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# Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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Chair: Mr. Bryan May





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Monday, November 23, 2020

• (1600)  
[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.)):** Welcome to meeting number 7 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

I am going to skip all of the preamble today.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on October 27, the committee is commencing its study of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the financial health of veterans organizations.

Welcome to all of the witnesses who have taken the time to join us today.

We have with us from the Royal Canadian Legion, Steven Clark, national executive director, and Lynda Mifflin of the Legion in Gold River; and from VETS Canada, we are joined today by Debbie Lowther, chair and co-founder.

For the witnesses' sake, let me say that you will each have five minutes for opening remarks. When you get down to one minute, I will hold my finger up. Don't panic: a minute is a long time to wrap up your thoughts.

As well, when we get into questions from Members of Parliament, I will also give the one-minute warning—keeping in mind that I try to be as liberal as possible with the time and give people an opportunity.

I see that Rachel Blaney thought that was funny. Nobody else did. Thanks, Rachel.

We'll try to give everyone the opportunity to get their messages out and their questions answered.

First up, for the first five minutes, is Mr. Steven Clark, national executive director of the Royal Canadian Legion.

The next five minutes is all yours, sir.

**Mr. Steven Clark (National Executive Director, Royal Canadian Legion):** Thank you very much for the invitation to the Royal Canadian Legion to appear before you today.

The Legion is a large national organization united around a common vision. For the first time in our almost 100 years of existence in serving veterans in Canada, we faced a challenge of our individual and collective financial health brought about by the COVID-19 outbreak. The Legion branches, being that we are a dues-based organization, fund their own operating expenses through member-

ship, which is supplemented by revenue from such things as their clubhouse and restaurant sales and hall rentals.

Since March of this year, those revenue streams have pretty much dried up. Until recently, the Legion had never sought nor received government financial assistance for our operations. That reach-out, therefore, on April 28 and again on June 3, was unprecedented. It was a very difficult decision, but it was necessary for the survival of the Royal Canadian Legion.

The government had introduced a variety of funding programs to assist not-for-profits, among them the Canada emergency wage subsidy and the Canada emergency business account loan, but few branches were eligible for these existing programs.

When it was announced, the emergency community support fund seemed to be exactly what was needed, but that program funded projects designed to help those in vulnerable communities during the COVID-19 crisis. Again, an organization's operational expenses could not be funded.

Similarly, regional relief and recovery funding through six regional development agencies was suggested as a funding option by both federal and provincial governments, but these programs specifically state that not-for-profits are ineligible.

Further, the announcement of \$83 million for the resilient communities fund managed by the Ontario Trillium Foundation was only for new program costs to recover and rebuild from COVID-19 and not, again, for operational costs.

How much financial trouble, then, were branches in? There are 1,381 Legion branches, 1,347 of them in Canada. Their viability and sustainability was triaged in June, July and September to determine their financial health, to assess what branches were facing, how they were managing and, unfortunately, which ones would close.

The results remained fairly consistent across the three assessment periods, and they were not encouraging. One hundred and fifty-nine branches indicated that they would be unable to open or would close within three months of opening, and 21 have now closed. Three hundred and twenty-nine indicated they would open but would struggle financially. Two hundred and fifty-four branches applied for existing relief programs. One hundred and eighty-six received that assistance, and 30 were declined.

The resurgence of COVID-19 cases has brought further temporary branch closures and will bring added financial stress as branches try to persevere and overcome the losses from the first few months of the outbreak to prevent their going over the financial cliff.

In May, the Legion's Dominion Executive Council released \$3 million from national reserves to provide grants to branches in need. It helped stave off imminent closures, but struggles continued. It was hard to stay calm and carry on.

With a lack of response to approaches to government for assistance, innovation grew from within to ensure that the lifeline network for veterans and communities nation-wide continued unabated.

That lifeline included our commitment to eradicating and preventing veterans' homelessness, providing benevolent comforting care to veterans, offering benevolent and disability application assistance, providing emergency funding, offering resources and referrals to support transition and mental health, providing financial support to hospitals and care facilities, and youth group sponsorships.

The innovation included setting up GoFundMe pages, bottle drives, preparing and serving hot meals, offering drive-through meals and having online live music parties.

Operationally we held virtual "buddy check" coffee meetings and implemented or enhanced modernizations for the annual poppy campaign, re-offered digital poppies and revised commemorations to respect restrictions.

The Legion is appreciative of the veterans organization emergency support fund announced on 10 November and the \$14 million allocated to Legion branches in Canada. The application process is already under way, with initial disbursements to take place on 21 December and with future disbursements scheduled for 2021. This funding will definitely help branches.

• (1605)

The road ahead is not without financial and operational uncertainty. Regardless of what our branches have faced or have yet to face, what is certain is that our commitment and obligation to serving Canada's veterans, their families and our communities will continue. The cost of not doing so is unimaginable.

Mr. Chair, the Legion thanks you for this opportunity to make this presentation as part of this important study.

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

We're now going over for another five minutes to Ms. Lynda Mifflin, from the Gold River Legion, branch 270. The next five minutes is all yours.

• (1610)

**Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP):** I think there might be some technical difficulties.

**The Chair:** Ms. Mifflin, can you hear us at all? Yes, the screen looks frozen. Maybe the techs can reach out to her.

We'll move on to Debbie Lowther, chair and co-founder of VETS Canada.

You may go ahead, Ms. Lowther.

**Ms. Debbie Lowther (Chair and Co-founder, VETS Canada):** Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen of the committee, thank you for the invitation to appear before you today. I'm happy to provide you with some insight into the impact that COVID-19 has had on the financial well-being of VETS Canada. For those of you who are not aware of who VETS Canada is, I will provide a brief introduction to our organization first.

VETS Canada is a federally registered charity whose mission is to provide assistance to veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces and RCMP who are homeless, at risk of becoming homeless or otherwise in crisis.

We were founded in 2010 and have hundreds of dedicated volunteers across the country who provide immediate support to veterans. We also operate three drop-in and support centres across the country, one in Ottawa, one that is co-located with our headquarters here in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, and one in Edmonton that is operated by VETS Canada on behalf of the Government of Alberta.

To date, we have responded to almost 12,000 requests for assistance from veterans and their families from coast to coast, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, including holidays. Requests for assistance come to us in a variety of ways, through our 1-888 phone line, our website or our social media platforms. Some are self-referrals from veterans themselves, and some come from other organizations or agencies. Over the past year, an average of 77% of all of our referrals came from Veterans Affairs Canada case managers.

I was once told that support is a big word with many meanings, so I will elaborate on what I mean when I say that we provide support to the veterans.

In the event that we encounter a veteran who is homeless, we immediately move the veteran from the streets by providing temporary accommodations, usually in a motel or a hotel. We provide food and clothing, and we assist that veteran in finding permanent housing, at which time we will cover the first month's rent and a deposit, and we will provide furniture to help the veteran become established in their new home.

We prevent homelessness for those veterans who are at risk of losing their housing by helping with arrears rent to avoid evictions. We pay hydro and other utilities bills to prevent disconnection.

These are just a few examples of the support we provide, but being a small organization without strict regulations, we often have the luxury to provide many other outside-of-the-box supports as well. I would say that food insecurity is the most prevalent need we have seen. However, as a result of the pandemic, housing issues have certainly risen.

Since 2014, we have received funding from the Government of Canada. From 2014 to 2018, we were under contract with Veterans Affairs Canada, and from 2018 until the end of March of this year, we were funded through its family well-being fund. Until two weeks ago, we hadn't received any federal funding since the end of March. As you know, at that time, COVID-19 had begun to seriously affect the lives of all Canadians, including veterans.

By the end of March, we closed our three drop-in support centres and our headquarters to the public, and our staff worked from home, responding to requests for assistance from veterans. Fortunately, there were many things we were able to do remotely to support veterans with no physical contact, and in the event that in-person support was required, many of our dedicated volunteers were willing to meet with veterans while taking all necessary precautions.

In spite of the drop-in centres and headquarters being closed, we still had to pay rent and utilities, and veterans still required assistance.

Over the past eight months, we have seen an increase in the number of veterans who have required assistance, but, sadly and yet understandably, we have seen a decrease in donations from kind, caring Canadians. Specifically, the requests for assistance increased by 36% compared to the same time period last year, and our donations decreased by 41%.

Keeping up with the overhead and the requests for assistance with an all but non-existent revenue stream was extremely difficult, and there were times over the past few months that we thought we would have to shut down. As the only veteran-serving organization aside from Veterans Affairs that was fully operational and open to provide support during this difficult time, we couldn't allow that to happen.

We are an organization with a very small staff of only six paid employees across the country, five who provide direct support to veterans and one administrative staff person. We are fortunate that I fill the role of executive director without taking a paycheque. In spite of that, we did have to make the difficult decision to lay off our administrator in October, and I took on that role as well. Had

we not recently received funds from the veterans organizations emergency support fund we would have had to lay off more people.

● (1615)

VETS Canada began 10 years ago because we identified a gap. We discovered that many veterans had not successfully transitioned to civilian life and were slipping through the cracks. Our aim was to fill that gap and to provide a safety net for veterans. We know that we have saved lives and have helped hundreds of families to stay together. Therefore, we know that, had we been forced to close due to our financial insecurity directly related to COVID-19, it would have had a deep impact on the lives of our most vulnerable veterans. This, in turn, would have had an impact on the case load at Veterans Affairs.

As Canada moves into the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, with many veterans barely surviving the first wave, we know that we will continue to receive more and more requests for assistance, but we will continue to do everything we can with what we have to respond to those requests.

In closing, with regard to the impact that COVID-19 has had on the financial health of VETS Canada, in the past 10 years, we never felt the threat of closure until we had to deal with the effect the pandemic has had on the lives of veterans in need.

Mr. Chair, thank you. I'm happy to answer questions from the committee.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, including for the work you do with veterans on the ground. It's much appreciated by this committee.

I understand that we have back with us Ms. Lynda Mifflin, Gold River Legion, branch 270.

I understand that the Internet connection is not the greatest where you are, so we'll do our best. The next five minutes is all yours.

**Ms. Lynda Mifflin (Bar Manager, Gold River Legion, Royal Canadian Legion):** Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the House of Commons committee on Veterans Affairs. It is both an honour and a privilege to participate in this study of the Royal Canadian Legion and other veteran organizations and their financial health during and after COVID-19.

My name is Lynda Mifflin, and I am representing branch 270 of the Royal Canadian Legion in Gold River, B.C., located on the west coast of beautiful Vancouver Island on the traditional lands of the Mowachah/Muchalaht First Nation. Our nearest urban centre is more than 100 kilometres to the east. We are a picturesque community of approximately 1,300 people situated at the gateway to historic Nootka Sound. Our branch has a membership of about 185 members, of which 35 are veterans.

Prior to COVID-19, we were an active branch, open seven days a week and featuring a full calendar of activities including meat draws, darts, food service, bingo, pool and live entertainment. We were able to provide the following: an environment of camaraderie for veterans, their families and our members; assistance and support to veterans, their families and all our members during illness or injury; assistance and support for veterans, their families and our members in accessing benefits available through the Royal Canadian Legion and Remembrance Day services.

Community events included community Easter egg hunts, a Canada Day barbeque, Gold River days, annual Legion golf tournaments, community Christmas parties with free food and entertainment, pancake breakfasts, and participation in parades. We also hosted dances for Valentine's, New Year's Eve and other similar events, as we have the only dance floor in our community. We hosted birthday parties, celebrations of life and wedding receptions, and rented for little or, in many cases, no charge.

We provide funding for veterans and their families to assist in expenses associated with end of life. Annually, between the branch and our ladies auxiliary, through fundraising and events, we provide thousands of dollars to our veterans, their families and the community at large, through means such as supporting minor hockey, ice skating, the local food bank and bursaries for deserving students, along with the continued support of other Legion venues such as Broadmead Care.

We provide financial assistance to veterans, their families and members of the community who require assistance to travel to seek medical attention outside of our area, and to individuals travelling for sports and other activities. Fundraising allowed us to provide many community events, including food and entertainment; to work with our first nations groups to support educational opportunities; and to inject money into the local economy by supporting local businesses wherever possible.

We provide a portion of our building to veterans' and seniors' activities at a significantly reduced rate, and they in turn provide social activities, and have recently started to provide food hampers in coordination with other community groups.

When COVID-19 arrived, our doors were closed from mid-March until mid-June, during which time we developed our safety plan, modified our space to meet requirements for social distancing, and put in place many measures to protect the health and safety of our veterans, members, staff, volunteers and guests.

Our current situation is that our hours of operation have been reduced to three days a week, from seven. Our member attendance is down dramatically. Our gross revenue has fallen by 80%—a loss of

revenue from B.C. Lotteries and Gaming due to decreased hours and reduced attendance.

Currently, due to COVID-19, volunteers are unwilling or unable to come out and provide services to our veterans, their families and our community, due to risks of exposure. We depend on volunteers and staff to keep our branch operating. We have paid staff only for bar service and custodial work. Volunteers make up the majority of our services to the community.

During our reduced hours, veterans and members are unable to socialize. Current public health orders prohibit us from hosting meat draws, 50/50 draws, darts, pool, cards, food service or any other events.

Currently, COVID-19 is restricting our ability to provide or assist veterans, their families, our members and others in our community in the following ways:

We are not able to provide transportation to medical appointments, whether in town or further down the island; to shop for groceries; or to meet other needs, due to a decrease in volunteers. It is inhibiting our ability to check-in and interact with our veterans and members who are suffering as a result of the isolation. It is hampering our ability to provide low-cost meals to our veterans and members. Without any events or fundraising activities, we are unable to be open enough hours to keep our regular staff gainfully employed, including the relatives of veterans who are employed here.

COVID-19 has affected many other services we are known for, namely Remembrance Day services, Canada Day celebrations and many other community events.

● (1620)

The suspension of normal Remembrance Day services has impacted us and our community, with past residents not travelling to participate. There was a loss of visitations with veterans who reside here and a loss of family time. There was a loss of revenue for us, our local hotels, restaurants, shops and stores. Our poppy campaign was compromised because we do not have the resources that larger urban areas have to accommodate poppy tagging.

In conclusion, Legions are an integral part of communities of our size and they provide a variety of important services and resources to veterans, their families and our communities as a whole. The lack of revenue as a result of COVID-19 jeopardizes those activities and our relationship with our community. Prior to COVID-19, we were an active branch providing resources to veterans, their families, our members and guests. Currently, we are struggling to meet the challenges of keeping our doors open during this pandemic. Indeed, our future is hanging in the wind. The lack of revenue and fundraising is putting the long-term viability of our branch and the work we do post COVID-19 very much in question.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

I'm glad we were able to hear you, if not see you. Clearly we have some more work to do on the broadband out in Victoria. I want to thank both you and Mr. Clark for the work you guys do. We all have Legions in our ridings, and they're amazing cornerstones in our communities.

For the first round of questions, we have the Conservative Party.

MP John Brassard, you have six minutes, sir.

**Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to thank all of the guests and the witnesses who've come before us.

This is an important study because all MPs, regardless of what party we're affiliated with, are hearing the concern within veterans' organizations, service organizations and community organizations, just how grave the situation is with respect not just to raising funds, but also to covering the expenses associated with the closures.

My first question is for you, Mr. Clark. On September 4, Dominion President Irvine wrote an open letter to all parliamentarians, in which he said, "I am witnessing extreme stress...over the possibility of Legion branches disappearing". The initial request months ago from Dominion Command was for \$30 million in funding, which would be required to alleviate a lot of the stress these branches are facing.

How difficult is the problem going to be with only \$14 million in funding?

• (1625)

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Mr. Brassard, we will certainly manage. Again, we appreciate the money that we have been provided through the VOESF. The \$30 million was based on expenses that a branch would have incurred in the initial five months of the closure. Based on that average expenditure, \$5,000 times 1,347 branches times the number of months they were closed for brought it up to approximately \$34 million, minus the \$3 million we had already provided. That would have been a start.

This has gone on a little bit longer. We have about half of what we had been hoping for, but we will manage as well as we can and we appreciate that money.

**Mr. John Brassard:** With regard to the \$3 million in reserves that the Royal Canadian Legion provided as an emergency relief to many of these Legions, are you planning on replenishing those re-

serves at Dominion Command or are you going to forgo those reserves, Mr. Clark?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** We will forgo those reserves. The \$14 million received will be for Legion branches only.

**Mr. John Brassard:** One of the things you mentioned was that there were Legions across the country that didn't have the opportunity to access some of the benefits, whether the emergency business account.... In meetings that you and I have had—and I've also met with provincial commands in B.C., Yukon, Alberta and Manitoba—we've discussed the difficulty with some of the tax-filing situations they're facing right now. I know my colleague Mr. Lawrence has asked the minister to intervene in this regard, but I'm wondering if you can briefly—because I do also have a question for Ms. Lowther—talk about the situation some of these smaller Legions are facing with respect to their tax situation.

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Absolutely.

I was approached, in fact, today, by a branch in Nova Scotia that had filed their T2 with CRA and received a response that they could not accept that filing because the branch was neither registered nor incorporated. Our Legion branches are not incorporated. The organization, as an entity, is incorporated, but not the individual Legion branches. That poses a problem.

If a requirement to get funding through the CEBA loan program requires you to be incorporated, our branches aren't. That poses a problem.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Thank you.

I think that's an important thing for the committee to consider as we move forward, perhaps as part of our recommendations, with respect to the situation that Mr. Clark just outlined.

Ms. Lowther, thank you so much for joining us this morning. I can't begin to appreciate the work you've done and the stress you have been under over the course of the last several months.

I know that you did receive funding in the latest announcement—from the passing of Bill C-4—to the tune of somewhere around \$850,000. Is that correct? In a year, what money would VETS Canada typically receive from Veterans Affairs Canada to facilitate its operations and the great work you do for veterans?

**Ms. Debbie Lowther:** The \$850,000 we received is actually the largest sum of money we have received from the federal government. Our funding prior to that, through the veteran family well-being fund, was \$840,000 for an 18-month period. We're definitely in a better situation with this \$850,000.

However, given the increased number of veterans coming forward, I guess we're in the same boat really, if you measure it that way.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Can you speak about the impact on veterans and their families?

I noticed that on September 24 VETS Canada issued a tweet about CERB ending in six days. You know you will be swamped with requests to help veterans and their families nationwide. Unfortunately, we haven't had any federal funding since March.

Can you talk about the impact you've seen on veterans and their families as a result, not just the work that you haven't been able to do, but also anecdotally from other organizations as well?

**Ms. Debbie Lowther:** A lot of the veterans who have come our way were receiving the CERB payments. We've had a few who, once that ended, were in dire straights. We also had a few who weren't actually entitled to those CERB payments, so they're going to have to pay those back. Then we've also had veterans who were in a second career or subsidizing their pensions by working part time. A lot of them were laid off, lost their employment because of COVID. Again, we're looking at supporting those veterans as well.

With regard to not having any funding since the end of March, we were under the impression that we would not be very long without funding. Unfortunately, a budget was not tabled in March of this year, so there was no vehicle with which to provide us that funding. We keep waiting.

• (1630)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Is that it?

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. That's time.

Thank you, sir.

Now we'll go over, for six minutes, to MP Lalonde, please.

**Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Chair.

It's always a pleasure to see some of you. Also welcome to Madam Mifflin too—as a witness anyway. That's a first introduction. Welcome.

I want to say thank you for all the work that's been done. You've reflected clearly on something that I think no one expected last March, and the impact on many individuals, including our veterans and particularly the homeless.

Mr. Clark, if I may say, I know locally the announcement for the \$14 million was well received, and certainly branch 632 has done great work in trying to expand on other avenues of revenue.

I know it's not the case for all the Legions, and I'm certainly very appreciative of the testimony by Ms. Mifflin...but maybe Mr. Clark,

tell me, as the money will be flowing, what is the current plan for this funding across our great Legions?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Thanks very much, Madam.

The \$14 million is going to be disbursed, as I've said, in a couple of disbursements this year and in 2021. There are 11 specific categories that the funding can be used for. We are not replacing lost revenue, unfortunately. We are looking to pay expenses that the branches have incurred.

The 11 categories, such as property tax, insurance, rent or mortgage, utilities, are the main things that the branches have been saying they need help with. That's what the funds will be used for across the country for branches in need. Not every branch will receive the funding.

Again, we are doing triage. If you're in need you will get it. If you can get by without it, please do so to help other branches that are in a greater need situation.

**Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde:** Thank you.

You did mention that some of the branches were eligible for some of the existing government programs, and some were not. I know that here the wage subsidy was used. Are there aspects you've heard from other Legions as to why they did not qualify for either the CEBA or the wage subsidy?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** There are two things that I have heard. One, of course, is the fact that the majority of Legions are staffed by volunteers, so when those Legions applied, they were just not eligible for it.

The other thing I heard—and this, specifically, was from the province of Quebec—was that a number of the branches that applied for the CEBA were required to have a cosigner. They were not being granted by their financial institutions to receive the loan on their own. That is something we are looking into, the inability to, perhaps, procure a cosigner for the loan caused some problems within that command. Those are the two main reasons that I had heard for the declines.

**Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde:** Thank you very much.

Ms. Mifflin, I know that you've spoken about your great Legion and some of the challenges with being smaller. I'm not sure exactly where, physically, you're located, other than in Victoria.

No? My colleague Ms. Blaney is saying no, so maybe you can tell me more about that. I see it as more rural, a little bit outside of a large urban centre....

I see in your résumé here that you work in the food and beverage industry. In terms of your ability to recuperate some of the revenues on a yearly basis—the revenues from before COVID—could you tell us some of the biggest challenges that have resulted from the fact you couldn't rent your hall? I think you said that you're the only dance hall in your neighbourhood, so it cost you a lot of money not being able to recuperate those dollars.



Is there a plan, other than government support, to find ways to do that as we are heading into the second wave?

• (1635)

**Ms. Lynda Mifflin:** Of course, yes, we are a very small branch in a very small community. We are in a remote location, and so we are pretty much dependent upon our local residents.

When and if the COVID restrictions are relaxed enough to allow us to resume some degree of normal operating, then of course locally we'll focus on fundraising events and those types of things to bolster our local branch. Short of that, any applications we can make at points for assistance elsewhere, we will, but mostly we are dependent upon ourselves and our community to help out.

**Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde:** What was your percentage of revenues from hall rentals, beverage sales and catering, before COVID?

**Ms. Lynda Mifflin:** From food sales, entertainment and those types of things—outside of our bar sales—probably about 30% of the other income was from events other than bar sales.

**Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde:** Okay. Currently, as we all know, the provincial governments are giving instructions, based on where you live, on whether you can either resume your activity on a more “normal” basis, or not—sadly.

If you were to tell me a little bit about your situation in your provincial jurisdiction, in terms of levels... I'm not sure where in British Columbia you're located, if I may ask.

**The Chair:** That's actually the time available, but I'll allow for a very brief answer, please.

**Ms. Lynda Mifflin:** We are located in north-central Vancouver Island, on the west coast. We are approximately 100 kilometres from Campbell River, our nearest urban centre, which is a community of approximately 40,000.

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

Up next for six minutes is MP Desilets.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank all the witnesses, who are shedding a very interesting light for us.

Thank you for being here and for your contribution, each in your own way, to the well-being of our veterans.

My first question is for Mr. Clark.

Do you feel that financial assistance is different for each province, as each legion operates very differently? I was only elected last year, but over time I have come to realize that Quebec is very different from the other provinces in how it works.

Do things vary at all?

[English]

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Mr. Desilets, absolutely. What we had to do is establish a baseline. We did not know what the branches require on an individual basis, so we have reached out with the application

process. They are returning the demands to Dominion Command. We are going to take a look at what the requirements are across the country.

Unlike what we did with the \$3 million reserves, we did not allocate it proportionally by branch. We need to find out what the exact need is so we can best address the need.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I'm a very visual, concrete type of person. Let's take the example of a legion like the one in Deux-Montagnes, in my constituency in Quebec, a very active legion that's very present in the community.

Would you be able to tell me how much money it might receive to alleviate its financial difficulties, which are very much to the fore?

• (1640)

[English]

**Mr. Steven Clark:** I'm unable to give that quantitative amount at the moment. We have approximately 1,400 branches and \$14 million, so if you did it proportionally each Legion would receive \$10,000, but we're not going to apportion it that way. Some branches will receive more and some will receive less, but we are replacing, as I said, expenses as opposed to revenues, so we want to make sure the bills can be paid.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I understand that it must be very hard for you to calculate, because expenses vary. You have scales and all of that. Can you explain to me how you did the calculation? It's not clear to me, and I am absolutely not judging you. Some legions own a building, some legions rent a building, and others operate under a variety of models.

How did you calculate it?

[English]

**Mr. Steven Clark:** We have sent an application form to every one of our branches for them to complete. They are looking at their 2019 expenses in 11 separate categories and putting down what they are requesting for funding for 2020 to meet the expenses in those categories. Each branch has to provide a copy of an audited financial statement or a review engagement or an approved budget so we know exactly how much it had expended in these various areas. You're right that some branches do not have a mortgage and some are not paying rent, but they may have higher costs in other areas.

Our goal is to make sure that we can make a definite impact on the branch.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Excellent.

In your opinion, will the funds currently allocated meet needs?

I would dare to go a step further and ask you this: when needs persist over time, how can you respond to ensure that certain legions in trouble can stay open for another month, two months, or six months?

[English]

**Mr. Steven Clark:** That is a very good question. That's why we're triaging the branches. Unfortunately, we know there will be more branches that will not survive, so providing funding to those particular branches is not going to add to their viability. Regrettably, we know there will be more closures. We want to make sure that as much as possible we can get funding to branches that will be able to use it and ensure their sustainability within their particular jurisdiction.

Is it enough? I'm going to say that at the end of probably February or March, we'll have branches approaching us for additional funding, and there may not be that funding. It's not a complete answer, but it is a help.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you very much, Mr. Clark, for your clear answers.

That will be all for me this time, Mr. Chair.

[English]

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

Now we go over to MP Blaney for six minutes.

Go ahead, please.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Just so everybody understands, Victoria is at the southern part of the island, and most of my riding is in the very northern part, where, of course, the amazing community of Gold River is. I'm so grateful to all the witnesses for being here.

As a member of Parliament who represents 11 Legions in my riding, I just want to say that small Legions across Canada are the heartbeat of communities. I want to thank you so much, Ms. Mifflin, for outlining so clearly that they are the places where people go to gather. These are the places that get rented so that community activities can happen. The impact they have on the local economy can never be underestimated. When they have those events, people come to visit and they come to stay, and that impacts the whole region. I want to say thank you for that very clear message.

I also want to acknowledge what Mr. Clark said repeatedly here today, which is that Legions are very independent. They work very hard to be independent and they are not comfortable asking for help, but because they need to, they must, because of the important role they play in the country and communities across our country. I want to thank you for all the work.

Just to support what you were saying, I know that for my Legions, some are struggling and some have found ways to survive. Every Legion is unique to its area.

I want to start with you first, Ms. Mifflin. First of all, thank you for again making me the proudest member of Parliament in Ottawa. I just can't say enough good things about my riding, but you've just proved what a great region I represent.

I first wanted to ask, did any of the programs that are available currently work in the Gold River Legion? Again, seeing that the gross revenue has gone down by 80%, could you tell us how you guys are managing at this time?

• (1645)

**Ms. Lynda Mifflin:** Okay. I'll try to answer that to the best of my ability.

I believe the program that is benefiting us at the moment is the wage subsidy program. That is covering a huge portion of our costs for our paid staff and our custodian. Other than that, how we're managing is by reducing our hours of operation, trying to manage our costs as closely as we possibly can and managing our inventories.

One of the juggling things that we're having to do, of course, is anticipating the next public health order, which may result in our closure again, so we're trying to balance our activities with that. Also, of course, we can't plan too many things too far in advance. By tightening up our laces and hanging in there, we're just getting by.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you for that.

I know, as I think you outlined so clearly, what a pivotal role the Legions play in so many rural and remote areas. Just as a side note, I want to let you know that I'm still working on that broadband. I know that's a big challenge in so many parts of our riding.

I'm wondering if you could outline for us what the concern would be if you guys couldn't be in the community anymore. You talked about all the services you provide and how you work with isolated veterans. If the Legion were no longer in Gold River, what would be the impact on the community?

**Ms. Lynda Mifflin:** Well, like I said, in communities of our size, Legions are an integral part of the community. We are the social centre for our community.

Without us, the veterans would suffer. There would be a loss of opportunities for them to get together and share and socialize. For the community, like I said in my statement, we inject thousands of dollars into our community every year with bursaries for students, and we support minor hockey, figure skating and the local food banks. All of those institutions would suffer without the Legion.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Something I want to get on the record is that, prior to COVID, while it's always a struggle in our smaller communities, I want to clarify that you were doing well. You're talking about how much you give back to the community, so I want to make sure that this is really clear.

**Ms. Lynda Mifflin:** Yes, absolutely. Prior to COVID, we were a vibrant little Legion. We were open seven days a week. We had activities going on in the evenings. We were sponsoring local activities and providing venues for the community for community events. That was prior to COVID. Since COVID hit and we were forced to close our doors, it has been a real challenge. As I said, our revenues have been decreased by 80%, which means we don't have anything to give back.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** So you—

**Ms. Lynda Mifflin:** What we do have, we are giving.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I believe that.

I guess the next short question is just how many volunteers you have not seen because of COVID.

**Ms. Lynda Mifflin:** It's the vast majority. Where we may have had 25 active volunteers before, we now have maybe two or three.

• (1650)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

That brings us to the end of round one.

Starting us off in round number two for five minutes, MP Seeback, the floor is yours.

**Mr. Kyle Seeback (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC):** Thanks.

Thanks, everyone, for coming to give your testimony today. These are tough, challenging times. I know it's been tough for Legions in my riding. One is in some real difficulty. It spent a lot of money to renovate and make its space a lot nicer for bookings this year, and this summer it took on debt. Of course, all of that revenue has disappeared, so it's at risk of closing.

Mr. Clark, you said that, according to your triage, 159 would close. The funding you're receiving from the government is not going to stave off the closures you mentioned earlier in your testimony, is it?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** No, it will not. That's why it's important that we work with our provincial commands, which know first-hand the financial health of every one of the branches, so they can best direct us on which branches need it and which ones, unfortunately, it will not provide assistance for.

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** Would you hazard a guess as to whether, if the funding you had asked for was delivered, that would have staved off the loss of at least some of these Legions that are going to be forced to close due to their catastrophic loss in revenue?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** If it had been provided earlier, it would have.

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** Thank you very much.

I'd like you to speak to what happens in a community when a Legion closes. You've talked about the benefits to community and to veterans, and I think we're not really thinking or talking about the devastating impact that this is going to have on communities. I wonder if you would speak to that. Then also, if a Legion closes, would it ever open up again? I suspect I know the answer to that, unfortunately.

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Thank you.

The biggest thing I want to refer to is the Legion's primary goal of assisting veterans and their families. We have approximately 1,400 branches across the country, 1,400 service offices so that if a veteran is in need, they know exactly where to go. They can go to the Legion. They can get immediate emergency financial help. They can get sustained assistance. If a branch isn't there, a link in that chain is gone, so that veteran has to go somewhere else outside of their community, perhaps, especially if it's in a more rural area. We want to make things easy for veterans. They have some difficulties, especially with transition, mental health and other factors. Legion service officers are there to give them the assistance they need, and if branches are not there, that assistance is still available, but it's less convenient for the individual veteran.

There's also the support provided to their families, to local charities, and to local hospitals, and if branches are not there to provide that, where will that funding come from to assist those programs in the community? We do things not because we are looking for any kind of recognition but because we want to be good community partners, and that's why we're there.

Across the country we have had branches close. Could they reopen? They could, but I have not seen it happen. Unfortunately, pretty much when a branch closes in a community, its footprint in that community is gone.

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think you asked for money in both April and June of this year during COVID. Is that correct?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** That is correct, yes.

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** If money had flowed quickly after those requests for funds, I think what you're saying is that for at least some of these 159 Legions that look as though they're going to close, that closure could have been staved off.

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Yes, absolutely, because some of those branches have yet to open. It's financially not prudent to do so, or they are not able to do so because they might have a small restaurant with no patio. Therefore, to open up and to provide the funding, and the expenses they would have to incur...it's just not viable for them to do so.

If funding had been provided earlier, there is a possibility, absolutely, that some of these branches would be in a better state today.

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** Right. I have one final question.

I know that the poppy drive was different this year because of COVID-19. I know that you tried very hard to adapt with Legion masks and other things. I know that I bought a bunch of them. How does it look early on for the receipts from the poppy fund? What is the impact of that going to be?

• (1655)

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Early on, it is not looking positive. There are exceptions. Madame Lalonde's riding of Orléans did exceptionally well this year, raising over \$100,000, but that's the exception. There are many communities that will not see that level of funding. With the poppy campaign, all the money that is raised stays locally to help local veterans. None of it comes to Dominion Command, so if there is less funding, that means there is less support available for veterans, and that will be devastating.

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** It's kind of a double whammy right now.

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Absolutely.

**Mr. Kyle Seeback:** Those are all my questions.

Thanks very much, everyone, for your time today.

**The Chair:** Thank you. You kept it right on time. I appreciate that.

Now I know where all the masks went. We'll have to talk to our friend from Orléans. I had to beg and plead for one of those masks for Remembrance Day. We were finally able to purchase one, but....

Up next, we have MP Samson for five minutes.

**Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, all three of you, for your presentations. It's an extremely important study to better understand what is happening on the ground and how we can continue to help, which is crucial. Legions do such excellent work in communities, and it's so nice to see how effective they are at supporting veterans and their families. I want to thank all of you for that.

I also want to talk about VETS Canada. It's just amazing how you stretch out right across the country and have so many volunteers supporting you. I, as an MP, struggle to understand how effective you people are. For example, you are basically 24-7; you mentioned that in your presentation, Debbie. It's just amazing. When you think that MPs can—and we do, in our office—call VETS Canada for help.... That's how effective you are.

Also, when you think about how over 75% of your work throughout COVID-19—and maybe ongoing, too—is case work from Veterans Affairs.... You are an extremely important organization on the ground, helping right across this country, and I can't thank you enough.

You spoke about how challenging it was financially, about laying off some people who were more administrative than on the ground. I can't thank you enough, as well, for the work that you've been doing on that front.

The \$850,000, as you said, might be the most you have gotten, but there are a couple of factors that come into play here: how deep the financial challenge your organization was in, over the last six months, and that you had to use those funds; and then being able to support an increased number of veterans and their families because of COVID-19. Can you talk to us a bit about how you got through it and how this funding will allow you to continue that work?

**Ms. Debbie Lowther:** Yes. Thank you for that and for your kind words.

We did get through it. I think it was.... We were very resourceful. We were able to really tap into some of our regular donors who maybe couldn't afford to donate financially but were willing to donate some food or that sort of thing. I mentioned in my presentation that we've always had the luxury of being able to do things outside the box. Well, we weren't able to do those sorts of things. We had to focus specifically on very urgent needs like food and shelter.

The funding will certainly help us to be able to continue doing the work that we do, as well as, hopefully, be able to do some of those “outside the box” things again. We work very well with the case managers at Veterans Affairs. Veterans Affairs can provide the financial benefits that veterans require, but often their hands are tied because of rules and regulations and legislation, so they will come to us for the things that they can't do when their hands are tied. This money will enable us to do those things that are equally important. It will help us in that way.

• (1700)

**Mr. Darrell Samson:** Thank you.

Your structure is volunteer based. You said you only have six people under salary, which is amazing.

Through COVID-19, did you feel you were losing some of the volunteers, or was it increasing? How do you foresee the next six months? How do you see things unfolding? We're into a second wave. Do you want to talk to us about the monies you have and how you foresee supporting veterans and their families in the next six months?

**Ms. Debbie Lowther:** With regard to the volunteers, that's certainly been a big impact. Our friends at the Legion said the same thing.

As an example, our Ottawa team has well over 100 volunteers. During COVID, we had less than 10 who were willing to go out and meet veterans face to face. It's had a big impact in that regard.

I have to say, though, a lot of them have missed their volunteer work. We are having a lot of them start to come back and wanting to re-engage. We have more people who are interested in helping—I think people who are still managing to thrive during COVID. We've had some of those people reach out to say they're doing okay so they want to help others, and that kind of thing.

We're hoping that the second wave is not going to be as bad as the first wave. However, in some areas were seeing that it already is. Over the next six months, we'll be day to day, really. We'll see what the future brings for us.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. I'm afraid that's time, sir.

Up next, we have MP Desilets, for two and a half minutes, please.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Two and a half minutes is not a lot.

Ms. Lowther, I admire the work you do. You say about a hundred volunteers used to work for your organization and that number has fallen to 10. I am stunned.

In your view, how much government assistance would you need to maintain your services, which I believe are essential?

[English]

**Ms. Debbie Lowther:** Thank you for that question.

As I mentioned earlier, the \$850,000 is certainly going to help us over the next year. Our issue is the long term.

As I mentioned in my statement, we only have six paid staff members, so we have to constantly be sourcing out revenue streams, looking for grant applications and that sort of thing. Then it usually falls to me, or getting a qualified volunteer to help with those grant applications. Those things are time-consuming.

For us, if we had ongoing long-term funding, that would take a huge, huge strain off of our organization.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Ms. Lowther, what would your financial needs be to maintain the same conditions you had a few months ago?

[English]

**Ms. Debbie Lowther:** Right now I would say that our biggest financial needs are to be able to provide the food and the rent and those sorts of things for veterans.

As I mentioned, the \$850,000 would be sufficient for a year. Normally in the run of a year, we would spend more than \$1 million, so we'll have to make that up somehow.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Perfect, you have answered clearly.

My last question is for Mr. Clark.

Would it be possible for us to see how the millions of dollars will be distributed in each of the legions?

[English]

**The Chair:** Make it short.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I will be brief, Mr. Chair.

I would like to see a document that shows the amounts distributed per legion.

Is that possible, Mr. Clark?

[English]

**The Chair:** Please give a very, very brief answer, please.

• (1705)

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Absolutely. On the 7th of December, we'll be sharing with Veterans Affairs a spreadsheet of all the branches receiving funding and to what level.

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

Now over to MP Blaney, for two and a half minutes, please.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

What we've heard very clearly is that during COVID-19, the number of our aging veterans in isolation has only grown, and that is a concern for me as well.

If I could, I'll start with you, Mr. Clark. Moving into the next year or so, we don't know how long this pandemic is going to unfold. We know that the financial burden has been challenging for all Legions across Canada. I'm just wondering if you could talk about what this will mean for the ability to have services for veterans, especially veterans who are aging, incredibly isolated and vulnerable to COVID-19.

**Mr. Steven Clark:** The really encouraging thing we have seen throughout this whole pandemic has been the ability for Legion members to volunteer to make sure they maintain that contact with veterans in their community, especially aged veterans, in contacting them on a daily or weekly basis.

I think of the gentleman in southern Alberta, a 98-year-old Second World War veteran, who every day would go to his Legion branch simply to have a cup of coffee and play checkers. He doesn't have that ability anymore, but people in that community know him, know what he used to do and know what he needs and are reaching out that way. We're seeing all across the country that individuals are volunteering their time and making sure they maintain social contact, even when physical distancing can't be had.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you.

Again, that's why Legions are so important. They're like the heartbeat of our communities. In Campbell River, we had a small Remembrance Day ceremony, and it amazed me how many veterans in their nineties came and socially distanced and sat in their cars to be there for that. I just want to respect them.

If I could go to you, Ms. Lowther, could you talk about the same thing? What will be the impact in the long term?

**Ms. Debbie Lowther:** On the long-term impact, it's going to take us a while to catch up, with what we've had to endure over the past eight months.

With regard to the older veterans you're speaking of and their social isolation, it's something that we've seen an awful lot of ourselves, especially with our drop-in centres. We have veterans who, as part of their regular routine, come to the drop-in centre to socialize, and they're not able to do that anymore, so we're having to come up with other creative ways to be able to maintain that social interaction.

We have a Guitars for Vets program that we offer as well. We've had to adapt that a bit, but luckily that program actually has been extremely busy with people who have a lot of time on their hands all of a sudden. We've been able to still provide guitar lessons via Zoom, Skype and that sort of thing. That has definitely helped with the social isolation.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. That's time.

Up next we have MP Wagantall, please, for five minutes.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

I too come from an area that is very rural, and our Legions play a very important role. I keep telling them that they're going to have to vote me in for many years hence before I can get to all of our Remembrance Day services that I would love to participate in.

I want to focus right now on you, Deb, and your drop-in support centres. I had the opportunity to go to the one on Besserer Street in Ottawa a couple of months after it opened. At that point, it was indicated to me that 65 veterans had already been referred from VAC to that particular facility for emergency help. The ability for you to assist them in so many ways very quickly was not lost on case managers, and now you indicate that 77% of your cases are coming from VAC. I'm wondering how exactly this works with their emergency fund that is there to assist veterans.

I know that it takes them much longer to get that money out the door, as you mentioned, but you also mentioned that they helped you to keep your staff. Is that the fund that this money came from—that actual emergency support fund—to keep your staff on, or did I misunderstand what you said there?

**Ms. Debbie Lowther:** With regard, first of all, to the caseload coming from Veterans Affairs and their emergency fund, you're right. It does take them a little longer to get those funds into the hands of veterans, and that's when we work kind of in tandem with them. We'll take care of the emergency needs and they'll look after the longer-term sort of thing. Also, the criteria for their emergency funds is a little more strict than what we would require.

For the funding for our staff members, we have been lucky with the emergency wage subsidy. That was definitely helpful.

• (1710)

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Okay, so that's where those funds came from then.

**Ms. Debbie Lowther:** Yes.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** I'm so pleased you were able to get that support. Are you able now to cover those wages and get your administrator back? What are you looking at going forward as far as that crucial staff goes?

**Ms. Debbie Lowther:** Yes. In addition to the wage subsidy, which, as I said, has been very helpful, part of the most recent funding, the veterans organizations emergency support fund, was to assist with our staffing. We will also be getting an administrator back. Unfortunately, the one we had found another job. We are in the market for a new administrator, but, to be fair, we could use a lot more staff. As I said, there are six paid staff across the country and we're dealing with upwards of 200 veterans a month.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** I hear you.

You're receiving \$850,000 of the \$6 million that was earmarked here for organizations outside of the Legion. I do appreciate that the Legion did not receive what it asked for, but of the \$6 million, of the \$850,000, you indicated that you got \$840,000 for the prior 18 months. That's around \$46,660 per month. That money goes to the veterans programming to help those veterans. Is there money from that fund that's going to the administrative side or is that covered through your charitable giving and that type of thing?

**Ms. Debbie Lowther:** No, some of that money does go to the administrative side, along with donations.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** What was the impact of finding yourself in the circumstance of having no budget and knowing that you would continue to not have a budget? Can you talk about the difference between receiving this funding now, which I understand is very helpful, and the uncertainty of not knowing what you have to work with going forward? Is that what you were trying to express as well?

**Ms. Debbie Lowther:** Yes. That's something that I think all non-profits deal with, always wondering where the next paycheque's going to come from, so to speak. That is a constant concern for us, especially.... As grateful as we are to have this funding, it is for a period of one year. Beyond that, we don't know.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Right.

I really appreciate the work you do and I truly believe the best way for the government to be effective is to fund organizations like the Legion and like yours that are hands on and that really do know the circumstances and that can deal with them quickly.

Thank you so much, Chair.

**Ms. Debbie Lowther:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

For five minutes, MP Fillmore, go ahead, please.

**Mr. Andy Fillmore (Halifax, Lib.):** Thanks very much, Chair.

Thanks, witnesses, not only for your remarkable work on behalf of Canada's veterans community but also for being here today. We're all very grateful for that.

I have to say that it's always nice to see a familiar face from home.

Deb, welcome and thanks for joining us. I'm going to direct my questions to you. As you know, I have become quite familiar with the work of VETS Canada, having visited you and Jim over at the headquarters here at home on a number of occasions and having participated in your boots on the ground initiative to help locate and assist homeless veterans.

With that familiarity, I would like to start with a profound and heartfelt thanks to you and Jim and the whole VETS Canada family, if I can call it that, across the country. The work you do and what you achieve really is remarkable. I'd like to, if I could, dig into the VETS Canada experience since March of this year. You said that donations are down by 41%. That's a heartbreaking statistic. At the same time, demand is up by 36%. That's some very difficult math to reconcile. I'll make three points and then I'll stop talking and you can take the rest of the time just to fill it in.

I wonder if you could share with the committee how it is that you've been able to continue to serve veterans through the pandemic. Second, can you include specifically any federal assistance that's been helpful? You mentioned already the veterans emergency fund, but have any of the COVID funds like the wage subsidy or anything like that been helpful? Third, what else do you need? That's what I'd like to hear. Really, I'm asking this question because I want to underscore to the committee and to people who are listening how important it is that organizations like yours get the support they need to continue doing the work that they do.

The floor is yours. Take as much time within my five minutes as you want.

Thanks, Deb. It's really nice to see you.

• (1715)

**Ms. Debbie Lowther:** It's nice to see you too, and thank you for your kind words.

With regard to some of the available federal funding, yes, we have been able to benefit from the emergency wage subsidy. We did receive some funding from the emergency community support fund that was administered through the United Way, specifically here in Nova Scotia.

Unfortunately, the way the fund worked is that you had to apply to the United Way, and there's not just one United Way; there's one in every city across the country. That meant many applications for us, and as I keep saying, we're a very small staff. We don't have people to be doing all these applications, so we decided to do applications in just the locations where we had drop-ins. Unfortunately, the application process in Edmonton had already closed, and so we ended up applying only here in Nova Scotia, but we did receive just over \$25,000 from that fund. Those two have definitely benefited us throughout the pandemic.

With regard to what we need, it always comes down to money. I know I keep talking about the staff. As I mentioned in my statement, I don't take a paycheque. My husband and I founded this organization, and neither of us takes a paycheque. I work about 60 hours a week without a paycheque. I'm not saying that because I want a paycheque, because I don't, but if something were to happen to me, and the organization needed to hire an executive director, where would that money come from? People don't like to think of their money going towards administrative things, but we have to have them.

**The Chair:** You have about 30 seconds.

**Mr. Andy Fillmore:** Quickly, are you undertaking any efforts to find new sources of revenue? We're all hearing about pivots now. Have you discovered anything that's working differently or better for you in the pandemic?

**Ms. Debbie Lowther:** I shouldn't say we're not looking; we're always looking for different sources of revenue. We have a couple of volunteers focusing on that right now, looking at some larger corporate donations, which we're hoping will be successful.

**Mr. Andy Fillmore:** Thank you so much for being here and for all your work. We will see you soon, I'm sure.

**The Chair:** Thank you, MP Fillmore, for keeping on time.

That brings us to the end of the second round, folks. As I mentioned at the beginning of the meeting, we have a hard stop at 5:30 unless there is any absolute 100% must-need-to-ask questions. I know we wanted to leave a few minutes at the end for discussion on timing for this committee.

Seeing no hands go up really quickly, I will simply thank all of the witnesses for appearing here today. I really do appreciate it.

MP Desilets, are you saying thank you, or are you saying you need—

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I'd simply like to take 30 seconds to thank our guests.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** I'm going to need at least five minutes at the end here, guys, just to bring everybody up to speed on what's going on with this timing, but if there is a desperate need for a 30-second question, and a 30-second answer from the witnesses, I think we can afford that.

MP Desilets, if you want to kick us off—and I see MP Carrie also has a 30-second question.

Go ahead very quickly, Monsieur Desilets.

• (1720)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I can put it in question form. Once again I'm impressed by the quality of our guests today. I thank them very much.

As I'm being told to ask a question, I'd say that my question is, what are your needs? Feel free to let us know. We won't have instant solutions as you would prefer, but please let us know what you need.

I thank you, and I also thank the legions in my region very much.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you. I think that was more of a comment than a question, but that's great.

I will go on to MP Carrie.

If you can stick to 30 seconds, that would be great, sir.

**Mr. Colin Carrie (Oshawa, CPC):** I'll go as quickly as I can.

I was really concerned to hear about the number of Legions at risk—I think the numbers are about a third.

My question is for Steve.

With regard to the service officers at the Legions, we know that VAC employees are working at home. I know that a lot of veterans need people on the ground. I am wondering if you've heard about the workload on them. What effect have these Veterans Affairs office closures, and perhaps the inability to talk to somebody, done to the workloads of the service officers?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** There hasn't been additional workload put onto the service officers. We've sustained the same level we had been providing on a remote basis, but the fact that we are still able to reach out to VAC staff for referrals in situations has been very helpful. All of our service officers across the country are continuing to provide the service that veterans need.

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

Thank you, Mr. Carrie. That was a very valuable question, and I'm glad we got that in.

I want to thank all of you for being here today.

**Mr. John Brassard:** I'm sorry, Mr. Chair; I have a request.

**The Chair:** Sure.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Mr. Clark mentioned that he's going to be providing a list to Veterans Affairs Canada about the funding for the Legions. I'm wondering if he could table that list with the committee when it's completed.

**The Chair:** Mr. Clark.

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Absolutely. We are going to be completely transparent and accountable, and I'm happy to do that.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Thank you, sir.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I will allow the witnesses to leave now. I want to thank them all for attending and helping us with this study. As has been said many times over the last two hours, it is vitally important that we make sure these cornerstone organizations across the country continue not just to survive but thrive.

Thank you for helping us in that regard. Thank you very much, folks.

For members of the committee, I'll get you to hold on for a few minutes here and we'll give you a quick update on the timing of these meetings.

We are still public, so just keep that in mind.

We had a conversation at the end of the last meeting about our ability to go longer and getting as much time as possible for these witnesses. I had the opportunity to chat with a number of parties to find out the story about whether or not we can extend these meetings if we're interrupted by votes, as we were today.

All committee dates are not created equal is what I've discovered.

Basically, the bottom line is that on Mondays, we have a hard stop at 5:30. The reason is that we have a meeting after us at 6:30, and the folks need to get in to clean the room an hour before the meeting comes in. For example, today we have a justice committee meeting at 6:30, in the same room that you're in, Mr. Brassard, so

the technicians and all of the clerk staff need to get in. They will be new people who will be switching out, so they have to clean the space in order to do that.

On Wednesdays, we have a little more wiggle room. For example, if we don't get the meeting started until 4:30, we can go to 6:30. It's not ideal, but it is doable. We can capture the whole two hours for our committee, but it is a fairly hard stop at 6:30. We run into some technical issues with regard to timing for interpretation and things such as that.

So on Wednesdays we have a little bit more latitude, and on Mondays we do not. This is par for the course, unfortunately, for this time slot, whether we're involved in a hybrid version of Parliament or not. Those who have been around for a while know that Mondays and Wednesdays are often interrupted by votes.

That is the situation. I wonder if anybody has any questions.

MP Brassard, I believe you had a question.

• (1725)

**Mr. John Brassard:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I do appreciate your reaching out to me earlier today to discuss this.

I think what we need to do as a committee is perhaps leave it at the discretion of the chair and the clerk in terms of the number of witnesses we're getting in.

If we know, for example, that there are going to be continuous votes on Monday after QP, then we limit, like we did today. We had three today. In some cases, we may have two. Monday would be the option for those days. Secondly, if we are to get into a greater number of witnesses, Wednesday would work better for that if we are able to extend for half an hour in the event that one or more questions from members are desired beyond the 5:30 point, to be fair to the witnesses and to be fair to the members as well.

We have some pretty important work ahead of us, as we discussed last week. Wednesday may be a little more appropriate day to do that. That's my suggestion, Mr. Chair. Unless anybody has any further discussion on it, that will be our position on this.

**The Chair:** MP Desilets, you have the floor.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We have votes on Monday and Wednesday. One-and-a-half-hour meetings make no sense for our committee. With all due respect to my colleagues, I would not want to cut into the witnesses' time. When we know a bit in advance that we may go to a vote, I wish we could extend that day's meeting by half an hour.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** I will reiterate that on Monday we do not have the option to extend the meeting. On Wednesday, we absolutely have the option to extend the meeting. That's the gamble we have.



Yes, Mr. Brassard, we only had three witnesses today, but we actually had four scheduled. One had an emergency and had to back out at the last minute.

The clerk is looking at these, of course, and the clerk and I can sit down and take a look. Coming up, I believe we have five witnesses for Wednesday. We were already leaning towards Wednesday as being a higher-volume day for us because we have that latitude. We can definitely do that, Mr. Brassard, and keep that in mind moving forward.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Yes, Mr. Chair, just to clarify, I think we have votes tomorrow. We don't have any votes scheduled on Wednesday at this point, so we may be in a better position on Wednesday to deal with the five witnesses. We also only have a couple of weeks left in this session.

**The Chair:** That's right, and they'll rotate it.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Right, so that's why I said to keep it at your discretion and the discretion of the clerk to have a limited number

of witnesses on Monday, if possible, and then we can extend it on Wednesday, if we need to, going forward. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Yes, absolutely. I appreciate that.

Like I said, I just wanted to make sure that it was clear for everybody on this committee that it's not my desire to cut us short. We absolutely have that hard stop in about 30 seconds.

I see that MP Wagantall has a quick 30-second question.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** No, it's not a question. I think we've come to a decision here. I encourage us to accept that and adjourn the meeting.

**The Chair:** Fantastic. Not seeing any objections to that, I thank all of you for your work today. I appreciate it, folks. Have a good evening.

The meeting is adjourned

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