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Chair

Mr. Royal Galipeau

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•(1155)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC)): The proceedings are now public.

Ladies and gentlemen, now joining us are senior officials from the Department of Veterans Affairs. We have André Levesque, Director General of the Commemoration Division, Janice Burke, Senior Director of Strategic Policy Integration, and Charlotte Bastien, Director General of Field Operations.

I would like to welcome our distinguished guests and let them know they have 10 minutes for their presentation—not 10 minutes each, mind you, but 10 minutes in total. Afterwards, we'll proceed with questions and answers, as usual.

Mr. Levesque, your microphone is on, and we are eager to hear what you have to say.

Mr. André Levesque (Director General, Commemoration Division, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the invitation to appear before the committee today. It's an honour to speak to you.

All three of us will be speaking, and I will be last, so I'll turn the floor over to my colleagues.

[*English*]

Ms. Janice Burke (Senior Director, Strategic Policy Integration, Department of Veterans Affairs): Good morning, everyone. My name is Janice Burke. I am the director of strategic policy in the policy division of Veterans Affairs Canada. I'm very happy to be appearing before you today.

As some of you may recall, I was last here in October 2012 and was providing an update on the benefits browser at that time. I would like to take this opportunity to introduce my colleagues, who will take you through an overview of the departmental services and benefits, otherwise known as VAC 101.

My colleague Charlotte Bastien, who is the director general of field operations in the service delivery branch, will speak to you about the services and benefits, including service delivery. André Levesque, who is the director general of commemorations, will give you an update on commemorative activities.

We'll begin with Charlotte.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Charlotte Bastien (Director General, Field Operations, Department of Veterans Affairs): Good morning. I will begin with

the first part of our presentation, an overview of our programs and services.

[*English*]

Whom do we serve? We serve more than 200,000 people ranging in age from 19 to 90 years old, and that includes war service veterans, Second World War and Korean War, Canadian Armed Forces personnel and veterans, RCMP members and survivors. The total planned spending for 2013-14 is \$3.6 billion, of which 90% flows directly to veterans.

I will provide an overview of our benefits and services. We have the disability pension and related allowance overview. Veterans, Canadian and merchant navy of the First World War, Second World War, and Korean War, and serving or former members of the Canadian Armed Forces who suffer from a service-related medical condition may qualify for a disability pension. Civilians who served in close support of the armed forces during wartime may also qualify. Veterans of allied forces may also be entitled to pension and compensation. Additional benefits may be awarded if the veteran has a spouse or dependents.

There's also the war veterans allowance. To give an overview, it's a form of financial assistance available from Veterans Affairs Canada and is in recognition of war services. Qualified veterans and survivors are provided with a regular monthly income to meet basic needs. The war veterans allowance is based on income, family status, and number of dependents.

Regarding treatment benefits, they are available for all veterans, traditional and modern-day. We provide a range of treatment benefits related to the 14 programs of choice, which include support for aids for daily living, ambulance services, audio services, dental services, hospital services, medical services, medical supplies, nursing services, oxygen therapy, prescription drugs, prosthetics, orthotics, related health services, special equipment, and vision care.

The department also provides support for service elements, such as health professionals, occupational stress injury clinics, and medicare premiums. Veterans may qualify to receive financial support for one or more treatment benefits if they are in receipt of a disability benefit, participating in the rehabilitation program, in receipt of the veterans independence program or long-term care, and also if they're in receipt of the war veterans allowance or the Canadian forces income support. Travel expenses incurred by the veteran when travelling to receive health care services and benefits may be reimbursed by Veterans Affairs.

The veterans independence program overview is also designed to assist veterans and survivors in maintaining their independence through the provision of home and community care, and includes services such as personal care, housekeeping, ground maintenance, ambulatory services, transportation services, home adaptation, and nursing home care. In budget 2012, we did have specific measures announced that included replacing the existing contribution agreement for the housekeeping and grounds-keeping component of the veterans independence program with annual grants, and that began in January 2013.

Regarding long-term care, we do provide support in three types of settings for long-term care: community beds in facilities that provide nursing home care to veterans and other provincial residents; contract beds in facilities with beds designated through contractual arrangements, with priority access for veterans; and also the departmental beds at Ste. Anne's Hospital.

In 2006 we did introduce the new Veterans Charter to support the modern-day veteran and their family's re-establishment into civilian life. As of June 2013, more than 44,000 veterans and their families have access to comprehensive rehabilitation and vocational assistance services, financial benefits, group health insurance, career transition services, disability award, death benefit, and family support.

● (1200)

To enhance the new Veterans Charter, changes were made in 2011 to enhance benefits and services. Some of the main highlights were to ensure a minimum annual income of more than \$42,000 for veterans in the rehabilitation program, or until age 65.

On mental health services, for those living with a mental health condition, we have a range of services and benefits for veterans, Canadian Armed Forces personnel, RCMP members, as well as their families. I will stress that we have 10 clinics throughout the country.

We provide case management services and transition services. There are also a number of levels of reviews and appeals if a veteran does not agree with the decision made regarding his application for disability benefits.

We have 60 locations throughout the country and more than 100 VAC employees on 24 CF bases and wings. We can be reached through our toll-free line, VAC account, and website.

I will leave commemoration to my colleague, André.

[Translation]

Mr. André Levesque: Thank you kindly. The Canada Remembers program endeavours to keep alive—

The Chair: I just wanted to let you know you have two minutes left. If you're sharing your time, you'll have to speak quickly.

Mr. André Levesque: I'll talk quickly.

The Canada Remembers program endeavours to keep alive the achievements and sacrifices made by those who served Canada in times of war, military conflict and peace. It also seeks to promote an understanding of the significance of these efforts in Canadian life as we know it today.

As you can see here, we are making numerous efforts, including maintaining memorials, providing funeral and burial services, organizing ceremonies, ensuring learning opportunities and funding community groups.

It will interest you to know that the majority of Canadians support veterans. The attitude is very positive. In fact, 91% of Canadians believe that veterans should be recognized for their service to Canada.

[English]

Let's not forget that there is a parliamentary program concerning wreaths for parliamentarians. If you have not already ordered yours, it's important to call 1-866-506-6805.

There's also a program dealing with Canadian flags for parliamentarians for the sole purpose of providing flags to families of veterans who have passed away. Again, you can contact Canadian Heritage.

In terms of commemoration, this year is the Year of the Korean War Veteran. We created a special certificate to recognize these veterans, and we're encouraging them and their families to ask for these certificates.

Also important to note is that the period from 2014, with the commemoration of the Great War, until 2020, with the 75th anniversary of the Second World War, will be extremely important.

Last, I would remind you that the 2013 budget proposes a \$5 million permanent visitor centre at the Canadian National Vimy Memorial in France, with the unveiling planned for 2017. It will be an important commemorative activity for Canada as a whole, in celebrating Vimy, as well as part of the road to 2017.

● (1205)

The Chair: Thank you very much for this excellent presentation. We'll now go to questions. The first questioner is a tough one, so be careful.

Mr. Stoffer, go ahead.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair,

Folks, I was wondering if you could give us, not right now, a written breakdown of what the staff complement would be for DVA in future years.

If I'm not mistaken, it was 4,100 a couple of years ago. With the transfer of Ste. Anne's to Quebec, there are now 900 full-time equivalents, if I'm not mistake, plus I understand that another 845 were to be readjusted out. That makes about 1,800 out of 4,100. I just want to verify that.

Could you send written information about what you believe the staff numbers will be next year and the year after? That would be great.

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: Mr. Stoffer, your request has been noted.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: *Merci*. Thank you.

The Chair: Please send the information to the clerk.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: To the clerk, yes. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Rafferty, it's your turn.

Mr. John Rafferty (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for joining us today.

A very large concern of mine is poverty among all Canadians, but especially among veterans, wartime and modern. I'm not sure if you're aware of this, but the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation was founded in 1946 with the sole purpose of, I think the quote is "helping Canada's veterans".

If you go into any city or town in Ontario, certainly you'll see these small single-floor cottages with one bedroom or two bedrooms, which were built in that period for veterans of World War II. However, things have changed. Not only does such a stand-alone housing program not exist any more for modern veterans, but the CMHC and Canadian taxpayers are on the hook for nearly \$1 trillion in Canadian mortgages of varying quality that are held by private financial institutions.

Under this government's watch, homelessness—not even having a roof over your head—has become an issue of great concern with respect to veterans and especially aboriginal veterans, who my staff and I see every day in my office in Thunder Bay. Food bank use by veterans has skyrocketed also.

I have a couple of questions for you today. I'll get to homelessness again, but first let me ask you a question of national and local importance. Veterans Affairs has recently announced that it will be closing the Thunder Bay office, along with other offices across Canada. I have a question, and then it's going to be a money question.

Why are veterans in my riding, my constituents, being forced to travel 10 hours by road to receive specialized face-to-face Veterans Affairs service? Keep in mind that these are wartime veterans. These are veterans who are used to doing things in a certain way and having those supports. Many of them are in their nineties and they use this face-to-face service. My question is, how much money is the Harper government actually saving by closing these offices, and the Thunder Bay office in particular?

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: First of all—

Mr. John Rafferty: Or if you'd like to get back to us again, a written answer to the clerk would be okay, if you're not prepared to answer now.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: Great.

[*English*]

Mr. John Rafferty: So you'll get back to the clerk with that information. Thank you.

As you know, the Harper government has supposedly set out to balance its budget, I think for the first time since 2007, and as part of that effort, each department was asked to cut spending by between 5% and 10%, according to various reports. This was also confirmed by some ministers publicly.

How much was Veterans Affairs asked to cut and from what programs was this money taken?

Ms. Janice Burke: We could certainly get back to you on the question.

Mr. John Rafferty: If you would, that would be great. Thank you very much.

The Chair: It gives you more time for more questions.

● (1210)

Mr. John Rafferty: Yes, it does.

The Chair: You have one more minute.

Mr. John Rafferty: I have lots of questions. I have a Last Post Fund question, but I'll ask the housing question first.

In a recent press release Veterans Affairs said the following:

"One homeless Veteran on the streets is one too many. That's why the Government of Canada is working to prevent and reduce homelessness among Veterans," said Minister Fantino. "Our Government is working hard to build new partnerships to help ensure homeless Veterans and those who are at risk of becoming homeless are getting the care and support they need."

Why is the government building partnerships and not simply taking sole responsibility for ensuring that not a single Canadian veteran is homeless? Why is there not a single specific and stand-alone federal program dedicated to building housing for Canada's modern veterans, poor, homeless, and otherwise?

I'm wondering if they're not worth the same thanks and support as wartime veterans received after the Second World War.

Ms. Janice Burke: Perhaps I'll answer the first part.

The Chair: You have three seconds.

Ms. Janice Burke: Three seconds?

The Chair: You have no more time, so speak fast.

Mr. John Rafferty: Perhaps you could do another written response to the clerk.

Ms. Janice Burke: A written response, but I do want to make it clear that we have the same concern. That's why we have implemented new programs for veterans who are transitioning from the military with the new Veterans Charter, which in my view and in the view of the department hopefully will prevent homelessness among the veteran population.

Mr. John Rafferty: Mr. Chair, thank you for the extra time. I'm used to a committee where you have seven minutes in the first round. I was a little confused and I apologize.

The Chair: You packed in quite a bit.

The next questioner is Mr. Hawn.

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll be quick and I'd appreciate quick answers.

First, is it true that veterans now in Thunder Bay have to drive 10 hours to get service, or will somebody come to them?

Mr. John Rafferty: It's face-to-face service.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Face to face, or will somebody come to them? A quick answer.

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: The quick answer is that what the department has always done is case managers, nurses and occupational therapists do home visits for assessment or follow-up and that will continue. They will not have to drive to another office to get those services. We've always driven out to the homes or to another location to meet with veterans.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Thank you.

I'm not sure the numbers are not cabinet confidence, but I can say to fill in about the deficit reduction action plan that Veterans Affairs was asked to cut far less than any other department and it was related to the overall decrease in the number of veterans.

Can you talk about your document handling process? No names, no back drill, but it's been suggested that hundreds of thousands of critical documents have been destroyed and somehow this information, these medical documents, are now lost forever. Could you comment on how you do that document handling, the destruction process and what goes into that?

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: First, the department takes very seriously its obligation to deal in a responsible manner with the documents and records of those we serve. We do follow Library and Archives Canada guidelines and legislation in the management of those records. In particular, in the cases I think you're referring to, these files were patient files from hospitals that the department transferred to the provinces between 1954 and 1995. The information in question dealt with patients who had either passed away or were discharged from the hospital.

Where the department does use military medical records for processing applications for benefits, these records are preserved by and are accessible from Library and Archives Canada.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: So no relevant files are lost? They're all there?

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: The records that would be required for processing applications are preserved and they are accessible with Library and Archives Canada, yes.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Thank you. To suggest otherwise would probably instill fear in the hearts of some veterans unnecessarily. That's kind of a judgmental call, but—

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: The disposal of the material that we do in no way impacts the delivery of services and benefits to veterans and their families.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: And they have nothing to fear from that.

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: No.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Thank you so much.

I do have a concern about some of the long-term care beds. I think it's an issue that is sort of half federal and half provincial. I'll just use the Kipnes Centre in Edmonton as an example. Those beds are for World War II and Korea vets. I know of cases where post-Korea vets have been trying to get in there and they can't. I think that needs to be corrected. I've talked to the provincial minister and I'm not sure whether that's a federal issue, a provincial issue, or a coordination issue between VAC and those facilities.

Can you comment on that?

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: Yes, I can.

Canadian Armed Forces veterans can be eligible for support in a community bed if the need for the long-term care is due to an illness or an injury that's directly related to their military service. If it's a facility that we have contract beds for priority access for veterans, most war veterans may be eligible if they have a need for a long-term care placement if their injury or their illness is linked to their service.

• (1215)

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I guess my point is we're running out of World War II and Korea folks. From my personal point of view, veterans are better with veterans. There are a whole lot of post-Korea folks that are now getting on and needing long-term care. I'd like to suggest that we find a way to give them priority access to those beds as well. I just throw that out there as a suggestion.

I don't know how much time I have left, but I have a quick question which will be my last. I just want to get this question on the record.

We don't turn any money back from VAC. We basically spend all the money we get and we're always going back to supp Bs to get more money. Is that a true statement?

Ms. Janice Burke: I'm certainly not a finance expert, so I can't speak to that.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: VAC spends all the money it's given.

Ms. Janice Burke: Certainly, the budget of approximately \$3.3 billion goes out to veterans directly in the form of benefits and services through the department—

The Chair: I'm sorry, but we've run out of time. If you have supplementary information, send it to the clerk. Thank you very much.

The next speaker is Mr. Karygiannis.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Concerning the VIP that you've harmonized and through it are sending the veterans x amount of dollars, has it been taken into consideration that some provinces have GST and PST combined and they have different taxation levels, and some are higher than others? If you take that into consideration and some veterans are complaining, would you be able to address it?

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: I'll have to get back to you on that issue.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: What I'm saying is in P.E.I. it's 15%. In Toronto it's 13%. Has that been taken into consideration?

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: I'll have to get back to you on that one.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: In view of some of the records in question that were being destroyed, do you know of any cases of any court actions that have been taken by veterans or a group of veterans to state to the department that you've destroyed their medical records? I noticed you came in with a pre-written answer, so I'm wondering if you're aware of any cases that have been taken to court where veterans have complained about cases that were—

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: I'll have to verify and get back to you on that.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: But you gave a clear answer to Mr. Hawn when you stated that nobody's records have been misplaced. Was that answer correct or incorrect?

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: As far as I know, the answer I provided is correct. On the point you're raising, I will check and get back to you.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Again, I'm not trying to badger or be difficult. You stated clearly that no veteran was affected. I'm asking you—

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: Based on the information I know of what records were destroyed, no veterans would have been impacted regarding delivery of services.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Can you please advise us how you got your information when you made your statement?

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: I got the information from the folks who manage and oversee the people responsible for the program. If you have further questions, we can refer the questions to them and they can explain the process in more detail.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: I will rephrase my question. You're not 150% sure if medical records were destroyed that are affecting vets who are fighting VRAB at this moment.

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: I'll go back, verify, and come back.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Sorry; answer with a yes or no, please, because I am willing to give you names: Kenneth Young, Mike Cole, Lakhan Mohan. Are you sure their cases have not been affected? Are you sure there's not a Supreme Court action going on right now because the medical records were destroyed?

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: I cannot comment on matters before the court.

The Chair: We have a point of order from Mr. Hawn.

I want to advise Mr. Karygiannis that after the point of order, he will still have one more minute.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I have a concern with what I think is badgering the witness, and the member is answering for the witness, in my view. I throw that out as an opinion. I wish he would treat the witnesses with a little more respect.

Thank you.

• (1220)

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Mr. Chair, I am presenting the witness with names that I know.

She answered Mr. Hawn's questions, and I see now that there is some doubt, so I am wondering if the witness would like to confirm to us that she is not sure if this is going on.

The answer you gave Mr. Hawn might have been something that you thought was there, but right now you're having a second opinion. If you have to go back and search, then you're not 100% sure no veterans have been affected. Am I correct?

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: I can't tell you yes or no. I need to go back and verify, and again, if the matter is before the court, I can't comment on that. That's not—

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: But what I'm understanding, Ms. Bastien, is that you're not absolutely sure if the records that were destroyed—

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: What I'm saying is I'll go back and check and if I was wrong, then—

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: You've answered Mr. Hawn by clarifying that—

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: As far as I know, those documents that were destroyed were not the types of documents that would be used to process applications for benefits.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: What I take from this, Mr. Chair, is that the witness is not 100% sure that the records destroyed would not affect any veterans. She's unsure if some veterans are being affected by the destruction of those documents.

Am I correct?

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: I will go and verify, and get back.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: How much longer do I have?

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: How many veterans are affected by the closing of the VAC centres? How much money are we thinking we're going to save? How much money do we know we're going to spend for these face-to-face meetings with the case officers having to go to the veterans' homes in order to look after them, because someone who is in Thunder Bay—

The Chair: That signals three questions, and you have zero seconds, so it had better be quick.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: She can supply a written answer.

What I'm looking for is the following. What are the cost savings? What is the cost to service the veterans should the case officers need to drive in order to provide the same care that they're getting right now face to face?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Karygiannis.

The next speaker is Mr. Chisu.

Mr. Corneliu Chisu (Pickering—Scarborough East, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

To the witnesses, thank you very much for your presentation and for being here today.

I would like to ask you a question about the disability pension. How long does a member need to serve to have a disability pension? Perhaps you can clarify this one. I was a serving member. I was not injured, and I know that I can get a pension after two years of service. What is the difference in how you are qualifying these disability pensions? Is the time of 10 years' service, which I heard, correct or not?

Ms. Janice Burke: Thank you for your question. Very quickly, the disability pension that is administered by Veterans Affairs Canada is provided to either serving members or veterans when they release for disabilities that are related to service. Veterans can apply at any point in time. In fact, we have veterans applying sometimes 40 or 50 years later. There's no time limit in terms of the length of time that you served. All you need to demonstrate is that there's a link between your disability and your military service.

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: Thank you very much for that answer.

Regarding the commemorations, you are issuing the Memorial Cross, right?

Mr. André Levesque: Yes.

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: Do you also issue the Memorial Ribbons? For example, if someone from a family has three or four descendants, I think they have a right to three Silver Crosses or three memorial medals and two ribbons, or something like that.

Mr. André Levesque: First of all, the Memorial Cross regulations were, as you know, amended to allow the member of the Canadian Forces to select up to three recipients of his or her choice, whoever they want, so you're correct on that.

The Memorial Ribbon was recently created last year for the families of the deceased. Typically, they would be allowed to have

three ribbons, but should the family need additional ribbons, they would be provided to the family. All they have to do is apply to the Canadian Forces which administers the program on behalf of the government. We would be happy to present them to the families and make them available to them.

• (1225)

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: Thank you very much. I have another question.

Our government, as you know, has implemented a new partnership with Service Canada, which provides more than 600 points of service across the country where veterans and their families can obtain general information regarding Veterans Affairs Canada programs and services.

Could you elaborate on the training Service Canada employees are receiving in order to support the veterans? When you are compensating services, you need to have training because Service Canada is a little bit larger, but the veterans have certain needs. How are you balancing this situation to be able to serve the veterans better?

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: Training was provided starting in September and October 2012 to Service Canada employees, on the basic programs and services and on being able to respond to general inquiries regarding Veterans Affairs Canada programs and services. They were also provided with training on being able to assist with filling out certain applications for Veterans Affairs benefits.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Musquodoboit Valley—Eastern Shore, NDP)): Perhaps I could ask for a point of clarification. This won't interrupt your time, Mr. Chisu.

Are the Silver Cross ribbons delivered to them by the Department of National Defence or by the Department of Veterans Affairs?

Mr. André Levesque: The Memorial Ribbon is administered by the Department of National Defence and is sent directly to the family member who requests the ribbon. It's basically sent to them right from the department.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Thank you, sir.

You still have a minute and a half, Mr. Chisu.

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: As a point of clarification, I think—

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: Mr. Karygiannis.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: On a point of order, can we clarify, please, whether or not our proceedings right now are being heard in public? Can we take a minute to make sure that this has been done?

I understand from people who are trying to tune in to our committee that this has not been done. Perhaps we could take a minute to verify that this is what is happening. Our offices, including my office, are trying to tune in, as are other people, and I'm being advised that they are not able to tune in. Could you please clarify that?

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: We will suspend in order to accommodate that request.

The clock has been stopped.

• (1225) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1225)

The Chair: Members of the committee, we're back in session.

If there is a problem, the problem does not originate from the House. It may originate from ParlVU. We have no evidence that there is a problem with transmission here.

Mr. Chisu, you have one minute and five seconds. Use them wisely.

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to return to the documents in the medical files, and so on. I understand that when I retire, after one year the medical file will go to the archives. Now, when it is a veteran or somebody who's claiming serious injury and so on and who's coming to you, the medical files are available from the archives.

What is the transition period if you want to serve a veteran quickly? How difficult is it to get the file? How quickly can you have the file from the archives? I understand also that National Defence is digitizing these files.

• (1230)

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: I'm not in a position to comment on the transfer between Canadian Armed Forces and Library and Archives. I'm not familiar with the inner workings of that. That would have to be referred to those authorities.

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: Who needs to provide you, if a veteran—

The Chair: Your time is up.

Monsieur Chicoine.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP): I'm going to give my time to Ms. Day.

The Chair: Ms. Day, we're listening.

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you all so much for appearing before the committee and answering our questions. Your contribution adds tremendous value to our work.

During your presentation, you talked about benefits that could be provided to veterans' spouses. My riding is home to two veterans residences, and most of the residents are widows. Although I'm speaking in the singular, this situation applies to many. Some of my constituents approached me about a specific situation: a woman who was widowed after divorcing the military member she had been married to. The divorce was a matter of survival for her and her child. But she was not entitled to receive widow benefits.

My question is for Charlotte Bastien.

I think you're familiar with these cases. Would this woman be entitled to receive benefits? If not, is there anything I could do to

help her obtain widow benefits, given that she did spend many years married to someone in the military?

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: I can't comment on personal situations. I don't—

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day: Sorry, I'll use the plural for my example. It applies not just to one person, but to many, and I won't use any names. I'm referring to all the widows in Canada who experienced domestic violence and had to divorce their spouses for the sake of their family's safety and survival, as well as their own. Is there some way, some method of intervening in situations like that?

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: I'm not sure I understand. Do you mean once they're divorced or once they're widowed? It also depends on the benefits the veteran was receiving from the department.

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day: The woman became a widow after her divorce. Her ex-husband, who was in the military, passed away after the divorce.

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: It depends on what benefits the veteran was receiving at the time of his death.

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day: Can you tell us who they should speak to and how to proceed with the request? Are these people's rights clearly indicated on the Web site?

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: There is information on the site. In the specific case of those who divorced their spouse because of domestic violence—

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day: We're talking about a family's safety.

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: or to ensure their family's safety, I will have to get back to you with the information.

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day: That would be much appreciated. Thank you.

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: When it comes to benefits, it always depends on what the veteran was receiving at the time of their death.

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day: In addition, you gave us a table in English only. I would point out that you are supposed to provide documents in both official languages. I'm talking about the table on disability decisions.

You mentioned the 60th anniversary of the Korean War and the special certificates that would be awarded to those veterans.

Will MPs play any role in that?

Mr. André Levesque: Surviving veterans, themselves, can apply for a certificate to our office or through the Department of Veterans Affairs. Veterans organizations can also make requests, as can parliamentarians. Normally, it would go through the minister's office, which would serve as the liaison. Certificates would then be given however you wish, so you could award them as you like.

• (1235)

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day: In light of fairly recent wars such as the one in Afghanistan, some veterans are relatively young.

Could you tell us whether the number of veterans is going up or has remained relatively unchanged?

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: Whether war service veterans or Canadian Armed Forces veterans, the total number of veterans is decreasing. But, as compared with World War II veterans and Korean War veterans, the percentage of modern-day vets, meaning those who fought between 1945 and the present, is higher. The presentation includes a diagram—

The Chair: I apologize, Ms. Bastien, but I have to stop you there. Your time is up.

Thank you, Ms. Day, for pointing out the problem on page 13 of the presentation. I assume this kind of thing will be rectified in the future. I would ask the witnesses to send the clerk a corrected version of page 13 in both official languages. Thank you kindly.

Mr. Lobb, go ahead.

[English]

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm going to give Mr. Hawn a minute or two of my time.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I want to go back to the document issue one more time, just to clarify.

Can you confirm that even if the 30-year-old or 40-year-old records we've talked about are destroyed through the normal process, following normal procedures that have been in place for many decades, the information in those documents that would be necessary to provide service to a veteran is always available in Library and Archives Canada?

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: The documents that we would require to process applications for disability benefits are military medical records, and they are preserved and accessible through Library and Archives Canada.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Thank you very much.

Mr. Lobb.

Mr. Ben Lobb: Thank you.

I have a question regarding the lump sum. If we go back a number of years, when we were looking at the new Veterans Charter and the changes to it, almost every witness talked about the lump sum. Instead of having it in one chunk, they wanted it broken up into several installments. I'm wondering if you could give us an update on what that looks like now. What is the percentage who want it in a lump sum, and what is the percentage who want it in an installment or annuity format?

Ms. Janice Burke: We introduced legislation in 2011 to provide veterans with the option of either taking a lump sum award or taking annual payments. In addition, they can take a lump sum award in combination with annual payments.

Since that time, the uptake has not been extremely high. I do not have the precise numbers for you today, but there hasn't been a large number of veterans who have opted for annual payments. It has been very small.

Mr. Ben Lobb: Is there any idea, or has the department spent any time thinking about why that may be? I can remember all the different advocacy groups that would come in and talk about this and it surprises me that there hasn't been more of an uptake to it. Is there any thought that the department has had behind that?

Ms. Janice Burke: We haven't analyzed it at this point, so I really can't offer an opinion, other than certainly when you provide a veteran with a lump sum award, there is opportunity, in particular because we provide financial counselling. It's \$500 for each award and there is an opportunity for veterans to seek out counselling and to invest the lump sum award on their own. That may be occurring, but I don't have a response for you today.

Mr. Ben Lobb: That very well may be. I think that would be helpful as well for our committee as we embark, probably at some point in time, upon a review of the new Veterans Charter again, to be able to look at those types of things.

One other thing I'm curious about is the transition interviews. I know this has been a talked about issue for a number of years and certainly it's in practice now. What types of results and benefits are we seeing for transferring personnel from these transition interviews or conversations? I guess there have been over 4,000 of them. What are you seeing that you can report back to us?

• (1240)

Ms. Janice Burke: As you're aware, transition interviews are completed. It's mandatory for medically released veterans. Veterans who are voluntarily releasing can also obtain a transition interview.

We don't have research right now in terms of the outcomes of those interviews, other than they are extremely valuable for veterans and their families. It's during that point in time before they release into the military that all of their needs are identified and whatever the needs are, care plans, case plans, are put in place for the veterans.

In addition, applications for VAC benefits are completed prior to their release so that when they leave the military, there is a seamless transition into civilian life and they are seamlessly transitioning into Veterans Affairs programs, whether it be rehabilitation or financial benefits.

We do know from an operational perspective that the interviews are very effective at getting the veterans early intervention, early access to VAC programs.

Mr. Ben Lobb: This is certainly helping to prevent anybody from falling through the cracks and not knowing what's available to them.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lobb.

Next is Mr. Hayes.

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

Much has been said about the deficit reduction action plan.

Our government has increased funding for Veterans Affairs Canada by nearly \$5 billion since we formed government. Number one, I want to know whether you agree with that. Number two, how much of that \$5 billion funding is directly related to programs that serve Canada's veterans?

Ms. Janice Burke: Yes, I am aware that since, I believe 2006, there has been an increase of \$5 billion in Veterans Affairs program budgets. Those increases have been—and I'll just give you an example—related to things such as in 2011, the new Veterans Charter enhancements were introduced. We also expanded the veterans independence program during that period of time. We doubled the number of OSI clinics. These are mental health clinics that are available to veterans and their families who suffer from mental health conditions. Those were also doubled.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Can the witness.... She said doubled, can she say how many there were before and how many there are now?

Ms. Janice Burke: Sure. There were five prior to 2006, and there are currently 10 OSI clinics today.

I could go on in terms of the list. Certainly on case management, we enhanced case management within the department as well.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Actually, Mr. Chair, that's really good. That's a good segue into my next question.

I looked through your presentation and it indicated that currently there are 7,100 case-managed veterans. I'd like to get a pretty clear idea as to how the case management process works and how that service is provided, and how an individual might apply for it. Are there individuals out there who require case management and aren't receiving it, or to your knowledge, are those who require case management being given that service?

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: From the data we had last June, there were more than 7,000 veterans being case managed across the country.

The process can be through transition interviews. It could be through communication with the department. If there's an identification of a potential need or requirement for case management services, then the veteran and his family would be referred for case management. Part of the process for case management is identifying the needs, doing an assessment of those needs, and engaging the veteran and his family in the case management process.

There is the assessment, analysis and development of a plan in consultation with the veteran and his family. The plan is then set into action. There is regular monitoring and evaluation of the plan to see if the options put in the plan are working for the veteran and his family. We reassess if it's required. We direct and assist the veteran through the various resources and providers to achieve the goal of the case plan to help the veteran and his family get a better quality of life.

• (1245)

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Obviously we're all here because we support the rights of veterans. At times I suspect—well, we know—there's going to be a difference in terms of whether an injury is service related or not.

Obviously there's a process available to deal with those situations, i.e., the appeal process. I wonder if you could outline how the appeal process works and what services are available to veterans to assist them in the appeal process.

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: For a disability decision, if for example a veteran does not agree with the decision of the department regarding a disability benefit, the veteran could enlist the assistance of the Bureau of Pensions Advocates, which provides free legal assistance to veterans to appeal disability benefit decisions. There are offices across the country. They will help the veterans to appeal. The process then takes place before the Veterans Review and Appeal Board panel, but there are levels of appeals. There's a departmental review, a review hearing, and there's also an appeal hearing.

If you want more detail regarding the inner workings, I would refer the question to either a representative from BPA or from the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. They could provide more details regarding the process.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Thank you, Ms. Bastien, and thank you, Mr. Hayes.

We now move on to the second round with Mr. Chicoine for four minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

Since it's our last meeting before Remembrance Day, I'd like to make a request. You can take it out of my speaking time if necessary, but I would like the committee members, as well as everyone else in the room, to join me in a moment of silence in honour of our veterans and fallen soldiers.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): If there's agreement, we will do that near the end of the committee.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Great.

I just have one question. There was some discussion earlier around the disposal of records. I would like you to tell us who decides what's relevant and what isn't, in short, what gets destroyed. I'm obviously referring to a comment by the ombudsman to the effect that this was causing a problem.

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: The act contains criteria used to determine which documents have to be kept and for how long. It's stipulated in the legislation.

As for the department, it follows a framework governing how those documents are to be managed. It lays out what we have to keep in our files, how long we have to keep the documents and when they can be destroyed. And everything is placed under the authority of Library and Archives Canada.

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: I understand there's a framework and all, but who decides what gets destroyed at the end of the day? As I said, the ombudsman indicated that, in the past, it had been difficult to establish the criteria or elements provided to veterans. Isn't there a grey area? Are all the criteria respected?

• (1250)

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: With regard to the records you're referring to, Library and Archives Canada was consulted and did approve the destruction of those documents, in accordance with the applicable criteria on preservation and time frames.

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: This summer, transition services underwent changes. Could you briefly explain what changed in terms of the amount awarded. I believe \$75,000 is now the amount awarded to help veterans as far as training goes. Basically, I'd like you to tell us what changes were made to that this summer.

[English]

Ms. Janice Burke: Sure, I can take that question.

What has changed is that the regulations around vocational training, vocational rehabilitation, were very inflexible, very much had prescribed amounts for costs relating to each training item within the regulations. For example, for tuition, the maximum was \$20,000. Things like special equipment had maximums of \$300. They were very inflexible and there were often delays in trying to develop and implement vocational rehabilitation plans for veterans who were participating in the rehabilitation program, because they had to request exceptional decision-making to exceed the amounts.

Essentially, all the individual prescribed amounts were removed and instead a one program amount was put in place of \$75,800. This provides much more flexibility in meeting the needs of the veterans vocational plan. For example, if they need to exceed tuition and the need is more than \$20,000, and it's based on need in the plan, it will be extended. It really simplified the decision-making process.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Thank you, Ms. Burke. If there is more written information that you could present later, that would be great. I'm sorry to cut off your time, but we need to go to the next questioner. I'm sorry about that.

Mr. Lizon for four minutes.

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

Welcome to our guests.

The first question I would like to ask is on commemoration. In my view, if I understand all that's being done by the department, I don't think there is enough done to really stress and make people aware of the Canadian contribution, especially to the First and Second World Wars. I don't think there is enough knowledge, especially in the young generation here in this country and on other continents, including Europe, of the great contributions Canada made, especially to the First World War and Second World War.

I think the general view would be distorted and our role and contribution would be underestimated. There is really a need that there be a full understanding, because I don't think there is another matching contribution on a percentage basis by any other country among the allied forces.

Mr. André Levesque: Thank you for that excellent question.

The first thing I want to say is that we work very closely with all our stakeholders, veterans groups, and especially schools for our young students in order to get that message out. We spend an enormous amount of time and resources to make sure that information is available to everyone, especially on our website, which has a lot of information.

In early September we sent more than 20,000 sample packs, for example, of education information on our world wars to schools across the country. We have had something like three million pieces of education products already sent in the last couple of months, just prior to Remembrance Week. We make a really big attempt to reach all of them.

The second thing is that Veterans Affairs obviously leads a number of commemorative activities throughout the country and in Ottawa, but that doesn't mean we do all of them. We work in partnership with all of our community organizations and try to act as a catalyst so communities can develop their own commemorative activities. We do our best to support them in any way we can.

With the upcoming anniversaries of the First and Second World Wars, I think you will find that once all the plans are finalized and announced, the communities will be standing right behind Veterans Affairs to help commemorate all those who need to be honoured and recognized. Especially with the beginning of the First World War, with the centenary happening in August 2014, you will find that things will start coming fairly rapidly and end in 2020 at the end of the 75th anniversary of the Second World War.

• (1255)

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Mr. Chair, I have a supplementary question.

As we all know, education is a provincial responsibility. How is the cooperation in different provinces? Is it good or does it need improvement? How would you describe it?

Mr. André Levesque: Things can absolutely always improve, that's for sure, but we have excellent relationships with the schools and the provinces.

We're often invited to attend provincial conferences, educational conferences that are put on by teachers across the country. We're often invited to have a booth and to present our materials.

You will find that the teachers are absolutely astounded by the quality of the information we provide to them so they can do a better job in their classrooms and in the field to try to help explain to the students and the population at large what commemoration is all about and how they can honour and recognize our veterans.

We have an excellent relationship with them. We continue to expand as much as we can. Again, it's a partnership, working together, hand in hand.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Thank you, sir.

Mr. Rafferty, you have two minutes, one question.

Mr. John Rafferty: I just want to follow up on some of my earlier questions. There's a bit of a disconnect for me.

The sense is that these Veterans Affairs offices are not required. That's the sense I get from the government and from your answers, Ms. Bastien.

Why are some still open, if they're not really needed?

Ms. Charlotte Bastien: The decision for the eight offices that are closing was made based on the current number of case-managed clients at the time and the forecast of case-managed clients in the coming years. The threshold was 160 case-managed clients. These offices had less than 160 at the time.

What we have been seeing is that the number keeps diminishing at those offices. At the same time, at certain other offices, the demand for case management services was increasing.

Mr. John Rafferty: What are the department's best estimates as to the number of homeless veterans in Canada? Does the department have estimates or any figures it could share with us today?

Ms. Janice Burke: We don't currently have a good understanding of the number of homeless veterans in Canada. We do track the veterans we are providing outreach to and getting them into VAC programs and also into transitional housing, projects that we have under way with ESDC.

Based on the numbers within the department, it's certainly less than 300 that we have identified to date.

Mr. John Rafferty: Thank you very much for that.

If I have—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): I'm afraid that's it. I'm sorry.

First of all, I want to personally thank the witnesses for coming today.

On behalf of our chairperson and our committee, we thank you very much for coming to our committee and presenting us with the information. We look forward to the written responses to the questions, which you can send to the clerk in the near future.

On behalf of our chair, Mr. Galipeau, and our committee members, two of whom have served their country, and for all the veterans in the room, it has been decided by all parties that we would like to observe one moment of silence for Remembrance Day.

Everyone who can, please stand for a moment of silence.

[A moment of silence observed]

• (1300)

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Thank you very much.

[English]

The meeting is adjourned.

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