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## **Standing Committee on National Defence**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Stephen Fuhr**



## Standing Committee on National Defence

Tuesday, October 25, 2016

•(1110)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Stephen Fuhr (Kelowna—Lake Country, Lib.)):** Welcome, everybody, to today's defence committee meeting.

I offer my apologies for our being a little bit late today. We had votes until about five minutes to 11:00, and we had to get ourselves here.

I'd like to thank the Canadian Forces ombudsman, Gary Walbourne, for being here today.

Without further ado, sir, I will give you the floor for your opening remarks.

**Mr. Gary Walbourne (Ombudsman, National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces Ombudsman):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning to all.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you about my work as National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces ombudsman. I propose to briefly review what my office has been doing lately, describe some major projects we are working on, and indicate the critical focus we are placing on problems faced by members of the military when they transition to civilian life. I will then of course be happy to answer any questions you may have.

My office was established as a neutral and objective mediator, investigator, and reporter on matters related to the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces. I also hold the role of special adviser to the minister.

Our investigations, reports, and educational pieces are not intended in any way to diminish this organization. Rather, as ombudsman I am here to provide independent, evidence-based recommendations intended to contribute to substantial and long-lasting improvements to the defence community. It is not part of my mandate to discuss theatres of operation, strategic defence policy, or military procurement.

Three weeks ago, during the Minister of Veterans Affairs' stakeholder summit, the deputy commander of military personnel command, Major General Eyre, stated that our country's security is threatened by systemic personnel issues because they directly affect recruitment and retention. I have long held the position that outdated policies and procedures hinder the engagement of capable and committed personnel.

I am now halfway through my mandate as ombudsman and have had the privilege to meet members of the defence community across

this country from coast to coast to coast. Wherever I go I find members of the defence community working hard and professionally to defend Canada. Since 2014, my reports to the Minister of National Defence, which have been publicly released, have included recommendations on a wide range of topics, including priority hiring in the public service, operational stress injuries, compensation options and periodic health assessments for reservists, and an investigation into the tragic events at Valcartier in 1974.

Many of the complaints we receive can be solved quite easily. Wearing the uniform, for example, should not require a member to suffer unreasonable financial loss on the sale of their home when they are posted. The home equity assistance program exists for this purpose, but it provides insufficient protection.

This is fixable. Members and their families should be properly protected from the impacts of huge variations in the cost of living when they are posted across this country. The post living differential program exists; however, it has been bounced between the Department of National Defence and Treasury Board since 2008. I ask why.

These problems are not beyond comprehension, nor are they too tough to crack. The military that landed on Juno Beach can surely figure out whether a loaf of bread costs the same in Shilo as it does in Esquimalt, Borden, or Bagotville. We cannot keep playing musical chairs on this issue. We must sit down and make a decision. Working together, we know what to fix and in most cases how to fix it.

In the coming months, I will submit reports to the Minister of National Defence on the care received by ill and injured cadets. I intend to shed light on the maze of administration facing parents and guardians of these young people should tragedy strike while they are in the care of the Canadian Armed Forces.

My office is also conducting a systematic review on Canadian rangers, whose vigilance and service is often little known in the southerly parts of this country. In this report, I will touch on chronic understaffing, equipment support, compensation challenges, and other personnel and logistical issues.

Finally, in the new year I plan to issue a report that flows from our study on boards of inquiry, which was published in 2015. Developed in collaboration with the Canadian Armed Forces, this update will address issues faced by grieving families during and after a board of inquiry. The report will include concrete recommendations aimed at ensuring that everyone involved is treated with respect.

Ladies and gentlemen, earlier this year the Minister of National Defence made a call for submissions from a variety of stakeholders to help inform the government's defence policy review. My office prepared a comprehensive submission highlighting concerns related to our defence community personnel serving both at home and abroad. It is my sincere hope that this submission is being taken seriously at the right levels. Today I would like to highlight some of our findings.

Just over half of all contacts made to my office deal with the issues of transition from military to civilian life. Both medically and non-medically releasing members of the Canadian Armed Forces face a daunting administrative process at end of career. In order to provide a clear picture of this complexity, my office, working in partnership with the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman, mapped out the release process in September.

We published this educational piece to inform our constituents, the Canadian public, officials, and law-makers such as yourselves on the process that is often the root cause of many of the issues surrounding transition. I have provided copies to the committee.

In keeping with the mandate letter of the Minister of National Defence and the direction to work with the Minister of Veterans Affairs to reduce complexity and overhaul service delivery, my office has recently published two reports that speak to simplifying the release process for transitioning members.

• (1115)

In the first report, released to the public in early September, I recommended that the Canadian Armed Forces determine whether an illness or injury was caused or aggravated by that member's military service and that that determination be presumed by Veterans Affairs Canada to be sufficient evidence in support of an application for benefits.

In conducting their adjudication under the new Veterans Charter, Veterans Affairs Canada, as the administrator, considers mostly documentary evidence generated by the Canadian Armed Forces. The evidence consists largely of the member's medical records and possibly other career-related records. Given that the Canadian Armed Forces has control of the member's career and has responsibility for the member's medical health throughout that career, such a determination can and should be presumed to be evidence in support of an application for benefits.

The second report, also released in September, proposed a new service delivery model for releasing members. The report contained three straightforward, achievable recommendations.

First, the Canadian Armed Forces should retain all members until all sources and benefits have been put in place prior to release. Second, a single point of contact, a concierge service, if you will, should be established for all medically releasing members to assist in their transition. Third, the Canadian Armed Forces should develop

an electronic tool that is capable of providing members with information so that they can best understand their potential benefit suite prior to release.

These three recommendations are founded in evidence and focused on members and their families. They are easy to understand and could be implemented rapidly if the will exists to do so.

My recommendation of having the Canadian Armed Forces determining service attribution in conjunction with a change to the service delivery model could cut wait times at Veterans Affairs Canada by 50% or more.

Ladies and gentlemen, I truly believe that these recommendations, if implemented, would be game changers.

Improving the transition process should be a real no-fail mission. I believe that many of the reports submitted by my office have served as a strong blueprint for change within the Canadian Armed Forces and will have positive downstream effects especially at Veterans Affairs Canada.

It was recently reported that there was a backlog of 11,500 applications at Veterans Affairs. This means many releasing members will experience moderate to extreme psychological and financial stress while awaiting adjudication of their files. Many will fall through the cracks. Many already have.

As former deputy veterans ombudsman, I have seen this backlog of applications at Veterans Affairs rise and fall, but never by more than a few thousand. These are not people issues. These are process issues. Fixing the service delivery model will mean real and positive change for the people who have served, sacrificed, and suffered on our behalf.

I want to conclude my remarks by highlighting a theme that runs through much of the work we do, the need for benefit parity for all those who wear the uniform. The concept of benefit parity is not new, but in my four years as deputy veterans ombudsman and two and a half years as the Canadian Armed Forces ombudsman, I am constantly reminded of the inequity. Whether it be regular or reserve force, Canadian rangers, junior Canadian rangers, cadets, or even veterans, benefit disparity continues.

My position has always been that a soldier is a soldier, an aviator is an aviator, and a sailor is a sailor. Once you put on the uniform, you are in service to Canada. If you get hurt while you are in uniform serving Canada, you should be treated equally.

I have promised still serving and former members across this country that I will strongly advocate for benefit parity. I have produced a number of reports that contain evidence-based recommendations on what needs to be fixed; we just need to do it.

I doubt there is not one of you who does not have a current or former Canadian Armed Forces member or a DND civilian living in your constituency. You play a vital role in their lives, as does my office, and I enjoy working with many of you on personnel issues, both individual and systemic. I believe that I have a duty to keep you up to date on my activities so you can feel confident to refer your constituents to my office should they feel they have nowhere else to turn.

Mr. Chair, distinguished members of the committee, I thank you and I stand ready for your questions.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much for your testimony and your work on this important file.

We'll start off with our seven-minute round of questions and I'll turn the floor over to Ms. Romanado.

• (1120)

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoynes, Lib.):** I'd like to thank you again, Mr. Walbourne, for being here today, and to members of the audience, I know we have some students in the crowd, so it's a great honour to have you here today.

Mr. Walbourne, it's a pleasure to see you again. You and I have had some conversations in the past. As you know, I'm a parent of two sons currently serving in the Canadian Armed Forces, so this issue is definitely near and dear to me.

As well, there is the work that you do with our cadet program. Prior to being elected, I was vice-president of a civilian committee in my local cadet corps in Greenfield Park, so I'm proud of the work that you have done in terms of recognizing the incident in 1974 and I look forward to reading additional outcomes coming out of that.

I'd like to talk to you a little about the transition from active service to what we will call non-active service. As you know, the decision to join the Canadian Armed Forces is one of immense pride. Members of the Canadian Armed Forces wear the uniform. They take a lot of pride in the fact that they are wearing that uniform, and it's part of their identity. When the decision for them to leave the Canadian Armed Forces is taken out of their hands, i.e., medical release due to no fault of their own, it is a real struggle for them and their families.

I'd like you to talk a bit more about the work that you have been trying to do and to talk about the attribution to service injury and how we can fix the wait time by identifying it earlier, attributing it when they're in the Canadian Armed Forces, before their release. It's definitely something you have been working hard on and I'd like to make sure that we understand it fully.

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** Thank you for the question.

As you say, the transitioning piece is very difficult at times, especially when the end of a career is not your choice, and you have to leave because of a medical reason.

I think that because of the process we have in place, we aggravate that whole episode. If someone has had to leave the military and doesn't understand what the financial support is going to be or what the medical support looks like, then that adds an extra burden of stress. If I lay that over an operational stress injury, then I can see where I'm very quickly creating a formula where there could be

problems. The fallout of that is that these things are usually felt on the home front long before even the ombudsman's office hears about them.

When members are releasing, I think that they need to have stability. They need to know what the future looks like, and they can go home and have those conversations with their families of what the new world order will be for them all. That's a major concern for me.

The Canadian Armed Forces has total responsibility for providing medical health care for a member. We know when, where, and how a soldier has become injured. If we know when, where, and how, that's adjudication. It's already been determined. I struggle a little with why we have to take a medical file that's been managed over the career of the member and then send that medical file to an outside organization, Veterans Affairs Canada, and have them adjudicate. That's my problem, and I've been pushing hard on this point.

I think we can really make the member understand what the future looks like if we do the adjudication. Before the release, if a member knows everything is in place, then I think that brings stability to the member and that helps ease transition. More importantly, it gives stability to the family, and I think that's a very important piece that we sometimes do not pay close attention to.

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado:** That leads me to my next question.

Thank you very much for the process mapping, by the way. When you do look at the documentation and see the steps people have to go through, whether they're reservists or full-time members, it is quite alarming. Thank you, also, for the recommendation of the new process mapping.

In your briefing, you talked about the creation of a family coordinator position. I wasn't clear if that position dealing with families had been created, or if it's something that will be created.

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** That is specific to the boards of inquiry. We released a report back in 2015 highlighting some of the issues surrounding the boards of inquiry. We were very pleased at the time that the chief of the defence staff accepted our recommendations to do a further review, and we've been working very closely with the department.

This will be a collaborative report that we're about to release. One of the recommendations in there will be to set up an entity that can take families from the start of a board of inquiry through to the end. We're getting very positive feedback from the department that the working group has been extremely helpful. I'm optimistic that when the report is released, the recommendations will be readily accepted. I think maybe there will be some plans to start moving forward.

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado:** I met with the Centre de ressources pour les familles des militaires in August to talk about the support families get in Quebec, specifically. I noticed in your document "Constituent and Stakeholder Engagement", that you hadn't visited yet a base in Quebec. I'm hopeful there will be a visit coming up soon to a base in Quebec.

• (1125)

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** When I took over the position, the first thing I wanted to do was find out where the ombudsman had been. We're located in Ottawa, and we do a lot of engagement in Ontario and Quebec. In each of those provinces we attend at least 15 to 20 separate committees, organizations, and family resource centres, or whatever it might be.

What I did find was that from the coasts inward there had been very little engagement, so in my first year I went to both coasts. This year I'll be doing Manitoba and Nova Scotia. Next year my focus will be back to the centre.

We do about 40 or more engagements between Ontario and Quebec every year.

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado:** When I spoke to the Centre de ressources pour les familles des militaires, they said that one of the issues that doesn't get talked about a lot is when the members of our Canadian Armed Forces move within Canada, such as when they move from Kingston to Valcartier. What happens is that there's a real difficulty for families to find services, whether it be new family doctors, dentists, and so on, and because that is provincial jurisdiction, there's a bit of a problem for supporting families that move along with their Canadian Forces members.

I'd like to know if that's something your office is thinking about working on a little more with the total support families receive from the Canadian Armed Forces.

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** In 2013, this office released the military families report, which was a very large, extensive review done on families and their concerns. Several of the issues were highlighted. Some are still ongoing, and one was finding services when you move to another location.

What we will do when we release the report of those recommendations is to keep following up with the department to find out what the latest report has in it. We're hoping for another update on that report, because there are, I think, seven recommendations that have not been addressed, with that being one of them. It is one of the concerns we have had.

It's not only about finding additional services, it also creates spousal unemployment or underemployment. We have different jurisdictions across the provinces that determine the criteria to be accepted into a program, so it does cause a lot of grief. It's not only about receiving services. For someone with an autistic child who has to move.... Finding those types of services in any location is difficult for any Canadian, but more so when we see the frequency of the moves and how we ask families to move.

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado:** Mr. Chair, could we ask if it might be possible for this committee to receive this update, once it's available, once it's public?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** Once we receive all updates we publish them, but I will make sure the committee receives a copy.

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado:** Thank you very much.

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

Ms. Gallant, you have the floor.

**Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC):**

Mr. Chairman, speaking through you to Mr. Walbourne, first of all it's a pleasure to welcome you here today on Navy Day. You work on behalf of all the armed forces, but it is especially fitting that you're here today. Thank you for all the work you've done on behalf of our Canadian Armed Forces personnel.

Having Petawawa in my riding, as you well know, I've heard rumblings that benefits and services under SISIP may be folded into Veterans Affairs Canada. As the Canadian Forces ombudsman, have you had many complaints surrounding SISIP and the services they provide, and what is your opinion on the notion of merging the two?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** I did specifically look at how many complaints we've received on SISIP. We have received 14 complaints on SISIP over the last two years. Eight of those were for information purposes, and in the remaining six cases, it was just a question of getting the right people to speak.

What my office has found in looking at SISIP is that they seem to have a very quick turnaround time—within two weeks. The establishment of the vocational and rehabilitation program seems to run fairly well. We have not done a deep dive. We get very few complaints about SISIP.

As for folding them in, if we're going to do it, let's be cautious about which process we're going to apply to the program in its entirety. I think SISIP works fairly well. They are fairly agile, responsive. There are other benefits inside SISIP other than just LTD and vocational rehabilitation, so I urge caution. I would make sure that we fully understand what the consequences of folding it into any entity would be. Those would be my concerns.

My opinion? That and 50¢ will get you a coffee somewhere.

My opinion is that if you have something that is working, why not emulate it instead of taking it down? I see good response, good performance, so I'd be a little reluctant. I'd like to know a little more before I decided to fold SISIP under anything.

• (1130)

**Mrs. Cheryl Gallant:** You said in your report that having the attribution of service conducted by the Canadian Forces for all releasing members may cut wait times at Veterans Affairs.

Can you elaborate on that point and explain how specifically it would reduce wait times?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** Right now, when a member is medically releasing, the first thing that has to happen is that they have to adjudicate the file to determine whether or not the illness was caused by service or the malady has been aggravated by service. Veterans Affairs Canada does that adjudication. They have a 16-week service standard. During those weeks they have to wait, and there are another three weeks to wait until they get their medical files from the Department of National Defence. If you add that to the 16 weeks, now we're at 19 weeks and looking forward.

If the adjudication is done, the question at Veterans Affairs is yes or no: is he in or out? The question now is on the impact. What is the impact on quality of life? Now we can start having a conversation on how we bring benefits and services to bear for that particular member's need.

Right now we waste an inordinate amount of time doing work that has already been done. My premise is that if we take the adjudication piece off the table, it should reduce that service standard by half.

**Mrs. Cheryl Gallant:** You were the deputy veterans ombudsman for nearly four years. Have you seen costing for the Liberal government's platform promises, and if so, how realistic do you think it is for the government to afford these promises?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** I haven't seen any costings.

**Mrs. Cheryl Gallant:** The government has hinted that it may be making significant changes to VAC and DND programming soon. What is your biggest fear?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** My biggest fear is inertia. We talk and talk about doing things, but nothing happens, so that's my biggest fear. If someone asked me what keeps me awake at night, it's just that.

I'll go back. It's not only Veterans Affairs and the Canadian Forces getting closer together to do work. Let's talk about programs that are inside the Canadian Forces. I used the post living deferential as an example in my opening comments. There is a program that's available for members, should they have to move from one location to another, to help balance the basket of goods, as it were, but it has not been updated for eight or nine years.

When I'm on the road doing town halls and talking to the constituents and the families, I believe the point of frustration now has gotten to "We don't care what it is, just tell us what it's going to be", because people are making life decisions.

My biggest fear, whether we get closer to working with Veterans Affairs and the Canadian Forces or whatever we're tackling, is inertia. We talk a lot about a lot of things, but I never see a lot of things happen on the ground.

**Mrs. Cheryl Gallant:** What happens if they overlook recommendations in your reports and go down a road that you don't agree with? What can we expect from Gary Walbourne?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** Well, if somebody can build a better mouse trap, I'll be the first champion. If we can come up with a program outside what I've considered that is more efficient and more effective, then you'll hear me. I'll be a champion across the country saying we have it right, but I'll also put a critical eye to anything we're going to introduce. I think that's my role: to make sure that any policy or procedure we put in place is both of those things, both efficient and effective.

**Mrs. Cheryl Gallant:** Often I will see a constituent who has medically released, and of course they're waiting, and they express frustration over the fact that they've been medically released for a condition that they acquired in the performance of their duties, yet when they go to apply for the Veterans Affairs benefits they have to fight for them.

On the one hand, they're being released because of this injury incurred in the performance of their duties, and then they have to convince Veterans Affairs that it was actually a duty-related injury.

There may be prejudices on one side or the other, pecuniary decisions that have to be made.

In your opinion, what entity would be the best to determine whether or not the injury is performance related? They're going through two adjudication processes. How can we have one medical adjudication process?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** Well, that goes right back to the core of my report. When a member presents themselves with an injury or a malady, the first thing we fill out is a form called a CF 98. On that form there's a place to say where the accident or the injury happened and what the member was doing at the time. I think that clearly establishes that it happened on the job and that the person was doing a sanctioned Canadian Armed Forces activity.

That's adjudication. I really struggle with the logic I see being applied, that we know this and that the member is headed towards the breach of universality of service and is about to be released. We're releasing them for a specific reason, and we know when, where, and how it happened, but yet we'll send it to Veterans Affairs Canada and wait for an adjudication.

I wish I had a clear answer to your question. I'm not quite sure whether I understand this.

• (1135)

**Mrs. Cheryl Gallant:** What, if anything, should be the surgeon general's role in determining what the injury is and how the claim should be applied to benefits through VAC?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** As I've said before, I believe the surgeon general's shop, because all medical officers reside in that entity, can do the adjudication of service. We don't have to send this to VAC.

I also understand, and I'm sure you will hear, that there are complex cases and there are operational stress injuries that manifest themselves many years down the road. I don't expect the surgeon general's shop to handle those. I believe there will always be a need for an adjudication cell at Veterans Affairs Canada to handle those types of cases. Those that are extremely complex will require multiple medical reviews or will involve an operational stress injury that manifests itself many years later.

We have about 1,500 members medically releasing a year. I think about 600 to 700 of those releases are attributable to service. I'm not talking about handling 60,000 cases a year or 11,000 cases a year. If we go after those medical releases attributable to service and all who are medically releasing, the maximum is 1,500.

When I say that, people say it's going to generate a lot of work. I'm not quite sure I understand that either, because we've been giving this member medical assistance and programs and help and aid all along the way. We've managed that piece of the career. Contrary to popular belief, when a soldier becomes ill or injured, the Canadian Armed Forces do good work. They pull out every stop. The chief of the defence staff has recently said, and he has said it multiple times, that he would like to return as many people to work as possible. In order to do that, there's a very rigorous program wrapped around these ill and injured soldiers.

That's my position. I think we have full control. I think we can clearly see what the end of the day looks like.

**Mrs. Cheryl Gallant:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Mr. Garrison, the floor is yours.

**Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke, NDP):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

It's a fortuitous day for you to appear before our committee. It's not only Navy Appreciation Day on the Hill, it's also Rainbow Day on the Hill. I have some students here shadowing some of the six out gay MPs today.

I want to echo the thanks for the work you do as ombudsman and for your focus on practical solutions that will actually make things better. I think you've done an enormously important task in getting your office focused on this area.

I want to ask you about something to start with today that is very specific, which I have discussed with you in the past. That's the situation we have remaining in Canada whereby thousands of Canadians who served honourably in the Canadian Forces were discharged based on their sexual orientation or gender identity up to 1992. Those Canadians, many of them still alive and still in the workforce, carry dishonourable discharges.

My question is about the competence and jurisdiction of your office. Could you, if you were asked, deal with the question of revising service records for those who were dismissed on that basis?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** This office was created in 1998, so I have full discretion to decide what I'll investigate from 1998 coming forward. For anything prior to 1998, I need ministerial approval to do it.

To answer your question, we have done pre-mandated investigations, Valcartier being the most recent example. If I were asked to look at this particular investigative piece, yes, our office stands ready to help in any way we can.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** You already deal with those who appeal against the conditions of their discharge. It's a kind of case you would already deal with. The question here is simply the date of these cases.

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** Exactly.

For anything from 1998 forward, we have dealt with similar types of cases.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** In your preliminary look at this question, do you have some sort of estimate of how many people might be impacted by a revision of those service records?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** No, I'm sorry. I don't have that information.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** I know there have been estimates of between 800 and 1,000 people who are still active. The practice ended in 1992, some 20 years ago, but many of those people who were discharged were in their twenties at the time of their discharge. They're still in the workforce carrying a dishonourable discharge from the Canadian Forces.

I wonder, from your experience, what the impacts are on those who have a dishonourable discharge from the military.

• (1140)

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** Well, there is a negative connotation that comes with it. Sometimes people will experience difficulty in finding other employment. There is a personal burden of shame carried because of it, and because of those types of behaviour, people are not very quick to speak well of the Canadian Armed Forces.

We have an amazing organization. Do we get it right all the time? No. I think that when we have the opportunity to correct past mistakes, we should take advantage of it.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** Thanks very much. That's very encouraging.

What I would like to do at this point, Mr. Chair, is give notice of a motion that I intend to move in the committee. I'm sorry that due to some technical questions I don't have copies to distribute, because the clerk has had to help me with the form of the motion.

The motion reads:

That the Committee recommend that the Honourable Minister of National Defence authorize the National Defence and Canadian Forces Ombudsman to revise the service records of LGBTQ members of the Canadian Forces who received dishonourable discharges from the military based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

That's a motion that will be circulated as a matter of course and that I will bring forward.

I think what we've heard from the ombudsman is that his office stands ready to do this work. I think it's important work for us to do.

Something you said really resonated with me: that this is a matter of justice for those who received the dishonourable discharges, but also a matter of the image of the Canadian military, and that this would be a positive thing for the Canadian Armed Forces to do.

If this came to pass, would it place a burden on your office that you wouldn't be able to handle, or do you think that if, let's say, there were 800 individual cases to review, your office would be capable of doing it?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** It would be much like any other systemic review. We plan flexibility in our organization so that we can do what we've planned in the business plan, but also have the ability to adapt and respond to any ministerial directive we may receive.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** I'm putting the motion before the committee because I wrote to the Minister of National Defence on May 12 asking him to authorize the ombudsman to take this action. I have received no response from the minister. That's why I'm putting the motion before this committee. I'll do it at the next opportunity.



Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

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

I'm going to turn the floor over to Mr. Gerretsen.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Walbourne, for coming today.

I want to follow up on what Mr. Garrison was talking about, because I think it will help at least my deliberative process. How long do you anticipate an undertaking like this would take, if there were roughly 800 cases to review?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** That would depend greatly on access to the files and how quickly I can get a response back from the department. Usually there is never a problem. Some of these files are going to be quite old. We may have to go back to the archives to get them. That would be the biggest delay I could see. Other than that, we would just wrap a systemic plan around it.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Have you done anything like this in the past in which you've had to go back, when it was authorized by the minister to do so?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** Valcartier would be a prime example.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Okay.

I'm just going over the statement that you made. You made an interesting comment in saying, "I have long held the position that outdated policies and procedures hinder the engagement of capable and committed personnel."

You talked about the one example involving the home equity assistance program, and I have a question about that. Before I go there, can you give some more examples of policies or procedures that you're concerned about, maybe some of the most outrageous ones or ones that made you wonder how they were ever in existence?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** I wish I could give you a straight answer, but here's where we come from. If you read any policy in isolation, it makes pretty good sense, but when you put it in time and context and add the other contributing policies around it, it becomes convoluted.

It's not any one policy that's causing me problems, but when you look at a policy that's had a piece bolted on to it because we went into a different theatre of operation or we have a different type of veteran today.... It's when you start doing these bolt-ons that policy gets very complex and very convoluted.

As the lady was saying, we mapped out the release process this year. It's the first time it's been done. It's absolutely convoluted, but any point and box in that process made sense at that point in time; it's the totality that's causing the problem. So I can't give you any specific—

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** You don't have an example of when a policy has been bolted on to another one?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** Nothing comes to me off the top of my head, no.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** You talked of the home equity assistance program and suggested that the only problem you see with it is that it has not been indexed since 2008, I think you said.

•(1145)

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** That was the post living differential.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** I'm sorry, yes. That was on the next page. So the problem of the post living differential program is that it has not been indexed?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** The post living differential program has not been updated since 2008.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** When you say updated, do you mean that the policy needs to be updated or that it just needs to be indexed to inflation or whatever the cost of living is?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** I think the review needs to go back and look at the basket of goods, do a regional review across the country, and determine what has changed. That's where I am.

Whether the government decides to index it or whatever they decide to do is the government's decision to make. What I'm talking about is keeping the program current, so that the families who are being posted from one area of this country to another have clarity on what their income package looks like, and giving them stability. That's my position on PLD.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Okay.

You said the home equity assistance program has insufficient protection, and then you said that's fixable. How is it fixable?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** When we look at the home equity assistance program, and there have been a couple of cases that have been very loud in the media, what the member has to prove is that there has been a greater than 20% reduction of the value of their home in that area. Trying to prove that is almost impossible. I think there's been one approval that has come out of Treasury Board over the last 20 years in favour of the member.

We've had some members who have lost in excess of \$80,000 or \$90,000 on the sale of their homes. I believe the home equity assistance program is a good program, if it were accessible. You can call anything fair, but if you make the barriers of access so high that no one can get at it, then I think it's rather redundant to even have it in place.

My problem is that when someone moves from one area of the country to another and experiences a major financial loss, I think consideration should be given to the conditions that are on the ground at the time. Just to say that you have to meet a 20% reduction.... There's one particular case that comes out of Alberta because a community was designated to be within one township instead of another. The person lost a considerable amount of money, and no consideration was given to what happened in the greater environment, in the regional environment, that caused that drop in the house price.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Is this something that happens a lot? Obviously, you have mentioned it in your comments. Is it something that comes up a lot that you continually find challenging?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** We'll receive on average five to six cases of it a year. It's not the number of them. It's the major impact it has on those individuals when it does happen. We talk about a loss greater than 20% on your home. That's the magnitude of it. If a member moves and has a major loss on the sale of their home, we can very quickly put that member into a bankruptcy position.

Those are the concerns I have. It's not the number of cases, but the magnitude of them is quite large for those individuals.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Okay, thank you for that.

I think that's all I have for now, Mr. Chair. If I have any more time, I'll give it to Ms. Romanado.

**The Chair:** You're pretty close to the end. I'll turn the floor over to Mr. Fisher, and we'll go to five-minute questions.

Mr. Fisher, you have the floor.

**Mr. Darren Fisher (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.):** Thank you, sir, for being here.

I appreciate your opinion all the time. I like your no-nonsense approach to solving problems.

Your focus on solving the problems with regard to transition to civilian life greatly interests me, and I know it greatly interests you. Part of the minister's mandate letter from the Prime Minister is bridging that gap.

Do you have a relationship with the minister? Do you sit down with the minister? Obviously, he's read your report. He knows what you hope to accomplish. Could you give us a sense of what his thoughts are on your recommendation to keep them under the umbrella of the CAF?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** The last two reports that I submitted to the minister were the attribution of service report and the new service delivery model. The responses I have got back have given me some encouragement. He's saying the recommendations have great merit and they're under further consideration.

I was at the Veterans Affairs stakeholders summit a couple or three weeks ago, and I was very pleased to hear the chief of the defence staff speak about a concierge type of service and maybe hanging on to our members until we have all they need in place, and taking care of them until that point in time. I haven't received the stamp of approval, but I'm hearing the right words in the environment.

As I've said before, it doesn't have to be my program, but it needs to be something that is efficient and effective, so I'm encouraged about what I'm hearing back from the senior levels inside the department.

**Mr. Darren Fisher:** To drill down just a tiny bit more on this, you're considered to be a special adviser to the minister. Do you have weekly meetings, monthly meetings? Do you have his ear when you feel like having his ear? Can you tell me a little bit about the relationship you have with the minister, as special adviser to the minister?

• (1150)

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** I try to meet with the minister every 30 days. It doesn't always happen. He's a busy fellow. We do try to meet on a regular basis. If I have cases that are of extreme urgency, I can get hold of him very quickly, if there's something in the environment that I think needs his immediate attention. That's pretty much it.

**Mr. Darren Fisher:** To do what you recommend, can you tell me what you think that might look like from a staffing perspective? Do you see a great swath of Veterans Affairs staff moving over to National Defence, being seconded? Can you sort of describe how you picture that new way of doing things, that new policy change?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** I do believe that, if we get the surgeon general's office to take the responsibility for determination of attribution of service, there will be pressure inside the surgeon general's office, remembering again that we're already dealing with these 1,500 cases and we are tracking them and doing all the medical things we need to do and keeping the files. I think there would be some burden on the surgeon general's office.

As for moving large swaths of people one way or the other, I'm not sure. If we did develop a more efficient, effective model, I think the last thing we need to do is to start pulling resources out of this environment on either side. I think we can refocus those resources. We can start having conversations about what the future would look like instead of waiting for the releasing member to explain to several entities what's happened in the past.

I believe there's opportunity here. No one has asked me how they should set it up, but if someone would like me to sit on that committee, I would do so. I talk, and I talk very basic, and I appreciate your comment that I have a logical, no-nonsense approach to dealing with things. They're very complex, but they're also built by us. We have built these complex systems, so I think we can fix them.

As to the moving of staff and who does what, I believe we just need to clear the lines of responsibility a little bit. If the member is serving, he's the responsibility of the Canadian Armed Forces, and until the uniform comes off, I think we need to do everything in our power to make sure that person is positioned to move forward.

**Mr. Darren Fisher:** Do you see any bureaucratic resistance to that type of change, like empire protecting? You're no-nonsense, so I would appreciate your thoughts on that.

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** I believe people become very protective of what they've built. I believe people take ownership of their processes and their procedures, and it's a good thing to have pride in what you've developed. But as the times change around us, I think we all have to learn as we grow older to let things go. I think there are new mindsets, new thought processes, new technologies that are available. It's time. There is some rust in the environment, no doubt about it. Change is always difficult. It causes fear in people.

I do believe we're at a point in time where enough is enough. We've made this so convoluted. I think we can reduce it back down to something that is much simpler, but I think we can do it collectively. I think there's an opportunity and a role for both sides to play here, but yes, I would agree there is some rust in the system and there is some protection. I get it.

**Mr. Darren Fisher:** Thank you. I hope to get a chance to speak later, if possible, if there's spare time on—

**The Chair:** I think we'll have time, but I have to give the floor to Mr. Paul-Hus.

**Mr. Darren Fisher:** Thank you, sir.

Thanks, Mr. Chair.

[Translation]

**Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Walbourne, I would like to mention that next February will mark 30 years since I joined the Canadian Armed Forces. I served for 22 years. There were problems then that still exist 30 years later. I can see that things have not changed very much.

In 1998, I was a major and superior officer when the ombudsman's office was created. There was reluctance to change. When the ombudsman arrived, I was one of the people who said that we did not want an ombudsman involved in our business and someone like you coming to check up on us. Today we are happy to have had an ombudsman and to still have one.

My first question is about the medical services available to reservists.

A report released last May described the various problems related to the medical services offered to classes A, B, and C. I experienced the three services and I know what you are talking about.

I would like to know how the Canadian Armed Forces responded to your report about these problems. Was it well received? Were your recommendations taken into consideration? Were you told that changes would be made?

[English]

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** In regard to that particular report, we haven't received a very favourable response other than that they are being taken under consideration and further work needs to be done before we get there. Again, it's the inertia I spoke about.

My concern about the classes of soldiers resonates in just about everything we do. If you're a class A soldier on a training exercise and you should become ill or injured, there's going to be a different level of engagement, different level of benefit or service available to you. So I've been talking about parity. I've said it: I think once you put on the uniform, we should stop talking about levels of and types of soldiers.

Just take that forward for an example. If I have class A, B, B+, C, regular force, rangers, and cadets, and once I put all these entities together, now I have to have several programs that have three and four streams because I have three environments—army, navy, and air force. So I multiply and make things so complex that I can see why there are delays and why the system is as stuck as it is.

I'm about to release a report within the next 45 to 60 days that's going to talk straight up about parity for reservists across the board. That will be coming out of my office, as I said, within the next two months. I am talking about a way to stop talking about classes of soldiers. If you have the uniform on and you get hurt while you're serving this country, the benefits and services suites should be open to all.

• (1155)

[Translation]

**Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus:** I completely agree with you on that.

My colleague Darren Fisher raised a question about that a bit earlier.

I have experienced it and know that the resistance to change in the Canadian Armed Forces is extremely strong. We are familiar with this resistance at the political level between the government and the

opposition. In my opinion, a political decision cannot produce change. Regardless of which party is in power, the problem is within the Canadian Armed Forces. Is there even a way to impose change?

I know that when they receive an order, all members of the military obey. Yet if no order is given, they do not do anything. They do not move. Is there a way to get the chain of command to make draconian decisions so that all force members comply? Do you think it is because there are many levels of command that it is difficult for a directive to be followed? In your opinion, do the problems have been solved at the political level or by the Canadian Armed Forces?

[English]

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** There are two parts to that question.

I do believe there are certain things that are outside the realm of authority of the Canadian Armed Forces, such as increasing benefits or those types of things. But I do believe also that many of the issues we're talking about are within the control of the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces. To change the release process is well within their authority. To decide to retain a member, that's going to run into an impact on the salary and wage envelope. That might be causing some chafing.

I do believe there are many things that we could be doing inside the department without any request or demand on the political side of the equation. Again, it's a matter of, as you said, when the Canadian Armed Forces decides to do something. When General Jon Vance decided that he was going to operationalize sexual assaults, sexual harassment, he pulled the trigger and put the resources to it and the entity is up and running and starting to collect a lot of data and a lot of engagement. So it is possible.

The chief of the defence staff did say at the stakeholder summit three weeks ago that they're looking at operationalizing the transition process to make sure there's an operational standard and process that everyone will have to pass through.

My only word of caution is this. I do believe we can do things, but some of these things we're trying to operationalize are very emotional. I think the chief has taken the time to get these things right. But I believe we need to start. We can start. We don't need outside influence to change some of the things we're currently talking about.

[Translation]

**Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus:** Thank you.

[English]

**The Chair:** Mr. Rioux, you have the floor.

[Translation]

**Mr. Jean Rioux (Saint-Jean, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Walbourne, it is a pleasure to meet you twice in such a short time.

As a member of the veterans affairs committee, I can tell you that the information you gave us was very useful to me during the week after our meeting. I met three different groups of veterans and I think I gave them some measure of hope.

I am the MP for Saint-Jean. The Royal Military College and the military base are in my riding. Members of the military move around a great deal. You said that members of the military were experiencing unreasonable financial losses from the sale of their homes. My colleague talked about this earlier. Since home prices vary from one region to another, force members arriving from other parts of the country often have to pay more for a house in Saint-Jean. So they suffer losses that are not covered. Moreover, force members do not have very much time to find a house.

In addition, the forces should cover certain costs to allow force members to go see a house or other accommodations. I think they are allowed three visits. If they leave before the end of their posting, the costs add up.

Some property developers have come to see me to suggest building housing stock including houses and other accommodations. Since the price would be based on market conditions, people would know what it is. These developers would offer a service to show people this standard housing by video. In addition, there would be no penalty for people leaving before the end of their tour since there would be constant turnover.

Might that be a more efficient system so that the forces and their members would not lose money?

• (1200)

[English]

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** Currently our office is working on an electronic engagement type of resource that we'll have available to all members of the Canadian Armed Forces. It's going to be a little more than the ABCs of moving. We're going to tie it in to the MLS system so that you can see average housing prices across the country, and so on and so forth. I think that's a tool that will help the families make some good, conscious decisions.

As for military housing, the Canadian Forces housing agency has turned the corner. I think they're starting to do some really good work.

With reference to allowing people to visit by video, I was in Yellowknife earlier this year, and what they've started to do there—an initiative on their own—is measure the rooms, take pictures, run videos, and send these to the potential occupants of these houses. It is working out extremely well. I think it's an initiative that was started by CFHA in Yellowknife. Someone very low on the management ladder decided to take this upon themselves. The response has been fantastic.

I know Ms. Francoeur was looking at expanding that program. I understand that she has recently announced her retirement. I'm hoping CFHA will continue with that type of program. I think tying it in to an educational model that we're going to publish will help to alleviate some of these issues.

[Translation]

**Mr. Jean Rioux:** What do you think of the idea of the private sector providing housing stock?

[English]

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** That's a very large piece. Once you get into the private sector, what part of the private sector is it? Will there be competition? All these things have to be considered.

I think the Canadian Armed Forces do a good job with the housing they have. They're starting to modernize the whole portfolio across the country. There are many options we could look at that would be of benefit to the members.

As for engagement with the private sector, it's way outside my purview of authority. I'm a little uncomfortable with the question.

**Mr. Jean Rioux:** Okay. I understand.

[Translation]

At the end of your report, you stated the following:

My position has always been: a soldier is a soldier; an aviator is an aviator; and a sailor is a sailor. Once you put a uniform on, you are in service to Canada. If you get hurt while you are in uniform—serving Canada—you should be treated equally.

Does that mean there are disparities between the three branches of service?

[English]

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** The different type of treatment usually comes from the class of soldier. Are you class A, just in for your Thursday night or on the weekends? Are you class B less than 180 days? Are you class B greater than 180 days? Are you class C? I think that's where the complexity comes from.

I believe that, depending where you find yourself, whether you're A, B, or C, if you should become injured, the potential benefit suite and care can be different across all three elements and across all levels of soldiers. That's my concern when I ask, once you put on the uniform, should it matter?

[Translation]

**Mr. Jean Rioux:** Mr. Chair, may I ask one final question?

[English]

It's just a short one.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, but we're out of time. I'm going to give the floor to Mr. Bezan.

**Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake—Eastman, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Walbourne, for your great reports, for spending time with us today, and for discussing all the different issues that are facing our men and women in uniform, but in particular for the last two reports you've brought out focusing on those who are in transition, are ill, injured, or being medically released. You make some great recommendations.

I know there is discussion around the whole idea of concierge service, something that you brought forward and I know the CDS embraces, something you feel could be done through the surgeon general's office, that it can handle some of this transition. I know there are others out there who are thinking that this should be controlled by Veterans Affairs. I just want to get your opinion on where the concierge service should be, how it would operate, and how that would tie into Veterans Affairs as the member moves over.

•(1205)

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** One of the major concerns we hear from transitioning members is the fact that they have to talk to multiple people. There can be two case managers. There can be two rehabilitation programs. It's just the complexity of what's there.

When I speak about a concierge, let me be very clear. It should be a Canadian Armed Forces member. The members who are releasing adapt better and respond better to their comrades. I'm talking about a Canadian Armed Forces concierge service. I think it could be tied into the IPSCs, the joint personnel support units and the IPSCs on the wings or bases. I believe that's a great place for it to be, but I am very certain of the position I take, that it should be a Canadian Armed Forces member. Just for the continuity for the member who is releasing, having that ability to talk to someone who has lived your life, I think, goes an extremely long way.

I think the concierge service is not to do the work but to make sure the member is getting to where he or she needs to be next, or explaining what's coming next, so that we can ease this burden that's placed upon that member. I'm adamant that it should be a Canadian Armed Forces member.

**Mr. James Bezan:** With your experience of being, first, the deputy ombudsman over at Veterans Affairs and now being the ombudsman at National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces, you clearly have articulated that there's a backlog over at Veterans Affairs, so if it actually got hold of the concierge service, that would exacerbate the problem, would it not?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** It wasn't I who raised the backlog. I think it was the CBC that released the report about two weeks ago.

The backlog exists. I know that Veterans Affairs Canada is in the process of hiring a whole bunch more front-line people. Maybe that will reduce the backlog. The backlog exists, so having worked and having had to meet a payroll in my life, I know that when something is not working, you don't add more to it. I don't think it's through anyone's fault that we find ourselves here—I just think it's time and circumstance—but if there is a burden on one entity or another of your business, then you don't go back to that entity with more burden. I think we have to give them relief.

When I talk about setting this up inside the Canadian Armed Forces, it's not to take anything away from Veterans Affairs Canada, because I think it does fantastic work, but it is to make sure that the downstream entity that will receive these files has a chance to get it right. I think if we keep just releasing people and they keep finding themselves here, yes, our backlog will remain. That's what I'm talking about. I think we need to be very clear about the lines of responsibility, when we let go and when they catch. That's where we find ourselves today.

**Mr. James Bezan:** From your experience, why is there resistance from Veterans Affairs to accept the terms of medical release from National Defence, especially as they're coming through the surgeon general's office?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** I don't believe it's a reluctance. I'll go back to the fact that it's a process that's been set up over 40 years, and we've always done it this way. Do we know another way to do it? Have we looked at other ways to do it? I can't say. I don't think it's reluctance. I just think this square peg doesn't fit into the round hole.

**Mr. James Bezan:** From the standpoint of the surgeon general actually making these determinations of whether or not a release is attributable to service, are the resources there for the surgeon general's office to continue to do those types of determinations and share that information with VAC?

Also, I know you've presented this to the minister, and he wrote back to you. What was the response from the minister?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** As for the surgeon general—I like to keep things as simple as possible—when a member of the Canadian Armed Forces has breached universality of service, his or her career is over with the Canadian Armed Forces. To breach universality of service, shouldn't that be adjudication enough for everybody? That's my point. Will there be some requirement on the part of the surgeon general maybe to have more medical officers or medical techs, whatever that looks like? Possibly, but there's going to be a cost to doing business, and right now I think we've shifted a lot of that cost onto the backs of the members who are releasing. Those are the ones who are waiting for the adjudication. Those are the ones who are waiting for these benefits to be put in place. I do believe there may be a demand for some resources at the surgeon general's organization, but I believe what we can save on the other end is going to far outweigh that cost.

•(1210)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Romanado, you have the floor.

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado:** Thank you. I have some additional questions—

**Mr. James Bezan:** Sorry, Mr. Chair, but on a point of order, I think in the spirit of motions at committee, all members get a chance to ask questions. I know that Mr. Robillard hasn't asked a question yet. I think he should be given the opportunity. If he doesn't want it, then it's up to him whether or not he shares that time or passes it on. It's not a determination of the chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you for that, Mr. Bezan, but I had already conferred with my colleague and he passed his question over to Ms. Romanado.

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado:** Thank you very much.

I'd like to talk a little about an issue that is very sensitive but is one that is near and dear. As you know, we had some losses in the last year at the Royal Military College. It's under investigation with the board of inquiry. My son lost two classmates this year. Pending the outcome of the inquiry, I'd like to talk a little about the universality of service and the fear that our members have of coming forward when they're struggling.

I don't know if this is something that you've looked into. Members of the Canadian Armed Forces receive medical services through the base. They aren't citizens who can go to a regular doctor outside of the Canadian Armed Forces. They are treated on bases, and so on and so forth. Is there an opportunity to perhaps create what we would call an employee assistance program that is separate from the Canadian Armed Forces, where members could feel that they could go in confidence to seek support if they need it, without fear of being flagged as unfit for service?

Could you elaborate a little on that? Have you done any work in that regard? Is this something that has been brought to your attention?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** It has been brought to our attention on numerous occasions. They usually come at us from the forum of operational stress injuries, where the member will know that there's something not quite right and is a little reluctant to go the chain of command.

I also have to say that I think the Canadian Armed Forces over the last several years has done a tremendous job in removing that stigma. The senior levels inside this organization, I've seen them actually walk the talk. I'm very pleased with what I'm seeing.

But there still remains a small group of people who are very reluctant to come forward. I asked the question why they are reluctant to come forward. I think that, at some point in time, the malady overtakes the stigma, and you need to have help.

Why is it so difficult to come forward? If they think that they've breached universality of service, they know they're being released. Mostly the stories they hear around transition and release are not great stories. I think we can change that story. I think there are some very practical, simple solutions that we can implement that could make the transitioning from an amazing organization something that may not be palatable to the members but is acceptable to them.

I think the fear and confusion of what potentially may happen holds some people back. We are concerned about it. We do get those individual cases. We apply a lot of resources to them. We really do.

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado:** You segued very well into my next question. What is the impact of these horror stories that we hear? We all have that vision of a former minister of veterans affairs running away from a spouse of an injured vet.

In terms of recruitment and retention, we're trying to recruit the best and the brightest into our Canadian Armed Forces. When they have a feeling that after service or, God forbid, during service something happens to them and they are not going to be taken care of, what impact does that have on recruitment and retention efforts?

We heard, especially from the navy, that we're having problems recruiting and retaining Canadian Armed Forces members. How does the impact of that negativity or that perception of negativity prevent us from getting the best and the brightest?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** God bless our friends in the media. They've raised many of the issues that are current and important. They report what it is they see.

That message is being received by Canadian citizens. It helps influence the parents of these young cadets or young civilians who are thinking about joining the Canadian Armed Forces.

I've never had the privilege or the honour to serve, but I will say here today, without a doubt, I've worked in and around the military for 15 years, almost 20, and there is no place like it. There is an esprit de corps that I can almost sense. I'm not quite sure what it is. I think you have to serve to understand what that is.

You can do any career you want to do. Pick a career. Anything you can do on civvy street, we do it two times as well. There's an

amazing opportunity, I think, for the youth of this country. I think it's an amazing organization. But do we have some problems? We most definitely do.

I think we can change these stories. We can make these positive. We have the Veterans Hiring Act, where a releasing member gets priority opportunity within the federal public service, which is also a good career. It's a great extension. I believe we have all the tools we need to make it a positive story on the street. It's just a matter of stopping some of the practices that we do.

• (1215)

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado:** The title I hold in the highest regard is "military mom", and I have to say that our men and women serving in the Canadian Armed Forces are top of the top. I agree with you in that regard.

I want to ask one last question.

**The Chair:** We'll have to circle back on that, because you're out of time, but I think we'll have some time.

I'm going to give the floor to Mr. Garrison.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** I want to ask another question about something that is very specific to my riding but which I think is a problem across the Canadian Forces. That is the question of our aging building infrastructure and in particular the presence of asbestos on many of the Canadian Forces bases.

I have met with constituents who are civilian employees but also Canadian Forces members who have shown me pictures of asbestos tiles disintegrating in rooms in which they still have to work. We all know the health problems that asbestos can cause.

Has your office been engaged with this issue of asbestos and the health impacts on Canadian Forces members?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** Yes, we have. Those engagements will usually come from a member who is serving in a particular region, or on a wing or a base, who has discovered something. When we run into it, once the local chain of command is engaged, action comes very quickly, with remediation or segregation of that type of material so that it's not harmful.

We have been involved. I'm guessing there have been three cases since I've been in the chair in which there were some fairly large issues on which we have dealt with the local chain of command. The response has been tremendous. However, I do also understand that we have an aging infrastructure, and it requires some work.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** When would it be appropriate for those members to approach your office with this kind of thing? What I'm hearing locally is that there has been some resistance to acting on the cases they're talking about and that there has been some allegation that some of the reports on the status of buildings haven't been, I'll say, fulsome with the truth about the presence of asbestos and its deteriorating condition.

When is it appropriate for those members to leave the chain of command and actually approach your office on this? This is a question they were asking me.

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** Our office is an office of last resort, but I also offer the service to every member of the defence community. At any point in time, if you're going through a process or have questions about a policy, you can call our office. We will help educate, inform, and get you in touch with the right people. A constituent can call us at any point in time. We will, however, if they have not followed the processes that are in place for them, put them back into the right lane. We'll help and guide, but they have to exhaust what's in the chain of command first.

I have to say that when I've engaged on these types of files, the response has been far more aggressive than anything else I've seen, so judging from my experiences dealing with the local chains of command in various parts of the country, the response to fix these issues has been very quick.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** Do you think the prevalence of this problem has been fully appreciated by DND in terms of its need for capital expenditures to replace these facilities, or is that something you can comment on?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** You're getting way outside my purview of authority, but I have heard that there is concern. People are seized with it; they are aware. I don't think it's something they're trying to hide or run away from.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** Okay, thank you.

**The Chair:** That finishes up our formal rounds of questions. We'll go to five-minute questions. We have quite a bit of time left.

I'll start with Mr. Paul-Hus, for five minutes.

[Translation]

**Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Walbourne, in your annual report you mention the investigation into the grenade explosion that killed cadets in Valcartier, in 1974. In 2015, you issued a report recommending that action be taken in this regard. The minister at the time authorized such action.

I know things are working their way through the system right now. You also said that you would follow up. Do the procedures relating to this event meet your expectations?

• (1220)

[English]

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** As for an update on Valcartier, the first piece of business to get accomplished was to have medical assessments done on the survivors of that tragedy and then to put cure plans in place to ensure that they had what they needed to move forward in the immediate future.

My last update is that almost all of those medical plans have been done and are working forward. I understand and believe that the issue about compensation is still outstanding and has not been resolved. From speaking with the minister, maybe 60 days or so ago, I understand that they are engaged directly with the cadet group and are working their way through it.

I am still very optimistic that the immediate needs of those survivors are being met. I believe that within the near future we'll see what the compensation package looks like.

We follow the case closely and carefully, because it was a very important investigation for our office. Right now, things are moving along, and we're just waiting for the finalization.

[Translation]

**Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus:** Okay.

I will share my time with Ms. Gallant.

[English]

**Mrs. Cheryl Gallant:** Mr. Chairman, through you, thank you to my colleague.

I was really pleased to hear that the minister is looking favourably upon your recommendations. While we haven't had a chance to speak to him directly, even though we've asked for him to come before our committee for over six months, I'm pleased to hear that the chief of the defence staff is also looking favourably upon your recommendations.

We here would like to provide a vote of confidence in the work you have done by giving you a stamp of approval, so I move:

That the Committee accept all recommendations in the two reports of the National Defence and Canadian Forces Ombudsman tabled in September 2016; that the Government implement all of these recommendations as the best way forward to support Canadian Armed Forces members and veterans, particularly those in transition; and that the Government respond to the Committee on this motion.

**The Chair:** We respectfully request that the motion be submitted in writing. It's obviously very comprehensive, so we have to see it and think it through. There are a lot of things there. That's what we're going to ask for.

**Mr. James Bezan:** On a point of order, Mr. Chair, in the routine motions that this committee passed at the beginning of the session, notice of motions says that they require 48 hours' notice if it's to be considered at committee, unless the motion relates directly to business then under consideration. This motion relates directly to this business.

**The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Philippe Grenier-Michaud):** We just need to see it written down.

**The Chair:** We're going to suspend.

• (1220)

(Pause)

• (1230)

**The Chair:** I'm going to give the floor back to Ms. Gallant to clarify the request on that motion.

**Mrs. Cheryl Gallant:** Essentially, we're stating that the committee agrees with the recommendations, which we've all read, in the two reports and we ask the government to implement these recommendations and report back to this committee.

**The Chair:** It's debatable.

Ms. Romanado.

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado:** Mr. Chair, as we have a very important witness in front of us, I move that the debate on this motion be now adjourned.

**The Chair:** All in favour of that motion please signify.

(Motion agreed to)

**Mrs. Cheryl Gallant:** Just for clarification, then, Mr. Chairman, we had the government that wanted to get rid of this motion and all the opposition voted in favour—just to clarify that the opposition wanted the motion to go forth and be discussed and voted upon, but the Liberals, the government members, decided to shoot it down.

**The Chair:** Did you want a recorded vote?

**Mr. Darren Fisher:** No, we voted to adjourn the debate.

**An hon. member:** We are going to debate the motion.

**The Chair:** It's not going to happen today.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** We're supposed to deliberate before making a decision.

**The Chair:** It was a big ask. I understand that. We're going to move forward.

I'm going to turn the floor over now to Mr. Fisher. You had a quick one, and you can split your five minutes. Then we'll move over to Mr. Randall Garrison after that.

**Mr. Darren Fisher:** I'll try to be quick. It concerns the home equity assistance program.

Not to make it too personal, but I have a constituent in my riding who has suffered greatly and has fought this for years. I think you may have even been speaking of him when you were discussing some of the problems with the program.

You say it's fixable. Can you give me an idea of how we can fix this? Could we possibly see making the fix retroactive? This is a gentleman with six children who suffered greatly in 2009 or 2010 when the market crashed. You say it's fixable. Do you have any ideas on how we could move forward with a fix on it?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** I think all issues are fixable.

For the home equity assistance program, I think the threshold of proving a 20% reduction in the value of your home may be a little unreasonable. Look at Alberta this year and what has happened and what is going to happen to house prices because of the price of oil, which has nothing to do with the Canadian Armed Forces but will have an impact on members who happen to buy or sell a home in that area.

There are two sides to home equity assistance. Sometimes the members sell and they make a good return on their property, but there are times when members face catastrophic losses, and we're probably talking about the same constituent. In those particular cases I think there should be flexibility.

I think the 20% level is high, and the person who determined that they did not meet that standard was also, I think, the same entity who did the revision on it to determine whether the first one was correct.

I believe it's fixable, but it's going to take some want and desire to do it. I just think that maybe 20% is a little bit much.

**Mr. Darren Fisher:** Do we fix it through DND or do we fix it through Treasury Board?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** It's not for me to say how.

**Mr. Darren Fisher:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Mr. Rioux.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Jean Rioux:** In your presentation, you stated: "Improving the transition process should be a no fail mission."

I think we all agree with that statement. My question is why Veterans Affairs Canada has a backlog of 11,500 applications? How did it get to that point?

[*English*]

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** First of all, there is a Veterans Affairs ombudsman, Mr. Guy Parent. I think that would be a question best asked of that office or the Department of Veterans Affairs.

From my experience, I think you're going to hear that because of the previous cuts in staff, the backlog arrived. Well, there has always been a backlog at Veterans Affairs Canada, for one reason or another, through no fault of their own.

That's where we find ourselves. That's the current status today. I think those would be good questions for the veterans ombudsman or the Department of Veterans Affairs.

●(1235)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Jean Rioux:** You made recommendations, four of them, I believe. You recommend essentially that the income of service members be confirmed before they leave the army, that the medical report follow the patient and be recognized by Veterans Affairs Canada, that a concierge program be created, and that information be provided to force members.

Will these recommendations reduce the number of applications? Do you think the government has the will to do this?

[*English*]

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** I'm not sure if it will reduce the number of requests, but I do believe it will reduce the amount of time it takes to process the requests. We have had a consistent, on average, 1,500 to 1,800 medically releasing members over the last number of years. It seems to be consistent. It seems to stay at that number.

I don't think the number of applications going into Veterans Affairs would be any greater, but I believe our ability to respond to them would be greatly enhanced. I think that's where the value would come in the recommendations we've put forward.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Jean Rioux:** Do you have any other recommendations to reduce the number of applications or do we simply have to accept this situation? I suppose there must be alternatives to consider in order to recognize the service of our force members and veterans.



[English]

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** I think there's still much that we can do. I do believe we are data rich and knowledge poor. I believe we can determine which trades, which occupations, will result in maladies. I think we know that. Paratroopers, for example, have bad knees and bad backs.

I think there is a lot that we can do. I believe this is just a starting point. I think this will have the greatest impact on turnaround times for transitioning members immediately, but I believe there's more that we can do. I think we can get to a point where we can predict what and when things will happen.

I do believe the ability is there. Will we be doing more? One hill at a time. I think there's much more that we can do.

[Translation]

**Mr. Jean Rioux:** As I understand it, this is the first phase and others will follow to show our appreciation of members of the military.

Thank you very much for this information.

[English]

**The Chair:** Mr. Garrison, you have the floor.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** Mr. Chair, I appreciate the Conservatives pointing out that motions on the topic today could be dealt with, so I'm going to do what most people probably expect me to do at this time, and that's to move the motion that I earlier gave notice of:

That the Committee recommend that the Honourable Minister of National Defence authorize the National Defence and Canadian Forces Ombudsman to revise the service records of LGBTQ members of the Canadian Forces who received dishonourable discharges from the military based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

It's my hope there may be one or more of the Liberals who are prepared to vote on this motion today. People have been waiting since 1992, when the military made the decision to allow people to serve, for a correction of this omission. It has very direct effects and impacts on their lives every day. I'd like to put the motion now.

**The Chair:** It's debatable.

Mr. Gerretsen.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Mr. Chair, I thank Mr. Garrison for bringing this motion forward. I know it's an issue that is near and dear to him personally. I'm well prepared to support this motion. I think that obviously throughout our past, as a society we've done some things that we come to realize weren't appropriate at the time. Therefore, I think this is one way to try to investigate some of those, what I at least see as wrongs. I'm very happy to support his motion.

**The Chair:** Does anybody else wish to speak?

(Motion agreed to)

**The Chair:** You had a bit more time, Mr. Garrison. Did you want to continue?

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** No, it's okay.

**The Chair:** Are there any more questions from your side, Ms. Gallant?

**Mrs. Cheryl Gallant:** Not from me.

Mr. Paul-Hus?

**Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus:** No.

**The Chair:** Ms. Romanado.

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado:** It's not every day that we have someone here with the experience that Mr. Walbourne has, having sat on both sides of the Veterans Affairs and Canadian Armed Forces file.

I just have a quick question.

Yesterday, General Roméo Dallaire came out in the public and made a recommendation that the Department of National Defence and the Department of Veterans Affairs merge. I'd like to get your thoughts on that, if you would be willing to share your thoughts.

• (1240)

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** I think, at the end of the day, it doesn't matter the construct of the entity that's handling the issues. I think it's the process and procedures we'll put in place.

To collapse both departments...are we going to create a monolith that no one can handle? I think no matter what we do, there must be clear lines of responsibility, easy to understand interpretive policy, and process that is member focused.

We build processes today to catch people doing things wrong. I think we need to get out of that mentality and start building programs that meet the 99% rule. It doesn't matter how big the entity is, who manages the entity, or how it's configured, but I think the role of this office will always be to ensure that anything we put in place is both efficient and ultimately effective. I do believe there are synergies in that line of thinking. There is opportunity, but there's also danger.

Let's make sure we know what we're talking about doing before we go ahead and just blindly do it.

**Mrs. Sherry Romanado:** On that note, I do like your comment about it being member-centric, and if you don't mind, I'd like to use that more often.

Thank you very much. That's all I have, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** There's still another minute or two left on that side before I give the floor back over here. Does anybody else have something they want to add? No?

Mr. Bezan.

**Mr. James Bezan:** I don't think I'll need five minutes either, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Walbourne, for coming here and presenting your recommendations on the report. When Conservatives were doing the consultations on defence policy review, we heard loud and clear over and over again from veterans, concerned members, academics, and the public at large that the heart and soul of the Canadian Armed Forces and its biggest asset and resource are the people who serve this nation in uniform. I do appreciate everything that you're doing in supporting those who have run into difficulty in service and transitioning out of service.

You heard the motion that my colleague brought forward on accepting all of your recommendations in your two reports that you tabled in September. If the government follows through on implementing those recommendations, as has been suggested by our side of the table, do you feel that the transition out of service will be much more amicable to those who are leaving and that the transition time and the adjudication time would be dramatically reduced?

**Mr. Gary Walbourne:** I think the recommendations we put forward will do exactly that. The recommendations are, the wording and the phraseology I just used, member-centric. The member has a malady. They have reached universality of service, and are about to release. Well, here's their comrade. This person is going to guide them through to the point where they are taking off the uniform, but before they take off the uniform, this person will tell them what their financial situation looks like, where their medical care is coming from, and what other options may be available for them and their family. That's what I'm talking about. That's member-centric.

I do believe these recommendations can start us down that path.

You talked a bit about the personnel of this organization. When I submitted our document on defence policy review, I made it very

clear that I don't talk about theatres of war, and I don't talk about procurement of aircraft, or navy, or ships, or whatever that might look like. I firmly believe that if we're not taking care of the personnel, you can buy all the planes and ships you like, but I believe the heart and soul of this organization are its people.

I've heard the chief of the defence staff say "people first". I'm very encouraged when I hear that type of conversation. I believe if we don't do things right on the ground...and they are minor niggling things that we've caused. I think if we don't remove them, we'll be having a different conversation about national security at some point in the future. I think the opportunity is here upon us. It's going to take a will and a desire to change what we currently do and look at something different.

**Mr. James Bezan:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Is there anybody else who wishes to speak?

Mr. Walbourne, thank you very much for coming today and for your work on this very important file.

A motion to adjourn.

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