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—
Chair

Mr. Royal Galipeau

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• (1110)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Musquodoboit Valley—Eastern Shore, NDP)): Members of the committee, we are now officially no longer in camera.

It is our pleasure to welcome Minister Fantino.

Congratulations, sir, on behalf of the chair, on your new role as Minister of Veterans Affairs.

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): In my view, it's the best ministry to have in the entire government.

We're honoured to have General Walter Semianiw and Mary Chaput with us, as well.

Sir, we look forward to your comments. Please proceed at your convenience.

Hon. Julian Fantino: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and members—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Sorry for the interruption.

Mr. Fantino, unfortunately the regular chair, Mr. Galipeau, cannot be with us, but I'm sure he sends his best, as well.

Thank you.

Hon. Julian Fantino: Let me thank you for stepping in. We wish him well, of course.

I thank you for the opportunity to appear today as part of the comprehensive review of the new Veterans Charter.

I thank you for having introduced our deputy and the general, as well. I'll move on to my comments.

In 2011, Parliament passed Bill C-55, which created one new monthly payment, expanded the eligibility for two monthly financial benefits, and allowed veterans to break their lump sum into more flexible terms of their choice. It also added a requirement that these new measures be reviewed by Parliament in 2013.

Upon taking office, I heard clearly from the Veterans Ombudsman, veterans groups, and stakeholders that a wider review of the new Veterans Charter was needed. I therefore asked my parliamentary secretary to ensure that a comprehensive review of the new Veterans Charter be taken up in short order. I am pleased to be here today to discuss how we can improve the new Veterans Charter for veterans and their families.

As you undertake this review, I'd like to take a minute to discuss my hopes for your work.

It is my firm belief that you should focus the review on how the new Veterans Charter serves the most seriously injured, how our government supports Canadian veterans' families, and how Veterans Affairs delivers the programs that have been put in place.

Some have said this should be a travelling road show. I disagree. I believe Canadians and veterans from across the country should be able to submit their comments or insights to you directly, and I believe we should remain focused.

Colleagues, the new Veterans Charter was unanimously passed by Parliament under the former government after years of debate and study among experts, veterans' representatives, and veterans themselves. While we can never say everyone, the vast majority obviously concluded that the old pension system had outlived its usefulness.

I encourage members to read the Senate's report on the new Veterans Charter, issued last year.

I would also highlight a comment Senator Roméo Dallaire stated upon its introduction in the other place:

...it is with great anticipation that I am speaking to [the new Veterans Charter], which proposes to modernize our veterans' assistance and compensation program...in fact, a new social contract between the people of Canada and our veterans, both past and present.

Advances in medical knowledge and disability management, and changing demographics among the veterans population were just some of the changes that led to this new approach in 2005. As the situation facing Canadian veterans changed from 2005 to today, so too has the new Veterans Charter and how it is applied.

We will be distributing copies of a report my department has produced, which outlines 160 adopted recommendations which led to 107 improvements to the administration of benefits and services under the new Veterans Charter. These changes represent our collective effort to keep pace with changing times, but I will be the first to agree that more needs to be done.

Colleagues, since 2005 we have seen the effects of the war in Afghanistan on our military men and women. With the new payment and options introduced in 2011, more financial support has been directed to those who have been seriously injured. However, I am convinced, as I stated earlier, more can and should be done.

Our commitment to veterans is absolute, and has been so since our government was first formed in 2006.

One must only look at the overall Veterans Affairs budget to see how, even during a recession and a government-wide cost reduction exercise, Veterans Affairs spends approximately \$700 million more today than in 2005.

● (1115)

The work our government does each day has been and can be called many things: duty, responsibility, commitment, social contract, obligation, sacred or not, or covenant. Colleagues, I believe it is all of those things.

Therefore, as part of this review, I ask you to determine how best to state our commitment to Canadians and their families and what is the best format to do so in the new Veterans Charter.

It is important that Canadians express through the parliamentary process exactly what is our shared duty, responsibility, mandate, obligation, commitment, or covenant to Canadian veterans.

Returning to the changing times, Veterans Affairs offices in eight locations across Canada have seen demand drop, and so yes, they are being closed. However, where veterans need them most, our government has maintained 26 Veterans Affairs Canada service centres, has established and supports 24 integrated personnel support centres and 17 operational stress injury clinics. In total, Veterans Affairs will have 67 locations across the country to meet the changing need but this is again only part of the story.

Imagine how many times a veteran has driven past a Service Canada office on the way downtown to pick up a brochure from a Veterans Affairs district office. Now, in locations where Veterans Affairs has never operated before, veterans and their families can visit one of 600 Service Canada sites to get the information they need.

As times have changed, so too have the rates being paid under the funeral and burial program. The average cost of a funeral today is just over \$7,000. That is why last spring our government increased the maximum payment to \$7,376 while providing an additional \$1,200 on average to a veteran's family for any burial costs. In so doing, we have one of the most robust programs of our allies. By comparison, the United States provides just over \$2,000, the United Kingdom provides \$3,500, and New Zealand provides \$1,800, all noted in Canadian dollars.

It is clear this program has kept up with the changing times, because of improvements made by our government.

I will also take a moment to speak about the supplementary estimates (B), which this year includes a request for another \$20 million to support Canadian veterans' funeral costs, our commemorative promotional programs, and to increase the war veterans allowance and other health-related benefits. This further request for

new financial support builds on our government's record of almost \$5 billion in new financial support since 2006. With our administration costs on the decline, this means every new request for additional funding from Parliament will more and more directly affect Canadian veterans.

I have one final thought before I take your questions. The exercise you are embarking on is not one of the elusive pursuit of perfection, but rather is about finding the reasonable solutions that will focus on the veterans and their families who need them the most, especially the critically injured and the homeless as examples.

Mr. Chair and members, thank you.

● (1120)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Minister, thank you very much.

We will now move to questioning of five-minute rounds. From the official opposition we will hear from Mr. Sylvain Chicoine, please.

[*Translation*]

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

I also want to thank the minister for agreeing to appear before the committee today to answer our questions.

My first question has to do with the class action lawsuit filed by Equitas. The government's lawyers said that Canada did not have a sacred obligation to take care of its veterans.

The question was asked, but you have skirted the issue in question period for the past two weeks. Can you tell me whether you accept that Canada has a sacred obligation to take care of its veterans?

[*English*]

Hon. Julian Fantino: Mr. Chair, and members, as I indicated, I don't like to get hung up on terminology because no matter what you say, it is always subject to individual interpretation and how people see things.

I think I've included a number of terminology which I believe all reflect the purpose and intent for which we have a Veterans Affairs Canada program and all of its components to assist veterans and their families in every respect. I'm going to let other people deal with the legal terminologies.

I think I've made it clear that no matter how you frame it and how you speak to it, my view is that we're all here to ensure that we do the absolute best for our veterans and their families, especially those who are most in need. I don't want to get into semantics about what words mean; I'd rather look at the spirit and intent of what we are here to do and what we are committed to do, and that is the best possible service, support, and programming for our veterans and their families, and particularly those who have special needs.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Thank you.

It's a shame that you continue to evade the question. We have an obligation and we should all recognize that. We have a duty to look after our veterans. We don't understand why the government is skirting the issue and refusing to use the legal terminology in question, when it would be easy to acknowledge that we have a sacred obligation to look after our veterans.

Since you persist in evading the question, I'll use my time to ask you another, this time, about funeral expenses.

The funeral benefit was increased to \$7,300, but the eligibility criteria are still so restrictive that very few families can access it. Despite raising the amount, the government isn't spending any more money because the eligibility criteria are such that very few people qualify.

Is any consideration being given to relaxing the eligibility criteria so that the money in the Last Post Fund is used to actually help families in need? If the veteran's estate is valued above the \$12,000 limit, a paltry amount, the veteran's family is denied the funeral benefit. The estate exemption limit hasn't been increased in years; in fact, it was even reduced 20 years ago. Do you have any plans to broaden the criteria at all?

• (1125)

[English]

Hon. Julian Fantino: Thank you for the question. To be perfectly frank with you, this is why we have this process in place. This is why we are doing a comprehensive study. This is why you as a committee are being asked to delve into these issues and come back with recommendations that we can consider moving forward on.

It's up to you now to deal with those issues. I don't want to prejudge or pre-empt the work you need to do, about which I'm very respectful, but it is certainly something you have the opportunity to deal with and to make recommendations on.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): You have time for a quick one.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: I'd like to discuss the changes to training at the post-secondary level. A maximum amount of \$75,000 over 4 years has been allocated, with the total envelope at \$2 million. That strikes me as very low. That will help only 20 veterans who want to pursue post-secondary studies. It's slightly more than what they get now, or not even.

Can you comment on that? It seems to me that just 20 veterans will benefit from the new changes.

[English]

Hon. Julian Fantino: I don't happen to have all of those figures. Maybe our deputy has. Let me go back and speak to the spirit and intent of what we're hoping to achieve.

I do agree that some of these things have to be worked out. From what I understand and the information I have, this will allow many more veterans, and the veteran's family, by the way, in the event of a

spouse and so forth, to access that particular amount of money in order to upgrade their skills, develop new skills, or learn a trade. All of this goes to our intent to work closely with corporate Canada, if you will, to enable our veterans to transition into meaningful work, jobs, and very often a second career. This is not a program in isolation. We are working very hard to connect that program with what now appears to be a very significant uptake by corporate Canada to bring into their workforce capable, able veterans with skill sets that can be very helpful, as we've seen, in many cases in corporate sector industries and businesses.

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

We'll now move to the parliamentary secretary, Mr. Gill, for five minutes please.

Mr. Parm Gill (Brampton—Springdale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I also want to thank the minister, the general, and the deputy minister for taking the time to appear before our committee. I really appreciate it.

Minister, the government through Veterans Affairs and National Defence works day in and day out to support Canadian veterans and their families. Can you confirm for the committee exactly what you are asking our committee to do so that we can get to work on the recommendations as quickly as possible?

Hon. Julian Fantino: Thank you for that question.

As I indicated in my comments, this is an opportunity for us not only to do the review that was required of Bill C-55, but to amplify the work, the research, the kinds of review that will enable us to better define what our commitment is to veterans.

We heard about different terminology, different dialogue. I think it's important for us to come to a consensus or an agreed reference on what it is we are in fact endeavouring to do, whether it's a social contract commitment, social obligations, the sacred obligation, or all of those things. I think we should try to find what it is exactly we need to address. Hopefully those words will then reflect into meaningful action throughout the whole of our service and support for veterans.

I believe the new Veterans Charter should reflect this more clearly. We should state that up front. It should be our vision, our mission, and something that all of us can embrace as a purpose and intent for why we're here in our responsibility to our veterans and their families.

I think that should be something that you, I hope, can come up with and we can embody in this revisiting of the new Veterans Charter.

• (1130)

Mr. Parm Gill: Thank you.

The last time this committee met, we heard from officials from Veterans Affairs who spoke about the programs and services provided by Veterans Affairs Canada.

You mentioned almost \$5 billion in new money. Can you explain to the committee what exactly you mean by that?

Hon. Julian Fantino: In the date time of about 2005, the Veterans Affairs budget was something in the area of \$2.8 billion. We're now up to \$3.6 billion. This to me indicates that, to the extent possible, ongoing efforts have been made to keep pace and to provide added necessary programs and support for veterans. Of that funding, 90% goes directly to programs for our veterans.

Something that I think needs to be mentioned as well is the type of support that is in place for veterans, especially those who obviously need the support, right down to home care, shovelling their snow, cutting their grass, those very things they no longer can do. By the way, that's also available to their surviving spouses.

I think there has been a lot of effort made over this period of time to ensure that veterans are supported. Not that money always is an indicator of progress, but I think we can say that a significant amount of added finances has been dedicated to veteran support program services. That also applies to their surviving spouses and so forth.

Mr. Parm Gill: How much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): You have 32 seconds.

Mr. Parm Gill: I'll try to be quick.

Minister, I noted you said this in your remarks that the "average cost of a funeral today in Canada is just over \$7,000. That is why, last spring, our government increased the maximum payment to \$7,376 while providing an additional \$1,200 on average to veterans families for any burial costs. We have one of the most robust programs of our allies. The United Kingdom provides \$3,500 and New Zealand provides \$1,800."

Can you talk a bit about that? It seems we are at the top of the food chain here.

Hon. Julian Fantino: In talking to our allied colleagues, we are seen as a model of progress in this particular area and in many other areas as well.

Again, I don't want to restrict the work of this committee. If you feel that this is an area you wish to delve into and come forward with recommendations on, I'd encourage you to do that. If there's a better way of doing what it is we can do, in a reasonable, affordable way that still addresses the optimum needs and entitlement of our veterans, then we need to talk about it and we need to consider it.

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

Thank you, Mr. Gill.

We now move on to Mr. Jim Karygiannis, for five minutes please.

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

Minister, your department is closing nine centres. That affects 26,788 veterans. A lot of the veterans are saying they don't want these centres to be closed.

Of the centres that are to be closed, for example Sydney, people will have to travel to Halifax. I'm not sure if you have ever done that trip. I had the opportunity to do it. It's about a four-and-a-half to five-hour drive. People from Windsor will have to drive to London. That's a two-hour drive.

A lot of the veterans, especially the older ones, don't have access to a computer. They don't have access to the 1-800 number. When you are 80 or 85 years old and you dial the 1-800 number, and hear "press one, press two", some people get frustrated.

The other thing is, these veterans fought in order to put us in front of the line.

Sir, I put it to you that your department is making these veterans go to the back of the line because when you tell them to go to the Service Canada centre, a lot of the Service Canada centres are not equipped to deal with the veterans' needs. The veterans are asked to use the phone and to call the 1-800 number and usually they get the 1-800 number for Service Canada. I'm not sure if you yourself have dialed it, but if you haven't, I suggest you do.

One of my questions to you, sir, is why don't you take a trip down to Sydney? Look the veterans in the eye. Ronald Clarke, for example, he's a good Tory; tell him you're closing the centres. We've got some vets in this room. Maybe you want to look them in their eyes and say you're closing their centres.

Further, your department in 2009 ordered 27,388 medical records. These are boxes. I'm not sure if in one box there is one veteran, or two, or three, but usually in one box you probably have two or three, but let's say for the sake of argument you have three. That translates to about 90,000 veterans whose medical records were destroyed. Are you going to tell me that some of them were people who had passed away?

Sir, I put it to you that there are records in there of people who are alive. One of them is trying to get his records. He couldn't get his records, and neither could others. There are a lot of veterans out there who want to get their records, but they're scared to come forward because of what is happening in your department.

Medical files are being breached. I'll give you a couple of examples: Dennis Manuge, Sean Bruyca, Harold Leduc. These people's medical files were breached. People are scared to come forward and ask for their medical records and to say, "Am I alive as far as you're concerned, or am I dead?" I put to you that Kenneth Young is very much alive and yet your department thinks he's dead because you destroyed his medical records.

Minister, would you go to Sydney, Nova Scotia, look the vets in the eye and say, "I'm not going to close your centres" or look them in the eye and say, "Yes, I'm closing your centres"?

• (1135)

Hon. Julian Fantino: The one thing I would do, Mr. Karygiannis, is not be an alarmist. I wouldn't be conveying false and inappropriate information such as you appear to be.

I don't want to get into a battle of words with you, but you need to make an apology for the way you have been speaking about veterans. You also need to clean up your act with respect to how you convey information. You are unnecessarily alarming people.

Whatever disposition is made of records, it is made pursuant to the records retention guidelines, rules, and regulations. Also, those that are in the purview of the Privacy Commissioner...

You choose to go off and alarm people unnecessarily, and it's shame on you, because the one thing you should be doing is be helpful and not sabotage the good efforts that so many people are making to help and support our veterans, to be understanding and make progress, in terms of the things that we need to do—

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Minister, would you answer the question?

Hon. Julian Fantino: Will you let me answer? I'm answering now.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Answer the question, please.

Hon. Julian Fantino: Mr. Chair, he asked a question; I think I'm entitled to answer.

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

Hon. Julian Fantino: What you need to do is better inform yourself about exactly what are in fact the rules, the regulations, the concepts, the policies, and also of course the commitment that people at Veterans Affairs Canada are making to support and deal with veterans; not constantly nag and misinform and create a moral panic on issues that really do not exist, for your own political agenda —

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): I'll stop it right there. Your five minutes are up, Mr. Karygiannis.

Committee, I always ask for respect from the members of the committee to the witnesses, and also from the witnesses to the committee.

Mr. Minister, with great respect, you did use the term “clean up your act”. As the chair, I find that slightly unparliamentary. I know that is not what you personally meant to say, so I will give you a chance to phrase that in a different way for the record, if you wish.

Hon. Julian Fantino: Mr. Chair, thank you very much.

The application and the references about not creating a moral panic where one does not exist, not misinforming, and not creating difficulty among vulnerable people, many of whom are veterans who need to have accurate, precise, concise information that does not give them a false impression—

• (1140)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Minister, my point was clear. You stated clearly on the record to “clean up your act”. That is not something I would ask a committee member to say to a minister and it is not something I would ask a witness to say to a committee member.

If we can't have respect all the way around, and I understand about a good verbal banter back and forth—I've been involved in it myself a lot—but the term “clean up your act”, in my personal view, is not acceptable in a committee.

I would remind everyone in the future, to please—

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Chair—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): No, Mr. Karygiannis.

I'll just leave it at that for now. I will caution everyone to watch the terminology, the language, and what it may mean. This is all on the public record and we don't want to impugn the motives or reputations of anyone in this particular regard.

At this time, we will now move on to the government.

Mr. Hayes, please, for five minutes.

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

Mr. Minister, welcome.

I appreciate the efforts your department is doing to provide training to Service Canada centre personnel. My riding in Sault Ste. Marie never had a Veterans Affairs office; it was always in North Bay. Now the folks in Sault Ste. Marie can go to the Service Canada centre to receive pertinent information specific to Veterans Affairs. I want you to know that they appreciate it.

Also, Minister, I want to thank you on behalf of the Korean War vets in my riding, for your efforts with respect to the recognition of Canadian Korean War veterans. I had an opportunity to host a great event in my riding in partnership with the Legion. In Sault Ste. Marie we had 23 Korean War vets come out, and I hosted a lunch and presented your certificates and had speeches.

I have a picture here of that particular event, and I'll be sure to send an electronic version to your office. Once again, I want to thank you for your efforts.

With regard to my first question, and Mr. Chicoine alluded to it, you stated that veterans now have access to \$75,800 for post-secondary education and trades training or certification. Having supported paying for both of my sons' university tuitions, that is an appropriate amount. That covers four years of education.

I want to get a sense of how this is different from the previous amount and what was previously in place.

Hon. Julian Fantino: We had a similar program that was nowhere near as generous. The former program had limits. I believe it was in the area of \$20,000. There was a great amount of technical work requiring receipts for every expenditure, even minor expenditures. A lot of processing work was required; I would call it a lot of red tape.

This is a bundled amount, which can include a variety of things that a veteran or their surviving spouse can claim for but not have to go through the intimate detailing and processing of every receipt. It's a bundled amount that can be for education, upscaling existing qualifications for a job that a veteran or spouse would be pursuing, or it could be a new trade.

This is a complementary program that also works with the likes of the True Patriot Love programs, the Helmets to Hardhats, the construction unions, those kinds of things.

That's the big difference. This has eliminated, I believe it was a million and change, documentations, transactions, that had to be processed. It's not only more flexible for veterans and surviving spouses, but it's also less cumbersome and less bureaucratic.

Deputy?

Ms. Mary Chaput (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): If I may add to what the minister has said, the program improvement that I think is most beneficial to the veterans who avail themselves of it is the removal of those item-by-item maximums. An example would be the program as previously designed had a maximum for Internet access worth \$25 a month. Over time we all know access to Internet per month costs much more than that. By virtue of that rigidity in the program, just one example, a veteran would have had to pursue an exceptions process to get exceptional approval for Internet charges in excess of \$25. By eliminating the item-by-item maximums, we've eliminated much of those exceptional approvals and thereby have made the program much more fluid and useful to the veteran.

• (1145)

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Thank you.

Is that my time?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): You have 45 seconds.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Forty-five seconds, thank you.

In 2013 the government made changes to the veterans independence program, which allows our veterans to remain in their homes longer with the dignity they deserve. I'd like to get a sense of what those changes were and how those changes will affect those in need.

Hon. Julian Fantino: The deputy alluded to some of that, whereby we've eliminated the need for our veterans to provide individual receipts. Some of these were for minor activities, such as grass cutting and snow shovelling. In essence, it eliminated 1.2 million transactions that were in play before. I think it's a great advantage. It processes things much more quickly. It reduces layers of red tape and makes us all more efficient. This is a great benefit not only to our veterans but also to taxpayers who are not having to fund things that are not very productive.

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

We'll now move on to Mr. Chisholm for five minutes, please. Welcome to the committee.

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I'm pleased to happen to be here today. I'm replacing John Rafferty, who unfortunately couldn't be here. It's my good fortune that I'm here at a time when you and your officials are here to present to this committee. I have a couple of things I want to ask you about.

One is the Dennis Manuge case about the clawback of the SISIP. I understand the clawback was stopped and that there was some question about paying back the money that was clawed back retroactively. Whether it was when you were last here or your predecessor was here, a decision had not been made to begin that retroactive payment. I wonder if you could clarify that for me, please.

Hon. Julian Fantino: Yes, thank you. As we speak, a decision has not been made. The matter is under consideration. We're alive to

the issues that are impacting the item, but as of now I can't give you a definitive answer other than that the matter is under consideration.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Just to interject for a second, the SISIP one Mr. Chisholm talked about was dealt with, but I believe you're both referring to the earnings loss benefit.

Hon. Julian Fantino: Yes.

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

Mr. Robert Chisholm: The decision has not been made. That's been in abeyance for some time. This matter was hard fought by Mr. Manuge and others who joined that class action lawsuit against the government. The government fought against it tooth and nail. Not to be overly graphic or crass, people are dying and that was part of the outrage of veterans and others with the court case and the way the government was fighting this.

I wonder if you could give us some clear indication, Minister, when your government is going to step up and correct the problem they created.

Hon. Julian Fantino: Go ahead.

Ms. Mary Chaput: If I may say so, Mr. Chair, the government did not appeal the decision as it relates to Veterans Affairs, because the court decision was not binding on Veterans Affairs. It was binding on DND contractual arrangements.

The programs we adjusted as a result of the decision were adjusted without appeal and at the government's voluntary will.

I would note that in budget 2013, \$262 million was provided to Veterans Affairs as a result of recalculations we are doing and infusions of cash into several programs. One of those was the war veterans allowance program, in which, as has been noted, offsets were previously made but are no longer being made.

The earnings loss program was also increased, as was the Canadian Forces income supplement benefit we administer. As well, further money is going into our veterans independence program and our long-term care program.

So certainly we have taken steps to secure the funding that allows us to mirror to some degree the court decision as it relates to veterans programs, notwithstanding the fact that legally the government was not bound to do so.

• (1150)

Mr. Robert Chisholm: My understanding is that the government made a commitment that they were going to do right by veterans in this regard. My concern is that the government, your department, continues to withhold moneys that should be paid out to those veterans.

I have to tell you, especially with the recent news about how government departments have failed to spend upwards of \$10 billion annually over the past three years out of budgets approved by Parliament, it doesn't give me great confidence to hear you say you have this money in your budget and you're trying to do well by veterans.

This is something that veterans and veterans advocates and people in our caucus will continue to talk to you about.

I have a couple of other questions.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Chisholm, unfortunately you've exercised your five minutes, sir. I apologize.

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): I believe that was more of a statement than a question.

We'll move on to the government side with Mr. Laurie Hawn, please, for five minutes.

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, and officials.

First of all, I want to thank Ms. Chaput for clarifying the question that Mr. Chisholm asked and clarifying very clearly that Veterans Affairs fulfilled their obligations even though they weren't legally required to do so. Thank you for that.

Mr. Minister, you and I have talked before about how in my view the biggest issue with the new Veterans Charter or veterans benefits is access, and how there are sometimes challenges to access. I will note that these challenges existed under the Pension Act as well, so challenges to access are not new. People seem to forget that and think that everything changed with the new Veterans Charter. It didn't change. Access challenges have always been there and are still there. That's one thing that concerns me personally.

Can you talk a little bit about things we might be able to do—and I have some ideas that I'll share with you maybe today, maybe later—to fix the challenges to access to make things a little bit more accessible?

Hon. Julian Fantino: Thank you for the question.

Surely, one of the things we hope we can improve on is our service delivery to veterans. To that end, any recommendations that come forward from this body will be well received and certainly will be very helpful.

We obviously are on a mission to cut red tape wherever we can, optimizing the ability to serve the needs of our veterans. There's also the misgiving that's in place. There's so much misinformation for someone who's come into this world relatively new in terms of having to learn the issues from many different perspectives, and sort out truth from fiction and misinformation, and who has some difficulty in understanding some issues. The one thing I can say is that we have many challenges, but surely one of them is to ensure that especially veterans, veterans advocacy groups, and stakeholders are empowered with the proper information to enable them to make decisions.

One of the items which I think needs to be done is how we communicate in a more efficient, more effective, way to veterans in terms of what they need to know. We probably need to do some work in that particular area. There are things which I hope this committee will consider and will share with us.

One of the misgivings of course, as we heard earlier, is the business about closures of offices. The offices are being closed for what we believe to be all the right reasons, but there are things in place. Nobody is requiring veterans who are in need of support or in need of direct contact with people to drive two hours anywhere. We

will come to their homes. Case managers or case workers, nurses or whomever, will come to their homes. It's things like this that we need to work on.

It isn't always about how we do things, but it's also about empowering people to know what their rights entitlement is also about and to be able to sort out fact from fiction.

• (1155)

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Thank you for that.

In terms of the overall aim of veterans programs, veterans have changed. Obviously, we have a lot of younger veterans and so on. It seems to me that the overall aim of the program is no longer lifelong financial dependence, other than for those who may need that because of their personal circumstances, but it's rehabilitation and retraining, so the veterans, especially the younger veterans, can get on with life on their own terms. Is that a fair statement?

Hon. Julian Fantino: It's absolutely fair. As I make my way and speak to veterans, ongoing and traditional veterans and more recent veterans, there certainly is an emerging greater need with the more recent veterans, especially post the Afghanistan war and all of that. We have to make some adjustments. That's why I believe this particular committee has the opportunity to address those issues so that we can again put in place whatever improvements we can with respect to the new Veterans Charter.

It would be a huge mistake for anybody to think that we should take the new Veterans Charter and chuck it, because when you look at the comparative figures—and I'll be happy to share with the committee, Mr. Chair, an actual comparative assessment of the old pension system, the new Veterans Charter, and also what is available from other government entities that can help veterans along their way. We'll share that with you later, Mr. Chair, but surely we need to modernize our approach to how we deal with veterans' issues. This committee I think would be a great resource to enable us to do that.

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

We now move on to Mr. Lizon for five minutes, please.

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

Minister, I would like to join my colleague in thanking you for attending the 70th anniversary of Operation Husky, which started the Italian campaign. You went to Italy, to Sicily, shortly after taking on your portfolio to pay tribute to those who fought there and died there during the Second World War.

Minister, the first question I would like to ask you has to do with the priority hiring for injured veterans. Could you tell the committee a little bit more about why you introduced that project?

Hon. Julian Fantino: Simply stated, it's just another effort to help our veterans who have been injured, as I call it, on duty in the service of Canada have access to government jobs, if they're qualified. Obviously, we're still looking to ensure that people are qualified. That's why that training module, that \$75,000-plus, will be very helpful.

We're looking to ensure that veterans who have been injured in some way in the line of duty are given a priority when it comes to accessing federal government jobs. That priority will be in place for five years. A veteran can be on that priority list for five years. Hopefully by then they will find suitable employment that they would wish to pursue in the federal government. Those veterans who are not injured on duty will have their status changed from two to five years.

It's another effort among many to pay tribute, to recognize, to appreciate the service of our veterans, especially those who have sustained an injury while serving, giving them priority hiring status within the federal government, the public service.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Thank you very much, Minister.

My second question has to do with another priority you mentioned, and that's homelessness. Can you take a moment and speak about why you've made this a priority? Can you also explain the pilot project and how it's going?

Hon. Julian Fantino: Mr. Chair, and members, I happen to come from a profession where in my experience I dealt a lot at the community level, obviously, with homelessness issues. It was not specific to veterans, but homelessness generally.

I feel that any veteran who is homeless is one homeless veteran too many. In actual fact, there's a pilot project under way involving a number of cities across Canada. There's great data coming together. A number of stakeholder groups are working very hard to help us identify and help homeless veterans realize their hopes and aspirations rather than be on the street.

I was recently in Calgary, where there's a homelessness program with a veterans focus which is achieving tremendous success. Our intent is that we need to do more in this particular area. We need to broaden our partnership with a lot of the entities that are now working in this particular area, such as the Royal Canadian Legion and Good Shepherd Ministries in Toronto. There are so many of them.

We need to do more in this particular area, because as I stated, fundamentally, one homeless veteran is one too many. I think we can do much better in this particular area.

Here again, Mr. Chair, and members, if you have any suggestions or recommendations that can address that very issue, we would be very pleased if you would share them with us.

● (1200)

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Mr. Chair—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): You have 22 seconds, sir.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Twenty-two seconds?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): You can say hello and he'll say goodbye, and then you're done.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Still on homelessness, Minister, what's the biggest challenge?

Hon. Julian Fantino: That's actually a good question. It's identifying veterans who are homeless who for whatever reason do not self-identify. It's difficult to ascertain, if you will, the validity of

veterans who may be homeless, whether they are or they aren't actually veterans. That identity issue is one of the more difficult areas we need to tackle.

That's why this pilot project with stakeholders is working to find ways to get better plugged in. I'm thinking that one of our resources there would be police officers. They're on the street, they're in contact with people all the time. It would be a natural thing for them to help us identify homeless veterans so that we can then engage.

There are so many supports available to homeless veterans that we can access right away to help them get off the street.

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

Now we go to Manon Perreault, who is sharing her time with Mr. Chicoine, I understand.

As we're in the second round now, members have four minutes.

Madame Perreault, for four minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Manon Perreault (Montcalm, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just had a look at the table listing the internal transfers. There was one transfer in which disability award funding was moved to allowances. An amount of \$249,000 was transferred to support allowances.

Can you explain the transfer please?

[*English*]

Ms. Mary Chaput: The number you've cited is not resonating with me, but certainly in the supplementary estimates, we did transfer approximately \$20 million from one program into another. The transfer related to a movement of funds—I'm just going to check for you; I've got it right here. We allocated funds from our disability allowances and awards into our earnings loss program. That was because the number of veterans who came forward and sought disability awards had been over-forecast, over-calculated to a small degree, and the numbers who needed earnings loss had been under-calculated, so we slid the money over to the place where it was most needed.

I don't know if that answers your question.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Manon Perreault: No, not exactly. I will explain more clearly.

Two amounts were transferred: \$249,000 and \$19,322. The second amount was transferred to the earnings loss program, which you just mentioned.

Does the \$249,000 reduction in disability award funding mean that you have stopped recognizing certain disabilities?

• (1205)

[English]

Ms. Mary Chaput: No, and I see the numbers you're looking at now. The 19.3, that's actually million dollars. That's what I had rounded up to \$20 million when I said that we had moved money from our disability awards over to earnings loss, but definitely it doesn't mean there were any applicants whose disability award applications were turned down by virtue of that transfer. It was because there were fewer applicants to the program than had been predicted.

As for the 249, yes you're right. We allocated money into the program called the Canadian Forces income support allowance. That's because there were more people who came forward seeking that kind of support for which they were entitled.

So one was an underestimate, one was for under-demand, the other one was over-demand, and we moved the money over to make sure it was where it was needed.

[Translation]

Ms. Manon Perreault: So the people who were receiving disability awards are continuing to receive them. Recognition hasn't stopped?

[English]

Ms. Mary Chaput: Absolutely, it did not stop.

[Translation]

Ms. Manon Perreault: Very good. Thank you.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): You have 21 seconds.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: I want to use the 21 seconds remaining to comment on something you said in your opening remarks.

You said Canada had one of the most robust programs as far as funeral and burial costs were concerned. But, in the United Kingdom, the \$3,500 is in addition to benefits available through other programs. In fact, a veteran there has access to other basic programs. So the amount is actually more than \$3,500. I don't remember what the situation is for New Zealand.

Regardless, it's easy to say that Canada provides more than the U. K., but the reality is it's a bit more complicated than that.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): *Merci*, Mr. Chicoine.

We'll now move over to the government side. Mr. Chisu, please for four minutes.

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

First of all, I would like to thank the minister for appearing as a witness at our committee. I commend him for his dedication to the case of our veterans. Also, I would like to commend him that he appeared with the deputy minister and also with General Semianiw. That is a very important thing. Being a veteran myself, the transition from being a soldier to being a veteran is very important, and that

outlines for me personally that the minister is genuinely interested in the care of the veterans.

The new Veterans Charter has been referred to as a living charter focused on a needs-based holistic approach to providing care and services to Canada's veterans. What action has our government taken to ensure that the new Veterans Charter evolves in a manner that provides the best available care to our veterans?

Hon. Julian Fantino: Thank you for the question.

One of the things in our research and in just looking back on history, if you will, I needed to know how the new Veterans Charter came to be and why, and all of that. That was a very, very important learning experience, certainly for me, to be able to compare what was in the old pension system to what the new Veterans Charter brought on board.

I appreciate fully that this was something that came about as a result of a lot of input from veterans themselves and veterans groups, and the various political parties all joined in to provide enhanced benefits, services and programs, and support for veterans and their families, which then became known as Bill C-55, and then, of course, the new Veterans Charter and all of that.

Since that time, it truly has been a living document, because in the interim period and up to recent times, there have been well over 100 very significant improvements made. In fact, I think the number of actual changes is something in the area of 160. It has been a consistent ongoing effort to better align services, programs, and support for veterans and their families, keeping pace with the changing times up to this point in time.

Granted, we can do better, and I think it's a very responsible thing we're doing, with your help and support, in that we'll now have a review and see if we can move forward in continuing this effort, but there has been a lot of effort to date, and I think that has to be acknowledged. We can't just constantly be negative about the progress, the support, and the commitment of almost five billion more new dollars to veterans programs and services since the new Veterans Charter came into being.

That's not chump change. That's a lot of commitment translated into program services. We have to thank the Canadian taxpayer for their contribution, their efforts, and their support to veterans, which continues.

We hope you can help us do even better.

• (1210)

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

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): You have 20 seconds, sir.

Mr. Corneliu Chisu: In fact, you spoke about the list of 160 adopted recommendations. That seems very comprehensive. What more are you contemplating? How will the recommendations of this review impact your approach?

Hon. Julian Fantino: Well, I think we have to take notice of the recommendations that have been made by the ombudsman, for instance, more recently in his report, of the recommendations that have come forward from veterans groups, veterans stakeholders, and veterans themselves, and of the things we have learned, such as the homelessness research that's now under way. There's also a lot of effort being made in regard to the post-traumatic stress disorder area and how we can better deal with that.

I'm very optimistic about the opportunities that lie ahead, that we can better support veterans and their families, but I do want to encourage you to keep a mindful view of those in greater need. There are some veterans who are doing very well. We don't have to worry about them. They're self-sufficient. There is something in the area of 800,000 veterans in this country, but only about 180,000 or thereabouts are actually within the programming of Veterans Affairs Canada.

The most needy is where I would hope the committee would focus first.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Minister, thank you very much for that.

As the chair, I have the prerogative to take the next opposition time for four minutes.

I have the following question for you. If you can't answer it for legal reasons, just say so, okay?

In the Equitas case, when the crown stated, and I'm paraphrasing, that the only fiduciary or social responsibility was towards the aboriginal community and not necessarily the veterans community, that sent shivers up the spines of a lot of veterans and their organizations out there.

There's a simple question I have for you. You sort of danced around it a bit in your preamble. I understand the difficulty in answering the question, but I'll ask again. Does the government, in your view, have a moral, legal, social, or fiduciary responsibility to care for those they asked to put in harm's way? We think it's a yes or no answer, but if you can't answer it in that regard, I'll accept that as a legal concern not to interfere with a court case.

Hon. Julian Fantino: Let me—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Minister, I only have four minutes so I'm asking very quickly, yes or no?

Hon. Julian Fantino: I can't give you a yes or no.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): That's good. That's all I was looking for, sir. If you can't say yes or no, then I appreciate that shortness on that.

The other one is—

Hon. Julian Fantino: Mr. Chair, please take note of my reference to how I believe—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Yes, sir, that was noted from a previous statement.

Hon. Julian Fantino: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): I'll turn to the nine office closures across the country. We had 11 veterans use speakerphones to call the DVA office at 1-866-522-2122. They asked quite simply

that since these offices were closing, could they have someone come to their house to fill out the forms. Every single one said they would get back to them in two to five business days. There is no guarantee, they said, that a person would actually come to their house because they have to be case managed before someone would come to their home.

I'd like clarification, sir. Can any veteran in the country call the 1-866 number and ask for a personal home visit? Are there restrictions and stipulations before that home visit takes place?

Hon. Julian Fantino: I don't know the technical response, and I'll ask the deputy to answer that in a moment, if I may, Mr. Chair. I'm also well aware of the fact that the Canadian Legion is another point of reference where veterans can get the kind of support they need to fill out forms or to navigate through the system.

We intend to do more in that particular area. We think we can expand our outreach and our service to veterans. It isn't wholly that number which you quoted.

Deputy?

• (1215)

Ms. Mary Chaput: You are correct, sir, in that our infrastructure does not contemplate home visits in each and every case. Our home visit strategy is focused on those who are case managed, meaning those with more complex needs where there are a whole series of supports, a sort of wrap-around service that we're providing for the veteran.

In those other cases where the veteran would like assistance in terms of filling out a form, our client service agents will be happy to work with the veterans over the telephone or online with them to get that work done.

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

As you know, Mr. Semianiw, I asked this question last time you were here, along with the deputy minister, about the Canada pension disability clawback or benefit reduction. As you know, if you are 50 years old and you are seriously injured from the military or the RCMP and you are permanently disabled where you can no longer work, you can apply for Canada pension disability. If you have, say, 25 or 30 years in, you also get a portion of your superannuation. However, if you apply for CPP disability and receive it, that CPP disability at 50 is clawed back from your superannuation which, by the way, upsets an awful lot of people out there.

I had asked the last time if it was possible that the department could look at this and come back with any kind of a response. I haven't received that yet so I'll leave that with you again. Perhaps it's possible to get a written response of what the government plans to do, not about the CPP clawback at 65, but the CPP disability clawback which affects everyone in the federal public service, mind you, but it's specifically RCMP and military veterans.

There are two other things I have for you before you go.

The national monument is a beautiful piece that's out there. It's just gorgeous. I'm not a wordsmith to describe how beautiful it is, but it is missing something very important. If you served in the Boer War, Bosnia, or any other conflict of war of that nature, you're not there. They have World War I, World War II, and Korea.

I suggested a while back the words "in the service of Canada" be imprinted on that monument in order to reflect every single person in the past, currently, and in the future. You can't have every battle and conflict on there—I understand that—but if the words "in the service of Canada" or something of that nature were there, then the modern-day veterans, those who served in other areas like Bosnia, Cyprus, etc., would feel more inclusive towards that. I personally believe this because this is what they've told me.

I'll just leave that with you. If you'd like to respond, go ahead.

Hon. Julian Fantino: I want to thank you for your passion and your suggestions. One of the things we're looking at is how we can best commemorate the various things, wars like the Korean War, which as you know was long forgotten, if you will, or long not commemorated. We now have the Afghanistan war to deal with.

I can only tell you, Mr. Chair, that we will be delving into that as an agenda item going forward.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Thank you. This is my last question for you.

With the Last Post Fund, as you know, the limit of \$12,000 was implemented by a previous government in 1995. It went from \$24,000 to \$12,000. With the new moneys that were passed by Parliament, according to retired Lieutenant-General Lou Cuppens, two-thirds of applicants will still not be eligible for the fund.

Are you at all contemplating raising the \$12,000 limit—if it were the \$24,000, and with inflation at least \$35,000 to \$40,000—so that more veterans and their families would be able to qualify for this? With the \$12,000 limit, there are still two-thirds of applicants who will be denied.

On my final question, could I have a response from you, sir.

Hon. Julian Fantino: Again, Mr. Chair, we would welcome the recommendations from this committee on that very issue, along with the other recommendations that you may make.

We're open to that, and please help us.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Minister, thank you very much for your response.

We will now move on to Mr. Lobb, please, for four minutes, and then Mr. Karygiannis.

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

Minister, with regard to Mr. Stoffer's first question, did you want to elaborate further on your thoughts from the question he put to you, or were you satisfied with that?

• (1220)

Hon. Julian Fantino: I'm good to go.

Mr. Ben Lobb: Okay. I wanted to make sure.

The next question I have is dealing with the lump sum. I'd like your thoughts as far as advice that Veterans Affairs provides to veterans who are to receive a lump sum, and how it now can be spread out in a type of annuity payment or a series of payments.

I wonder if you could comment on how veterans feel about that.

Hon. Julian Fantino: I'll speak to the issue in a global sense, if you will.

This is one of the most misunderstood issues. The misunderstanding of how that actually works has created what I believe to be some discomfort among veterans and veterans groups.

My understanding, and I'll ask the deputy to elaborate, is that before a serving soldier leaves the military, they are able to take advantage of financial advice and support and all of that. When they transition into being veterans, they are also able to avail themselves of that financial advice to enable them to govern their lump-sum payout. Whether they want to extend the payout is a choice that they have. That is an area where there's so much misunderstanding and discomfort.

Deputy, could you elaborate on that, please.

Ms. Mary Chaput: Yes. Thanks, Minister.

Indeed, as you said, they do have a choice on whether to take it in a single lump sum or a mix of a lower lump sum and periodic payments, or all periodic payments. An amount of funding is provided for veterans to get independent financial counselling as they make that decision. Depending on their age, they may have very different uses or requirements for a lump-sum payment. For some, the advantage of taking it in periodic payments is a means by which they may be able to demonstrate a steady income stream, and for example, qualify for a mortgage or other lifelong decisions and progressions that one makes.

The fact is that most of them are not choosing to take periodic payments. It's been 2% or 1%. They are typically choosing to take it in a lump sum. I can only assume that the independent financial advice they are getting is suggesting that in their particular circumstance that's the best way to go.

Mr. Ben Lobb: I think you hit on an important point, as well. The transitional discussions from Canadian Forces to Veterans Affairs is vitally important. It's going to help to take out some of the misconceptions out there. Lots of people think you get the lump sum and then you never hear from Veterans Affairs again. They don't realize that the earnings loss benefit is out there. Certainly there is a great amount of retraining and different types of therapies that are available.

I wonder if you could comment briefly on that. To me, that is what the new Veterans Charter is about. It is about their wellness as they continue to age and move through life.

Ms. Mary Chaput: That's right. You're making reference to some of the financial supports we provide to veterans during the period when they're in vocational rehab, when we want them to be concentrating on their health without a lot of financial worry impeding that recovery. During that period we ensure that an earnings loss payment is made so the veteran can be confident that while they're healing, those financial issues are covered off.

We also make some of the same types of payments in other parts of our rehab programs, such as vocational rehab. In that case, in addition to the money that's provided to the veteran or the reimbursements for things like tuition, books, or transportation to and from school, there is financial support provided for child care, as an example. While they're retraining and trying to skill up or re-skill to re-enter the job market, they needn't be worrying about incremental expenses that can be quite significant, such as child care.

There is a whole array of supports that attempt to take those worries off their minds.

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

To follow up on Mr. Lobb's question, is it possible that at a later time you could send to the committee the number of veterans who are using that opportunity right now?

• (1225)

Ms. Mary Chaput: Do you mean child care?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): I don't mean child care but education and everything. I believe Mr. Hayes mentioned \$75,000. If you could let us know how many veterans are actually accessing that, it would be helpful for this committee.

Ms. Mary Chaput: Sure.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): We now move to the last questioner—there are four more minutes to go, Mr. Minister—which is Mr. Karygiannis, please.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, your shortcomings are certainly displayed by your attacking my credibility, but I will sort of let it go. I've known you for a long time and I never figured you'd go that low.

Having said that, sir, I have a couple of questions for you. Listening to your deputy, we're told that home visits are only for people who are case managed. Your deputy went so far as to say that a person on the phone will help the veteran—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Are you calling a point of order?

Hon. Laurie Hawn: It's a point of order.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Yes, sir. Go ahead.

It won't interrupt your time, Mr. Karygiannis.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Just with respect to the recent remarks made, I think you covered it nicely before.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): That's a good point.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: The fact is, there were some comments made

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

Hon. Laurie Hawn: —by the member that speak for themselves poorly, but—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): I take your point, and again, I remind all members of the committee and the witnesses to please be careful in how they phrase their language.

Thank you.

Mr. Karygiannis, go ahead, please.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Thank you, Chair.

The deputy said that over the phone you can help a veteran fill out the forms. For an 80-year-old veteran from Korea or an 85-year-old or a 90-year-old veteran from World War II, it would be very difficult to fill out the forms and to listen to somebody over the phone telling them, "Fill in here, fill in there".

I go back to ask you, sir, why we are closing down these centres where the vets need them the most. Mr. Stoffer said he had 11 vets on the phone, and these people are probably still waiting to be contacted. There are 27,688 vets who are being affected by the closure of the nine centres. As has been revealed, the only people who will get home visits are people who are case managed. I will put it to you further that for an 80-year-old or a 90-year-old trying to fill out the form over the phone it will be very challenging. Would you reconsider, sir, the closing of your centres? Would you consider leaving them open?

Last week Bill C-11 was introduced, and it said we're going to give priority to veterans to be at the front of the line to get jobs with federal departments. While you're saying you'll give them priority, you're closing centres and you're destroying jobs.

Having heard everything that has been said here today, I ask you again if you would reconsider and look the vets in the eyes and say, "Let's talk about it", and maybe we should leave the centres open because an 80-year-old cannot fill out a form over the phone.

Here is one last chance, Minister. Would you reconsider leaving the centres open, yes or no?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Mr. Minister.

Hon. Julian Fantino: Thank you for the question.

In respect of enabling veterans to do their work, and I talk to a lot of veterans and their family members about this very issue, we thank the Canadian Legion for their help. We thank family members of veterans who help their relatives, their father and mother, do the kinds of things they need to do. Failing all that, Service Canada offices are right in their community. The people there will help them fill out forms and deal with the issues as they arise. More often than not, we find that veterans are self-sufficient in a lot of areas. I've talked to a lot of veterans who have never once had the need to go to any veterans office, because their daughter, their son, a social worker in a home, or some other entity has helped them deal with the kinds of things that they need to deal with.

The short answer is that we believe we have done the responsible thing. We will continue to ensure that veterans are well looked after in all of their needs, and that will not change.

• (1230)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Minister, thank you very much for that.

In a final response, on behalf of the committee, I'd like to thank you, your deputy minister, and General Semianiw very much for

coming, and also to Mr. Hillier in the back—he isn't leaving without saying hello. Sir, you did ask, regarding a recommendation on the Last Post Fund, it has been brought to my attention that two years ago this committee recommended that. I just wanted to let you know on the record.

Hon. Julian Fantino: May I answer?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Yes.

Hon. Julian Fantino: We're not discounting any of the work, or recommendations, or previous efforts that have been made. At this point, rather than do piecemeal one-offs, I think that this is a great opportunity, Mr. Chair, and committee members, to bring it all together and move forward. I must say there's been much misinformation, miscommunication, lack of understanding of where we are on all these issues.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Thank you, Minister, and my thanks to your department. We appreciate your coming.

We'll take one minute, folks, and go back in camera to deal with the motions on the table.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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