined in delivering a quicker service?

Ms. Sinnott or Mr. Robinson, or maybe Mr. White.

Mr. Brad White (Dominion Secretary, Dominion Command, Royal Canadian Legion): I think a major point of the reduction in wait times at this stage in the game is the availability of the electronic service health records. That has really increased the ability of not only the case manager, but also Legion service officers who have access to CSDN under the network to be able to grab the file. A lot of it was waiting time for the file to get processed, to the individual's needing the file to be able to move forward.

As we've said in the brief that Mr. Moore has given, that is very much a positive step that's happened out of this transformation program to date, and we've decreased the waiting times, we're increasing the flow by having the access to the electronic health service records.

Mr. Richard Harris: So the streamlining is effective.

The Chair: Mr. Robinson, do you want to reply?

Mr. David Robinson: Just very quickly, I might add that we were living—and we still live, in large measure—in a paper world. If you think about what would be required in terms of mailing paper, mailing paper between offices, between VAC offices, storing paper, retrieving paper, the number of people just handling paper was phenomenal. By starting to move towards electronic processing, we are really making big steps in terms of improving the speed, with fewer hands touching files, with more to come.

Mr. Richard Harris: Thank you very much.

Do I have more time for questions?

The Chair: A real quick one; you're just about over your time now.

Mr. Richard Harris: Let me just make a comment, then.

I appreciate everything that you folks are trying to do for veterans. I know that change doesn't happen overnight, but it appears to me that everything seems to be on a pretty positive path.

Whatever they've done for us, we have to do twice for them: that's right, Mr. Moore.

I think VAC is certainly trying to do that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Zimmer, you have a full five minutes today.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Yes.

Again, it's an honour to be here, actually. When I was asked to be on the veterans affairs committee, it was just an honour to be asked and to be part of your lives, I guess. For what you've contributed to us and what you've done in the past, it's an honour to be here.

I preface this a little bit cautiously, because I don't want to get into necessarily a partisan argument with Mr. Casey. I only ask this because I think we need a benchmark of where we are now as opposed to where we were pre-2006. I want to put it into context with what's here.

Again, Mr. Moore, we can always do better. I think there's no argument there; we can always do better. Even if it were 99.999%, we could always do that 0.01% better. So I'll give you that.

But I wanted to ask all four of you if you were familiar with the cuts of the former government, with what they were—just an opinion, I guess.

We'll start with Mr. White, if that's possible.

• (1635)

Mr. Brad White: I'm not in a position to talk about the cuts that any government has made to the veterans program. I'm looking for improvements to the program. I don't think it's necessary to talk about the past.

Mr. Gordon Moore: The same: we're here to make sure that the veteran is looked after right from the very start, from the very first application that he puts in, right through to the award. We want to make sure that each veteran gets what they deserve. That's the bottom line.

Whether it's the Conservative government, Liberal, or NDP, it doesn't matter. The bottom line is the veteran. If we can get everyone on the same page...then this committee probably wouldn't be here, because we would all be on the same page doing the job that we're supposed to do.

For every veteran who has served this country, I will say again, we owe them big time. I will keep saying that as long as I'm wearing this uniform.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Agreed.

Mr. Robinson.

Mr. David Robinson: I'd simply like to say, with regard to the comments of the dominion president, that we are 100% in alignment with his view that our orientation for everything we're doing is to improve services to clients and veterans. It's not a budget initiative. This is about improving services.

It's a very challenging and complex world that we're living in. The number of our clients, sadly, is reducing, so we don't need the infrastructure that we used to have in the department in order to serve our clients. At the same time, they're becoming more complex, and we have to try to move to higher-value work so that we're providing better support to the more complex cases, and stop having people moving paper files around when we should really have them focused out toward providing services to vets and their families.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thanks.

Maureen.

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: I'm not able to comment on any cuts or...

Mr. Bob Zimmer: For the benefit of the room, it was 11%. It was significant.

Again, to go back to the point that I was making, it's not to get into that she-said-he-said; it's more to show how far we've come to this day.

It's kind of speaking to what you guys are saying. The bottom line is that we care about veterans, and I think I say that to demonstrate that we care about veterans and we really put money where our mouth is. I just did that from that perspective.

To move on to another question, in terms of the streamlining—a pilot's-eye view, I guess, looking down at this from a broad perspective—I'd like your opinions on the streamlining of the entire process.

We've heard some already, but I'm more curious about your opinions, Mr. Moore and Mr. White, about the streamlining and how that's going. You've spoken to that somewhat, but can you explain it some more?

Mr. Brad White: The streamlining process as defined and as ongoing right now in the transformation process is making steps forward. One has to remember that we still have the Pension Act, and now the New Veterans Charter. Those are two very different pieces of legislation under which a very diverse group of people now come.

Case managers at VAC have trouble interpreting the Pension Act and the New Veterans Charter. Our own service officers are dealing with both pieces of legislation to assist the people as they move forward. We're now going to take that type of an information process and put it down to a Service Canada representative. When a veteran calls into Service Canada and says, "What about this situation?", it will be very difficult for anybody from Service Canada to be able to interpret something out of the Pension Act or the New Veterans Charter and be able to assist the individual. Naturally, the default is that it's going to have to go back to a case manager somewhere in Veterans Affairs to be able to respond to the question. In actual fact, if this is transformation and streamlining, we've got to take an additional step to get right back to where we were before. So there are going to be issues.

A cookie-cutter solution for everybody doesn't work. The age and the diversity of the population that we're dealing with goes from an 18-year-old who's had maybe one or two tours in Afghanistan up to a 100-plus-year-old who's been in World War II. So that complexity goes all the way through.

Even with today's modern veterans, if you want to call them modern veterans, you can get an individual who's down on his luck and is couch-surfing. Does he have access to the Internet? Probably not. So where is he going to get his access point through to?

There are all sorts of parameters here that haven't been addressed yet. So that's my question.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. White. We're quite a bit over.

That ends round one. We'll go to round two, which is a four-minute round. We've been a little generous here because we have only one group of witnesses today, so we'll try to be reasonable.

I understand, Ms. Turmel, that you will start round two.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to talk a bit about the service. You said that it would be improved and that you would be cutting down on red tape. I would also like to talk about the 600 Service Canada outlets that you mentioned. You are aware that people often come and see us, their members of Parliament, because they have knocked on every door without getting an answer. We are getting more and more of those visits from veterans, and 90% of the cases are very complex.

Let me give you an example. A lady came to see us because her father, a veteran, had died. She had been denied funeral expenses and she was trying to find out why. She came to see us; we have tried to contact the appropriate people, but no one has called us back. We have no information. What do we tell that person? What answers do we give her? And we are in a major centre, not in some remote area.

[*English*]

Mr. David Robinson: I'm not sure that I have a good answer for your specific case.

Ms. Nycole Turmel: Sorry. It's one specific case, but those that I'm talking about are all the same. They are really complex and we don't get an answer.

Mr. David Robinson: I would like to go back and check in my own department, because I don't know the answer to this and there could very well be a good answer. There could very well be a service that's provided to members of Parliament that I'm not aware of. Other than that, we have our general inquiry lines to Veterans Affairs.

But I might like to take that one back, because I think there might be an answer that I'm not aware of.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nycole Turmel: My next question is for Mr. Moore.

We know that there have been cuts. I have been told that 250 case manager positions have been eliminated across the country. Those

are the people making house calls and providing services directly to veterans. They understand their situation very well. They can detect changes and help the families, who do not always have the time or the ability, to be able to pick up on the changes and to come to terms with them.

Do you see a difference? Are the improvements that have been announced really a lot better? Instead of trying to cut down on red tape, should they not also be looking at having service centres and improving the service that regional case managers provide, especially because they know those remote areas as well as the veterans' rights?

Mr. Brad White: I will answer in English, if I may. It will be a lot better for both of us.

[*English*]

The real issue when we're doing cuts like this is that we've been told the people will be offered a chance to go into a different place. Maybe somebody will become a case manager and receive the training to become a case manager. We haven't seen this yet, so we're waiting as well to see how this service delivery is going to develop.

Take, for example, the Sydney office in Cape Breton. We've been told that it's going to close in 2014. We've been told that those people have been offered positions down in the Halifax region in the same type of work, and we're hoping that they get more case managers.

The issue is to get more case managers to be able to deal with the people directly. That's what we want to see. We haven't seen it yet, and we haven't seen how that's going to develop. We're waiting to see how that will develop and where those people will be repositioned, retrained, and reused to be able to serve veterans.

So we're watching too.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nycole Turmel: Thank you.

Sylvain, do you want to ask another question?

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Chicoine.

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to ask Mr. Moore a question.

In the section of your brief entitled “Reducing Complexity”, you say: Please remove the artificial barriers and complexity to ensure our war-time veterans and their spouses have access to the Veterans Independence Program.

Could you explain a little more what you mean by that statement?

•(1645)

[English]

Ms. Andrea Siew (Director, Service Bureau, Royal Canadian Legion): For the veterans independence program, one of the primary gateways for access is that you must have a disability entitlement. For a World War II veteran or their surviving spouse, there's a huge process to go through to get that access.

We typically try to get a hearing loss disability entitlement. You have to actually send in an application form or have the veteran come in. You must have an older World War II veteran come in and fill out the application form, and then you have to send it to Veterans Affairs, get the audiogram, and do all of that. It can be a very lengthy process, especially for some of our older veterans. Then we can apply for the veterans independence program to get the house-keeping, the grounds-keeping, and some meals on wheels programs in the home to keep them there independently.

For all our war veterans, the Legion's position is that the program should be made available to all our war veterans and their spouses without them having to go through those barriers and hoops for the eligibility. The program is about keeping them in their homes. It's about making a safer environment for them. The Gerontological Advisory Council, in their 2006 report, called it "Keeping the Promise", and Veterans Affairs has not kept that promise for these older veterans.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're actually over quite a bit on Ms. Turmel's time, and since I did allow it, I'm going to make each of the four-minute rounds into five-minute rounds, because we've gone over quite a bit. If that's okay...?

We'll go to Mr. Lizon, now for five minutes.

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

First of all, I would like to acknowledge and welcome our veterans present here. Thank you very much again for your great service to our great country.

Thank you very much to the witnesses for coming. Thank you for your work for veterans.

Before I ask a question, I'll make a general comment. We are living in a rapidly changing world, and I truly believe that whatever we do, we have to acknowledge the fact that the world is changing and the way people communicate is changing. We have to prepare people for new ways of communication; it's something we cannot avoid.

People used to communicate by phone. Most of us here will remember rotary phones. I remember the phone that was before that. It only had a crank, and you would get the operator on the other side, who would connect you. Some people probably don't remember that.

And not necessarily everybody had a phone at home. There was either a phone booth or the post office. Therefore, on the argument that not everybody has a computer now or access to the Internet, I would agree; maybe not at home. But there are places, and many of them, to which people can and do go to use a computer. The same

argument could have been made then, that not everybody has a telephone and that therefore within walking distance there should be an office where you go to meet someone face to face.

I hear negative comments from...on the part of the Legion, and I know they do tremendous work with veterans. I work with and am always in touch with the Legion in Mississauga, in Cooksville. I rather hear positive comments on many initiatives that we do.

As my colleague said before, there is always room for improvement. If something doesn't work, I guess we are in a position to change it, to expand it, to go a different route. But I think we should be flexible and open-minded, if I may say so.

I would like to ask a question on the topic of proactive communication with veterans. Of course communication is a core, important function of Veterans Affairs Canada. We've spoken about plain language in the letters that are sent to veterans.

Can you outline how your office and department communicates proactively with veterans on the many aspects of changes that are taking place at Veterans Affairs Canada?

•(1650)

Mr. David Robinson: I'm afraid that probably neither I nor Maureen is expert on the external communications, but I think it would be fair to say that we can be doing a lot more to talk about how we're improving our service offerings for vets. I can't tell you more than that.

One of the things I can talk about is that when we're talking about the transformation agenda inside Veterans Affairs, one of the first groups of people we have to communicate with is our own employees. I think we need to do a much better job of telling them how the world of work is going to change for them.

But sir, I can't tell you any more about external communications.

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: I can add a small piece of information.

For the My VAC Account clients who have signed up for a My VAC Account and have given us a valid e-mail address and expressed a preference for being communicated with electronically and online, we would be sending messages saying "Please check your My VAC Account; we have sent a message to you recently, and you should check it there", so that they get a secure message from the department.

If a person expresses a wish to communicate with us electronically, which is a new way for us, then we honour that request rather than send them paper mail at this point.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Do you have an idea what percentage communicate electronically with you at this point?

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: As of last week, we had 2,700 individuals who communicate with us online through the My VAC Account, and we receive around 300 questions or e-mails through the secure messaging... E-mail is the wrong terminology, and I'm not a technical expert, but we receive somewhere around 300 messages from those veterans in the run of a week.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

You used three of your five minutes to give us that eloquent introduction. I just wanted to make that point.

I'm not sure whether Mr. Chicoine or Ms. Morin will pick up...?

It will be Ms. Morin, then.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Isabelle Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to go back to what Ms. Adams was saying earlier about receipts. Perhaps I did not fully understand. I am not a member of this committee; I am replacing another member.

Veterans used to need receipts before being reimbursed for their travel to see a doctor, a psychologist or a psychiatrist. As I understand it, they will no longer need those receipts. For example, if I move and live 300 km from my family doctor, but I still want that doctor's services, can I sign up for a ridesharing program to go to see him and claim the cost of a plane ticket?

[*English*]

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: As I understood that, you said that you've moved three to five kilometres away; are you saying it's 300 to 500 kilometres away, and asking whether you can claim a plane ticket?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Isabelle Morin: Yes.

[*English*]

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: We would likely suggest to you, as to any other member of the general public, that it would be more useful for you to obtain the services of a physician in your local community rather than purchase a plane ticket whenever you need to see a physician.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Isabelle Morin: We know that there is a shortage of family doctors in Quebec and that not everyone has one. If a person wants to keep the same doctor, after moving 300 or 400 km away from that doctor, the person can travel by car. If I drive, it costs me \$100 for gas. But could I claim the cost of a plane ticket, now that receipts for travel expenses will no longer be checked?

[*English*]

Mr. David Robinson: This sounds like a really extreme example, but I think the short answer is that we would have to take a look at each individual case. There could be cases, where people live in a remote area, in which they require service and there just is no medical professional in the area. That's reality. That happens here. So we would have to take a look at that.

But for generalities, it's hard to say.

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: We have paid to send people to specialists on a referral basis. We have paid for and reimbursed folks for plane tickets, hotel rooms, and an individual to travel with them, if they are unable to travel by themselves and so on.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Isabelle Morin: I am sorry, but I do not have a lot of time. Let me put the question another way.

Can someone use their car, spending \$100 in gas, but claim \$1,000 as if he had bought a plane ticket? The claim will not be checked, correct? That is my question.

• (1655)

[*English*]

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: We are not asking individuals to provide receipts with their health-related travel claims. However, the program allows for the department to request, on a verification basis, that we receive the receipts in order to verify them. We would do that on an irregular basis, if receipts were....

There's nothing to stop someone from generating receipts for travel that they didn't have, and that would show up when one looks at the claims. It would show up similarly if you visited your doctor who is 10 miles away and you claimed 1,000 miles.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Isabelle Morin: Great.

I have another question about a matter Mr. Lizon raised.

I am very pleased that you can do things online. I was born with a computer in my hands. My generation was. This interests me, of course. As I was listening to you, I decided to look at the content of the website. When I got to the welcome page, I saw that there are 50 options to look at. I feel the same way as I do when I call Sears and they ask me to choose "one of the following 18 options".

I put myself in the shoes of an 80-year-old veteran who goes online and has 50 options to choose from. I wonder how that reduces red tape and how choosing from those 50 options is easier for the veteran. Can you shed any light on that for me?

[*English*]

Mr. David Robinson: We are improving all of our service delivery options. Web service is scheduled to be one of the things we pay additional attention to.

You are using your cell phone. A lot of our new clients belong to Generation X and Generation Y. That's how they are going to get service. It's not the way I would do it, but they will be looking at using portable devices—tablets and telephone—to get service.

Part of where we're going over the next three and a half years is to simplifying our service offerings so that they're easy to read on a handheld device. We're not there today, but we're going there.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Harris.

Mr. Richard Harris: I understand that this is a work in progress. I've seen companies in the private sector work on websites for a long time before they got it right. When you're dealing with veterans, simplifying it is the best thing you can do. I wish you luck on that.

I want to get back to travel expenses. I think it's one of the areas that have undergone significant changes in the length of time and processing. The first part would be the length of time it took to process a travel claim prior to the red tape transformation exercise. Where are we now with travel claims with respect to time?

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: Right now it takes approximately three to five days for an individual to have a health-related travel claim processed. If the individual is on direct deposit, which was an early initiative, then the cheque is not sent to him in the mail. The cheque is deposited in the bank account, so it's a fairly short time period.

Mr. Richard Harris: What was it before we went through the streamlining process?

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: A year or two ago, it could have been two weeks to 30 days.

Mr. Richard Harris: So it sounds as if there's been a significant change there.

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: I would say so, yes. One can always look for improvement. If you could submit online and get your direct deposit the next day, that would be even better, but we're not there yet.

Mr. Richard Harris: I think it's important when you have parts of the service that can be measured, then and now, and the streamlining effect can be identified. It's part of the whole package of getting rid of the red tape and making things work in a more efficient and faster way for vets, because that is what this is all about, making things easier for the vets who need the services. Being able to measure progress is certainly one of the things we should be doing.

• (1700)

The Chair: Did you want Mr. Robinson to respond, Mr. Harris?

Mr. Richard Harris: Yes.

Mr. David Robinson: We do absolutely have that baseline data. I just don't have it here in front of me, unfortunately.

You can't know whether you've transformed or not if you don't know what you're moving from and moving to. People might be frustrated at the speed at which we're making these changes, but we're trying to be very deliberate. We don't want to ever lose sight of our service standards currently. We don't want to fall below what we're already doing. We only want to improve.

So before we add every new step, we try to make sure that we're protecting the quality of work we're already doing. For our pilots here on the committee, it's like flying a 747 and strapping on new engines while you're in flight. That's kind of the way it feels for us.

Mr. Richard Harris: We've talked about this with other presenters from Veterans Affairs. In all of the changes that are being done, the number one question—I'm sure it must be on your wall—must be “Before we do it, is it best for the veteran? Is it best for the people we serve?”

I'm sure that's first and foremost in the minds of all the folks in your department who are trying to offer better service to vets. One of the things that I think is important to bring up again is that through all of the budget rationalizations throughout the entire government, I know that Veterans Affairs was the lowest. It was 1% or less, by far lower than any of the other departments.

I think this is proof positive that your focus is on what's best for vets. While you can streamline services and save some dollars, you're always trying to improve the services in any type of transformation that you're going through. So I congratulate you on that.

The Chair: Mr. White.

Mr. Brad White: I can't get away with not saying something on this one.

We're taking an institution that hasn't moved its doors in a lot of years. We're taking an institution in a bureaucracy that's been sitting there, very comfortable in doing its business the way it has been doing it, until all of a sudden we had 158 casualties, serious deaths, in Afghanistan and people coming back and saying “We need a new way to do business”.

The Legion fully supports the aims of the New Veterans Charter to make a person well and get them on their feet again, instead of simply continuing to support an injury. But if we hadn't made our noise and hadn't made our moves, we would never have had Bill C-55 come forward to make some of those changes, to move the New Veterans Charter out of its concrete. It's supposed to be a living document.

Processing and reassessing how business is done at VAC should be a normal institutional everyday way of life. It hasn't been. So when we say that the changes are coming and they're institutional, they need to come. It's about time.

Doing business better with the modern technology, it's a wonderful thing. Yes, we can do business better. But as I've said before, it's not a cookie-cutter situation. We're dealing with a very diverse group of people and we have to remember that. We can't paint everybody with the same brush. It's a very diverse, wide group of people.

Mr. Richard Harris: Well, I'd like to thank you and congratulate you for your vision.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. We are quite a bit past time on that question.

Because we have time...and it's always at the discretion of the chair to extend it, but I have always looked to the committee for guidance as to whether you want to end it there or want to add a question to either side. As I have in the past, I would look to the committee to get your feeling on it.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I have a quick question, or comment really.

The Chair: You're all right to go one more? Okay.

Then one question to either side.

A question from Mr. Stoffer, then Ms. Adams or whomever from that side, then we'll wrap it up.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I figured that since the great Andrea is here, I might as well ask her a question.

First of all, I want to thank the Legion on your coordination with other veterans groups in compiling resolutions and ways forward. It's not only the Legion. You're working with other veterans organizations in order to not necessarily put pressure on government but sort of advise the government on some of the new ways to go.

Andrea, in Nova Scotia we lost Jim MacLeod of the Waverley Legion, one of the greatest service officers I've ever known. He breathed, he slept, he woke up: veterans, veterans, veterans, that's all he did. He did a tremendous job. When he died, many veterans said "Who do I go to now?" I said there's always VAC and everything else, but they felt a great loss.

When these new programs come into place, Andrea, I would like to know what type of training VAC offers so that you can understand the new enhancements or changes that are going through and can advise your officers across the country about what they should do or how they should do it when something new comes up.

Could you give a quick explanation of how that is affecting you and your tremendous service officers across the country?

• (1705)

Ms. Andrea Siew: We have a very structured training program for all of our service officers at the branch level. Every branch has a service officer. They act as a referral agent because of the complexity and the privacy issues. All of the branches in each province receive training at least on an annual basis and the frequency of the training is mandated. To be a branch service officer you have to have that specific training. They're provided all of the updates and changes to the policies and procedures that Veterans Affairs has.

We work very closely on the transformation. For any new policy or process, as they're promulgating it, as they're testing it, we're also consulted in that process to make sure it will meet our needs as well as the needs of all of our veterans. That's pushed down to all of our branch service officers.

Then we work up to our command service officers, who are professionally trained, security cleared, and we have annual training programs for all of them. As their initial training program, they all receive formal training from VAC on the disability benefit process, from the Veterans Review and Appeal Board on the presentation of appeals, and every two years we go to Veterans Affairs. We will go to Charlottetown, and Veterans Affairs comes to provide us very specific presentations on all of the changes, their processes, which allows us to be more knowledgeable to our veterans as well seeing that we can facilitate through the process better, so when we do get the call from a veteran we understand the two pieces of legislation and the complex process.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Adams for a question, please.

Ms. Eve Adams: Thank you again for being here today.

I think Mr. Harris said it well, in that any change that's brought forward.... I know that Minister Blaney certainly looks at it and asks what we can do to better serve our veterans, to more efficiently serve those people who have put their lives in harm's way on behalf of our nation. And I know that's something that runs very deeply amongst all of our staff throughout Veterans Affairs. I've visited many of the offices, and our staff are just such passionate advocates for our veterans.

I'd like to speak very briefly about the plain language initiative that's been brought forward and just tie it back into the disability claims. Not only are disability applications now being reviewed and an answer is given to the veteran in a much faster period of time, but if the answer happens to be negative, the veteran receives a very clear plain language letter from the ministry that explains exactly what information was missing so that the veteran can go out and obtain that information if they feel the decision was incorrect.

Could you elaborate on that plain language initiative?

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: We have an initiative under way now where we are reviewing all of the communication, all of the letters, all of the decision documents and so on, that we use to communicate with veterans so that they are clear, concise, easily readable, and easily understood. That way we're not speaking in—if you can forgive me for saying it—"bureaucratese" in a letter to a veteran who really needs to understand the decision, yes or no, and, if no, then what additional information the veteran should provide, what they should do.

Ms. Eve Adams: It's clear and it's straightforward, and they understand what information might be missing that they can then provide to you.

Ms. Maureen Sinnott: Then they can come back to the department as needed. It's an initiative that's ongoing. We're reviewing all of our letters and all of our communications on a constant basis so that it is plain and clear.

The Chair: Mr. Robinson, go ahead.

Mr. David Robinson: I might just build on what Maureen is saying.

It's not just the communications products with veterans and their families that are improving. We're also going one step behind that and improving the wording on our policies so that our employees understand better the obligations that they have towards the provision of services to veterans and their families. So we're cleaning that up and making it available for our own employees.

I want to thank you for noticing the dedication of Veterans Affairs employees, because my experience has been like yours. In travelling the country, people have told us that they're not doing this because it's a job; they believe in the mission.

So thank you very much for noticing.

• (1710)

The Chair: Thank you all very much.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Chair: There is a minute left. Before I excuse you, I do want to just make a couple of points. Previous chairs used to do it; we always run out of time here.

First, I do want to admire two things: one, the changes that are taking place; and, as Brad White would know, the Legion's role in both keeping current and being advocates and providers.

I know that Brad had a hand in writing that presentation.

No? I'm surprised.

I do want to say this, though. Mr. Moore referenced the committee. As you well know, a lot of the changes come because of the committee process. A lot of the advances come because of the committee.

So on behalf of all of the members here, so that it's on the record, I want everybody to understand that every committee member is I think dedicated both to the veterans and to the changes that are necessary. Changes will continue to be necessary as we go forward, so the idea of having an active, open conversation is I think terrific. But I think we also recognize that there are a lot of people who try to make this a better life for our veterans, and we'll continue to do that.

Voices: Hear, hear!

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll suspend for a couple of minutes and come back in camera for some quick business.

Thank you very much.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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