



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

ACVA



NUMBER 046



1st SESSION



41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Wednesday, October 17, 2012



Chair

Mr. Greg Kerr

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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•(1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

Folks, as we call you together, before we have our presentation, we have a special guest dropping by, Mr. Lloyd Swick. I'm going to get him to take a couple of minutes to explain what he's up to. He said very clearly he's not allowed to lobby, but he'd like to make us aware of the very important work he's doing on behalf of the animals that were connected with war activity, military activity.

Sir, go right ahead.

Mr. Lloyd Swick (Representative, Animals in War Dedication Project): Thank you, Mr. Kerr, and thank you, committee members.

My name is Lloyd Swick, and for the last three years I've been with a small committee working towards putting up a monument in Confederation Park dedicated to the animals that served our forces and also the Allied forces in war. It's a subject that must be talked about. Many other countries, such as Britain, Belgium, Australia, and New Zealand, have seen such a need. We have been lackadaisical in this matter.

Three years ago Peter Stoffer and I dropped in at the NCC and proposed that we have such a monument. Madam Lemay was in the chair. She supported it to the extent that if it could bring an aspect of national interest to our capital, then they would support it.

The fact that we have an unveiling on November 3 at 10:30 in Confederation Park shows that we met the mandate. This is a story that must be told, and I think I can best tell it to you by relating a story about one battle, the Battle of Passchendaele. Does anyone know the story of Passchendaele?

An hon. member: We do.

Mr. Lloyd Swick: Yes, you're the veterans committee. Then you'll know that Field Marshal Haig, the British commander over all the forces, said to our General Currie, "I want you to take Passchendaele". It was a spot of strategic importance in that it was blocking the way to the Belgian coast where we could use supply ships. Currie looked over the land....

You must remember that World War I very quickly became a stalemated battle. Guns pounded one another. They broke up the ground and they broke up the sewage lines, so World War I was fought in mud and crud—human waste. Currie looked over the land that contained great craters into which man and horse could disappear just like that. He told his commander that he could do it

with his one corps, but it would be at a terrible cost. He was overruled in his objection and he went forward.

Here is the point. He inched forward with 20,000 men towards Passchendaele with the overhead—

Are there any service guys here? You know about an over-covering barrage, which goes ahead of the infantry troops and softens up the enemy.

They did it. They captured Passchendaele. They held it for five days until reinforcements came up, and then we discovered the accuracy of General Currie's words when he said, "Yes, but it will be at tremendous cost". Out of the 20,000 who went in, 4,000 survived.

The point I want to make is that 90% of the ammunition that was fired by that creeping barrage to soften up the enemy was brought forward to the front hills by mules, and if that firepower had not been there, would there have been any survivors?

I relate the story to you because I think it is high time we had a monument dedicated to the animals that served our forces in war. This is a typical case in which our casualties would have been much higher. As a matter of fact, it was Field Marshal Haig who said that had it not been for our horses, our animals, we might not have been victorious in battle, and if that were the case, you would not be sitting here, nor would I be talking.

I know I cannot bring up the aspect of money. My project is costing \$160,000. I'm \$18,000 short. You may have received these little plastic cards.

If you go on to Animals In War Dedication, aiwdedication.ca, you'll find out what our project's about, and there are also ways through which you might make a donation.

I think my four minutes are up. I do thank you for your attention and I wish you all well.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

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

Certainly we got it, and I think we can follow through to get the contact information for everybody if they'd like to have it.

Thank you, Mr. Stoffer, for raising that, and Ms. Adams.

We are officially back to committee business. As you know, we're studying the benefits; the benefits browser is going to be presented today.

Now that I'm refocused, thank you very much for coming in today. I know we have two name tags there for Sheri and for Janice, and as I understand it you're probably going to take close to an hour to make your presentation, or a little shy of that. Then there is some interaction or some questions and answers, and then we'll follow up whatever questions the committee has.

Thank you for your patience, and thank you for being here today. It's all yours. Take it away.

• (1540)

Ms. Sheri Ostridge (Senior Director, E-Comms, Marketing and Transformation Communications, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for having me and Janice Burke here today. My name is Sheri Ostridge, and I am senior director of e-comms, marketing, and transformation communications at Veterans Affairs Canada.

We're really excited to be here today. We're talking about an e-tool for veterans, for a gentleman like Mr. Swick and for others, that was launched only on Monday by Minister Blaney, by the parliamentary secretary, and by the Veterans Ombudsman.

[Translation]

We are here today to introduce you to a new online tool called the Benefits Browser. As the minister said on Monday, this tool provides information on programs and services based on the situation of the veteran using it.

[English]

The benefits browser is a key improvement in the way veterans will be able to access information about our department's services and benefits.

Mr. Chair, we've handed out copies—I hope everyone has copies—of a deck in English and French of our presentation. I now invite committee members to the second slide.

I'll give a brief overview and clarify what the browser is. On the left is the French version and English is on the right of our screens. My colleague, Janice Burke, will explain a key new component that lies within the benefits browser and that our policies are now online for the first time. This is something that we're really thrilled to have. Following that we'll have a demonstration of the browser, and that will take about 10 to 15 minutes.

We'll go to slide number four. We'll skip right through the outline.

Improvements continue, and I know this committee has heard much about the progress that has been made at the department in improving services for veterans. We're very thrilled, and we feel this is part of the progress the department is making. We're working to offer more online options to communicate better and more simply through plain language and other initiatives.

We're streamlining internal processes and modernizing our policies so the veterans' experience is a good one, with less hassle and less bureaucracy, and we are really making some leaps forward.

To tell you about the development of the benefits browser is a true story of partnership. A prototype was developed as an internal tool by the office of the ombudsman. Their staff required fast and central

access to specific VAC information, so there was much back-and-forth between our websites. It was providing a kind of platform for them to work off. Thus started the process of the benefits browser.

We worked with the OVO and we adopted their concept for our staff, so we started on an internal basis. We went through some pilots and redesigned and published the tool internally for our staff, who had different needs. As a result of the positive response to the internal browser, modifications were made. We also had to adapt, as per Government of Canada web standards, and we were able to make it available to the public, to veterans and their families, earlier this week, on Monday. It resides at veterans.gc.ca.

We'll get into how this works in the demo, but to give you a bit of a set-up, if you draw your attention to the front of the room and the screens, veterans can take two options—two paths, if you will—from the very front page. It's highly visible, and on the benefits browser you're seeing a silhouette of a soldier. “Benefits at a Glance” is one option that is seen on one page, then all of the services and benefits. Then “Browse your Benefits” is a self-guided series of questions. It's very quick. In under probably three minutes a veteran can get information that's relevant to him or her.

In addition to programs and services, acts and regulations and program policies have also been added within this, so I'll pass to my colleague, Janice, to give us a little bit of information about that.

Ms. Janice Burke (Senior Director, Strategic Policy Integration, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, Sheri.

We are now on slide 7.

Good afternoon. My name is Janice Burke, and I am the director of strategic policy integration.

I as well am very pleased to be here this afternoon to discuss the implementation of the benefits browser and how it will provide improved and more timely access to information on programs, services, and policies that are important and relevant to veterans and their families.

As Sheri indicated, as a result of listening and working closely with our veteran stakeholders, this information is now available in one location, making it easier for veterans and their families to obtain the information they need when they need it. The really good news part of the browser program is that some information, such as program policies, is now available for the first time. This is because one of our transformation commitments was to renew and simplify all new program policies and make them available online for our veterans and their families.

I'm pleased to say that approximately two-thirds of our program policies are now available on the benefits browser. These policies pertain to the following programs: our treatment program; rehabilitation; career transition services; income support; and financial benefits, such as earnings loss, the permanent impairment allowance, supplemental retirement benefits, and the war veterans allowance.

The remaining third of our policies are currently under revision. These policies pertain to disability benefits, the veterans independence program, and long-term care.

I am pleased to say that by March 31, 2013, all of our VAC program policies will be available online for our veterans and their families.

The new policies are simpler to understand. We used more plain language where we could. The policies are also now displayed in a more logical and consistent format, with hyperlinks embedded in the policies that enable you to go to other related policies, information, acts, and regulations.

As indicated before, veterans and their families can now access these policies online for the first time. While policies are also available and are provided when requested, they now can be viewed and filtered in one location whenever needed, without delay, which is really what transformation is about: making life simpler for our veterans and their families and providing veterans with greater access to the services and programs provided by Veterans Affairs.

• (1545)

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: Just to recap a little bit on the benefits that we envision for veterans, they will see, as Janice has said, policies that previously they would have had to request from the department, and it would have taken time to send them. They are now able to go online and immediately see them, so if they're with advocates or folks who are helping them, they are able to access them really quickly.

The information you're going to see is going to be displayed clearly in a focused way, and it's very easy for the users to get to an individual information viewpoint. It's an interactive experience. The users identify themselves and move through the information; underneath, it's filtered through so they can get to what counts for them.

Our website attracts almost 3,000 visitors every day, so as for getting the word out, in one way they're coming to us already. That's a very big benefit. We're going to build on that. The announcement on Monday by the minister, parliamentary secretary, and ombudsman was the start of our campaign to push out the word that the benefits browser exists. We look forward to promoting it further, after Veterans Week, with some regional advertising that we will target around CF bases.

I want to mention that protection of privacy was factored in. I know that committee members have heard of our project management approach and how we have privacy assessments as part of our commitment to transformation. That was factored into the planning of this. You'll see that one of the benefits is that at the end of the process, users can actually have information emailed to them, but

those emails aren't captured. They're not stored at all. It's a quick email and it's not held, so it's a simple process.

As I mentioned at the beginning, the improvements are very much a result of our work with the ombudsman's office, and we did want to recognize that it's a great partnership and we're really thrilled that we were able to work so closely with them. I think it's a strong tool because of that.

Mr. Chair, we're up for the demo. We'll get to show you what lies beneath.

The Chair: I think we're ready. Please do.

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: I would also make a suggestion. It depends on the committee's time, but if folks want to come up, we'll have our computer terminals. If you want to take a look through it yourselves so that you can then show others, we would welcome that.

We're going to take two scenarios. We're going to use a veteran of the Second World War. We'll call him Paul. Paul may come in to the front page, veterans.gc.ca. He will have two options, as I mentioned: to go through Benefits at a Glance on the left or Browse your Benefits on the right.

We're going to start with Benefits at a Glance. If any of you have your mobile devices here, this is mobile-friendly and its full functionality works, so if folks wanted to follow along I give you that option. However, I know we're not in a wireless environment, so you might not have that ability.

First, he's going to come in through Benefits at a Glance. He's going to come to a full page of the services and benefits that are currently offered by the department. As well, there are links outside the department to CF, DND, and other related government departments. In one place, he will find everything offered by our department and then by others that are affiliated with us.

He is a veteran of the Second World War. He will see at the very top that there are different divisions of Second World War veteran, Canadian Forces, an application that may be pre-1996 or post-2006, and RCMP. Where he would come in as a Second World War veteran, he'll double-click and he will see highlighted in blue and yellow the lists of VAC services and benefits that are most relevant to him and his service.

The links on the right that aren't highlighted—for example, disability award and benefits to survivors—are still active links that will get him that information quickly, but we are sorting through information and telling him in a quick way which ones he's going to be most likely interested in reading.

I'll take you through the disability pension, for example. He may want to have a look at that. He's going to click on the link. We're still on the website. He can look at the various pieces of information related to the disability benefit, including the different types and the steps for him to apply. He can get his application online and get walked through the process. I want to mention that this by any means doesn't replace personal service. Paul can still call into our 1-800 number if he has questions. This is another channel.

We've heard from veterans themselves that they want the ability to find more information online and go through self-serve options. For those veterans, this is a great tool. Others may get to a point where they have questions. Then they can visit our offices or our Service Canada service points, or they can use the phone to get through. Other veterans may stop at this point.

Each time he clicks a link, information is opened in a new window, but he can always return to Benefits at a Glance.

Now we're going to come back to the front page again and go into the benefits browser. It will take a minute to load.

● (1550)

At my desk it runs much more quickly than it is doing right now, but that's part of what we do. I must add that our whole website is also set up for various ages of computers. My home computer may be at a speed more like this, rather than that of places where speeds are faster. It's still all accessible; it's just that sometimes the time factor is different.

I will mention that in addition to this, we still have our traditional services and benefits information, which veterans can receive at our offices or can have mailed to them. It isn't that all the information is moving to the online channel; we still have multiple channels for our information. We have been told time and again in our client satisfaction surveys and in public opinion research that various audiences like to receive information differently. We are respecting that, for sure.

Now we see the benefits browser.

You'll come in to browse your benefits. I'm going to take as an example "Charlotte". She's a recently released CF member, so she's going to come in to the "Canadian Forces Regular Member" menu option, but before we click, we're going to take a scan to see....

There are different groups. There are Second World War veterans, Allied veterans, RCMP member or veteran, reserve member, Korean War veteran, Korean War allied veteran, and family member or survivor.

We based the different groups, of course, on the different groups we serve, but also on information from our call centre and our front-line staff, who deal with veterans and know them best in terms of how they see themselves. For example, you may be both a reserve and a CF member, so you have a choice, but you'll get to the same path. It's so that veterans see themselves when they come to this site.

We're going to click on "Veterans", "Forces", "Regular member". Charlotte is looking for information. You'll see there is a scroll-down menu that gives choices. Is she still serving? Has she been released? In this case, I'm going to say she's been released, and we hit the next button.

Again she has choices, with quick questions: Do you have a service-related disability or illness? Have you been medically released? Are you experiencing health problems?

In this case we'll say that Charlotte was medically released within the last 120 days. We'll press "Next".

You'll see that already she has been given an overview of the different programs, such as "Transition interview", "Disability benefits", "Rehab", or "Financial support" that would apply to her situation.

I will stress that this is not a decision-making tool; this is an information tool. She can navigate through the screens, and any of the "Read more" links will take her to more information about that particular area.

● (1555)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Manon Perreault (Montcalm, NDP): Can we see how much additional information there is? If we click on "Read More", can we see how much additional information there is? Is it possible to do it presently?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: You mean now?

Ms. Manon Perreault: Yes.

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: Ah, yes.

Ms. Manon Perreault: Thank you.

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: You're welcome.

[*English*]

If we go to the rehab link, we'll click on "More", to see....

In this one we have "What is the program?", "How would I qualify?", "How do I apply?", and any important notes that the client should be aware of—or in this case, a potential future client.

As well, always you will see that there is "Contact Us", so that, if somebody gets to a point at which they have a problem, this is an option as well, and they can contact us by phone or by email.

I'm sorry; did you want to slow down a bit on the top?

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): I just want to read the paragraph right where your screen is.

Thank you.

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: Now we'll go up. I want to show folks, if we go back a page.... We'll come out of the rehab screen and go back to the section talking about "Related information". You'll see the bar at the top. This gives them more details on medical benefits, the VIP, and long-term care.

You can see that there is quite a volume of information. We're trying to give them a summary if it so that they can quickly read it but then follow up, wherever they're interested, for more information.

We'll come back to the top again. This is a new piece in which we're adding the policies, as Janice has mentioned. Also, the acts and regulations, which we won't go to right this second, are available to Charlotte.

I will pass the floor over to Janice, who can take us through a little bit of that aspect of the site.

Ms. Janice Burke: Yes, I can give you an example.

If Charlotte were having difficulties with her lower limbs—for example, perhaps she had an injury to her right leg—and was interested in finding out what treatment benefits are available from Veterans Affairs Canada, she could simply go in and click on “Treatment benefits”. She's interested in understanding what the policies are and she wants to do this in the comfort and privacy of her own home. She clicks on “Treatment benefits” to find the policy, and the policy comes right up.

For example, it's “Aids for daily living”. She may be interested in what we provide in terms of canes or other kinds of devices to assist with walking. She can click on the policy for “Aids for daily living”.

What comes up is a very simple policy, in terms of the purpose and the objective of the policy, and it lays out in very simple terms what would be considered in determining whether or not she would be eligible for any of the aids to daily living.

Essentially, this provides her with enough information so that, if she wants, she can talk to a case manager, talk to her health practitioner about the need, and then contact Veterans Affairs to obtain the approval of the benefit.

I'll go back to you, Sheri.

• (1600)

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: As you can see, it's easy and visible, and there is greater access to information than there ever was before. It will hopefully cut down on the time needed for veterans to find out the information they need. They would be coming to a case manager, in the case that Janice used, with probably more specific questions than ever before, because they've been able to access and read it themselves. It is part of the research that they will be able to do.

Maybe we'll go to acts and regulations, just to give a sense of what's there as well. These are also on the site, and they link to various sites and the Justice Canada site. These are there as support to the policies. This is something that is also new and that has been added underneath the browser.

One benefit of this is that at the end, Charlotte can email her results to herself. As she is capturing the different pieces of services and benefits that are available to her, she now can go in and email herself the information.

I don't know, Mr. Chair, whether you or another member would like to be emailed Charlotte's—in this case—information. If we could get your email address, hopefully you'll get it before too long.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Are you ready?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: We'll do it right now.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Anybody can have my email address, apparently, but that's okay.

It's bob.zimmer.p9@parl.gc.ca, and that's as short as we could make it.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC): Does his wife find out about Charlotte?

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: Pretend that Bob is Charlotte for a moment and you will see her information. The user will get a confirmation that an email has been sent. As I mentioned earlier, the email is not retained. And so, off goes the information, which they can then print out at their leisure and read.

The links from within are also kept live in the email.

You'll see, perhaps, Mr. Zimmer, when you get your email, that there are live links, so that if she wanted information on the rehab program, she could link through, and it will come back with the very

So there it is. I think that took less than a minute. That was good.

Mr. Chair, that gives you an overview of the browser. I will pass it back to you. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Bob. We've all agreed not to share that information with anybody else.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I will say that it came in both French and English.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much.

You are now prepared for some questions from the group. We'll start with Mr. Stoffer.

• (1605)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and my thanks to you all for coming.

I'm sure that for many veterans who are really up to speed on computer technology, this would be a real help. My concern is for those who don't use computer technology or who don't have access to a computer, especially those in rural or northern communities where there are no CAP sites anymore. How do they access this type of information?

I wanted to go through a couple of scenarios.

On long-term care, I wanted to double-check the wording. You refer to a Canadian Forces veteran with a service-related injury or illness who was medically released within the last 120 days.

First of all, if he missed 120 days, what happens there? If the person is suffering post-traumatic stress disorder, he may not follow this timeline. Second, it says the person has a service-related injury or illness. Generally, that's decided by decision-makers, not necessarily by the individual veterans. They assume they have a service-related injury, but this is not a decision thing; this is just an information package.

Also, on long-term care, you say that if a veteran requires long-term care, his first call should be to his provincial long-term care placement office. I just want to understand why it is that way. Your second call, in that case, should be to VAC, but if you're a veteran looking at this site, you're not thinking of the province; you're thinking of the federal government. Your first call, I believe, should be to the VAC. If the VAC then says to contact your provincial or regional rep, that would make sense, but saying to contact the provincial person first may confuse the issue.

Right now, for World War II and Korean War veterans who have served overseas, long-term care is a federal responsibility. When the last Korean War veteran dies, that will change, and a lot of that care will be a provincial responsibility. I just want to ask why it was worded that way and what is going to be in place for them. I know you said they can still use the 1-866 number.

There are many Canadians, especially in the veteran and RCMP communities, who don't understand computer technology. It is still new for them. This is especially true of those who are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and getting help from a family member or a friend. Will VAC be going out to these communities and holding seminars or community meetings? VAC needs to sit down with people in the Legions and VAC halls and show them how this actually works.

And thank you for coming.

Ms. Janice Burke: Okay.

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: If you want, Janice, I can handle the first question.

Mr. Stoffer, at the end you referred to veterans in areas where they don't have a CAP site or they're not on computers. We have many different options. This is not the only tool we use in communication. We're extremely proud of it, but it won't cover all our audiences.

For many years the department has been known for adapting to what the veterans need. *Salute!* newspaper is one example. We use a large font because we know our readers are of an age that they need that. Sometimes we anticipate it before we're asked. That's the best situation. We have publications that are liked by veterans and we will maintain those.

To promote something like the benefits browser to folks who don't have access will be done through our existing publications like *Salute!*, but we also have the ability through the 1-800 number that you mentioned that veterans can call. They say they're not online, but they've heard about this and they want to have a package sent to them.

Our call centre and staff in our offices have been trained. They will be able to go through it themselves, so veterans can say this is the information they're interested in, and then it could be mailed to them. These alternative delivery methods are available; even this tool might not be of interest to a particular veteran.

The other thing we're finding, based on feedback, is that family members are also increasingly becoming our audience, because they communicate for the veteran. While veterans themselves may not be into computers, in many cases the family members are.

You mentioned Canadian Forces bases. We have ongoing SCAN seminars. As part of our outreach—and I think former colleague Colleen Soltermann has been here to talk about our outreach—we go to bases and have sessions at military family resource centres. We're able to tell them about the new tools and also the traditional tools, and we add those to the mix so that veterans have choices of how to get the information.

Hopefully that helps to answer your question.

● (1610)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want to point out that we might use that in the second round of questions for the NDP, because Mr. Stoffer used up over three minutes of his time just getting to where he was going and therefore didn't give you a lot of time to answer. I would suggest that in the next round he might follow through. We do want to hear it, for sure.

Go ahead, Ms. Adams, please.

Ms. Eve Adams (Mississauga—Brampton South, CPC): Thanks very much, and thank you for the presentation and the demonstration.

After we had the government announcement, we had quite a bit of universally positive feedback.

Could you sum up for us in a few simple points how this new browser helps veterans and what the key aspects are?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: I would agree, and we were quite excited about how well it was received. Even at the announcement at our VAC office, we had feedback from veterans saying how great this is and that they're excited to use it. A couple of emails have already come in on it, so thank you. We're very proud of the work our staff and the OVO staff have done to get us to this point.

To summarize the benefits, I hope you got a sense from the demonstration that we've made it quick and easy for veterans to access a significant amount of information. I think we're all aware that you can easily get into information overload in this society, so we're trying to distill a whole lot of information and get to what's important for the veteran. I think the benefit to veterans is that we're making it simple for them, and we're making it relevant and targeted to them.

One of the big benefits that Janice spoke of is having access to that information. That is making our business at Veterans Affairs much more accessible for folks to understand how decisions are made. I'd say those are the key benefits.

Ms. Eve Adams: Thank you very much.

Can you tell me how the browser complements other initiatives at Veterans Affairs Canada, in particular the red tape reduction initiative and perhaps the plain language initiative?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: This is a key part of the red tape initiative and also the plain language initiative, which started quite some time ago.

We have spent time on plain language to make the information that much more understandable, whether it has been decision letters or content on our website. This gives veterans another choice in how they communicate with Veterans Affairs and how they receive their information.

We also have other online services that have been announced as part of cutting red tape, the My VAC Account and the My VAC Book, which I think have been discussed at this committee recently. Again it's giving veterans that many more ways to do self-serve options, and that's a key part of our red tape initiative: to give information when the veteran wants it, with 24/7 access. Veterans have told us this is what they want, and we've responded with these types of initiatives: plain language and red tape reduction.

Ms. Eve Adams: Thank you.

To reiterate, for veterans who don't have access to the Internet, how are we going about helping them?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: For veterans who don't have the access, we have multiple channels. We can send them information as we've always done. We also have Service Canada points of service, which have increased exponentially in the last number of months. We also have trained staff in our offices who can help with questions any time the veterans have them.

We have multiple channels that can augment, if you will, the website.

Ms. Eve Adams: I have to say that in speaking with seniors.... An older veteran gave us a presentation at the beginning of our meeting today. I would say he is over 70, and the first thing he did was refer us to his website. He was quick to point out that donations can be made online.

I know my mother is very adept at just about everything—Facebook, downloading pictures, and so on. I think there is a greater uptake, even amongst older communities.

Of course, younger veterans have been asking for this type of access and information for quite some time now, so congratulations to you and to your team.

•(1615)

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Casey, you have five minutes.

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

I'm actually going to pick up on that last happy note that the parliamentary secretary left with Ms. Ostridge and Ms. Burke. Some of you may not know this, but Sheri Ostridge was the lead in a delegation that went over to Vimy. She spent her Easter weekend in

Vimy with some parliamentarians and veterans for some commemoration services there.

I'm going to embarrass her, but she is a true professional, in every respect. The taxpayers of Canada and the veterans of this country are lucky to have people serving them who are as dedicated as Sheri Ostridge. I saw her work over that Easter weekend first-hand. I was part of that delegation and proud to be so.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Sean Casey: Now that I've totally embarrassed you, is the benefits browser something that's going to save money for the department and the Government of Canada?

Ms. Janice Burke: I can help to answer that. The benefits browser, as Sheri indicated, is about getting information to our veterans faster. They have asked us for this. They wanted more information on our programs and services. It's really about that, as opposed to anything around reducing budgets or making cuts or that kind of thing.

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: I would add that I think it's about efficiencies, in terms of a veteran being able to access it and making it more efficient and reducing the hassle. It was less about resources or reducing resources; it's more about communication in this case.

Mr. Sean Casey: I understand that, but you really haven't answered my question. Is the answer that you don't know, or that it doesn't matter?

My question is on whether or not this is going to save money. I understand you're telling me that saving money isn't the goal, but do you know whether it will save money and whether or not that was the main motivation behind putting it in?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: We're always very conscious of spending taxpayers' dollars and where the value is the greatest. In the long term, I don't have a figure on what the cost savings would be because, again, it wasn't the intent of the project.

There is a cost for publications and printing, so long-term savings would be in that area. There's been less demand, though, for publications; we're responding to what we were asked for by veterans. Over time, there could be cost savings as a result of less printing.

I think that's actually a good use of taxpayers' dollars, but it will only be based on the needs of the veterans.

Mr. Sean Casey: This next point came up a couple of times when we talked about your having services available to veterans, not just through the veterans browser but also through your offices. When you say you have services and information available through your offices, you're referring to your district offices, right?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: I mean all of our offices. We have information kiosks at our offices, and also at the CF offices that are related to us, whether they be military resource family centres or the integrated personnel service units. We have information available at all of the different outlets, including Service Canada, which is part of our new service delivery offerings.

Mr. Sean Casey: We're quite familiar with them.

The presentation, and I think I heard one of you also, mentioned that one-third of your policies are under review. Is that right?

Ms. Janice Burke: Yes, that's correct, Mr. Casey.

We now have the majority of our policies in the benefits browser; we just don't have them all revised. However, by the end of March 2013, all our program policies will be online.

Mr. Sean Casey: Is the revision of your policies a substantive revision, or is this just a matter of cleaning them up so they can be published? Are one-third of the policies in the department in a state of flux?

• (1620)

Ms. Janice Burke: No. We're not ready to publish them yet because they've not been completed and approved. Substantive changes have been made to the policies, in terms of using plainer language and trying to keep the terminology in the policies simpler to understand as well. That's what we've been working on for the last year. By the end of this March, all policies will be available.

If anyone is interested in seeing the policies that are not on the benefits browser, they can certainly be made available easily.

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

I'm going to now turn to the new member, Mr. Hayes, for five minutes.

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

Could you help me out here? I'm trying to grasp this concept of prototype. How was that developed and who was involved? Were veterans involved? I read here that it's an internal tool that has now gone external. I want to have a better understanding of the development process—what was involved, who was involved, and how long it took.

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: Staff at the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman were the original idea-generators and creators of a tool for their staff. I can't speak in great detail because I don't work with that office, but my understanding is that it was based on questions that they mostly got from veterans and the information the staff needed to answer those veterans' questions. Definitely that feedback and that kind of service between veterans and the ombudsman's office was an essential part that drove what information was needed in the original tool. Veterans' feedback was definitely an important part, but I don't know the whole story because I wasn't working at the office at all.

After that, it was expanded and suggested to the department as a tool of benefit to our department. Once that happened, a decision was made and it was agreed that a pilot be run for a small group of staff. Of course, staff numbers in the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman and in Veterans Affairs are very different, so we started with a small group of staff, the Winnipeg district office. We gradually expanded the scope over the fall of 2001. By the end of the calendar year, we had the majority of VAC staff able to access this tool. It was an internal tool, at this point.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Before you developed this tool, how many websites and forms and documents would a veteran have to review

compared to now, on one single website? The reality is that this is a single website, but with multiple links. Earlier they probably had to go to each one of those individually, and work their way through it. How many websites and forms were there prior to this?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: Our website has approximately 200,000 pages, just to give you a sense of the scope of information. I know many of you are aware that websites have made various leaps, even in the last five to 10 years, but when the Veterans Affairs website began in the nineties, basically brochures were taken and put up on the website. Information was just captured, written, and put up on the web. We've come so many leaps beyond that, and now information is created in an interactive way.

That said, some of the information put up there in the nineties is still legitimate and accurate, so what we needed to do was find a way to quickly highlight that information for the veteran. Not every veteran would come in and touch 200,000 pages. Many of those, for example, are our Canadian virtual war memorial, honouring all of Canada's war dead. Many of the pages there would not be touched by a veteran with service and benefits questions.

This tool is significant in that it channels the veteran. I think there are 48 landing pages underneath this tool. That said, the existing base is still there. If they want the information, it's still available to them.

Part of our work as well, and this is across government, is on web standards. Departments are looking through their websites to make sure that content is updated, that it's not redundant, that it's not trivial, that the best information is there, and that we have quality of information in both languages as a priority.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: I keep hearing about plain language and I looked at that. It looks like plain language, but I don't think that's all part of it. You mentioned earlier that policies are being rewritten to have plain language. I would like to see an example of what was previously not considered plain language versus what is now considered plain language so that I can understand what it was people were struggling with in terms of the previous language. Are there any examples of those readily available?

• (1625)

Ms. Janice Burke: Sure, we could provide that to you.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: I don't need anything grandiose. It's just because I keep hearing this plain language terminology and I want to make the comparison.

Ms. Janice Burke: For example, previously the policies referred to articles and sections without the title of what the benefit was. We did a lot more work in terms of ensuring that technical language was not contained within the policy. We can certainly provide examples of where we have used plain language in our policies.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: It doesn't necessarily have to go to all of the committee. To an extent this is my own personal thing.

Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We now go to Ms. Morin for five minutes, please.
[Translation]

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

In looking at the Internet site, I have a few concerns. Will there be a chat function?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: I'm sorry, but I can't hear you.
[English]

Ms. Isabelle Morin: I don't want to lose my time.

The Chair: We can hear you now. We will reset the clock. Could you ask the question again, please?
[Translation]

Ms. Isabelle Morin: First, will there be a chat function for veterans who visit the site?
[English]

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: That's a great question, and a great idea, actually. We don't have online chat as part of our plan for the benefits browser at this point. That said, there are multiple different channels, YouTube and Twitter, that we are exploring. I will bring back online chat as an idea. We're looking to expand, and that's a great suggestion. Thank you.

[Translation]

Ms. Isabelle Morin: Thank you very much.

You praised how quick and easy to use your website is. You said that your presentation showed just how easy the website is to use.

You know, there are a lot of veterans in my riding. My office is very close to Ste. Anne's hospital, and I am constantly in contact with them. Most of them do not want to communicate with my office by email. We always need to meet with them. I am afraid that some veterans are not comfortable with the website. Currently, we still have people who can respond to requests by telephone, but will those people still be there in the future?

You also contrasted the very quick service of the Internet site and the very slow service over the phone when people want to obtain documents. However, I hope that the existing systems do not disappear.

I would also like to point out that I don't find the website particularly easy to navigate. The home page gives you two options: "Benefits at a Glance" and "Browse Your Benefits". If you click on "Benefits at a Glance", you land on a page with 44 choices: 20 choices under the heading "Services and Benefits", 6 choices under the heading "Acts and Regulations", 7 choices under the heading "CF/DND Programs and Services", 6 choices under the

heading "Other Supports" and 5 choices under the heading "Related Government Departments".

Let's put ourselves in the shoes of someone with a health problem who wants to go and look at your website. Of these 44 choices, 6 are related to health: "Long Term Care", "Treatment Benefits", "Group Health Insurance", "Veterans Health Care Regulations", "Health Services" and "Mental Health".

I don't think it's that simple. I'm thinking about veterans who have health problems, who are stressed, who are older, who do not necessarily have help and who have been told that it would take a long time to contact the department to obtain a paper copy of some documents. They go to the site and must choose one of these options. You just said that the site contains 200,000 pages. I find it very difficult. I'm wondering how this will be able to help veterans who are having difficulty and how they could be well served by the website.

[English]

Ms. Janice Burke: Maybe I could speak to that.

Certainly the idea of the benefits browser is to ensure that for veterans and their families, and certainly for neighbours and support groups that are interested in understanding what services are available, it's provided. It's in no way necessary for veterans or their family members to make a decision about what services or benefits they're going to actually access or apply for.

As you pointed out, it does look complex, but I think it's complex because we have a multitude of programs and supports for veterans. That's what makes it complex. If we just had two or three programs for veterans, this would look very simple, but because we have such a wide suite of programs, it's actually a good-news story that it looks like this.

Certainly what we've seen and experienced is that if veterans have mental health conditions, most are able to function quite well, and they're able to access the information on websites and elsewhere. When they're in a crisis or they're not doing so well, it's the family members who are accessing the information. This is great for family members and for their peer support circles, as well, who want to access the programs. It's really—

• (1630)

[Translation]

Ms. Isabelle Morin: Since I don't have much time left, I want to know very quickly what guarantee we have now that there will still be telephone service in 10 years for veterans who do not want to use the website.

[English]

Ms. Janice Burke: What I can say is that at Veterans Affairs Canada, we are committed to meeting the needs of veterans and their families, whatever those needs might be. Whether it's today, tomorrow, or in 10 years' time, I'm quite certain that we will be meeting those needs through whatever channels exist. We don't know what technology might exist or what the needs might be in 10 years, but I can assure you that we will be there to assist.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll go to Mr. Lobb for five minutes, please.

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

The first question I have is to Ms. Ostridge. The work you've done was in coordination with the Veterans Ombudsman's office, and I'm assuming with the Royal Canadian Legion and other groups, etc. Is that the fact? They were involved with the perceived issue and the perceived solution, all the way through to completion. Is that the idea?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: Yes, although a slight nuance is that it definitely was the leadership of the ombudsman's office that started the process. They had a tool and they brought it to the department. I want to recognize their leadership in doing that. They shared that they had something they thought was worthy that the department should consider. Once that happened, we worked over the months with the ombudsman's office. After that it was expanded to service officers at the Royal Canadian Legion.

We're not done, though. I must add that this is the launch. As with any web tool, it's only as good as the feedback we get, in this case from users, veterans, and service officers. Part of our plan is that we will do focus testing later this calendar year. It is a continual process to get feedback to make it better.

The ombudsman, I'm sure, will have other recommendations the department will consider in regard to communication. We are open to those, because at the end of the day it helps us communicate better with veterans.

Mr. Ben Lobb: If you have a VAC number for your VAC account, is it your interpretation that on one screen you may have your VAC account open, and on the other screen you may have a screen open to help you fill out or continue your application?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: That could be. I couldn't speak for an individual veteran, but I know that there are many options for use. We've been thrilled that we've been able to expand My VAC Account. We hope over time that more veterans will be using it. You could see them working in tandem. They are complementary tools. We'll hopefully find out from our user feedback whether they have them open at the same time or use them at different times.

Mr. Ben Lobb: The mandate behind all this is to cut red tape. You write in your presentation that this gives fast and easy access to relevant information. Have you done, or are you going to do, any tests to actually see how much faster this actually is compared to the old system?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: That's a great suggestion, so we'll work that into our planning. We haven't developed the focus group testing questions yet for what we're trying to achieve and test. It is a great suggestion, so I'll bring it back.

Mr. Ben Lobb: I'm pretty certain that this is going to be exponentially faster than what was there before. However, I think this committee would be interested in seeing, in situation X, how much quicker it is for the average person to get to where they need to go.

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: Thank you.

Mr. Ben Lobb: In regard to Ms. Morin's comments about the chat accounts—and far be it from me to stick up for any Veterans Affairs

department—Veterans Affairs has a Twitter account and a Facebook account. You can email and call your own personal representative. How far do we have to take this thing? It seems to me that there could be some skepticism among veterans about having a chat account and who would be looking at it. Is there any sense in keeping a chat account?

If they want to start their own Twitter accounts or Facebook pages, maybe that's where we can just say that this is what we've done, it's a great thing, and if anybody wants to tag something or attach something, maybe that's where they should keep that to themselves and their own groups. They can help each other. Does that make any sense?

•(1635)

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: I'd add to Janice's point about needs.

What's important for the department, and frankly for other departments, is to respond to the needs of the veterans. How many tools are enough? We don't know in five years if Twitter is even going to exist anymore. It's more likely it'll be replaced by the next new one, so we have to be conscious of where our veterans and their families are and we want to be there. We also know that CF modern-day veterans have online chats and they have their own communities. Ours isn't to replace those, but it's to complement them from an information perspective.

Mr. Ben Lobb: I have a quick last question. Was there a budget assigned to this project?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: Sure.

Mr. Ben Lobb: Could you tell the committee what that cost was?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: Yes. The majority of cost was our staff. I don't have the hours broken down as to how many staff and how many hours. That's something I couldn't guess at right now.

As far as web development cost is concerned, we had a small contract in the range of \$25,000 to \$30,000. Obviously, because the website already existed and all of the web pages were there, it was the filter and the development piece that we just needed to build. It was actually kind of a beautiful project in the sense that it took the big book and just made a really sophisticated table of contents, if you will, to get to the information that's in the book.

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

Now we go to Mr. Lizon for a full five minutes.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for coming here this afternoon.

The first question I have is on the seminars that you mentioned. Will you do seminars in other cities in Canada? If I'm interested in sending one of my office staff to the seminar and maybe in contacting the local Legion to also take part in the seminar, would you run it?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: Yes, absolutely. We have an outreach group, and part of their goal is to make sure that benefits and services information gets out, so we would, absolutely. It speaks to Mr. Stoffer's question as well on remote areas. We have to have other champions, such as yourselves, who have staff and who themselves have interactions with veterans and can tell them about these tools being available. Upon request, we could certainly arrange to have information sessions set up.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Having the information is important because if my office, or anybody else's office for that matter, gets a phone call from a veteran, they will be able to assist the person, or if the veteran has a person who is computer-literate and the veteran doesn't want to do it himself or herself, he or she would get the proper instruction.

There was some suggestion of chat rooms. I also have a question on what's next. The reason is that I was expecting the browser to be comparable to the tax software that you sit in front of. You input your information, you click finish, and there come your options and warnings or reminders that you may be eligible for something. Could you maybe elaborate on this? Is there something you plan for the future, maybe not immediately, but in future development?

Ms. Janice Burke: I think our motto at Veterans Affairs Canada is to continuously improve. If there's opportunity to improve our services and programs, including our online system, we want to do that, in consultation, obviously, with our stakeholders and with our veterans in terms of what the needs may be.

•(1640)

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: My colleague Ben Lobb asked whether this works together with the people who have accounts set up. How is it connected together? If a veteran wants to start filling out the application, for example, and sets up an account, someone can remotely help the person. How does this work with the browser you're presenting?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: I'm not the expert on My VAC Account—I think Ms. Sinnott was here recently—but I can tell you that the My VAC Account is a secure environment, and to protect the privacy of that client, information is retained in it. In order to respect that secure zone, there's no interconnectivity between this tool and that tool.

This information is on the website, though, and it is complementary to My VAC Account. I say complementary because they're both online and they're both self-serve for veterans, and that's part of our target. Part of our goal with transformation and in cutting red tape is to give veterans choices and options for information, so they're complementary in the sense that they're both online. Veterans have told us that they want more options for online business with us, whether it's for an information need or, in the case of My VAC Account, to help with actually serving the veteran and getting the actual benefit for them.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: I know this question was asked, but do you have any information on the traffic since the browser was launched?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: We don't yet. We will soon, sir. Web analytics are working hard, but we don't have the number in yet, so I can follow up with that.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Thank you very much.

I'm done.

The Chair: You're sure?

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Yes.

The Chair: I don't know how to handle this.

Thank you, Mr. Lizon.

By the way, if he does go on the web page and tries to get his tax return done, you're allowed to turn it down.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Thank you.

That ends round one. We'll now go into round two.

Ms. Perreault, you have four minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Manon Perreault: Good afternoon. Thank you for being here.

When I see sites with so much text, I think to myself that we have to like to read. Indeed, as we go from one link to another, then another, we have to read a lot and be very alert to keep track of all this information.

If someone is entitled to a disability benefit, he may also be entitled to the veterans independence program. However, if I look at your "Long Term Care" section, I can see that it may be the same thing. The person must have his provincial admissions department and must go back to Veterans Affairs. He may also be entitled to the veterans independence program.

In seeing all this, I'm wondering if you are worried that your phone lines will be overloaded.

[*English*]

Ms. Janice Burke: Maybe I could start, and Sheri may want to respond.

The information that you see on the benefits browser is essentially the kind of information that our folks in call centres will provide to veterans and their families when they call. It's essentially trying to provide this information in writing to veterans when they want to view it at their own leisure.

Certainly, as I indicated before, we want to continuously improve the information that we present to our veterans and their families. We want to ensure that they understand it. We don't want information overload for our veterans. We will continue to look at the information on the web to determine, as Sheri indicated, with veteran focus groups whether or not we need to reduce or change the information.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Manon Perreault: I fully understand what you are saying, but I find it to be quite a lot for people who do not particularly like to read. They must sit down at the computer and follow all the links, one after another.

It is a source of information; I understand that.

Is it also possible to make a request? Could you please give me a very quick answer?

• (1645)

[English]

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: I can answer that. To make a request online is absolutely possible. There's a "Contact us" button. If they have a question on anything in particular, and it doesn't even have to be about the web content, we have an information box that comes into Veterans Affairs; it's monitored and then either followed up on or sent to the appropriate area of the department.

As far as the level of detail goes, there are a couple of things. I think today we went through the demonstration quite quickly. In some ways I think it's a little bit of an artificial environment: we scrolled quickly because we were trying to respect the committee's time, so we gave you a quick overview.

I think how readers will process this quite likely depends, as you say, on their literacy level and on their health condition. Again, we're committed to listening to the needs of our veterans and we understand completely that no one website will answer every question, but we are committed to constant improvement.

We will look at feedback from our veterans in the coming months and ask them whether what they see is too much information for their questions. Do we need to reduce it some? Maybe we just need to have headings. Those are the kinds of questions that we'll get through our public opinion research. Then we'll be able to adapt it accordingly, because without knowing from the users themselves—

[Translation]

Ms. Manon Perreault: People who have had access to the site telephoned you. Did most of them have positive things to say? Did they tell you that the site was easy to navigate? Were the veterans able to navigate it smoothly and get around it easily?

[English]

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: I don't have statistics with me on the kind of feedback, but anecdotally I can say that we have had comments that it's difficult to navigate. That is part of the information that we have taken. We agree with the ombudsman that this is an improvement; it's probably not as far as we have to go, but it's a step in a positive direction.

I think it was the volume. It's part of the puzzle of a website of information. More was thought to be better, and to keep putting more information on for the benefit of the veteran was thought to be better, but now we know we need to help the veteran navigate through that information.

On your question on our phone lines and whether we consider we may get more calls because of this, working with our front lines and our call centres is an important part of every initiative that comes out. Call volumes are monitored. It wasn't part of our plan that call volumes would spike. We will watch that, but we have been working with our analysts to make sure they are very trained on what this new tool is and what it can do for them.

However, you're right. It's likely there will be some questions, and that's the benefit of having our analysts there. They can verbally go through it. In the case of a veteran who says he heard on the news

about this new tool but doesn't have a computer, the analyst can actually go through it, fill it out, and mail it to him. That's an option we have.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Go ahead, Mr. Zimmer, please.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thank you for coming today. I'd also like to thank the veterans in the room today for coming. I recognize you today as well. Thank you for doing what you do and for what you've done.

I just have a comment. I think it's a great place to start. To say that the website is started is somewhat inaccurate; it's been ongoing and it's been a process of improvement as we go.

I have a few comments relating to some of the comments about the usability factors for members. I just noticed a few things that I would probably tweak if I had the choice. I've had websites too, and I fix them and make them better.

What I wanted to know is the format for feedback for the website. Obviously, there's an email, but how quickly can you address those issues if they come up? What's your plan for that?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: Usability I mentioned earlier. It's an effort across government, actually. One of the elements of web standards is usability, making sure the sites work and serve the needs of the constituencies that visit the sites. That's very important for us.

As far as a format for feedback is concerned, there is the email option. Obviously, people are online already on this; their tendencies are probably going to be email. That said, we can also receive feedback through our 1-800 number, through in-person service. How quickly we'd be able to update depends on the level of the change or the feedback that we got. Some may be quick fixes and some may be for the longer term. It would depend on what the suggestion is.

Was there another comment or question?

• (1650)

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I suppose it leads into my next comment anyway.

The website was just introduced on October 15....

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: Our website has existed for many years, but this section of the website was announced and launched on Monday, the 15th.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: To give you some credit, we're criticizing something that's been open for, what, two days? I think it's trying to make a positive change for it.

I'm not sure which of my colleagues had suggested this, but what's the next step? Somebody mentioned tax interface software that allows you to interact with it and put in your data. The concern with that is obviously with security, especially with veterans' information. It's sensitive, and we don't want to put it at risk.

Are you looking at the next step for the website already? You've done this now. I'm sure you're figuring it out. Is there a next step planned? What are your thoughts on that?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: In terms of next steps, the focus group testing is key in order for us to evaluate and get user feedback and become familiar with the online habits of users as to what they need. That's a first thing. This was developed as an information tool. It is interactive, but at this point it does not meet the service delivery aspect. That's in My VAC Account.

Future development of My VAC Account is something I can't speak to, but on this one there's not a plan at this point that would get into decision-making at all. There was a comment made about human touch and the benefit of humans. This isn't a decision-making tool and, as Janice has said, it's a complex process. We have a wonderful range of programs and service, but at this point it's not within the scope of our next step to say that this will suddenly replace the expertise and the decisions that come through the good work of our staff.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: To reaffirm what we've talked about, we're certainly always looking for ways to make things better and sharper. I will say I am amazed at how good things are, and we still can always get better, for sure. The many good things coming out as a result of some of these initiatives are great. Anything that's adding to the pot of good things for veterans is a positive, so we'll take it at that and thank you for your presentation today.

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: Okay, thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Zimmer.

We'll now go to Mr. Chisholm for four minutes, please.

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I enjoyed being here for this presentation.

There's no doubt that this will make information accessible to people who can access it, and that's great. I appreciate the fact that you've already acknowledged that it is complicated to navigate. Some of the concerns you've heard are about whether people who can't access this will still be able to speak to a human being. That's number one.

Number two is where is this going to go? In other areas where Canadians are dealing with governments or accessing government services, whether it be in fisheries when they are applying for a licence or renewing their licence or gear tags or whatever, they now have to go online. A lot of people don't have access to computers or don't know their way around computers, and then when they pick this up and try to get hold of a human being, they're being referred to the website. We get those kinds of calls every day in our office in Dartmouth.

Those are some of the concerns I have. I think it's quite worrisome. What can you say? You folks are doing the best you can under the circumstances to deliver important services, but I want to register that on behalf of veterans and RCMP members in my riding

who may run into problems accessing information and talking to a human being.

I'd appreciate your comments.

•(1655)

Ms. Janice Burke: Currently we're very committed to multi-channel service and we've been providing service to veterans via the telephone, via walking into offices to obtain the information, through email, and through written communication, and this is simply another channel. Having said that, again it goes back to the fact that we're always going to be very cognizant of the needs of our veterans and their families. As their needs change, so may the policies and the services, but it is guided by what the veterans say they require.

This benefits browser is an example of basically building something in response to what our veterans and our stakeholders have said: "Your website is too complicated. I can't seem to understand what programs and benefits might apply to me." That was because they had to go to various spots on the website. Today, this week, they now have one area they can go to and obtain the information that's relevant to them, and also obtain the policies that are relevant to any of the decision-making around their eligibility.

All I can say is that at Veterans Affairs Canada, we truly are committed to ensuring that we understand the needs and that we continue to meet them.

Mr. Robert Chisholm: I do appreciate that. My staff talk with your staff, and with the staff at EI and Service Canada, every day. I appreciate what you're dealing with and your commitment to providing these services, but my point, on behalf of veterans, is that it's becoming increasingly difficult to get a human voice, to get a response, and to get guidance.

This is a tool, but my concern... I'll be watching, certainly, that this is not the thin edge of the wedge in Veterans Affairs of trying to funnel people in a direction that doesn't provide them with the kind of service they deserve.

Ms. Janice Burke: No, exactly. Perhaps I could add as well that not only have we improved the online component, but our colleagues here previously were talking about cutting red tape. I believe at our call centres, for example, we're now down to waiting two minutes to receive a live voice, so we are making improvements in all of the channels, not simply the online component.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to our last questioner of the day.

Go ahead, Ms. Adams, please.

Ms. Eve Adams: Thank you.

I know this isn't your specialty or your focus, but perhaps we could reassure members of this committee that veterans can continue to receive home visits, that they can continue to visit their caseworker for further information, that the human-to-human contact will continue just as it has, that veterans can now go to any Service Canada outlet and receive information and access to information, and that this dramatically increases the number of points of access for our veterans.

Ms. Janice Burke: Yes, that's absolutely the case.

I believe home visits are unique to Veterans Affairs Canada. Our case managers go out and visit veterans and their families. They do assessments. They work with veterans. They provide information through that kind of face-to-face interaction. In terms of access to in-person service, veterans will now be able to access and obtain information on programs at more than 600 sites across the country.

If anything, then, in terms of getting more information out to our veterans, when I think about where we were two years ago, we have certainly increased our reach to veterans, including veterans in rural communities. We're working more with community organizations to provide information on programs and services.

In addition to that, we're working very closely with service providers, the health professionals who are actually seeing our veterans. They are becoming much more aware of the benefits and services that Veterans Affairs Canada provides and can guide veterans to those services.

• (1700)

Ms. Eve Adams: Thank you.

The idea behind the browser is to provide as much information as possible for veterans, and they don't necessarily need to go through the question-and-answer portion. They could simply put in a keyword. They could put "disability" into a keyword search—I'm sure everyone here is familiar with Google or a keyword search—and every relevant result would pop up for them. Then they could explore what benefits might be available to them. That's what we were hearing.

We're also reviewing the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. We heard as part of the testimony at this committee that when veterans are more aware of the types of benefits out there, they avail themselves of those benefits more frequently, so I would imagine....

Perhaps I'll put this question to you: do you imagine there will be a greater uptake of benefits now that veterans can go online and do additional searches to find out what types of benefits might exist?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: That's definitely an important part of our work. Our objective, even under the communications policy of the government, is accessibility and transparency as part of it. If Canadians don't know about the services, how can they have uptake?

Ms. Eve Adams: This is exactly it. Certainly our Conservative government wants to make sure that veterans are receiving every service they are eligible for.

I'd like to ask you a quick question about the mobile application. I went online using my BlackBerry while you were speaking. Could you tell me a little bit about the types of services from the benefits browser that are available through the mobile application?

Ms. Sheri Ostridge: Absolutely.

It speaks to what the future will bring, as who would have thought, even five or six years ago, that we would have a mobile app and it would have multiple platforms of use?

Many of our veteran clients are of an age that they are savvy about technology. We've talked a lot today about those veterans who don't access it, but there are thousands of veterans who are actually telling us that they want mobile apps. They've been asking for email. They've been asking for things such as My VAC Account, so it's in response to that.

As for the mobile app and what we've shown you today, the full functionality that you've seen is available on smart phones and on multiple platforms. We're really thrilled that we were able to do that. We also have a mobile app for commemoration and for Veterans' Week. That's a really exciting part. We've had very high uptake on that.

We also have a connection so that you can go in through a mobile app and access where offices are or where events for Veterans' Week are. We use geomapping. People can actually, on their mobile device or iPhone or whatever, type in their postal code and find out where on Remembrance Day, for example, the nearest service is located.

Again, that's speaking to what the user needs. I think it's continuing to get the messages out, not only in service and benefits but also on the commemoration side as well.

The Chair: Do you have one more quick question?

Ms. Eve Adams: No.

It's a wonderful outreach tool that I know was very popular in years past. Students would go on it to see which Remembrance Day ceremonies they could attend.

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

That completes our rounds of questioning.

I want to thank Sheri, Janice, and the gentlemen for joining us today. I think we learned a lot. If we pass along questions to you, I know that you'll send back written information. We appreciate that.

That would be the business of the day. We're going to knock off early so everybody can go and enjoy themselves before the votes.

The meeting is adjourned.

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