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**Chair**

**Mr. Greg Kerr**



## Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Wednesday, November 28, 2012

• (1535)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC)):** Folks, we'll begin our meeting.

We thought it prudent to have the minister here to start the meeting, so we're delighted to have Minister Blaney, his deputy, and staff with us this afternoon. Obviously the main focus is the supplementary estimates.

I understand, Minister, that you're going to be with us for about an hour?

**Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs):** Sure, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** I know you're flexible.

We appreciate your being here, and certainly you understand the routine. You'll make your comments and then committee members will ask you questions.

I know we're particularly pleased that Mr. Stoffer made an effort to get back from Toronto just because the minister is here.

Did I get that right?

**Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP):** That's right.

**The Chair:** Good. I'm glad to hear that.

Mr. Blaney, please begin.

[Translation]

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, for welcoming me to the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. First of all, I would like to thank you for hearing me as part of the study of the Supplementary Estimates, as well as for the important work that you do on this committee, especially with regard to the transition from military life to civilian life.

I would also like to give special thanks to the parliamentary secretary, Ms. Eve Adam, who organized the ceremony on the Hill. I would like to congratulate the members. It was very well received by all of the MPs and senators. During Remembrance Week, it gave parliamentarians the opportunity to pay tribute to our veterans.

They are the reason why we are here today. With your support, I would like to obtain additional votes to fund two particular initiatives for our veterans.

[English]

The supplementary estimates show our government's ongoing commitment to Canada's veterans and their families, and I count on your support for the more than \$18 million in new funding for veterans' benefits and services.

[Translation]

As you are aware, I promised that our government would commit to maintaining veterans' benefits. We're going much further than that, as you know, because we've improved those benefits. At the same time, veterans have asked us to cut red tape, and that is what we are doing.

[English]

I've said we will provide veterans and their families with better and improved services, and the supplementary estimates prove we are doing just that.

I've said many times that we would ensure the necessary funding is always in place to cover veterans' benefits, that we are a needs-based organization, even when the costs surpass our fiscal projections. That's why I'm here with these supplementary estimates.

Minister MacKay and I have gone above and beyond the parameters of the Federal Court ruling on SISIP, the Canadian Armed Forces long-term disability benefits. The 2012 economic update includes \$1.2 billion in new investments for Canadian Armed Forces and veterans benefits, and the supplementary estimates (B) include over \$18 million in new funding, including \$16 million to change the way we calculate veterans benefits under the earnings lost and the Canadian Forces income support programs.

This one change represents an additional \$177 million for veterans and their families over the next five years. It will also put more money in the pockets of the injured and ill veterans who need it the most.

[Translation]

You also know that we committed to cutting the red tape regarding a program that is very popular among veterans, the Veterans Independence Program. We have streamlined the process. We are now operating with lump-sum payments, rather than asking veterans to provide thousands, even millions, of supporting documents. That's why I need your cooperation today. With these measures, we encourage our veterans to stay at home longer each time, which is why we provide them with housekeeping and yard work services.

[English]

Other measures in the supplementary estimates are equally important. They relate to providing veterans with more choices for career transition services, and through an investment of over \$2.2 million, they provide more points of service for veterans through our partnership with Service Canada. Through this innovative partnership, which will improve access to service for veterans, we are providing 600 points of services, where in the past there were 60. So it's expanding our outreach for veterans by ten times.

When you total all the new expenditures and savings in the supplementary estimates, the net result for the department is another \$18.85 million this year to support veterans and their families. More importantly, this increased funding builds on our record of delivering the enhanced care and support that veterans and their families need, when and where they need it.

In Budget 2005—let's go back a little while—which covered the final year before we implemented the new Veterans Charter, Veterans Affairs Canada was allocated \$2.85 billion. Seven years later, in Budget 2012, the department's allocation grew. This allocation grew by \$3.57 billion. It is an increase of approximately \$715 million per year.

[Translation]

If you add up all of the annual increases between 2005 and 2012, compared to the 2005 budget, you get a cumulative total of nearly \$3.9 billion in additional funds for veterans' programs and services.

[English]

We are clearly delivering for Canada's veterans and their families. How do we achieve it? We achieve it by addressing the needs of veterans and their families.

We've doubled the number of operational stress injury clinics we are operating so that we can help veterans struggling with mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder or depression.

[Translation]

We have also set up a Scientific Advisory Committee to study veterans' health issues and I am expecting to receive the findings shortly. We have established a Veterans' Bill of Rights as well.

As you know, we have created the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman. We have significantly improved the way we protect veterans' personal information through our 10-point Privacy Action Plan and our Privacy Action Plan 2.0. You will recall there was an issue with respect to the use of Agent Orange at CFB Gagetown. This is also something that we have resolved.

We have expanded the Veterans Independence Program to more low-income and disabled widows and we have extended more benefits to Allied Veterans.

[English]

We've enhanced our career transition services by supporting innovative programs such as Helmets to Hardhats, and we've developed a robust veterans transition action plan to help military personnel and their families with every aspect of the transition to civilian life.

All of these measures have made a real and meaningful difference, and we are now taking the next steps. We are cutting red tape, because that's what veterans and their families have asked us for: hassle-free service, more efficiency, less red tape, and more results. That's why we are streamlining the way we're doing things at this department.

We are modernizing the department. We are simplifying policies that have become too complex and introducing new technology. Yes, we are going on the web. That's why we've launched the veterans benefits browser, a tool that was developed by the ombudsman that is not only available to our officials but to all the veterans community. As well, we have My VAC Book and My VAC Account, so that all veterans can access our programs and services through the web at any time of the day and whenever they want, and, it's important to add, in a safe manner.

In closing, we are doing the very things our veterans have been telling us they want, and we are proud to be delivering. Our government is determined to serve Canada's heroes in the same way that they have always served this country. That's why this afternoon I hope I will get unanimous consent for this increased funding for our veterans of more than \$18 million—additional funding for veterans and their families.

Thank you.

• (1540)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

As you know, we go to our five-minute round, so at least some of the members will get a chance to ask you questions. I realize the next round is certainly for senior staff. The others will get to ask questions.

We start with Ms. Mathyssen, please, for five minutes.

**Ms. Irene Mathyssen (London—Fanshawe, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here.

I have a number of questions and I'd like to go through them, and then we'll wait for your response. These questions are in regard to long-term care for post-Korean War veterans.

I know the history of the devolution of veterans hospitals to the provinces, and I know about the mandate these hospitals operate under, but, Minister, mandates can change if there's political will.

I refer now to the case of retired Colonel Neil Russell, a 33-year veteran of the Canadian Forces. I know that his wife, Elsa, has written to you.

Neil has a spinal injury and was treated at Parkwood Hospital in my riding, but he can't walk or stand and he needs long-term care. Unfortunately, there are no provincial beds available to him for one or two years from now. He's to be discharged from Parkwood on December 1 and he has nowhere to go. His wife, Elsa, doesn't drive and she cannot take care of him.

Many post-Korean War vets, I've discovered in the last while, are completely unaware that they can't receive long-term care in a veterans hospital. My question is threefold. Why "no" to the centres of excellences that could provide this long-term care? Why the refusal to change the veterans hospital mandate so that modern-day veterans can get the federal government support that they've earned and they deserve?

Finally, I know that Elsa Russell wrote to you. Have you responded to her letter and her plea? I'd like to put her plea into the record. She says:

I wish to reiterate that Neil loyally served Canada for 33 years doing his share to protect Canadian and Allied interests during the Cold War. It would seem just that Canada should help in his time of need.

Is Canada prepared to help Neil Russell in his time of need?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** I am pleased to address those three questions.

Before I do so, I would like to introduce my deputy minister, Ms. Marie Chaput. This is the first time I have had the privilege of being here with her, and I'm very glad to have her with me in her new endeavour today.

Regarding your question, yes, we do take care of our veterans, and we have veterans facilities. As you are well aware, we have beds that are dedicated to our Second World War veterans because at that time there was no public health system. Now we have a public health system, and we're working in partnership with them. That's why we are providing all our veterans with community beds.

The first thing that is important to understand, Ms. Mathysen, is that whenever possible we are providing all the help and support that is necessary so that we can maintain our veterans and their families in their homes, because this is their first choice; the first priority of our veterans is to stay at home. That's why we provide them with an array of services—the veterans independence program, rehab services. We have people visiting them, and we provide them sometimes with all the devices that are needed.

That's the first part of it—

● (1545)

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Minister, Neil Russell cannot go home and he can't get a bed. He cannot get a bed in a provincial facility. He's caught. His wife is caught.

[Translation]

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Yes.

[English]

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** We're looking to this government to find solutions that will work for people like Neil Russell.

[Translation]

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Exactly, that is just what I was going to tell you.

Indeed, if a veteran no longer wishes to remain at home, he can go to an establishment of his choice. Of course, when the veteran has sustained a service-related injury, we accompany him to insure that he receives care in an appropriate residence, or at home. This is what we refer to as "community locations". Currently there are more than

6000 such places. We invest nearly \$266 million per year for veterans.

You referred to the hospitals. I would remind you that the federal government no longer has any hospitals. The only establishment that is still under our jurisdiction would be Ste Anne's hospital, which would now be viewed more as a long-term care centre. As you know, we signed a transfer agreement with the Government of Quebec in order to ensure that the quality of care would be maintained for veterans of the Second World War and the Korean War, and to ensure that, later on, this establishment would be there to serve the community. This was in the interest not only of both of our two governments, but also in the interest of the staff working in this establishment.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

We'll go to Ms. Adams for five minutes, please.

**Ms. Eve Adams (Mississauga—Brampton South, CPC):** Thank you very much, Minister, for appearing before us today, along with the newly appointed deputy minister.

In your opening statement you indicated that over the last seven budgets your allocation has increased by almost \$4 billion. Can you give our committee an appreciation for the types of services our veterans are receiving with those additional dollars?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Sure. Actually, you're right, and this is quite an amazing story when we look at the number. I was quite surprised myself to see that we are investing on an annual basis, since our Conservative government took power in 2006, \$750 million more per year. One of the reasons why that is so is that we have introduced the new Veterans Charter, and we also introduced enhancements to the new Veterans Charter more than a year ago.

The whole reasoning behind the new Veterans Charter is aimed at helping veterans to transition in a seamless manner from military to civilian life. The other great thing about the new Veterans Charter is that it enables a veteran who has been released from the Canadian Forces, but who may experience some challenges in the course of his life that are related to his military service, to come back to Veterans Affairs Canada.

That's why I've been coming quite consistently before this committee for more funding, because there has been a strong uptake from the veterans community for those programs. As you know, the core of those programs is a recognition of the loss a veteran may have encountered during his military service—what we refer to as the disability award—but there is also financial compensation while the veteran is re-embarking, if I may say, into civilian life. That's what we call the earnings loss benefit.

There is also an array of services provided regarding the rehabilitation service. There's also mental health support, as well as other services that are needed. It's an array of services that is quite extensive, and the veterans community is benefiting from it and using the services we are providing.

● (1550)

**Ms. Eve Adams:** Thanks, Minister.

Our committee is just finalizing its review of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. We've heard that Canada is the only country in the world that will actually fund a lawyer to review your benefits. For greater clarity, if a veteran receives a determination of benefits, they can then take that determination to a lawyer, have the lawyer review all of that for them free of charge—a second review, if you will—and then if some appeal needs to be made, we will actually fund the lawyer for them as they go before VRAB.

This has universally been applauded. Veterans have come forward...just about every veterans advocacy group has come forward to say how truly necessary and remarkable and truly generous this is, especially when we compare ourselves to every other country in the world.

You've recently made some appointments to that board, individuals with military or medical backgrounds. Can you explain for us why you chose to make those types of appointments?

[Translation]

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Thank you, Madam Parliamentary Secretary, for raising this point.

Indeed, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board is a tool available to veterans which enables them to challenge decisions made by the Department of Veterans Affairs. There is both a review and an appeal process. The board is independent from the government. We have a rigorous process for selecting members sitting on this board, which relies on their skills. There is therefore a prequalification process and the criteria we are looking for include military experience, medical experience or quasi-judicial experience.

I have with me the profile of the four new members who have been appointed. We have a nurse with more than 35 years of experience in health care, who has also worked in the area of rehabilitation and career transition. We also have a soldier with 27 years of experience who retired with the rank of brigadier general. We also have a Lieutenant-Colonel who spent 22 years with the Canadian Forces, Lieutenant-Colonel Colin Reichle, as well as another member of the Canadian Forces who—it is interesting to point this out—was a lawyer in the office of the Judge Advocate General, whom soldiers refer to as the JAG.

We are very pleased to have confident individuals who bring depth to the board, which will ensure that when a veteran appeals to the board, he or she will be dealing with individuals who have military culture and experience.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

We now go to Mr. Casey for five minutes.

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

Mr. Minister, in your opening remarks you referred to your expanding partnership with Service Canada. That's what I want to ask you about first. If this is a partnership, then I would think Service Canada would be keeping you apprised of their plans in the next few years.

Mr. Minister, you may not be aware, but the majority on this committee didn't want to hear from the Auditor General.

My question starts with something your department told the Auditor General. At recommendation 4.53, in response to the recommendation, your department said to the Auditor General that, "Processes and standards are in place to give all"—and I emphasize the word "all"—"case-managed veterans more access to their case manager."

As you know, I'm from Prince Edward Island. When all of your changes are put in place, all we're going to have is Service Canada, because you're going to close the district office and we'll have no case managers. Every time I raise this, I hear from you in question period or from your press attaché, through some fairly sharp tweets, that the service that's going to be provided by Service Canada is more than an adequate replacement for the loss of case managers on Prince Edward Island and the closure of the district office.

I have here a secret document from the strategic services branch, an integrated operational plan, which indicates that between April 1, 2012, and April 1, 2015, Service Canada will reduce its workforce on Prince Edward Island by 113 to 61. So there's going to be a 46% cut at Service Canada. Because of your expanding partnership, I expect you're probably already aware of that.

Mr. Minister, considering what you've told the Attorney General

• (1555)

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Auditor.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** —the Auditor General—with respect to the standards that are in place to give all case-managed veterans more access, and considering that you are closing the only district office in Prince Edward Island and moving the case managers out, and considering that Service Canada is cutting 46% of its employees on Prince Edward Island, my question for you, Mr. Minister, is this: will you be advising the Auditor General that the statement you made needs to be amended?

[Translation]

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Thank you for your question on the expansion of services that we will provide to the veteran community through Service Canada.

First, it is not just the Department of Veterans Affairs that must serve veterans, but rather all of government. That is why, by using the services of Service Canada, we are able to offer one-stop services for veterans, which allows them to have a wider range of services. Of course, there are costs associated with this, and that is why I need your support today. In fact, I have to obtain the necessary funds for Service Canada to provide the services to veterans.

I'll come back to Prince Edward Island. As you know, there are five Service Canada offices in that province. They are located in Charlottetown, O'Leary, Summerside, Montague and Souris. As you know, the level of service and home visits for veterans are being maintained, whether they're done by case managers or Veterans Affairs Canada staff. That means that the level of service is the same for veterans on Prince Edward Island. There are home visits. And if veterans want to go to a point of contact with the Department of Veterans Affairs, they no longer have to cross the whole island. They can go to one of the neighbouring towns to receive services related not only to Veterans Affairs Canada, but also to all of government.

As further information, I have to tell you that we also plan to hire additional resources to maintain a case manager ratio of 1 to 40. That means that in all cases where there is an increase in the number of veterans, we will adjust, we will add veterans and hire case managers in Halifax, St. John's, Quebec City, Pembroke, Ottawa, Kingston and Edmonton, because to us it is important to adapt to the changing reality of veterans.

For the first time in the recent history of our department, Veterans Affairs, we have more veterans coming back from conflicts, peacekeeping missions, NATO missions, United Nations missions and Afghanistan than we do veterans from older conflicts. Therefore, all the while offering the same services to our traditional veterans, we also ensure we are able to meet the needs of modern-day veterans.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Minister.

Now we go to Mr. Harris for five minutes.

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

Welcome, Minister and Ms. Chaput.

Mr. Minister, your last comment brought some context to the challenges that Veterans Affairs has been facing. We went from the end of the Korean War some 50 years ago to our involvement in an active theatre of conflict in Afghanistan. I would suggest that for maybe 50 years Veterans Affairs was dealing with something they were very familiar with, and then all of a sudden there is a whole new set of challenges that they're faced with. Given the magnitude of the challenges of the modern-day conflict, I think Veterans Affairs have done an outstanding job and they've reacted to the change.

Mr. Minister, I want to applaud you for the leadership you've shown, and, Ms. Chaput, for the recognition that you folks have shown, in the need to go into a transitional change, to streamline and to use our dollars more effectively in the areas of need. I think you're doing that.

I know Minister Flaherty mentioned some additional moneys for Veterans Affairs in his economic statement. Could you perhaps tell us what the amount was that was allocated for veterans and armed forces benefits, and how that money is going to be spent? Could you give us some idea of how helpful that would be?

• (1600)

[Translation]

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Thank you for your question and your comment.

In fact, you are right. The Department of Veterans Affairs has maintained a steady rhythm over a certain number of decades and it has developed specific expertise.

Yesterday, I was in Kingston where the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research conducts studies. We released the results of a study that lasted over 60 years. That means that we were able to combine data and conduct geriatric research on our veterans who participated in the Second World War and the Korean War. We have developed significant expertise in this area.

Other countries have participated in medium-sized conflicts. I am thinking for example of our American neighbours who fought in the Vietnam War. They experienced other, larger arrivals of groups of veterans. We did not experience that situation before being involved in peacekeeping missions. That is why our department is undergoing a full transformation. We must adapt to this reality. Moreover, Ms. Chaput was associate deputy minister before becoming deputy minister and is actively participating in the department's transformation. In other words, the department we know today is different from what it was four years ago and from what it will be in four years. We are adapting to the needs of modern veterans.

To answer your question, our finance minister, Mr. Flaherty, included that in his last economic statement.

[English]

I may go on in English.

The 2012 economic update includes \$1.2 billion for the next six years in cash for new investments for the Canadian Forces and for veterans' benefits. Actually, this money has already begun to flow. As you know, it's because we are going to stop deducting the veterans' pension benefit from the earnings loss benefit and the Canadian Forces income support benefit. I made an announcement this summer that this would be \$177 million over the next five years.

That's why I need your support this afternoon to increase the supplementary estimates by an amount of \$16 million, so that we can begin to put this money back into the pockets of veterans.

**Mr. Richard Harris:** Thank you, Minister.

**The Chair:** You have 10 seconds left to get a question in, and I hope the minister can answer it fairly quickly.

**Mr. Richard Harris:** I guess that begs the question, Minister, whether you believe there is any possibility that the NDP will support our supplementary estimates.

[Translation]

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** I hope so. When I appeared on March 5, they opposed them. I hope we can count on the unanimous support of NDP members today and that they won't oppose additional money for our veterans.

[English]

**Mr. Richard Harris:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you both for that.

Now we will move on to Mr. Chicoine, for five minutes, please.

[Translation]

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would also like to thank the minister for appearing to discuss supplementary estimates (B) 2012-2013.

Since he is asking for our support for these supplementary estimates, I think it would be very relevant to obtain all of the information that has been requested, especially by the Parliamentary Budget Officer, regarding the cuts within his department. I would like to ask the minister if he is able to provide to us the information requested by the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** It would be my pleasure to answer all of your questions. I await them. What do you want to know? We are an open book. I am ready to take your questions.

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** Where were the budget cuts made? What positions are slated for elimination, and so on? In short, could you provide everything the Parliamentary Budget Officer requested?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** I think the budget was very clear. As you know, the goal of Budget 2012 is to improve the services provided to veterans and to adapt to their needs. In certain cases, we need more staff. In certain cases, we have less staff. In total, about 250 jobs are affected by the measures found in the budget. They are spread evenly within our structure. We plan to implement these measures over the three years set out in the budget year.

As you know, a good example is the simplification of the Veterans Independence Program. In the past, when veterans lived at home and were entitled to housekeeping services, they had to ask for a bill and send it to the department every time. We had to have staff to process the hundreds of thousands of transactions to provide reimbursement. It was like that year after year.

You will surely agree with me that, from one year to the next, we can estimate the costs of those housekeeping services. That is therefore what we do. That is why we now send lump sums to veterans twice a year. We tell them to keep their receipts, a bit like when we receive receipts for tax purposes for charitable gifts. Thousands of hours of administrative and routine tasks have been eliminated. That allows us to redirect our staff and to allow them to provide front-line services, such as case management by customer service agents.

•(1605)

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** The Parliamentary Budget Officer asked for more information from you. How do you explain the fact that he

has to go to the courts to obtain more specific information, information that was requested from you?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** I think I already answered your question about the number of jobs. If you have other questions, I will be happy to answer them.

If you would like to know the amount of savings, they total approximately \$36 million per year.

As for the other part of your question, as I pointed out this afternoon, not only are we maintaining benefits, but we are increasing them significantly. Earlier I gave the example of a \$750 million increase in our budget since 2006, that is to say since our government took office.

Let's take a look at how we've improved the New Veterans Charter over the last two years. It has cost \$189 million. If you take into account the harmonization of our programs that goes beyond the decision handed down by the court, which I announced together with Minister MacKay, veterans will receive nearly half a billion dollars in additional investments.

**Mr. Sylvain Chicoine:** I'd like you to shed some light on the transfer of the Ste. Anne Hospital that you mentioned. Six hundred and seventy-two thousand dollars was also set aside in your budget.

I would also like you to explain why you are requesting this amount and what the money will be used for. Is it for renovations? Will this work on the hospital be done at the request of the Government of Quebec?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Thank you for your question.

Tens of millions of dollars have been invested in renovating the Ste. Anne Hospital. These renovations were carried out over a number of years and they are almost finished. We are talking about more than \$100 million. The amount referred to is a contingency fund for the hospital's renovations. This is a residual amount.

To give you an update on the transfer agreement, I can tell you that it was signed by the Minister of Health last spring, if I'm not mistaken. The process is underway and the negotiator is continuing talks with the Government of Quebec. I think this is a win-win situation. This is good news for our veterans. We are committed to maintaining service to our veterans in both official languages. This is also good for the Government of Quebec because it will eventually be able to use certain floors of this building. As you know, beds are becoming available. It will now be possible to offer these floors to the community. This is a modern and newly renovated facility that will be available to the Government of Quebec.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Minister.

Now we go to Mr. Hayes, for five minutes, please.

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



I want to tell all my veterans that I am so proud to be on this committee. When I was back home during my riding week I met with the executive of the Legion—with a purpose. I wanted to speak with them to see if I could get a better understanding of their problems and concerns so that I could set an agenda for a town hall meeting I want to have with all Legion members in my riding in January. They initially didn't really have a lot of concerns.

They had great praise for you, Mr. Minister. I just want you to know that.

One of the things that a few of them did say is that Canada, as far as they're concerned, and to their knowledge, does a much better job comparatively, in their understanding, than other countries. I would just like to get a sense from you—so I can speak with confidence in January when I go back there—of the Canadian approach to the delivery of veterans' benefits and to the range of veterans' benefits in comparison with our international partners. If we had to compare ourselves to our allies, in terms of what it is we provide, how would you say we compare? Has that study been done, a sort of side-by-side look at how we're doing? I think we're doing fairly well.

●(1610)

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** There are always ways in which we can improve our program. That's what we're striving to do. This very committee has clearly demonstrated that Canada is leading among other countries for providing services to our veterans. That's the way it should be. They have put their lives on the front line for us. That's the reason we need to give them the best we can.

Regarding the Royal Canadian Legion, I want to mention a very interesting initiative that was undertaken not so long ago by the Royal Canadian Legion. They sponsored a pilot project that was jointly led with the University of British Columbia. This project is to help veterans returning from Afghanistan, those really young veterans who may experience some mental health issues or depression following a mission, related to stress they might have endured during this mission.

This pilot project was driven over a number of years in conjunction with the University of British Columbia. It has proven, very outstanding results. Of the more than 250 veterans who took part in that soldier-to-soldier program, which goes over a two- to three-month period, only one has not completed the program. The evidence-based results have proven that this program is really efficient and that it is helping to improve the quality of life of those specific veterans.

We have been informed of this program, and as of a month ago we have identified what they call the veterans transition program as an official service provider for our government. It means that now we are partnering not only with the veterans transition program, but also with the Royal Canadian Legion, which has also decided that it would support this kind of soldier-to-soldier approach for addressing mental health issues for modern veterans. It is complementary to the services we are providing. We are actually very proud of the work they have done. We are looking forward to the expansion of this project in a timely manner. I might also add that some charities have also joined this project, namely, in this case, True Patriot Love.

This is the kind of initiative that shows that all of Canadian society is moving forward, is showing support. This is also a very good

example of the typical Korean veteran, let's say, or those who may have had a longer experience, helping the modern veteran. This is very inspiring in the way we are moving forward and adapting to the needs and realities of modern veterans.

**Mr. Bryan Hayes:** This is one program. If we were to compare the total number of programs we offer with perhaps the U.K. or the United States...how do we compare with other countries in terms of what we're providing to our veterans?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** I am going to invite our deputy minister to comment on this one.

**Ms. Mary Chaput (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister.

Indeed we do compare quite favourably. As you probably know, the U.S. has a very comprehensive system wherein they not only provide the care for the veteran through the course of his career and then on through his life as a post-military veteran, but they also provide their hospital care directly and much of their health care directly.

We had a lot of talk with the U.S. just last week, and they were remarking on how much further ahead they feel we are in terms of the use of information technology and the manner in which we serve veterans. Their own estimate was that we are likely two years ahead of them in that regard, and indeed they have asked us to come to them and give them a bit of our lessons learned and some insights into the advancements we've made.

In terms of other jurisdictions, it's harder to compare; the systems become less similar. But the U.K., as an example, is quite different from us, in that in the U.K.—and I think it's actually a disadvantage—a veteran cannot go to one door and get the services they need. They must go to many different doors. So I think that's yet another advantage that we offer to the veterans here in Canada.

●(1615)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much for that. I'm sure you'll get more questions here a little later on. I appreciate that.

Mr. Lizon, for five minutes.

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

Thank you very much, Madam Chaput, and thank you for coming to the committee.

Minister, you mentioned several times already the initiative you introduced of cutting red tape, an initiative that is aimed at making veterans' interaction with Veterans Affairs Canada better. Could you expand on that and tell the committee what specific measures you have introduced to cut the red tape, and could you explain how that has helped veterans?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Absolutely. I thank you for the question.

Actually, not only did the veterans community ask for cutting red tape, but the Auditor General also asked us, so that our processes can be streamlined and our wait times reduced. That's why we are moving forward with a busy agenda.

The ombudsman has also asked—and this has been implemented for more than a year—that we communicate clearly with veterans. That may sound trivial, but if a military veteran gets a letter from the government that is unclear and is written in a bureaucratic way, it might be difficult for the veteran, who is used to having clear direction, to understand the meaning of the content of this letter. That's why the Veterans Ombudsman recommended—and we have implemented this measure—that we communicate in what we call plain and clear language. So now when we communicate with a veteran, we break the letter we're sending into pieces, so that there's a clear identification of the veteran's needs, his claim. There's also a reasoning for what is behind the decision. There is the decision, the criteria that have led to the decision, the facts that were used, the rules and guidelines that have helped to render this decision, and the result in terms of impact—programs or services that can be provided. As well, there will be a way the veteran can get more information or get us to revisit the decision. This initiative comes from a recommendation of the Veterans Ombudsman, and it is part of our initiative to cut red tape. It is called a plain and clear language initiative.

I have also mentioned that we strive to reduce wait times. Our deputy minister mentioned that some other countries are facing some challenges with wait times. We strive to reduce our wait times, and when people call us through our 1-800 VAC line, we strive to answer them in a timely manner. Of course, there is always room for improvement, but we've seen significant improvement.

The other part of cutting red tape is in simplifying forms, such as the ones that were required for privacy. There used to be many forms for privacy, for veterans who were applying, so we are eliminating duplication of those forms, and we've reduced this number.

Those are some of the initiatives. I've also touched on the web initiative.

In a nutshell, that's what our cutting red tape initiative is, and we are not done yet.

● (1620)

**Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon:** Mr. Minister, another program you introduced last January was Helmets to Hardhats Canada. It's almost a year since the program has been in place. Can you point out to the committee how this effort is assisting veterans who leave the armed forces as they transition to civilian life? Are they able to find meaningful employment thanks to the program? How is the program working?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** In short, it's online: [www.helmetstohardhats.ca](http://www.helmetstohardhats.ca).

[Translation]

In French, the hyperlink is <http://duregimentauxbatiments.ca/>

In January, Prime Minister Harper announced the partnership between the Government of Alberta, several trade unions and the TransCanada company. This partnership led to the creation of a website that manages and facilitates the official transition of our veterans to civilian life, particularly in the construction trades.

This program seeks to identify the training that our veterans receive in the Canadian Forces and acknowledges their expertise

through accreditation in cooperation with the different units, workers and unions.

One good thing about this program is that the veterans are supported in establishing how these skills they have acquired in the military will be recognized in the civilian world. That's the greatest advantage of the program, which is managed by a career military person. I can tell you that a number of other partners have also come on board, including the Government of Ontario. Other companies would also like to benefit from this pool of potential workers, who are members of the Canadian Forces who want to work in the construction field after retiring from the service.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Minister.

That concludes round one.

I know you're prepared to stay for the rest, but we can use this as a break.

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Do you want to stay a little longer or are you ready to go?

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** I'd love to, but I must be on my way.

[Translation]

Thank you for your attention.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much for being here.

We'll suspend for a minute while the minister leaves and other witnesses move in.

● (1620)

(Pause)

● (1625)

**The Chair:** We're going to resume where we left off.

Deputy Minister Mary Chaput is here, a rather familiar face, and Charlotte Stewart is back with us as well. Welcome.

I think you've got the gist of what happens. I don't know if you had any additional comments you wanted to make. Do you want to go right into the questioning?

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Right.

**The Chair:** Since we're back in order then, the first person I have listed is Ms. Mathysen.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I very much appreciate you being here, Madam Chaput and Madam Stewart. I'd like to pick up on a question that was asked of the minister in regard to the \$594,000 in savings that are anticipated.

I know Monsieur Chicoine touched on it, but could you give us a sense of where these savings can be found and what future sources of savings you would anticipate?

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** I'm sorry, I just couldn't hear the savings number you quoted.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** It was \$594,000.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** The \$594,000 cited in the estimates relates to savings we will make by virtue of eliminating a certain degree of overlap and duplication in the services we provide and those that are provided by DND.

More specifically, in the course of moving toward Budget 2012, we and DND consulted and determined that it would be more appropriate for the Department of National Defence to take on what we describe as career transition services, treatment benefits, and VIP services as they relate to still serving members of the forces.

Prior to that point in time we had been doing so, and it was creating confusion for a still serving member as to which door to go to, the DND door or the Veterans Affairs door.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Okay.

**The Chair:** Are you going to switch? You don't have to use all your time if you don't want to.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Mr. Chicoine has a question.

**The Chair:** Okay.

Mr. Chicoine.

[*Translation*]

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

I'd like to quickly touch on the hospital transfer again. The minister mentioned that an agreement had in fact been announced. A new government is in office now, however we still don't know when this transfer will take place.

Could you elaborate on this a little more?

[*English*]

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Yes, sir. Indeed, during the election period, the work we were conducting on the transfer was suspended for a certain period of time. Both governments are now keen to get back to the table and work out the details of the progress they made prior to the election.

At this stage of the game, it's expected that the transfer will take place in either the first or second quarter of the next fiscal year. The main point is that both governments remain committed to the transfer, working through it with the original principles in mind. Those principles that both are committed to are, first, that the quality of care and range of services provided to veterans should remain constant, notwithstanding the transfer; second, that the provision of services in both official languages remain a constant; third, that the employees' rights, those working at the hospital, should be attended to so that the strong staff remain with the hospital during the transfer; and finally, that the asset value of the hospital in terms of plant and equipment be maintained over the course of the transfer.

**The Chair:** We'll go to Mr. Lobb.

• (1630)

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

My first question is regarding VIP. I'm wondering if you could tell the committee roughly how many veterans will receive VIP in this fiscal year.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** In any given fiscal year, we have somewhere around 100,000 veterans who receive benefits under the VIP. There are three types of benefits: groundskeeping, housekeeping, and what I tend to call personal care. Most of the veterans who receive VIP are receiving groundskeeping and housekeeping, and a much smaller portion are receiving personal care. The personal care is intended to prolong the time that a veteran can remain in their house. It kicks in at the point at which the veteran may need help with things like getting in and out of a tub, negotiating stairs, or just needing a lot more physical help.

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** There are still four of five months left in the fiscal year. What do you figure the total dollar amount will be for VIP expenditures?

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** I'm going to defer to Charlotte on that one.

**Ms. Charlotte Stewart (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Human Resources and Corporate Services, Department of Veterans Affairs):** It's in the area of \$350 million.

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** So it's quite a significant amount that's getting out to help veterans stay in their homes a little bit longer.

**Ms. Charlotte Stewart:** Yes.

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** Certainly, for the people watching this, it's helpful to know the dollar amount that's going to the people who have served our country well.

A couple of years ago, there was quite a debate on the disability award. I believe it's indexed, and the maximum amount is around \$270,000. The idea was that veterans would be able to take incremental amounts instead of the lump sum. You may not have these numbers with you today, but could you give the committee an idea of how many veterans have decided to take the disability award in incremental amounts? Is this something that has been popular with veterans?

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** The maximum disability award is at \$293,000 at this stage of the game, and it's indexed, so it'll be a greater amount next year. In respect of the options veterans were provided, you're quite right. They were entitled to take a lump sum or to take a portion in a lump and the balance in installments. Moreover, they were allowed to change their mind along the way.

Precise statistics are hard to come up with in terms of how many chose what, but we know that there has been a dip in the expenditures related to the disability award, which reflects the fact that some have chosen the extended or more protracted payment process. The dip is in the order of \$85 million.

Is that correct, Charlotte?

**Ms. Charlotte Stewart:** That's correct.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** That's a substantial number of people choosing to do it in one of a number of ways.

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** I see there is a bit of a grey area there where they are going to take the lump or change their minds. Is there any way that you could give us a percentage? Is it 20% who are now taking it over a number of different payments? Or is that something that you don't have at your fingertips?

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** I don't have it with me today. I'm sure we have those statistics. We'd be happy to get that for you.

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** I'm sure the committee would be interested, just to see if that change has made a difference and is being used.

**Ms. Charlotte Stewart:** Could I just add one more comment on that one too? The number electing to defer is fairly small; we will get the exact number. But what we do see is that they're taking advantage of the opportunity to get financial counselling, so for some of that lag, while they may eventually opt to get the lump sum, they're taking their time, they're getting advice, and they're making an informed decision. I think that was also one of the outcomes we were looking for when we put this change in place.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We will now go to Mr. Stoffer, please, for four minutes.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

First of all, Madam Chaput, congratulations on your new position, I wish you the very best. If you see Suzanne Tining, thank her on our behalf. She did a good job.

•(1635)

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** We will.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** Also, thanks to the DVA for the efforts on the animals in motion tour and the monument with Lloyd Swick.

As well, a couple of requests have been put to the minister in regard to the national cenotaph and trying to put an inclusive phrase on the cenotaph, which is supported by all veterans organizations: "In the service of Canada". Unfortunately, it wasn't done for this Remembrance Day, but we're hoping that for next time, "In the service of Canada" will be inscribed on our national cenotaph, making it more inclusive to all those who have served in the Boer War, for example, not just in World War II, World War I, Korea, and others.

Also, we're looking for a statuette on the Valiants Memorial for William Hall from Nova Scotia, Canada's first black person to receive the Victoria Cross. You have received correspondence from Senator Meredith, Senator Oliver, me, and others regarding that. If it's possible....

You talked about the earnings loss benefit that has now ceased, as the minister has gone beyond the court case. There is another deduction that's happening that affects many veterans: the Canada pension disability clawback. For members of the military or the RCMP who are medically released, they find themselves on Canada pension disability, but that money is deducted dollar for dollar from their superannuation, much earlier than age 65. They have been asking for many years to have a stop put to this. I was wondering if, at a later time, you could give a written answer to that particular request.

Also, Harold Leduc wrote a response to us regarding the VRAB. We're hoping that the minister will have an opportunity after reading the evidence to respond to his concerns from a ministerial level.

As well, could you advise us in a written response of what the government is doing on homeless veterans?

There are so many other things here, but another one, of course, is that the government announced, through Minister Blaney, an audit on the Sunnybrook concerns, due to all the media reports last week on the Sunnybrook hospital in Toronto. I've just toured the facility and met with all the families. I get two completely different stories. I was hoping that the audit.... Would that be a public audit? Would families of the veterans who are in the hospital be allowed to participate in that audit? Would that be a public audit where we—members of the opposition or government—would have an opportunity to see that audit before it's tabled?

Thank you very much for coming today.

You don't have to respond in kind, but at a later date, if possible.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Okay.

**The Chair:** A short response is fine.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Yes, certainly. I will work from back to front.

In terms of Sunnybrook, the audit is just up and off the ground. A group of staff will look into that and create a report. I expect that it will involve consultation with management of the facility as well as the families. We'd be happy to get back to you as to the next steps in that regard.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** Okay.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** A number of efforts are under way concerning homelessness. The department itself runs a number of homelessness initiatives. Some of these we run personally and some we do in concert with HRSDC. Basically, they involve staff fanning out to Canada's biggest cities, where homelessness is a fact of life, sadly.

Last week, as I said, I was talking to the U.S. quite extensively. They were commenting that homelessness in their context is a very pervasive problem. Our estimate is that the number of homeless veterans in Canada is likely lower than 250. This doesn't mean that 250 is a good number; actually, it's the reason we want to get out into the streets with the case managers and case workers, to identify these veterans and see what we can do about helping them out.

The last thing I would say on homelessness is that there's new research—again, this was discussed last week—indicating that whereas to this point in time it had been understood that mental health was typically one of the most prevalent causes of homelessness, in fact newer research is indicating that addictions are one of the biggest, if not the biggest, cause. This may cause a bit of a change in programming around how one attacks homelessness.

That's all I would like to offer at this point in time.

**The Chair:** I want to thank you both very much for that information. If there's anything written that you want to send along as well, that's fine.

•(1640)

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Sure.

**The Chair:** We'll go to our final questioner, who will be Mr. Zimmer, please, for four minutes.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River, CPC):** Thanks for coming, Ms. Chaput and Ms. Stewart.

I want to say that with a minister who cares so much about veterans, it's obvious when he speaks that he does care, and it's nice to hear this from you as well. I think it's important that we have staff who really take it to heart, especially with veterans.

I want to know the answer to a simple question. How many VAC officials work at your office in P.E.I.?

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** In Prince Edward Island on any given day there are about 1,200 staff.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** As a follow-up to that, is there any other province in which there are more VAC staff than the number who work in P.E.I.?

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** No. By far, that is the province at which we employ the most number of staff.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Thanks for that information. It brings to light a bit.... My colleague across the way often accuses us of unfair cutbacks. I think this just proves how fair we are. I think that's the truth.

We also have heard a lot about "points of presence", in essence points of service for veterans. The total number of those points has dramatically increased in the past year.

I want to ask you, what kinds of services are available at these new points of presence, please?

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Indeed the points of service have expanded greatly. As the minister said, we have moved from our 60 existing to 600, when we incorporate the Service Canada network.

At the Service Canada network—at those storefronts—a veteran coming in, or a sibling or a child of the veteran, or somebody who is helping out a veteran can get very general information about VAC programs and services. As well, they could get literature on those programs and services; they could get help as they navigate the website; moreover, they could get help in the completion of applications and the collection of the appropriate supporting documents. And then finally, they will also get a service whereby the veteran's identification will be authenticated at that stage of the game, so that this step is leapfrogged as they move into the system and their application is processed.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** I think it's a benefit to have all those services in one place, because now our veterans can access so many other services at that one point.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** That's right.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** For me, it's a form of streamlining, but it actually increases the service level.

I don't know what your comment would be to that. Is it a better level of service?

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** To my mind, it's a better level of service. It's basically a triage model, whereby we have separated those duties that can be done by other government employees in a very responsible and careful way. We can have confidence in what is done

by the Service Canada representatives as that material moves to us. I feel it would build confidence and convenience into the lives of veterans who availed themselves of that service.

Moreover, it allows us to keep the very complex cases for those very experienced and expert case managers who are on our staff. By keeping the very complex with the very highly trained, and the simpler cases—not simplistic, but simple—with those who are trained to a different level, I think we get the greatest economies and the best outcome for the veteran.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Absolutely.

Finally, I'd just say again, thanks for caring about our veterans. We do. I know a lot of people here do. Continue the great job and great work. Thank you.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, witnesses and Mr. Zimmer.

We've just agreed by consensus to add one more question. We have a guest visiting us today.

Mr. Godin, welcome. I wasn't going to qualify; I was just going to say that if you'd like to ask a question, please feel free to go ahead.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP):** Than, you Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for coming to meet with us today.

I just have one question.

November 11 is a day to go and meet our veterans, pay tribute to them and celebrate this day — although I don't really like to call this a celebration. However, the most important thing is the way in which we offer services to veterans.

In the estimates, I don't see any money dedicated to funerals or burials. These people tell me that they want to be buried with dignity and honour. They fought for our country. They gave us freedom, democracy and the right of free speech. The question is, how does the government intend to act on veterans' requests in the coming months?

At their age, they cannot be refused such services. I do not agree with giving them the same amount as a burial under the social welfare program. I think that unacceptable for our veterans.

I'd like to hear your comments on this.

• (1645)

[*English*]

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Thank you, sir.

Certainly we appreciate your views on a veteran's right to a very dignified and appropriate funeral and burial. As it stands, any veteran who dies of a service-related illness or injury is afforded that through the government. We understand there is a lot of controversy, debate, and pressure around this issue. We're constantly reviewing the program to see where we feel it can or cannot be improved.

The acknowledgment at the time of their death of the sacrifice these people have made in the course of their lives is one that we feel is very appropriate. That's why the program is designed as it is, at this stage of the game.

I would simply reiterate that we're constantly in a process of review of this program and all our programs.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

The last spot is over....

Do you want to take it, Ms. Adams?

**Ms. Eve Adams:** Thank you.

If you might allow just a personal comment, I was meeting with some young female students, and it's always wonderful to look at a table of individuals who have taken on leadership roles and to see two women.

So thank you very much, and congratulations on your new appointment.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Thank you.

**Ms. Eve Adams:** Could you indicate to us whether, in your estimation, veterans are better or worse off today than they were six years ago? If you could, just elaborate.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** I'd be happy to.

Without a doubt, I think veterans are better served now than they were in the past. I think one can draw some conclusions in that regard, if you consider different veterans at different points in their lives. If you take a veteran who is relatively young, who is exiting his military service years and transitioning into what will be a civilian life and career, I think the new Veterans Charter, with the programs around rehabilitation—if there is an injury—aimed at reintegration, earnings loss during that period of rehabilitation, vocational retraining for both the veteran and/or his spouse, if necessary, is a really strong arrow in the veteran's quiver as they transition into their civilian life.

If you move from that kind of individual to someone who perhaps suffers from mental health issues, there's no doubt the services we're offering more recently are much more robust than they have been in the past.

As you may know, we have what are called the integrated personnel support units, where any veteran and/or their family can come for very holistic care—mental health, physical health—and we make sure that the continuity of care is there to deal with both sides of that equation. Moreover, we have 17 operational stress injury clinics that we share with DND, where those who suffer from tougher mental health issues, like PTSD, can get very, very expert care. In addition to that, there are similar clinics where social support is provided to the veteran suffering from mental health conditions, peer support from families and other veterans who have actually been through the same mental health issues.

If you leave that type of veteran and move to a veteran who is perhaps very seriously injured, it brings us back to those elements of the new Veterans Charter that are geared specifically to the seriously injured in terms of the disability award, the treatment benefits, the physio and occupational therapy that is there, earnings loss. Then for

the very seriously injured, there is the permanent incapacity assessment and supplement that's provided for those who are not able to return to work by virtue of their injuries.

Finally, if you move toward those coming toward the end of their lives and all through this continuum, even for the elderly, there are case managers who will provide care to the veteran, help them with palliative issues, support the spouse through those very difficult last six to eight months, and ensure that the veteran moves through that period of their life with a degree of dignity and care they deserve.

When you consider the panoply of scenarios that a veteran may face in their life, and you juxtapose it with the programs and services we're attempting to offer, I think a veteran these days is well served in recognition of how well they have served.

● (1650)

**Ms. Eve Adams:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. Well put.

That ends our time, in terms of rounds. We agreed to a question on each side.

Oh, I'm getting a look from Mr. Casey.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** I understood that everyone would have a question, and then there was an extra question for two of the three parties here. I'm ready.

**The Chair:** Is everybody okay, then, with one more question?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** My apologies, Mr. Casey. I wasn't trying to leave you out. You know I would never want to leave you out. You get one question.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'm all thrown off now.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** I'll ask it for you.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** No, that's okay. I'm sure I'll be able to pull myself together.

Witnesses, you are here seeking approval for additional expenditures of about \$18.8 million. You are undoubtedly aware that the Government of Canada is the subject of at least two class action lawsuits, one that has been commenced on behalf of some modern-day veterans based in British Columbia who are seeking to be treated equally with people who are on workers' compensation. That's the Equitas lawsuit. Another was commenced about five years ago, at the same time as the Manuge class action. That class action lawsuit was brought on behalf of RCMP veterans who want the Government of Canada to stop clawing back their pension benefits.

My question to you is, how much of this additional \$18.8 million that you're seeking approval for today is dedicated to, one, fighting those lawsuits, or two, settling them?

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** None of it is.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Okay. We have it on the record.

Thank you for that.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Mr. Chair, if I may, we do have the answer to the question regarding how many veterans have chosen to take partial payments of their disability awards versus lump sum payments.

**The Chair:** Okay, sure.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** It's apparently less than 5%.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Good. Thank you for that.

Okay. We're going to vote on the supplementary estimates. You're certainly welcome to stay. It's an open meeting. If you feel that you'd like to move on, it's totally up to you.

**Ms. Mary Chaput:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** I want to thank you for being here and participating today.

We have two votes. I just want to remind everybody that you can adopt, reduce, or negate the vote—in other words, vote against it—but you cannot change it, you cannot add to it, and you can't try to be innovative and change around what's there.

So it's very simple: adopt, reduce, or in fact vote against the supplementary estimate.

The first amount is in vote 1b and it's an amount of \$2,890,963.

Those in favour?

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** I have a motion to make a slight alteration.

**The Chair:** You're going to reduce the amount?

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** Yes.

**The Chair:** Okay.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** And I can explain why.

**The Chair:** There's a motion to reduce.

You've made the motion. That's in order. Would you like to explain why?

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** Sure. Just to let you know, it's the page where it says "Funding for the Service Canada Partnership" of \$2,219,000. That is a transfer of money over to Service Canada to provide services for veterans throughout the country.

As you know, nine district offices are being closed across the country, and seven veterans across the country have already written to me. They have gone into Service Canada and they have asked for a variety of help and benefits. Every single one of them has had a negative experience at Service Canada. I understand that this is in the initial stage. They said that every single person at Service Canada was very polite, very nice, and very helpful, but three of them got the wrong website, two of them got the wrong toll-free number, and one was told, "The computer is over there". Another one was told he could call the 1-800 number for help, because the person at Service Canada just wasn't qualified to do that yet.

We personally, on this side, do not agree that district offices should be closed and that the work should be transferred to Service Canada. Service Canada employees are very busy right now with all kinds of other objectives, so we're basically saying that the \$2,219,000 for Service Canada should be deleted.

That's what our motion is.

•(1655)

**The Chair:** Okay. The motion is made. It is open for comment and debate.

Ms. Adams, and then Mr. Casey.

**Ms. Eve Adams:** Thank you.

Well, I'm shocked to hear that the opposition would want to reduce the level of service available to our veterans.

We've heard that previously veterans had 60 points of access. They're now up to 600 different points of access for general information. We've recently gone online, of course, so we've had presentations to this committee about the enhanced level of customer service available to our veterans.

Those veterans who need home visits will still have home visits. If there is a specific complaint about a Service Canada office, my goodness, we want to hear about it. We want to fix that and remedy that. It is our intention to provide the highest level of customer service to our veterans, and I can't believe the opposition would actually want to strip money out of the budget, money that would serve our veterans. There is no way we are prepared to support that.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** I understand.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Casey, please.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Acknowledged.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'm going to be voting against Mr. Stoffer's motion, but I feel compelled to give an explanation. I am indeed not happy that my province will be the only one with no case managers. I'm not happy that my province will be the only one without a district office. I do understand that the department has decided that all that Prince Edward Island veterans are entitled to in the way of face-to-face service is Service Canada.

I'm extremely concerned that Service Canada plans to reduce its workforce in Prince Edward Island by 46% over the next three years at the very time when they will be the only point of contact.

Having said that, I think I would be doing a great disservice to the veterans in my province, and probably a great disservice to veterans in other provinces where the department has already decided to go this way, by tying their hands behind their backs and not giving them enough money. There isn't enough money in Service Canada now to do the job. They're cutting back, and for us to compound the error would be a grave mistake.

So I'll be voting against the motion, although I'm not at all happy that the Department of Veterans Affairs has decided to go in this direction.

**The Chair:** Okay, and that will certainly show in the minutes.

Thank you, Mr. Casey.

I think Mr. Zimmer is next.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Yes.

As a rationale of a few persons' opinions on the issue versus thousands, literally thousands, of veterans across this country, you're going to endorse a cut to the budget is just shocking to me. This is coming from a party that is supposed to be so pro-veteran. To me, it's just shocking. I think it says where you're really at.

We on this side have been funding at increasing levels for the last six years, and will continue to do so. To hear that from that side I think is telling, and it's sad.

**The Chair:** Okay, thank you.

Mr. Harris is next.

**Mr. Richard Harris:** Mr. Chair, we've just had some excellent presentations by the minister, the deputy minister, and the assistant deputy minister. They've clearly outlined the progress, the tremendous progress, that the department has made over the last few years, and where they're going. They've clearly identified that there are changes that they believe are going to streamline and improve the services to veterans. Now we have the budget numbers in front of us. These numbers cover what we've heard today and provide the resources for the direction the department is moving in and the direction that the minister wants to move in, which has been evident by the increased benefits.

I am just astounded that Mr. Stoffer would even think of making a motion that would withdraw funds from these numbers. That they want to reduce benefits by withdrawing funds...I'm really astounded. I thought Mr. Stoffer made a mistake at first and he realized what he's trying to do, but I guess not. I say shame on him for wanting to withdraw services from veterans.

• (1700)

**The Chair:** Okay, thank you, Mr. Harris.

Ms. Mathysen.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Well, thank you, Mr. Chair.

Quite frankly, I'm very disturbed that the government would deliberately misrepresent this motion. It's very clear to me that in transferring this sum of money to Service Canada, veterans are going to suffer. They rely on the kinds of services they receive from Veterans Affairs, and this plan to close the offices puts veterans at risk.

In regard to Service Canada, they do, indeed, work very hard. They're very good at what they do. Despite that, this government has seen fit to reduce their numbers. They cannot keep up with what they're currently doing. It's very clear to me that transferring Veterans Affairs to Service Canada will only exacerbate that and make it very difficult for our veterans to get the kind of support that is constantly being promised but not delivered.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Mathysen.

Mr. Godin, please.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** I'm shocked to hear the government's position on this.

[*Translation*]

They said services to veterans provided by Veterans Affairs Canada will be transferred to Service Canada. However, Service Canada staff is not even able to provide services to Canadians, whether it be in terms of employment insurance or other programs. There are cuts happening on all sides. The government claims that it is listening to veterans. However, in Prince Edward Island, for example, it is shutting down all services and people will have to go to Service Canada.

Mr. Chair, the way things are right now, even when we call Service Canada, people are unable to answer our questions without going through Ottawa. When we put questions to the director of Service Canada's Atlantic region, he tells us he will call us back the next day because he has to check on the request. That must mean contacting the Prime Minister's Office. Service Canada cannot make any decisions. Is that where our services for our veterans are going?

I don't think estimates can be changed, either to increase them or allocate them elsewhere. The government and the minister must show leadership. They should make it clear that they will not send their clients to Service Canada and that they will instead keep providing the services from their offices, and that they will not close them down. They should also tell us that they will provide services to our veterans, who, as I mentioned earlier, fought to give us freedom, democracy and more.

Earlier, to try to get our witness Ms. Chaput to talk, Ms. Adams spoke about services. Well, it's not true that things have been going swimmingly since 2006. My office has never received so many calls from veterans. Mr. Chair, many of them came to my office with bags of pills they threw onto the desk, and they asked me to look at what they had. These veterans said they could not even have access to services.

Mr. Chair, I would invite you to come to my office. You will see the medals a veteran brought. He hung them in my assistant's office because he no longer wanted to have them. At the same time, the government is saying that it is doing a great job for veterans. This is unacceptable.

All of that to say that I will support sending a message to the government saying that transferring these services to Service Canada is unacceptable. That is not where these services should be provided. It is not Service Canada's job. Service Canada staff already have their hands full.

We have a minister representing veterans, so I ask him to provide services to these veterans. He should not be handing them over to another institution that does not have the same interest as the Department of Veterans Affairs.



Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Godin.

I may not end up at your constituency office, but I'll take your word for it.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** I invite you to do that any day, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Mr. Chicoine.

[Translation]

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

There is not very much to add to what Mr. Godin said.

The only way to interpret this is that we are against closing these offices. At this time, Service Canada is unable to properly provide services to veterans. It is not true that there is a handful of veterans. I have also seen some cases.

If the conservatives are really in favour of providing appropriate services to veterans, they should do a sort of follow-up with veterans turning to Service Canada. I am sure they would see that, unfortunately, providing a range of services to veterans and meeting their needs appropriately is an extremely complex issue. They will not get the services they need at Service Canada at this time, or next year either, in my opinion.

Mr. Stoffer's motion is simply aimed at sending the government the message that it should not transfer the money to Service Canada, which is unable to provide appropriate services to veterans. Service Canada staff already have enough on their plates, from providing the services they offer to dealing with budget cuts as well. They cannot provide these services.

So please don't play innocent.

• (1705)

[English]

**The Chair:** Okay.

I want to point out that I know there are a few more, but I'm not going to let people start doing the second round. In other words, if you've already spoken, I'm going to accept that as your comments.

Because Mr. Stoffer is the mover, he will be able to have a second round.

Do you want to be the last one, or do you want to go next?

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** I can wait until the rest are done.

**The Chair:** You have the right to do that, as a mover, if you want.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** I'll wait until I hear the rest of the comments.

**The Chair:** Okay.

We have Ms. Adams next, then Mr. Lobb, Mr. Zimmer, and then we'll go to Mr. Stoffer.

**Ms. Eve Adams:** Notwithstanding some of the alarmist rhetoric from the other side—some very animated rhetoric—what's really going on here is a defence of union interests. It's not really concern about veterans and the level of service being provided to our veterans.

To be clear, Monsieur Godin, you are advocating against 29 additional new points of service for veterans. In Quebec, there would be 116 new points of service available with the funding that you are asking us to remove.

To be very clear, our case managers will still continue to serve our veterans. Monsieur Godin, I know you are new to our committee today and subbing in, and we are very happy to have you, but—

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Although I'm here before you, I'm not new here.

**Ms. Eve Adams:** If I might, I do have the floor, sir, on a point of order.

If I might suggest to you, we have just recently gone through a study of the transformation at Veterans Affairs. What we've learned and what we've brought in witnesses to speak to is the fact that we have put a focus on empowering our local case workers. What we have accomplished by doing that is having somebody on the ground who meets with the veteran, meets with the veteran's family, who has a very clear understanding about what the veteran needs and is able to point the veteran to every service that's available to him or her.

Then, and this is the really critical point, we've reduced wait times to receive a decision from Veterans Affairs; there have been dramatic reductions, and we're not even satisfied with that. We want to continue to reduce the wait times our veterans have before they receive funding or services. We are very focused on their customer service. That's also why we've introduced the clear language initiative whereby instead of having this letter sent to you in gobbledygook or bureaucratese, in very simple clear language a veteran understands why his benefits are going to be provided to him and what medical evidence was relied upon. If that veteran needs to come forward with additional information, they have the opportunity to do so.

Our case managers are still on the ground and are still available to our veterans. This \$2 million of critical funding would provide critical assistance to our veterans at additional points of service across the country. We would go from 60 points of service to 600 points of service. It cuts down on the travel times for our veterans. Currently poor veterans are going to district offices and are taking hours to get there. I don't understand why you would want to inconvenience our veterans, why you would want to strip them of this additional ability to access our services. They will still have access to our phone lines and to the Internet.

But most importantly, our government is committed to providing home visits to those veterans who need them. That will continue. So this rhetoric that we're hearing about how veterans are being underserved is categorically untrue. I would implore you to withdraw this motion. I would implore you to spend the \$2 million and provide enhanced customer service to our veterans. I simply cannot understand why somebody who is so passionate about our veterans is moving to reduce the level of service available to our veterans. We will now go to 600 points of service across the country. If you have a specific example of one individual who wasn't able to provide service to our veterans, please bring it forward.

Mr. Godin, you indicated you've got all sorts of case files at your constituency office. I would implore you to send them to us. At the end of the day, this is not about grandstanding. This is about serving our veterans. I too have a constituency office and I can tell you that our veterans are very well served.

**The Chair:** Okay, thank you.

We'll hear from Mr. Lobb, Mr. Lizon, and then close with Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Lobb, go ahead, please.

• (1710)

**Mr. Ben Lobb:** I would say out of all the ridings of our 308 MPs, the veterans are best served in Huron—Bruce.

But seriously, I think maybe the opposition, the NDP, are slightly misinformed on what they're potentially talking about—maybe not. The Service Canada employees will not be providing counselling, case management. That's not their role. I don't think you're trying to imply that it was, but I think we need to be clear that they're not going to be doing that. As Ms. Adams says, it's a point of service, an entry point to help veterans get the information. Maybe their family members get information they may need so they can either start a relationship with Veterans Affairs or whatever the unique situation is.

I'll give you an example. I'm a rural member of Parliament. There are no offices for veterans in Huron—Bruce. There are two full-time Service Canada offices, one in Goderich and one in Walkerton. Other satellite offices run part-time. This is a benefit to veterans in my area because now they have an official point of service in Huron—Bruce. Before, they may have gone to London. I think this is an enhancement, from my perspective. For the \$2 million we're putting in, I think we're getting a pretty good return. The return is that the veterans are going to have a better point of service and better access to the benefits.

Maybe the other reason Mr. Godin says he's got veterans coming to his office in increasing numbers is that our message is getting out to veterans, what benefits are available to them. That could very well be why they're coming, because they've had a friend or a fellow veteran who's had some success working with Veterans Affairs and now they want to see what else is available to them. If you have veterans coming into your office asking questions, it's leading them to other successful results inside the department.

I think it's good. I'm sure others on the other side will disagree, but I thought I should put it from the perspective of a rural member of Parliament.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Lobb.

Mr. Lizon.

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

I just would add the quick comment that from listening to the honourable colleagues on the opposite side, I haven't really heard a rationale for their position. It's hard for me to understand that based on eight complaints you would take such a stand.

But I respect people's own opinions. I may not agree with it, but I don't think.... If someone doesn't like the way Service Canada works,

or they had a bad experience in the past, it doesn't mean Service Canada cannot do the job or cannot serve. I don't think that's a rationale that should be presented here.

I haven't really heard anything that would convince me that you have a case.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Lizon.

The last one we'll hear from is the mover of the motion, please.

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** I thank everyone for their comments.

First of all, I would just refer you to page 1009, chapter 20, of *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, which our colleague Cynara has given us. It says that we are not permitted to attempt to change the way funds are allocated or transfer money from one item to another.

If I could, I'd take that \$2,219,000 and transfer it to another aspect of the supplementary estimates, but I'm not permitted to do that. Unfortunately, the rules.... We tried years ago to get these things changed, to move one item to another, to keep it the same, but we're not permitted to do so. I rather think, or I believe, it was the Conservative Party that voted against that in a House and procedure motion one time.

The reality, for Ms. Parliamentary Secretary, is that Service Canada people are also unionized, so this is not a union argument at all, I can assure you. In all my years here, I have never had one veteran or a veterans organization say that DVA services should be provided by Service Canada. Not one has ever asked me—ever. I don't know if anyone here has ever been asked, before this happened, that Veterans Affairs wanted to be served by Service Canada.

I can't reallocate that money within the supplementary estimates. Those are the rules. I can't do that. This is the only way we have to let the government know that we don't like the idea that district offices are closing. We simply don't like that.

I encourage any of you to go on Thursday to Cape Breton, to the big rally they have, and people will tell you how they feel about the closure of Cape Breton's office. I don't have to tell you about Prince Edward Island or Thunder Bay or anywhere else. A lot of people are quite upset that these offices are closing.

If the argument is that Service Canada can provide that service and expand it to 600, why don't you apply that same thinking to Citizenship and Immigration, and to Revenue Canada? Why doesn't Service Canada do everything, then, if that's the argument? Imagine how many Citizenship and Immigration people can be helped by Service Canada, if that is your argument.

Mr. Chair, I would truly love to move that money somewhere else in here, but I can't. I'm not permitted to by the rules. This is the only way we in opposition can say to the government, with the greatest of respect, that we don't believe the burden of veterans' care should be put on those already overworked employees at Service Canada. Don't forget, many of those Service Canada people will be losing their jobs. They got affected letters. They're also being laid off because of the restraints of the government in terms of its fiscal concerns.

So that's why we're doing it. I wish I could move it somewhere else, but I can't. I have to go by the rules and procedure.

And you'll cut me off, Mr. Chairman, but we'll have a vote on this, and we'll move on to the other vote, and we'll have a nice evening.

Thank you.

• (1715)

**The Chair:** No, I would never cut you off. But—

**Mr. Peter Stoffer:** You were thinking of it, though.

**The Chair:** Well, I'm always thinking of various options.

You have a point of order?

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Yes, I have a point of order. I have the right to have a point of order.

**The Chair:** You do.

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Yes.

No, you can't cut him off. I mean, it's his motion.

**The Chair:** Mr. Godin, you know better than that. I would not cut somebody off.

Mr. Stoffer is just.... He's just fooling you.

Okay?

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Okay.

**The Chair:** We have to vote on the amendment, which is to take \$2.2 million out of the \$2.89 million. We've had a very active discussion.

All those in favour of the amendment proposed by Mr. Stoffer, indicate with a show of hands.

(Amendment negated)

**The Chair:** Shall vote 1b under Veterans Affairs carry?

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Department

Vote 1b—Operating expenditures.....\$2,890,963

(Vote 1b agreed to)

**The Chair:** We then go on to vote 5b, which is over \$15 million. You've seen it in the papers.

All those in favour of vote 5b, please indicate with a show of hands.

Vote 5b—The grants listed in the Estimates and contributions.....\$15,855,400

(Vote 5b agreed to)

**The Chair:** Thank you. It's unanimous, so I don't have to ask for those opposed. I will put it on the record as unopposed.

Shall I report these supplementary estimates to the House?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** We'll then follow procedure.

Now I'm going to go to my professional assistant and ask whether I left anything out. I want to make sure I get it in legally.

On Monday we are going to go back to hopefully finishing up the final draft or the final copy of the report. Once that's done, certainly unless anybody has other business, we will see you in February. Think about that for Monday.

If everybody is satisfied and there is nothing further for the committee, thank you, we're done.





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