



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

43rd PARLIAMENT, 2nd SESSION

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 027

Friday, May 28, 2021

Chair: Mr. Bryan May



Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Friday, May 28, 2021

• (1355)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.)): Good afternoon, everyone. I will forgo the preamble. I just want to thank the witnesses for their patience. Technology is not always our friend.

I call this meeting to order. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on October 27, 2020, the committee is resuming its study of service dogs for veterans.

We're going to start the first hour with Audeamus Service Dogs Program. We're joined today by Brigadier-General Peter Holt, retired, and Corporal Christopher Lohnes from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

The next 10 to 15 minutes, gentlemen, are all yours.

Brigadier-General (Retired) Peter Holt (Audeamus Service Dog Program): Mr. Chair, thank you very much. I am honoured to be here in front of members of Parliament.

This is not my first rodeo. I used to appear in front of something called SCONDVA back in the day. Then, I was wearing a uniform and I was actually in a building, which I kind of liked, in a committee room, but this is virtual, so we just take what we get.

[Translation]

I also want to say that as a general in the Canadian Forces, I am able to speak French, and I like to do so. If you have any questions for me in French, I will be very happy to speak in the language of Molière.

[English]

I'm going to cut to the chase. That's one of the things you have to do when you're in uniform, and since we had a bit of technology I'll note that I am an engineer but my speciality is armoured vehicles not IT. If you need help with a tank, I can work with that, but with IT systems, maybe not so much. I have the same pains with them that you do.

Who are we? Audeamus is Latin for “we dare”. It's always handy to have your name in Latin, because then you don't have to translate it. The term is very accurate. We dare because we are an all volunteer, not-for-profit organization run by mostly veterans and some serving members of both the Canadian Armed Forces and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Our mission, if you want, because the military likes to have mission statements, is to assist veterans dealing with PTSD and operational stress injury return to a more normal civilian life. The means we choose to do that with is that we try to use psychiatric service dogs.

I'm extremely pleased with the mandate of your committee or the area you're focusing on right now. It is something that is desperately needed. I have served in uniform for far too many years. I am currently an honorary colonel, so I guess I'm still in uniform. I am very much interested in the welfare of the people who served with me and who are still serving. That's what my passion is.

How does it work? I am the chair of the board of directors. I must admit—I told you that I'm an army general with a speciality in engineering armoured vehicles—I can't say I know a lot about dogs, except that I love them, but I know about veterans. I've lived through many of the experiences that they've lived through in some of the wonderful places that Canada has sent us to, and we won't talk about that.

On my board, I tend to have a mixture of, again, serving and retired folks who served in uniform with either the Canadian Armed Forces or the Mounties. Our head trainer is Corporal Chris Lohnes. He's here with us today. He has had many years' experience training dogs on the force, and you'll hear from him about that.

We were going to be joined by Dr. Susan Brock, our mental health professional. However, and this is ironic, she was already planning to take a mental health break in a small cabin without any Internet connection this weekend, so she's on her way to that place right now. Trust me, knowing what mental health professionals have been going through the past while, I commend Susan. She was worried about this, and I said, no, I would read her comments into the record. Susan is an experienced clinical psychologist who has worked for many years with us and has worked with veterans for many years. That is her field of study.

Of course, Dr. Colleen Dell is going to be saying her own piece. She'll probably be joined by Dr. Darlene Chalmers of the University of Regina. They'll talk about the excellent research that's being done in the field of psychiatric service dogs.

I'll just focus on my piece. We've spent five years developing a mental health-focused curriculum with researchers and people like Chris and other people who have trained dogs, because we want to focus on the connection between the veteran and the dog.

That has been complicated since March of 2020. Hands-on training has been rather difficult to have. As a matter of fact, it's been expressly forbidden. We have been forced to do a bunch of adaptation, using online training and formats like this, which we have learned to work with. It's been trialed and we've tested it. Dr. Dell and Chris can talk a bit more about the details. You can work things through, even if you can't meet in person, as we are demonstrating today.

I guess one of the things that anyone who looks after taxpayers' money is concerned about is cost. One of the things I mentioned is that it's not for profit, and I'll say it again. We rely on generous donors. We often use rescue dogs, if you're interested, when it comes to paying a whole bunch of money for a dog. Chris can get into the details, but we can put a dog into a veteran's hands for between \$3,000 and \$5,000. As I said, we have generous people who donate money to us. We sometimes have dogs donated.

We do everything we can, because we are trying not to put a burden on the veteran. I'm very conscious of some of the veterans who come back and have to leave the military or the force and who don't have a heck of a lot of money. We try not to impose on them. We try to find ways to help them in that regard. I do not think it is right to take money from veterans. That's just another personal passion of mine. We can get into that in questions, if you want.

Let me cut to the chase. What's my key message? You always have to have a key message when you're speaking. When you're speaking to a parliamentary committee, I've learned that it helps. My key message is that I believe in building on research done in Canada. I'm very happy that Colleen is here. She can talk more about the details of the research. We should never be shy about it. I've worn the uniform of Canada in a lot of different places around the world. I've never been shy about where I came from or what Canada brings. In this case, I would suggest that we have a world-class approach to dealing with the challenges of veterans with PTSD or, if you prefer, operational stress injury. Veterans we've sent off into places of difficulty have come back not as well as they were when they left.

There's a secret sauce, if you will, to our organization. When I joined the military many years ago, I was taught to work in teams. I was taught to have a battle buddy.

[Translation]

In Quebec, we say "*compagnon de combat*".

[English]

The translation may not be perfect, but we spoke our own jargon in the army, and that was what I learned—*compagnon de combat*. Your battle buddy is with you. You look after him or her and they look after you. In a very strange way—well, not a strange way at all—the battle buddy for our veterans is a bit furry compared with the previous battle buddy, but that's okay. The same principle applies. It's a team. It's working in teams. Canadians are very good at working in teams. That is something I was proud of in my time in those strange places I ended up, some of them pretty hot and dusty. I'm proud of it now. That is the focus we have.

Again, I am not an expert on training dogs, nor am I an expert on researching human-animal interaction. We have those experts, for-

tunately, on the call with us. I am, however, an expert on veterans. I can see the difference it makes in the veterans' lives who have a battle buddy to assist them. It's just a different one in a different context. Really, it is integral that we teach our people to work within the team and as part of the team. That is a saving grace, if you would.

• (1400)

The whole service dog team, as you will hear in more detail, is what sets us apart. It is a really important thing for building on what I know the training of our people in uniform is based on—the whole team approach.

I'm just trying to figure out how to do this. I have Susan Brock's testimony, which of course needs to be read into the record. I have to pretend I'm a clinical psychologist, I guess. Maybe, to get you away from listening to me, it would be good to switch you over to somebody who knows about dogs, Corporal Chris Lohnes. I know that Chris has some words to say about the hands-on and now on-screen training we do.

I don't know, Mr. Chair, if you want to break up our testimony. There are three parts to it.

• (1405)

The Chair: If you have opening remarks, please make them now. You have about five more minutes, Chris.

As a suggestion—and this is up to you, of course—if there is written testimony from the witness who wasn't able to attend, it could be submitted to us in writing and we can share it with committee members to speed things up a bit today.

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: Good.

The Chair: Mr. Lohnes.

Corporal Christopher Lohnes (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Audeamus Service Dog Program): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to present today.

We work with individuals who have PTSD, TBI, OSI and physical limitations due to their injuries.

The premise of our program is "Are you present? Are you safe?" If you're present, you have the awareness of your surroundings and are capable of being safe. If you are present and safe, you have the timing to reward your potential service dog to develop skills, routines and rituals. This allows the ability to connect as one with your potential service dog. The daily routines help you regain a sense of worth.

Our program develops connection-based activities and training that fosters the reclaiming of the injured veteran or first responder's life. Matching the veteran with a service dog that is complementary to them reinforces a connection to caring for the dog through daily routines and walks. It's an integral component of our program.

You may not know Karen Pryor, who conducted research in the 1970s around shaping and marker signals by training dolphins. The dolphins are trained by teaching the end through a reward marker. This allowed the researchers to learn which behaviours were reward based and how, with no reward, behaviours became minimal. Many people do not realize that positive marking behaviours were led by this researcher and how she contributed to animal training in the world.

I've been using this approach for over 30 years with the RCMP police dog service, and I've spent eight years training service dogs with injured people with PTSD, OSI, TBI and physical injuries in both Canada and Ukraine. Karen Pryor's finding is key to injured veterans and first responders. The marker for them is feeling present and gaining the ability to function through reward, which is their service dog's connection for supporting them.

How do we do this approach in training? We begin with a connection base, where the injured person connects to a non-judgmental dog. This fosters connection within the service dog training through small increments of positive and attainable goals. This leads to regaining connection and engagement with family and friends and, slowly, engagement in the community.

What have we learned through the research we've put into practice? Having a holistic environment, where you are with nature, fosters the ability for the injured person to have a positive state of mind. Within this environment, routines and rituals are developed for the injured person that are unique to them, to learn how to do activities with their potential service dog. Routine building fosters the injured brain to make reconnections and to develop improved long-term and short-term memories.

Additionally, we have learned that when a person has been injured, over years of exposure, their brain injury generates different learning requirements in the amount of time required to learn and develop skills. Learners go at their own pace, and they move through the program as they develop. We are supportive. In many cases, people take over a year to get through our program, and we have several people who have taken up to two years.

The service dog is part of the overall treatment and augments conventional treatments, such as the person's ability, through talk therapy, to last for longer periods without shutting down from triggers. For example, if triggered 15 minutes into a session, they will do a regulating activity that we have taught them and can return to the session for a longer period and improve the success rate of their treatment.

Due to COVID, we spent over a year developing the ability to deliver online Zoom training in line with our program. This was done by working with the research to determine best practices and how long learning and connection can be done, and the parameters required within Zoom. How to foster connection, how long you can train and how many skills you can be taught at one time were ex-

amined. We learned that using the safety of the home and making connections with the training team and participants' cohorts is a critical component of the program.

We now know that having 12 to 15 pre-learning lesson modules are required for someone to start the program. That means we've determined that there are 15 things that someone needs to learn or be able to do before they can be successful in training a service dog.

- (1410)

Connection is established through learning how to touch your dog, and the dog learning how to want to be touched. The reward increases in the presence for both by improving the timing and the use of the handler to know when to be present, and for the dog to want to do tasks for that handler or user.

There's working through feelings of anxiety and having tunnel vision during the various drills and skills that we work on. The user of the dog returning to being present makes it possible for them to feel safe and have awareness of their surroundings.

Obedience is used to develop the connection and understanding of being present and safe through the dog. Obedience is not the driving force of our program. We are not a 52-week obedience program. We use obedience to foster a connection. The result is an obedient dog that is working, present and safe.

The Chair: Thank you. That brings us to the end of the time for opening remarks.

We're going to jump right into questions.

Up first, I believe we have MP Brassard for six minutes, please.

Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you both for your presentation.

I really want to focus on the issue of standards.

I guess my question is for either to General Holt or Mr. Lohnes. Were you part of the study group or stakeholder group that was involved with the Canada standards board study that was being done on the standardization of service dogs in Canada?

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: I'll lead off and then I'll let Chris jump in, sir, if you don't mind.

My predecessor was involved. I took over as chair after the regrettable falling apart of that initiative. From what I gather, there was a lack of agreement within the committee about standards. In a strange way, that led us to go back and focus on doing standards ourselves, based on research. Chris will be able to talk more about that.

You're right. That initiative, which everybody had high hopes for, did not work. The details of why it didn't work were before my time. Sometimes when you face difficulties, you have to regroup and take a different path. That forced us to go back and look at the whole concept of standards and look at how we were going to base them. We went with an evidence-based and research-based approach to doing standards.

Chris referred to a little bit of... There's been a lot of research on animal-human interaction. The application of it—you'll hear from Dr. Colleen Dell in the next hour—has been supported by Health Canada in quite a large study. We've taken part in that. We feel that we can build on that research base to have a coherent, logical and consistent model for standards. We actually have something in the works with the Province of Saskatchewan, which is proceeding but hasn't got there yet.

Again, I do the big picture. Chris can talk about the details.

• (1415)

Cpl Christopher Lohnes: Thank you.

Yes, I was part of the standards board committee. At the time, I was part of another organization. The falling apart of that board to develop a standard happened because there appeared to be different interests in what a standard should be. Then, from what I understand, a complaint was put forward to the Competition Bureau, which stopped the board from functioning.

Mr. John Brassard: Chris, out of curiosity, what were some of those differences of opinion that you spoke about?

Cpl Christopher Lohnes: For an example, in what detail should the training of the dog be? What should be included in the standard? For example, there were parties at the table that thought very strongly that there should be a breeding program attached to the standard. I pointed out to them in one meeting that the RCMP didn't start with a breeding program and then develop a standard. It took us a while to develop a very strong standard that is world-renowned. We've gone through three different breeding programs in the RCMP to the present one, where we're very successful.

There were some things like that going on in the board that I think made it difficult for it to come to a baseline standard.

Mr. John Brassard: Based on your experience as the volunteer chair for the organization, or that of General Holt, what do you think some of those standards should look like if we were to develop or engage in a national standard for service dogs for PTSD for veterans?

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: I'll start off, and again I'll pass it to Chris.

As I said, there are existing standards. The RCMP, for example, have a very good standard, but they don't deal as much with the mental health issues, obviously.

What you need is sort of a... I hate to use the word "synergy". I know it's too often used. You need, perhaps, an amalgamation of existing standards that focus on dogs that do other things. You also must bring in the mental health component, and that can only be brought in, once again, by using very focused research.

As I say, luckily Health Canada has come to the rescue by assigning funding to research projects in this field. That has led us to a number of iterations, the last of which is in the hands of the Province of Saskatchewan, as we speak.

We have 10 provinces and three territories, and you're well aware of that. Given this federal structure of our wonderful country, the division of who does what to whom is what it is. We find that working through, in this case, the Province of Saskatchewan, because coincidentally the research is taking place in Saskatchewan, we have found a pathway there. The national standard came adrift, as my naval friends would say.

[*Translation*]

Life is a war.

[*English*]

That's the other thing we'd say in the military. It happens.

Mr. John Brassard: Chris, do you have anything to add to this, as far as a national standard is concerned, on top of what General Holt said?

The Chair: That's time, but I'll give you the opportunity for a brief answer, please.

Cpl Christopher Lohnes: I would suggest that if you're going to look at service dogs, then it has to be specific to service dog testing. A well-trained, obedient dog is not a service dog, but a service dog is a well-trained, obedient dog because of the outcome of doing the work.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you.

The Chair: Now for six minutes we have MP Lalonde, please.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.): Thank you very much for taking the time to meet with us today.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for your patience with the technology.

[*English*]

I want to say thank you for the great work Audeamus is doing to help our veterans and, as well, the first responders and war correspondents.

Having seen and heard some of the coverage of your team's work, I appreciate the evidence-based and holistic approach you take when it comes to providing assistance to veterans in need. I was very impressed to know that it's run by and for injured veterans. I'm also very impressed by your resilience and certainly your quick action in the repositioning to continue to train our dogs.

My question is this. I believe and I understand that you have also worked internationally, specifically with Germany, to develop service dog programs for veterans in other countries. I understand that Germany doesn't yet have specific policies on service dogs. Is there anything that you feel they, or possibly any other country, have done differently that could help us with our Canadian veterans?

• (1420)

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: Once again I'll go to Chris. Chris has worked with Germany and Ukraine. There are other countries that have valued our approach to doing things. I'll let Chris speak to that, because he's been there.

Cpl Christopher Lohnes: I've been working since 2015 with an organization that's based out of Canada—Hero's Companion—led by Kalyna Kardash. We went to build a service dog program in Ukraine, but the culture there is extremely different so we morphed it into a therapy dog program, with the therapy dogs doing many service dog types of tasks with the veterans. When we first started there, we weren't allowed on any hospital grounds. There is now an MOU with three leading hospitals in Ukraine for treatment there.

On my third visit to Ukraine in 2017, we stopped off in Germany. Through a contact with one of our researchers in B.C., we were able to meet with the head psychiatrist for injured veterans in Germany. We started a dialogue with them and opened the door for them to gain information from us to help with their program. We're still working on building a relationship with them.

The relationship in Ukraine is extremely strong. We have 25 handlers in that country and they're having very good results there.

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

Mr. Brassard, I was asking you—somewhat—about the history behind Veterans Affairs, and certainly about the current lack of a definite policy on service dogs. I'm not sure who will answer, but if the department were to develop one, how would this impact the work that you do? Do you think this will improve your ability to serve veterans?

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: Once again, I'll lead off.

I come from a technical background—engineering—and open standards are what we want. What worries me is getting standards that are closed and just focused on one particular group. That's a challenge. We believe in open standards, where there's no “you have to have this particular colour of vest on and you have to have this particular logo on your uniform or on your dog”. I'm being silly there but what I'm saying is it's openness, an open standard. That's what we have been working on in Saskatchewan, for example, to have something that's open, that anybody can apply to. Again, it's based on what we've learned. As a matter of fact, if you look at international activities, we're trying to be open and share this.

Looking after injured veterans is not just a Canadian problem, it's a problem that is prevalent in quite a few nations. I think we have some very good ideas here in Canada, and we should maybe let other people in on them. There are no secrets here. We're trying to look after people who have served and who need assistance. It's something we should do in an open manner.

Chris, we've talked about this. Do you have any more to add?

Cpl Christopher Lohnes: I would suggest that if you're looking at a standard, it has to be more than an obedience- or task-oriented, directed standard. It's not “walk your dog down the street and turn around, turn left, turn right”. We've learned through doing the research—which backs up our own notion—that we have to take veterans and companion dogs through the different environments they function in, and in each one, ask whether the team is working together to make both of them safe, present and functional.

There have to be specific service dog tasking and mental health observations that say, “Yes, this is a service dog. It's not a comfort dog. It's not a companion dog. It's not a pet.”

• (1425)

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: Thank you.

The Chair: That's time, I'm afraid.

Up next we have MP Desilets for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

My thanks to the witnesses. Your knowledge is very useful to us.

My first question is for you, Mr. Lohnes.

We are all trying to use the best practices, the best evidence and the best science. My understanding is that a number of provinces across Canada are putting forward certain practices, and Saskatchewan is setting an example for us to follow.

Are you able to compare the provinces? Do any provinces stand out in particular with respect to service dogs? If so, how do they stand out?

[*English*]

Cpl Christopher Lohnes: I can answer by saying that Nova Scotia, Alberta and B.C. follow a standard that is obedience-based. Their certification or testing for that is about 45 minutes to an hour long, from the people I've spoken to who have gone through it, and there appears to be no mental health component on their side of things.

New Brunswick follows the disabilities act, and as long as your dog is functioning within that, they're supportive of service dogs in that province.

In Ontario, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, the Territories and Yukon, from what I understand, we are putting forward an idea to the Saskatchewan government for what we believe is an open, attainable standard for service dogs. I understand MSAR is working with the Manitoba government. I'm not sure what's going on in Ontario right now, because there are a number of varying interests there.

[Translation]

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: May I add something, Mr. Desilets?

Mr. Luc Desilets: Sure. Go ahead.

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: As I said, we need to have an open mind when it comes to standards. Let me repeat that what matters is mental health.

I see soldiers with whom I have worked for many years who are not the same as they were 10 years ago, before they were deployed to Afghanistan or wherever. So it is important to consider the mental health aspect.

We are looking for a good dog, who can follow commands and all that, but I think you have to balance the mental health of the veteran with the behaviour of the dog in terms of obedience.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Would you say that we are leaning more towards a certain type of service dog for therapeutic purposes in Canada?

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: As you have heard, in Ukraine and Germany, they are used for therapeutic purposes, but that is another area.

We sort of use them for therapeutic purposes, but the dogs are also owned by, and partners of, the veterans. They are battle buddies, as I said. As a veteran, I understand that model. The dog is part of your soul. I totally understand what a battle buddy is. If we use that idea to convince our veterans, and sometimes it's hard, they're going to understand it one hundred percent.

Unfortunately, Dr. Brock is not here, but she has a therapy dog because she is a psychologist and it is a perfect fit for her. However, a service dog is a little different.

I hope I have made that clear.

• (1430)

Mr. Luc Desilets: Yes, you are very clear. Your French is excellent.

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: Thank you.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Earlier, you referred to open standards.

Wasn't that sort of related to the problem at the Canadian General Standards Board?

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: Yes, it was.

[English]

Chris, did you get that?

[Translation]

You are exactly right, Mr. Desilets.

[English]

Chris, it's the question of the standards. There are some people who want the standards to be closed rather than open. That's the issue of just wanting an obedient dog rather than a psychiatric service dog. Isn't that right?

Cpl Christopher Lohnes: If I could add in, and this may help a bit, we know from the research that dogs will help you, no matter what. A pet will help you. However, what we found in the research is that veterans going through the program and learning with their dogs, going through all the struggles, develop new pathways in their brains.

If we're truly looking at helping veterans regain some kind of—for lack of a better word—normalcy, reconnecting pathways in the brain to retain long-term and short-term memory improvements is a key ability for them to once again be able to function within the family, with friends and in their community.

I'm dealing with an MLA in Saskatchewan right now who was given a fully trained—supposedly fully trained—service dog. When I met him and started working with him, he had no idea of some of the things that his dog was doing, because there was no work put into him. He was just given a supposedly fully trained dog.

If you don't know what the possibilities are, how do you know what that dog can do for you, if you haven't learned about it?

The Chair: Thank you. I'm afraid that's time.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: MP Blaney is next for six minutes, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

I thank the witnesses so much for their important testimony today.

I have to confess that, even though this is only our second day on this study, I am feeling a bit of frustration. I felt it already because so many veterans have talked to me about the specific challenges that they face, for example, receiving a dog that isn't trained to support them in the way they need to be supported. I have heard from veterans who have a service dog, but there are no national standards that would make it easier for them to say, "Yes, you must rent me that house. You say no dogs. This is not just a pet. This is something so much more."

My concern is that, without national standards, we don't have the veteran focus at the end. We need to make sure they get the services, and that should be our focus.

I have some questions, and again, thank you so much for your testimony. You talked about standards, and the standards you have. Could you tell us a bit about what they are? Are they training standards? Are they conduct standards for members, or are they a mixture of both?

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: I may be accused of being disrespectful, but the answer is yes.

I'm sorry; my sense of humour has been my downfall.

You're absolutely right. The dog and the veteran become a team. We identify them as service dog teams. From the times I've been on deployment, I know that your team modifies your own behaviour, and you modify the team's behaviour.

It's hard to describe. If you saw.... That's the advantage of seeing what happens to some of these veterans who have difficulty getting out their front doors. Once we go through the training, they're shopping at Walmart. Mind you, they can't do that now, but they can get out and do things. They're out in public. They have confidence. It's marvellous. They're back to being the people I recognized when they worked for me.

You're right. It's a combination of the two, and yes, there's the frustration of not having national standards. We're going through the province, because the national standard thing didn't quite work.

I was so thrilled when I saw what you're working on in this committee, because you're exactly in the right space. This is what needs to be done, so congratulations to the committee for tackling this.

Hopefully, it's not going to be Don Quixote-ish. I hope there's not a big windmill that's going to hit you, but this is so important. It is a national problem—no, a national challenge. It's a challenge. We don't have problems; we have challenges.

• (1435)

Cpl Christopher Lohnes: If I could add, you asked a question specific to our program.

In order for someone to go through our certification, we don't test; we certify. Because of the brain injury, we don't know how long it's going to take someone to get through the program. You may be able to get through things in eight months, whereas it would take a veteran 12 months to do it because we're reformatting how they learn and remember things.

Of course we're going to have some base stuff that we do around some obedience skills, but the key thing is not to do the obedience skills. It's seeing how they are connected. Is the dog looking for direction from the handler and looking to see what it has to do for support? How is the timing and presence for both?

When we start moving into the full certification, it's three days long for us. It's three days long for a very important reason. For someone to be able to function at home with their friends or neighbours or in the community, they have to be able to manage their triggers, and some of them can be very bad. How they manage their

triggers is through the skills and the development of the skills that we've shown them.

During our process, yes, we take them for a walk here and there, in different places. We take them in the environments that they need to function in. If you never go to Costco, I'm not taking you to Costco because you're never going to go there, but if you're going to your doctor's office five days a week, we're going to do some work there to see how you're functioning there. How are you in the doctor's waiting room? How are you in the doctor's office?

It's always looking at whether the team is present. If they're present, they're safe. If they're not present or their timing is off, then they can't see their surroundings so they're not safe in that environment. That means we have to go back to the drawing board and help them more for that specific environment.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: That's really helpful.

I'm wondering two things. First, have you ever had your standards reviewed by a third party, or are they just internal? That third party is really the next step if we're going to have a more national standard. I'm curious about that.

Second, can we get a copy of your standards? Do you have something that the committee could actually review and make sure it's represented in our report?

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: I'll answer the last question first. I believe I sent a copy of the standard, the Saskatchewan one, to MP Cathay Wagantall.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: If we could get it sent to the clerk, that would mean that all of us would get it. I would really appreciate that.

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: I can't remember. Did I send it to the clerk? I'll make sure.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: I'll go through that email and make sure that Mr. Jolicoeur, who is your clerk, gets it. I will make sure of that.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: Now, the—

The Chair: I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask for a brief answer, please.

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: Okay.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: It was on the third party review.

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: We are in the process of going through that, and our next step is a meeting that is the week after next. We're doing it through the Canadian Accreditation Council.

Cpl Christopher Lohnes: Yes, we're going through an accreditation process, not only for our organization but for our mental health learning package and for our trainers' development.

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: Yes, we're basically getting our organization accepted as a.... It's basically a sort of stamp on our organization, to say that it is able to do that. We see that as a verification of our standard.

I'm sorry, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: That's okay. Thank you very much.

Up next is MP Doherty for five minutes, please.

Mr. Todd Doherty (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to our guests.

I wanted to make a comment to my colleagues who are here, just in case they've never seen the impact that these dogs can have. I'll take you back to the last session when my Bill C-211, regarding a national framework on PTSD, was at third reading. We had first responders and veterans who were here in the gallery waiting for the presentation at the Senate, basically to make sure that it passed.

There was a first responder who brought their service dog. Obviously, the emotions and my anxiety were high. This service dog actually came over and laid across my feet. What an amazing.... It's so emotional, you know. The first responder came over to me and said that the dog had sensed my anxiety and had come to try to calm me down.

I've also seen first responders and veterans with service dogs that can sense just a slight change in their owner's demeanour, and then will actually start guiding the veteran or the first responder out of the area where the anxiety is being felt. This is something that is critical.

It's very frustrating because I've seen first-hand the benefits that these animals bring.

Mr. Holt and Mr. Lohnes, you spoke about B.C., Nova Scotia, Alberta and Saskatchewan, which have developed standards. Are these standards something that we can adopt nationally?

• (1440)

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: What you'll find is that there are differences between them. What would be useful would be to have a comparison done of the standards. I would certainly offer up and will make sure that your clerk has a copy of our standard.

As far as I'm concerned, compare away. The sooner we get to a national standard the better. As long as it is open and doesn't say that you must have a particular colour of standard or shape of standard or whatever, then I think that's perfect—absolutely right. If we could build on what the provinces have done and what we are doing with the provinces and different organizations, then so much the better.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Yes, I don't think we should let fear and bureaucratic process really slow this. The impact and the need is so desperate. The need is desperate and the impact is immeasurable.

We talked about two different types of training as well. I'm wondering if you feel like you've had enough time to actually accurately talk about the two different types of training. I would like to give you the opportunity to really expand on that, if possible, for my colleagues to understand.

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: Chris, why don't you can take this, the obedience part, but also the importance of reinforcing with the veteran, because it is supporting the veteran. I'll just say that all of what we do is to support those people who are in need, those veterans.

Cpl Christopher Lohnes: I would guess that you'd have to look at various organizations throughout Canada. Let's put it this way: All, I think, have a good premise to help veterans, but it also goes to what your knowledge is on what's possible.

Many of them are obedience-based. Is that good? Yes, you have an obedient dog that can function in public, but is that obedient dog actually doing things specific to that veteran, tailored to them? Not every veteran would have a recovery to a trigger that's the same as others', but the dog would act similarly.

For example, you may need your dog to jump on you to break your trigger and train of thought, where I may need my dog to lick my hand. The way the dog interacts with you to bring you back to being present would be different in different circumstances. In doing the training on connection, the two learn how to work together and what works for both of them.

Mr. Todd Doherty: And build that trust.

Cpl Christopher Lohnes: They build that trust, for sure, and that trust is the base for everything. If you don't have a solid base on how that connective piece works, it's very hard, I think, to have a service dog that's going to be functional for that veteran in any environment that they want to go into.

Can someone take an obedient dog into most environments? For sure, but an injured veteran poses a whole new circumstance, because you don't know when they're going to be triggered and you don't know what's going to cause it all the time. However, you work on the different types of regulating, the recovery things, that will help them with their dog come back to being present so that they can safely, for example, go home.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I have a quick question because I understand, Mr. Chair, my time is very short.

The Chair: Go on.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Would that speak to the difficulty in coming up with a national standard, because not any one case is the same?

• (1445)

Cpl Christopher Lohnes: No, I don't think it matters how cases are different. It matters how you look at the certification process. Are you certifying an obedient dog or are you certifying a mental health support dog?

Mr. Todd Doherty: Right.

BGen (Ret'd) Peter Holt: I will add that it's the team. The veteran and the dog are a team.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Right. Thank you.

The Chair: Great, and that's a good point to end on. I'm afraid that is the end of our first half of today's meeting.

I want to thank you, Mr. Holt and Mr. Lohnes, for joining us here today and helping us with this study.

I'm going to suspend for a very brief two-minute break to allow the clerk to do the sound checks for the second hour. I will hand it over to the clerk, and we will suspend for two minutes.

Thank you.

• (1445)

(Pause)

• (1445)

The Chair: Okay, we are good to come back.

First of all, I apologize to the witnesses joining us now for the technical delays, but I appreciate your sticking with us today.

Appearing as individuals, I have Colleen Anne Dell, professor and centennial enhancement chair in one health and wellness, University of Saskatchewan; Darlene Chalmers, associate professor and associate dean of undergraduate studies; and joining us from Wounded Warriors Canada, Philip Ralph, director, health services.

I thank you all for joining us. I understand that Dr. Dell and Dr. Chalmers will be combining their opening statements for a total of 10 minutes.

I will turn it over to you to start us off in the second half of our meeting.

Dr. Colleen Anne Dell (Professor and Centennial Enhancement Chair, One Health and Wellness, University of Saskatchewan, As an Individual): Great. Thank you so much.

I want to start by acknowledging the land that we're sharing across the country today and any animals that you might have around you, given that a lot of us are working from home.

Thank you for this opportunity to share the expertise from our office. For five years, we've been doing research with service dogs specifically, and for 10 years with animals in a general therapeutic manner.

We're going to make five key points today and hopefully they will help contribute to the committee's discussion. I want you to keep in mind what MP Doherty said in his observations about the emotion attached to service dogs, because we're going to return to that. There's something really important to note about it.

Our first point is the research question that's really important to our team: What is the extent to which service dogs are beneficial to veterans' wellness and how are they beneficial? This is similar to the past work of our office on the role of indigenous culture in helping people heal from addictions. It's about how it works; it's not about questioning if it works. That would be disrespectful. This approach also recognizes the lived and living experience alongside scientific evidence, which we know is emerging in the service dog field.

In asking this research question, we know that service dogs are one distinct category of canines with a job. However, they're also domesticated animals that live with us in our households. The domestication of dogs has occurred over thousands of years, and there are really solid implications from this that we can't negate. For example, the vast majority of Canadian households identify and treat pets as family members. This is even more likely among veterans

who are paired with a service dog. This cannot be lost in the discussion. We often refer to this as a human-animal relationship or bond, or in academia we call it "zooeyia", and this connection is incredibly powerful. Even in the pandemic we could see it beyond veterans.

That's the important question to us.

Second, research is still emerging, as we know, on service dogs and their benefits, and our team has produced quite a fair amount here in Canada over the past several years. What we've concluded to date is that this issue is very complex and that service dogs are a source of personalized support and a complement to treatment.

How does this happen? Service dogs are sentient beings with the ability to bond with humans, and they're task-trained to have technical skills to assist veterans. It's in this former role that service dogs generally provide what humans cannot or choose not to provide. We found this in our work with people in recovery generally from problematic substance use with their pets. It's also emerging in our current study with veterans.

We focus on substance use because it is a high risk factor—substance-use disorder from having a PTSD diagnosis. In a couple of our findings, we found that service dogs are a source of personalized support, as I said, and a complement to treatment. In a 2016 qualitative study, we saw that they assisted with decreasing the problematic use of substances and prescribed medications. They also supported physical health, a sense of psychological acceptance, a social connection and a spiritual purpose, which today we refer to as "moral injury".

In an exploratory study in 2017, we identified a decrease in problematic substance abuse again, decrease in PTSD symptoms and a decrease or stabilization in use of medications that usually have reported negative effects, such as psychiatric medications. In phase one of our pilot study in 2019, we saw a reduction in problematic alcohol and opioid use and PTSD symptoms.

Underlying all of this is the human-animal bond. It's not just the technical skills the dogs have. This is what's emerging from the American research as well. Right now we have a SUAP grant from Health Canada, and we're working alongside 12 service dog organizations to help them learn about problematic substance use with their veterans, to use evidence-based practices and to look at peer support.

We have done several studies with veterans and have a lot of findings from them that we can discuss later, but I'm going to turn it over to Darlene now.

• (1450)

Dr. Darlene Chalmers (Associate Professor and Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies, University of Regina, As an Individual): Thanks, Colleen.

Thank you, everyone, for allowing us to be here and share with you.

I'm going to present to you three more points.

The first one is just building on and talking further about service dogs being a personalized support and a complement treatment. Service dogs perform technical tasks for the veteran. For example, interrupting a nightmare is one form of task. In our research, we consistently hear that service dogs are a source of support in veterans' wellness. We often learn that this is because some veterans are not receiving adequate formal support elsewhere.

In our experience, service dogs and animals generally can be an entry point for relationship development with an individual seeking and receiving care. In this way, the service dog is one pathway into veterans' lives. Thinking about that, professionals working with veterans need to be aware of the role of service dogs generally for PTSD and how to incorporate service dogs into their practice.

Service dogs can also be a barrier for veterans seeking and receiving care, and these concerns reside primarily at the systems level. A veteran with a service dog being denied counselling or service at a counselling office is a concern. A veteran being denied housing because of a service dog is a concern. There seems to be no standard experience across the country. There's a need for health care and allied professionals to be educated about the role of service dogs and the benefits in veterans' lives.

This leads to the fourth point, which is around standards. There is certainly a need for leadership in this area. While on our end, we're doing the research to establish the efficacy of service dogs and how they assist with the wellness of veterans, there appears to be a void and conflict as well as confusion about standards across the provinces and territories. The lack of consensus with the Canadian General Standards Board process several years ago has likely had many unintended and negative consequences. The lack of national standards has resulted in individual provinces taking assorted approaches to service dog public access. It is also leading to individualized policies being developed by organizations that are not experts in this area. For example, a university campus might be doing that.

We're making this statement to offer the insight that part of the lack of consensus during that process may have been that standards are trying to be made for dogs that are not doing standardized jobs. For some service dog organizations, the job of the service dog is more around the bond, that human-animal bond, and less the technical skills and vice versa, so service dogs are not trained in standardized ways.

A caution from our perspective about standards development is the need for a made-in-Canada approach that fits within our context, for example, provincial and territorial human rights service dog policies. As well as our point, the service dog organizations vary significantly in the programs that they offer and how service

dogs are trained. These and other significant points need to be considered in standards development.

That all said, the goal of each service dog training program is likely very similar in intent, and that's to improve veteran wellness.

Our fifth and final point is linked to the need for standards. It's around our research team's adoption of a patient-oriented approach to our research in the area of veterans, PTSD and service dogs. This translated for us into the first veteran group, Audeamus, with Mr. Lohnes, who was speaking earlier. It was suggested that we as researchers really needed to train a service dog alongside the veterans in the program as part of an informed research process. A key finding for us from that process and based on our experiences is making sure that service dog welfare is at the centre of our conversations.

Service dogs are not tools. They're not devices for human welfare, even though they are complements in veterans' treatment and supports to them. They provide both technical skill and the benefits of the human-animal bond. As one researcher, van Houtert, and others wrote in 2018, they concluded that the lack of knowledge regarding the welfare of psychiatric service dogs creates risks for both human and animal welfare.

I'll end it there. Thank you.

• (1455)

The Chair: Thank you. That's exactly on time. I very much appreciate that.

Now we go over to Mr. Philip Ralph, director of health services with Wounded Warriors Canada.

You have five minutes, sir.

Captain(N) (Retired) Philip Ralph (Director, Health Services, Wounded Warriors Canada): Good afternoon. It's my pleasure to address the committee today on behalf of Wounded Warriors Canada as your committee continues to examine the ways to better support Canada's veterans and their families. Before I address the specific topic of service dogs for veterans, I believe it would be helpful to present a broader perspective on the mission of Wounded Warriors Canada.

Wounded Warriors Canada today stands as a national mental health service provider for veterans, first responders and their families. Our services offer culturally appropriate group-based interventions that are clinically facilitated and grounded in evidence that draws upon leading trauma research. In addition, we offer programs designed to create trauma-informed workplaces. These 10 clinically facilitated evidence-informed programs are at the heart of all that we do. Our investment in service dogs is in addition to these core programs.

Given that clinically facilitated evidence-informed programs are at the heart of what we do as a national mental health service provider, there is a simple question: Why has Wounded Warriors Canada invested approximately \$3 million for the provision of service dogs for veterans and first responders since 2013? The answer to us is simple. These investments are based on the life-changing effects that we have seen and that have been demonstrated in significant studies that have been produced in the last decade.

The finding of a study funded by Veterans Affairs Canada through Université Laval reaffirmed the efficacy of properly trained and well-behaved service dogs. Most recently, in 2020, Purdue University in the U.S. found that the task of disrupting episodes of anxiety ranked among the most important and often used tasks among service dogs.

The findings of a randomized trial study released on January 5, 2020, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs showed that participants paired with a service dog experienced a reduction in the severity of PTSD symptoms compared with participants paired with an emotional support dog, and had fewer suicidal behaviours and ideations, particularly 18 months post-pairing.

Wounded Warriors Canada funds providers that screen, intake, train and pair these amazing dogs with their handlers. Program eligibility for funding is measured against three core principles: one, the establishment of a consistent, defined, transparent and measurable national standard for all funded PTSD service dog providers irrespective of their province; two, formal recognition of all Wounded Warriors Canada funded service dog providers across the country that meet or exceed the standards that are published and are willing to work in a co-operative manner with other Wounded Warriors Canada funded service dog providers; and three, the implementation of a clinically informed set of prescriber guidelines applicable to all applicants for a PTSD service dog.

This process is seeing results. In November 2020, following a six-month, three-phase process established at our national service dogs conference, which was held in Victoria in February 2020, just before the country locked down because of the current pandemic, we welcomed Fire Team K-9's located in Pembroke, Ontario, as our latest probationary Wounded Warriors Canada funded service dog provider.

Due to the ongoing support of the veteran and family well-being fund, Wounded Warriors Canada is currently looking at adding another provider, which will help veterans in the Meaford area and in the province of New Brunswick. We anticipate that the review process will be completed by the second quarter of this fiscal year. We will continue to seek providers that are willing to work collaboratively within the framework of our three key principles.

Our program would not be at the maturity that it is without the amazing and ongoing support of Canadians. Having said that, we remain amazed by the commitment and professionalism of our providers, who continue to lead and set an example in working in a collaborative and congenial manner in an often siloed space.

I know that the committee will hear from Dani Forbes, the executive director of National Service Dogs in the coming days. We are proud to have National Service Dogs as one of our funded

providers. Dani did outstanding work on the Canadian General Standards Board standards committee. She is someone we rely on as a leader in training our nation, along with Mike Annan of Vancouver Island Compassion Dogs. Both Dani's and Mike's advice is key when we look to add a provider to our group.

• (1500)

Dani's and Mike's organizations have gone through the further rigorous steps to become ADI- accredited as well.

I hope the committee will listen carefully to Dani's words, especially with respect to standards, when she appears before the committee, as I'm just hearing today how important this standards piece is over and over again.

Both Médric and Jocelyn Cousineau have recently been awarded the meritorious service medal for their leadership in this space. This is both well deserved and long overdue. We are proud to have Paws Fur Thought as part of our group. They were among the first to recognize the need for prescriber guidelines, and their wise counsel is invaluable.

While I look forward to the committee's questions, I do have one ask of government, and with this ask I will conclude my remarks.

There is a glaring and obvious need for national standards when it comes to service dogs in Canada. We as an organization applaud and appreciate the earlier efforts of the Government of Canada to establish those standards through the Canadian General Standards Board process. The committee worked hard; however, the need for unanimous consensus proved to be its Achilles heel.

When it comes to standards, we work with our own published set of standards, which are informed by the hard work done at CGSB and provinces like British Columbia that have established standards. However, it is ultimately the role of government to establish standards. Service dogs are about the health and wellness of our veterans, first responders and ultimately the general population.

There's one thing this current pandemic and history informs us of. When it comes to the health of Canadians in general and veterans in particular, the government must lead from the front.

Thank you.

• (1505)

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir.

Leading us off with questions, we have Mr. Fillmore for five minutes.

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

Thanks to the witnesses for making themselves available today and for sharing their expertise and knowledge. It's very much appreciated.

I'm not sure whether you were able to listen in on the first half of our meeting today, where we heard the wonderful testimony from General Holt and Corporal Lohnes from Audeamus. It was fascinating and enlightening. I find some connection and overlap with the testimony from professors Dell and Chalmers, and I want to dwell there for a moment.

The picture that is becoming clear to me is that there's a great complexity here. We are needing to train the trainers who train the dog. We're needing to train the dog, and then we're needing to train the veteran and the dog together so that they pair successfully. I think there were prescriber standards. There is a lot around this.

I'll go back to one thing that Corporal Lohnes talked about. He opened his remarks by talking about this fundamental question: Are you present and are you safe? I regret I wasn't able to ask him to unpack that a little bit, but I wonder if, at a foundational level, you can talk about that question and how the dog's presence in that question affects the answer.

I'll ask that to either Professor Dell or Professor Chalmers.

Dr. Colleen Anne Dell: I'll start, and I'll give it to Darlene.

Absolutely, and what we know about the dog itself is that dogs live in the moment. Dogs are very present. That's what happens when the veterans are with the dog, and we see that in all types of contexts. Even when we're working in prison with dogs, it helps people be in the moment.

When you are working with the veteran and they are working with the dog who is in the moment, they are also taking that on. They're also doing things like tactile touch. That's going to help them calm down, or whatever it is that the dog's trained to do, and the veteran, as you were saying there, is trained to do that at that time as well.

The dog is not this big magical thing that's going to fix everything. The dog is a complement to the other services that are going on in that veteran's life, and this is what we say all the time.

I'm going to slip this in before I give it to Darlene. The welfare of that dog is absolutely essential, and I think we always need to start from that, because it's not a tool.

Dr. Darlene Chalmers: I'll add to that. Thanks, Colleen.

The idea of being present and safe, as Colleen mentioned, being in the moment and focused helps to create some additional safety for that veteran.

I think about the training that we've done with Audeamus, and being out in the public and being able to experience that as we were training service dogs alongside veterans. Those dogs are also providing a support, in the moment, in that public space.

That support might be, as one example, where a veteran may be experiencing hypervigilance. That dog can be there to nudge that veteran, cue that veteran and be a support alongside them to ensure that the veteran is safe in terms of whatever plan is put in place for them to be able to remove themselves from that situation or stay in that situation if they have to, and then be able to regain focus and carry on.

When I think about present and safe, that's an example that comes to mind for me, MP Fillmore.

Dr. Colleen Anne Dell: That's where you're going to have a connection as well. As Chris said, if there is no connection, if it is just an obedient dog, it's just not going to work in the way it should. It won't work unless there is that really strong connection.

Mr. Andy Fillmore: Right, so it's becoming a member of the family and becoming a partner. As you said, it's not just a dog's skill set that we're talking about here. It really is about a relationship. You're making that really clear. Thank you for that.

Maybe I'll preface this next question by saying that we've been looking at this question of standards. It's easy to fall into the abstract a little bit, the mechanical route—that you need to do this, and you need to cover that—but at the end of the day, this really is about this relationship and the personal experience of the veteran with the animal.

To help us bring it out of the abstract, maybe take us through a day in the life of a successful pairing of a veteran and a dog. What is that dog giving to that veteran? What are the interactions? Maybe you could just sort of paint a picture there.

• (1510)

The Chair: I'm afraid that's time, but I'll allow for a brief answer.

Mr. Andy Fillmore: What? You're kidding.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Andy.

Could we have a brief answer, please?

Dr. Darlene Chalmers: Sure. I'll just jump in quickly.

I think what that dog is giving to the veteran is the support and opportunity to be able to function in day-to-day life. It might be establishing routines, supporting the veteran, having daily routines set up and being able to get to their appointments, resuming some of the activities that a veteran may have done previously in their life before their injury—and it's mutual.

Colleen—

The Chair: I'm afraid I have to cut you off there. I'm sorry.

Mr. Andy Fillmore: Thank you both.

The Chair: Up next, we have MP Desilets for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Good afternoon to the witnesses. Thank you for joining us today.

Ms. Dell, something bothers me a little. I have a hint of an answer, but I'd like your opinion.

A pilot study conducted at Laval University in 2018 seems to show that service dogs have a very positive influence on sleep. They would also decrease socialization disorders, anxiety and depression related to post-traumatic stress disorder. However, according to this study, there appears to be no effect on the use of medication.

I gather that you do not see it the same way. Since I have a lot of questions, could you tell me briefly how you explain that?

[*English*]

Dr. Colleen Anne Dell: Sure. They were looking at prescribed medication and they didn't see a decrease. We have found a decrease in prescribed medication, and so have some of the studies coming out of Purdue and so forth. We also looked at other types of substances, like alcohol, marijuana and things like that. The VAC study didn't, but again it was a preliminary first study. It was the same for us.

I keep saying here is an exploratory; here's a preliminary. We are in our fifth year now. We have a much broader, stronger study, but we're growing. With that evidence base, if we had this meeting five years from now, we would be saying something different. Underlying all of that is that we as a society do not recognize what animals contribute to our lives.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I may be wrong, but we may not be comparing the same variables. Our studies may not be on the same type of dog or the same type of training. So we may well get different results. For example, some studies focus on the qualities of certain breeds of dogs. But that does not change the fact that they are probably all good dogs and good projects.

Ms. Chalmers, what are your thoughts on the need for standards in Canada?

[*English*]

The Chair: We can have a very brief response. That's time, but I'll allow for a quick response.

Go ahead, please.

Dr. Darlene Chalmers: Thank you for your question.

There is a great variety in dogs and programs right across Canada. Based on our multiple interactions with veterans through our research projects, we've learned that these gaps and inconsistencies in the standards—provincial and territorial—really have an impact on veterans. I agree that it's right and important that we need to acknowledge that each individual dog handler and each dog team is unique. However, as Mr. Lohnes stated, regardless of that, we still need a consistent standard nationally.

I'll stop there.

• (1515)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

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

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

I thank the witnesses.

I'll come to you first, Mr. Ralph. I'm really concerned about the end-user, who is the veteran. I'm just wondering if you have any specific thoughts about how the lack of national standards in Canada impacts the end-user, who is the veteran.

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Philip Ralph: It impacts directly in two ways. One, it adds undue confusion for a veteran who is already strugg-

ling with mental health issues. They are out there and shouldn't have to do their own shopping, shall we say, to try to figure out which program is going to meet their needs.

There needs to be some kind of objective standard so that, when a veteran is in need and their clinician has identified that a service dog would be helpful for them, they can go to a trusted source. That source would be connected to standards. There is no other way to line it up on a national basis.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

If I could come to you, Ms. Dell and Ms. Chalmers, I'm a little concerned about your testimony. I just want to make sure I got it right.

What I heard was that you were not sure that there should be standardization, that there's a lack of consensus and that the dogs "are not doing standardized jobs". However, I've heard from veterans—and you talked about it in your testimony—who can't find a place to live because renters won't accept their service dog. I've talked to veterans who have received service dogs, but didn't get the supports and it fell apart. Sometimes the dog suffers. Sometimes the veteran suffers. I have talked to veterans who have been scammed. They get a dog that they've been told is trained and it is not trained at all.

To me, national standards is a huge part of the solution. If we don't have that.... I understand these are unique jobs. I don't know how we could ever sort of pinpoint it, because the veterans' experiences are so different.

I'm just wondering if you could clarify that for me.

Dr. Colleen Anne Dell: I'll start.

We are not saying not to have national standards at all. We're saying it's complex and that if we were going to create these standards, we'd also have to know what jobs these dogs are doing. You can go to one service dog organization where you get a dog and you don't do any of the training at all. You get a dog that has technical skills and hopefully you develop a bond with it.

On the other hand, you can go to an organization where you train the dog itself. You can see the difference. One is about technical skills and one is about the human-animal connection plus the technical skills.

What are these standards for? Is it just the obedience part of the dog? Do we also want to do standards that talk about that connection with the dog and the mental health part of the organizations that are doing the training?

No, we absolutely need standards. We're not saying that. It is complex and we realize there is not one way these dogs are trained. The programs are so diverse in how they approach it.

I don't have the answer to that, but that has to be recognized.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm afraid that's time, MP Blaney.

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

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I really am sad that we had such technical issues in the beginning. We are getting some tremendously valuable information here and it's too bad. I would encourage all of you who are on the panel today that if you do miss something during the course of not just your testimony but also the question and answer period and you feel compelled to send it to the committee, please do send it to the clerk.

Darlene, I want to focus on you. Phil, you might want to jump in on this.

Darlene, you said something interesting, which was that leadership is needed with respect to a national standard because you feel that there is a void there. We're all aware of what happened with the CGSB and how the movement toward a national standard effectively collapsed because there was a diversity of opinion.

For Darlene and Phil, if that leadership is needed, in your opinion, who needs to take that lead?

Dr. Darlene Chalmers: Certainly the government needs to be involved as part of this. We're really looking to those service dog organizations that can contribute and participate as part of the development of those standards. Those individuals or organizations that have that expertise can certainly provide input and guidance around what will be needed in order to have a national standard that will be fit for service dog organizations and that service dog organizations will adhere to.

There has to be a commitment. There has to be buy-in from organizations, for sure.

I'll pass it to Phil.

• (1520)

Mr. John Brassard: Phil, let me start by saying that one of the things that is widely recognized within the committee is the standard that Wounded Warriors uses for their dogs, as well.

Is this the kind of thing where perhaps Wounded Warriors could take the lead on developing a national service standard?

I do have one more question for Colleen, so if you could keep it short for me there, Phil, I'd appreciate it.

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Philip Ralph: I wouldn't say what we have published, and it's clearly available on our website, is the 100% solution.

Mr. John Brassard: It's a good solution.

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Philip Ralph: It's a great place to start, and it's certainly a lot better than what we have right now. To the two professors' point, it is a lot of task-based stuff but they are programs.

In order to be accredited...and I thought I'd bring this as an illustration. This is one of our program's submissions for trying to become a Wounded Warriors Canada service dog provider. It's not just

about the tasks. It's about the things the professors mentioned, which are very important, regarding the care and welfare of the dog. It has to be part of the overall umbrella of the standards. It must also include the mental health component. It is a requirement for all of our providers to have a mental health provision.

We also supplement what the organizations have with our expertise from our other clinical programs to provide training for our service dog providers, so that they have the proper background in mental health because that is very important. It is ultimately about that human-animal bond—the handler and the dog, together, making that difference in the veteran and first responder's life.

Mr. John Brassard: If any point has been made clear today, and the point has been emphasized by veterans I have spoken to, it is precisely that, the human-animal bond.

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Philip Ralph: The government has to take the lead. That's the only way. That's the only way that standards work.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you, Phil. Good to see you again, by the way.

In the minute I have left, Colleen, and perhaps Darlene, do you see a need for accessibility standards apart from training standards?

Dr. Colleen Anne Dell: I'm going to answer that with what Philip was saying. Staff need to be trained in mental health. With our SUAP grant right now, we've trained 30 service dog organization staff in peer support with mental health innovations. We've been evaluating that. We've had them all take mental health first aid from the Canadian Mental Health Association.

Those are the types of things. I don't know if this is answering your question, but that has to be part of that standard process too. It's not just about training that dog and handing that dog over. It's about that veteran being part of the peer support group.

You heard of the fire buddy earlier. A different term may have been used. We use fire buddy a lot. That is what that dog becomes, as well as the group that the people are with. We have seen the ability to do that now online, which has been really challenging during the pandemic, but we've also been able to go online and do some of that.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you to all of the witnesses today. This has been valuable. I wish we had more time. Thank you for your time.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Brassard.

Up next, for five minutes, we have MP Casey.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I am going to start with Mr. Ralph.

In your opening remarks, Mr. Ralph, you set out three key principles that were in place to determine who is funded by Wounded Warriors Canada.

Can you repeat the first one, please?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Philip Ralph: The first one is the national standards that we have, or the Wounded Warriors Canada standards. You have to train your dog to these standards in order to even be considered. That's just step one.

We have a three-phase vetting process. The first phase looks, first of all, at governance and financials and all the things for a service dog organization, such as whether it is a stable, reliable organization. Then the providers have to demonstrate a willingness to work in a collegial manner with other service dog providers, which, sadly, lacks sometimes in some areas of the space—not in all areas but in some. One service dog provider is never going to be able to supply the needs of this nation. We need to work collaboratively with one another.

Phase two looks at the service dog training itself and what goes into it. It also looks at the mental health training component. Beyond mental health training, do they understand the effects of trauma? It's a lot different from just general mental health awareness. Do they understand the uniqueness of veteran or first responder culture? It is a unique way of thinking and a unique culture, which informs how you train the dog, how the dogs are paired and the care you provide for the veteran and the dog afterwards, with all the follow-up, etc.

Then, in phase three, we conduct site visits and talk to graduates of their programs. Part of the ongoing thing about what we do is that once somebody is funded, they first become a probationary recipient of funds. We see how the first phase of funding goes and follow their program, but the great resource is that, on a monthly basis, we have a call much like this—a Zoom call right across the country—in which our service dog providers who are part of our team talk to each other. They talk about any problems that have come up and any challenges or something they've seen that probably another service dog provider has already encountered, especially if they're a more mature service dog provider and have had a lot more experience. They discuss questions such as transitioning to successor dogs and all the kinds of issues that come up related to service dogs.

The standards piece starts it. The standard we start with is publicly available. It's on our website. Anybody can see it.

• (1525)

Mr. Sean Casey: You've developed a standard to which you require partners to ascribe, and we're all here trying to solve this puzzle of why there is no national standard. You've developed one, and there's a bunch of providers that are keen to meet it.

Have you ever been given an explanation as to why the standard you've developed has not been used as at least a starting point or adopted in whole or in part by a provincial or federal government?

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Philip Ralph: That's a great question.

On what we developed, I have to give credit where credit is due. It's gained from sources that are out there. If you look at our standard and then at the Province of British Columbia's website, you're going to see a lot of similarities in the standards. As far as published standards go that are out there and available and actually in effect today, the Province of British Columbia actually has the best one in Canada. I can say that. I don't even live in the Province of British Columbia, so I'm not trying to do something with a hometown advantage.

Mr. Sean Casey: If it makes you feel any better, sir, you're not the first witness to have said that.

Capt(N) (Ret'd) Philip Ralph: I understand from veterans and first responders living in the Province of British Columbia that the downfall with the system seems to be that they're not readily enforcing the standard they have. How do you then regulate it?

There are all kinds of accessibility issues—the question was asked earlier—but once you have a standard, then you have what the dogs are and where they can access all those pieces that need to come in. They're important. It's an important starting place. I wouldn't say that we have the 100% solution, but it's certainly a great place to start.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you, sir.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much.

That brings us to the end of today's meeting. I want to, first and foremost, thank all the witnesses for their patience today. Also, thank you to all my colleagues for your indulgence to extend the meeting an extra half an hour, and a special thanks to the technical staff, through you, Mr. Clerk, if you could pass it along. When everything is running great, we love them. We grumble when everything is not running great, but without them, we wouldn't be heard at all today. Thank you to all the technical folks for getting us back on track today.

Thank you very much, everyone, and have a great weekend.

I adjourn today's meeting.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>