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• (1835)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC)): Welcome to meeting number 48 of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. For the first hour this evening, we have witnesses in connection with the study of the experience of women veterans. The second hour will be devoted to committee business.

[*English*]

Before we get started with our witnesses, I just want to remind everybody that tonight we're continuing our study on the experience of women veterans.

We have with us two witnesses here in person, and we have one witness online as well.

Just so that everyone knows, I will be chairing at least the first portion of the meeting. I expect the chair to arrive at some point during that first hour or thereabouts, and he will probably chair the second portion of the meeting when we move in camera. He asked me to fill in unexpectedly, so I am going to do that until he arrives.

For the first hour, we will have our witnesses for the study. We are joined here in person by two of them. Karen McCrimmon is a former member of Parliament and a retired lieutenant-colonel. We also have with us the Honourable Rebecca Patterson, a senator for Ontario. Joining us by video conference this evening is Lee-Anne Quinn, a retired major and a nurse practitioner.

We'll move right into our testimony.

I just want to remind everybody that if there is anything we deal with this evening that causes you any concern, or if you would like to seek assistance as a result of sensitive matters we may have to deal with, please reach out to our clerk. That applies to our witnesses, as well as to anyone else in the room, including our members. Please reach out, and we can make sure help is provided to you.

With that, I'll introduce our first witness. We'll start with Senator Patterson.

I'll turn the floor over to you. You have five minutes to make some opening remarks.

Hon. Rebecca Patterson (Senator, Ontario, CSG): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good evening, honourable members. Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the experiences of female and women veterans. As the first woman CAF veteran appointed to the Senate, I ap-

pear before you as a fellow parliamentarian and as a veteran myself, having fully retired in January 2023.

I enrolled in the Canadian Armed Forces in January 1989. This was the same month that women started integration into all occupations, except those on submarines. I've personally experienced great advances for women since 1989. For example, I'm the first person with a military nursing background to lead at the rank of flag officer—rear-admiral—which was previously unheard of when I joined.

What has been slower to adapt is who we recognize as female and women veterans and the support we provide to them. Veterans are traditionally portrayed as white older men who are war fighters, resulting in women being less likely to identify and then be recognized as veterans who need service. This results in veteran services that are not tailored to sex and gender-specific issues.

Prior to my appointment at the Senate, I served in many different military domains. My experience is diverse and includes addressing sexual misconduct and culture change in the CAF, as well as leading military health care at the height of the pandemic and through the establishment of the women's health program. I was also the defence champion for women and facilitated the establishment of the defence team pride network, for which I was the interim champion. I understand the people who serve.

Women are one of the fastest-growing segments of military veterans in Canada, and the systems of support for women veterans were designed based on the male experience. This stems from research focusing on male veterans while being presented as gender-neutral. We have learned in health care that gender-neutral excludes women. While I don't deny that we share common experiences, more research is needed on the different sex and gender-specific health and well-being requirements.

I want to state clearly that you cannot address female and women's health without addressing their health while they serve in the Canadian Armed Forces or as members of the RCMP. What does this mean? Ideally, we prevent harm to women in the first place so they don't need to seek veteran services from VAC. It's about the continuity between active service and the support they receive for service-related injuries and illnesses. Women veterans' health is occupational health-related. It sits on a continuum between an initial event during service and their current well-being as a veteran. This remains true whether the disability presents itself immediately or in the future, and we absolutely cannot ignore this reality.

To improve transition and integration into post-service life and to potentially prevent injury to current CAF members, information exchange between the CAF and VAC is essential. By routinely sharing data, such as on injury and illness patterns and trends, we can better understand the impact of military service on women, better prepare for services that veterans will require and better fund them.

Veterans are not a homogenous group. They are an intersection of identities that influence experiences and expectations for the supports they seek and need post-service. Therefore, I would also caution you to not conflate female and women veterans' service requirements with those of other equity-seeking groups. We cannot lump together all those with diverse needs into one program or one funding group without inevitably failing to address key areas that are unique to each specific group. All groups should be considered individually, although harmoniously, so that we can ensure equity and, ultimately, better lived experiences for those who have sustained harm in the service of our country.

The final point I would like to raise before questions is this: The ideal outcome is equitable and fair support for CAF and RCMP members and veterans. The CAF is modernizing and changing, which means that our veterans' needs are changing as well. VAC's mandate to support the well-being of veterans and their families and to promote remembrance of achievements shouldn't be seen as a barrier to doing things differently. We must be proactive in anticipating veterans' needs and not reactive, as is unfortunately so often the case.

As Canadians who are willing to give their all in service of the country, we deserve better.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1840)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you very much.

We'll turn now to Ms. Karen McCrimmon for her opening remarks for the next five minutes.

The floor is yours.

Mrs. Karen McCrimmon (Lieutenant-Colonel (Retired), As an Individual): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you to all the honourable members here tonight. It's an honour to be with you today and to share my experiences. I'd like give you some ideas on how you can help make a difference.

I'll get right to the point. With five minutes, I might be speaking quickly, but I'll do my very best.

We need you to ask the tough questions and listen to the answers. It might seem obvious, but sometimes we need to be reminded that we can't actually solve problems until we really understand them. Then, once you've listened, you need to action them.

That's why I'm very grateful for this opportunity. You've asked the question. That's so important, and we appreciate it very much. That's point number one.

Point number two is to ask for a plan. There's a saying in the military that failing to plan is planning to fail. To make any type of major changes inside an organization, you need a comprehensive, coordinated and measurable plan. Ask for it.

Point number three is that what you permit, you promote. I would argue that the RCMP, the CAF and VAC have permitted the neglect of women and other groups that did not fit into their view of the ideal or acceptable RCMP officer, soldier or veteran. This needs to stop.

Point number four is that representation matters. You need a critical mass of committed individuals to confront and change a harmful climate or culture. Today, in the military and the RCMP, a considerable number of women are rising into the senior and influential positions of their organizations, and we're starting to see real changes happening in culture and in the awareness of women-specific issues. However, we don't see that same representative change in VAC.

We need more women at decision-making levels, and more veterans, men and women. As such, one easy starting point would be the naming of a fully empowered and fully funded ministerial advisory board for women veterans. In short, hire more veterans, especially women, who have planning expertise or proven hands-on experience. Women are 50% of the military's future recruiting pool. Not fixing the military women-specific issues found within VAC, CAF and the RCMP will clearly have significant follow-on effects for those organizations.

Point five is that feedback loops prevent more harm. I heard the senator say exactly the same thing. How does Veterans Affairs capture injury trends or illnesses like cancers, and how does it feed that important information back upstream, back to the military and back to the RCMP to prevent more injury?

Where is the feedback loop inside VAC for decisions that have been overturned by the VRAB. I don't even know if there is one. Physical injuries, like musculoskeletal injuries, are still being caused today by equipment and uniforms that weren't designed for a woman's body. Uniforms and equipment are all replaced periodically, so there needs to be a continual assessment of their suitability for women. This is where GBA+ comes into play.

There are also psychological and spiritual or emotional injuries like PTSD; moral injury; and institutional betrayal, which are also still happening because we aren't asking the tough questions and listening to the answers, especially when the listening hurts. Listening needs to be followed by action.

In closing, how can this committee best help hold VAC accountable for improving the health and well-being of women veterans? You must demand, first, to see a strategic plan. Once again, failing to plan is planning to fail. Second, demand more data collection, research and transparency for veterans and the public, including sex-segregated data on VAC and VRAB claim processes, representation, budgets and spending. Third, we need more women and veterans within the department as case managers, supervisors, project officers, researchers, etc. Fourth, we need the establishment of feedback loops for all relevant departments to prevent reoccurrences of negative or harmful circumstances.

• (1845)

Finally, if we want real change, we must remember that whatever behaviour we reward is the behaviour we are going to get. We must demand, expect and reward better.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you, Mrs. McCrimmon.

The final opening remarks will come from Lee-Anne Quinn, who's with us online.

The floor is yours for the next five minutes, Ms. Quinn.

Ms. Lee-Anne Quinn (Major (Retired), Nurse Practitioner, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and honourable members, for this invite.

I must admit right up front that I did not really understand or anticipate what was going to be expected this evening, so I don't have a great big script in front of me that has been written. I just know this: I've had 23 years of regular force experience and then four years as an honorary lieutenant-colonel for a reserve unit in my hometown. That covers Peterborough, Cobourg and Belleville.

Over my years of experience, I have seen a lot of changes. I've seen some good and some bad. Obviously, as my two predecessors have spoken about, more changes are definitely needed in order to bring the standards of equality up to where they should be.

I could give a lot of examples, but I don't think this is the forum to do that. I'm mostly here to listen and to participate when I am asked to do so.

• (1850)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you, Ms. Quinn.

I apologize if we failed as a committee to make sure you understood exactly what would transpire. I apologize on our behalf for that. However, we're certainly glad you're here with us and that you are going to be able to contribute to the questions and answers, which will come now. I know you'll have a lot of good insight to provide us.

I want to thank all three of you for your opening remarks and also for your service to our country. We can never say that enough, and we can never do enough to try to honour it. This study is certainly a part of that. Your being here tonight will be very helpful to us as a committee, without question.

We'll now turn to our rounds of questioning. In our first round, we have six minutes per questioner, and up in the first round is Michelle Ferreri.

The floor is yours for six minutes.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri (Peterborough—Kawartha, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for having me today. I'm honoured to be here.

Again, I'll reiterate what the chair has said: Thank you for your service.

I'm going to toot Lee-Anne's horn a bit here because she didn't tell you what she's accomplished, and I think it's really important that we all know it. Lee-Anne Quinn has received the Order of Military Merit, the highest order a member of the military can receive. She was the honorary lieutenant-colonel to the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment. She is an all-star athlete. She is a Guinness World Records record holder. She's an RN. She's a nurse practitioner. She received the Florence Nightingale Award in 2007 as Canada's top nurse. She has served and practised medicine around the world in war-torn countries. She is also a survivor of PTSD.

I think that tell you the magnitude of what this woman is in a bit of a nutshell. Lee-Anne brings so much knowledge and compassion that it is such an honour to say she's from my riding.

Lee-Anne, this study really is to help us as parliamentarians here in Parliament do better, and I think you have the knowledge inside of your head to help us do that.

One of the key issues in this study on women veterans is around mental health, and I would love to hear—if you're comfortable, without triggering you or causing you too much distress—what you can suggest to parliamentarians regarding Veterans Affairs' supporting women, in particular around the mental and physical health aspect. Please feel free to give as many examples as possible of what we could do better.

Ms. Lee-Anne Quinn: Thank you for your kind words, MP Michelle Ferreri.

As Michelle alluded to, yes, I am a PTSD survivor. The first thing I can say, on the advertising and offering of support from Veterans Affairs when I left the Canadian Forces, is that I did not tap into it for five years of my post-military career. That's due to a number of reasons, but one of the reasons is that I didn't know what Veterans Affairs had to offer for me. I think one important part is that you need to reach out to those who are retiring and those who are veterans and say you are a service being offered that can help pave the path for them to get some help.

I know that improvements have been made on that level of voice and advertising. I still hear from my friends who have had recent retirements from the military that they really don't know what they can ask or who to ask at Veterans Affairs, so they ask for guidance from me to take those steps.

• (1855)

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: That's great. I think navigating the system is a big challenge, with a lot of bureaucracy as well.

I also want to point out that Lee-Anne opened up a clinic in our community and, on her own time, helps the most vulnerable living on the street. I just can't say enough about what this human brings to the table.

I think you're between a bit of a rock and a hard place, because you don't want to dismiss the value of what the Canadian Forces brought to your life—if I may be so bold as to say that—but you also sort of say, listen, there is a lot of room for improvement.

I would put it back to you, Lee-Anne, and ask you for some key things that you would like to see done differently, if there are any key things that jump out at you or specific examples you would like to give the committee.

Ms. Lee-Anne Quinn: Some key things that jump out to me are.... I'm not speaking specifically as a retired regular military officer. My next little talk will be in reference to my position as the honorary lieutenant-colonel with an army reserve unit.

I will tell you that the incidents that happened to me were definitely the result of my being a female with a short stature. With regard to the honorary colonel and honorary lieutenant-colonel who were there prior to my assuming that position, there's no way that neglect or prejudice would have been handed to them, as they would not have tolerated it.

If some help is needed, from my end, in looking at the grand picture, I would say that assistance is needed in the reserve units in particular—because I can only speak about the army reserve unit that I was honorary colonel for—to enlighten them to the fact that females can hold positions that require respect as well.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you.

That's the time we have for that particular block of questions.

We'll now move to our second block of questions, and we have Ms. Rechie Valdez for six minutes.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses who have joined us today. It is truly an honour to hear your testimony. Thank you so much for your sacrifice for our country.

I'm going to direct my questions to former lieutenant-colonel McCrimmon.

As you are the first woman to command a Canadian Forces air force squadron, I want to get your perspective on what the different needs are for women veterans who work for the air force, the navy or the army. Do you have any insight there?

Mrs. Karen McCrimmon: Thank you very much for that question. I think it's really important.

My background is the army and the air force, the senator's is the navy, and Lee-Anne's is the air force and the army, so we have a lot of everything here. However, I think we can say that, environmentally, yes, there were some specifics of equipment that didn't work or uniforms that didn't fit, like boots and webbing, and it was even about the size of certain weaponry that you were expected to operate.

There are differences among the services, but it all comes down to wanting the CAF and VAC to be willing to say, well, it's different. Every time we order a new piece of equipment, we have to make sure it fits women as well as men.

We can probably all tell you stories of particular pieces of equipment that didn't fit. Flak jackets, for me, in Afghanistan—and I'm of a fairly normal stature—didn't fit. They were very uncomfortable to wear for long periods of time. I've heard they've gotten better; that's good. It was about 20 years ago that I was in Afghanistan.

That's what we need, that continual improvement. You just can't do it once and forget about it.

• (1900)

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you.

You have given your five recommendations to the committee already, so I'm going to just ask, Senator Patterson, if you want to weigh in. Are there any legislative or mandate changes you would recommend? Do you have a top three or five?

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: Thank you very much.

Because I'm so new, I haven't filled out my paperwork, which I'm going to do.

Lee-Anne, it's wonderful to see you, by the way.

I think what's really important is when we're looking... Is it legislative changes, or is it improving policy and process as we move forward? I think mandate letters really need to be considered as we move forward with what the role of VAC is. I will use my previous CAF experience of being told, "Well, we don't do that. It's not in our mandate letter." It isn't because there are bad people there. These are people who are short of staff, but that is not an excuse when you're trying to access services. Only the Canadian Armed Forces can fill that gap, so when we look at mandate letters, for example, it has to be that VAC reaches out to you rather than you trying to find VAC.

Even if you choose to not do something at that point as a veteran, that's okay, but we were told that's not in their mandate letter, so I think you probably need to review the mandate to make sure there's no gap.

Have things improved? Absolutely, and I believe other committees are going to talk to that very effect. However, you can't just talk to the CAF or the RCMP about that. You have to talk to VAC, probably at the same time, so I would suggest maybe not legislative but policy change.

The next thing you need to have a look at is that you have to name it. Include the term "woman veteran". It's not a dirty term. It's not a qualifier. Whether it be in mandate letters or whatever, you need to disaggregate "veteran"—not all the time but at times. When you're talking about it, call it what it is. If you hide the language, it doesn't exist. That's my culture background coming in.

As you see, there may not be legislative changes right now. I don't have that depth of knowledge; I will have to pass that to my colleagues. However, I would suggest to start there. Even on your committee, in everything you talk about, talk about women veterans. I think that would be wonderful.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you.

Senator Patterson, really quickly, you always talk about the transition into civilian life. You've successfully been able to do it—all three of you have, actually. Can you give some advice as to what we can include there? What made you successful and able to pursue these careers after serving?

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: I think I'm still in transition, to be honest with you, but thank you. That's a good question.

I think we have to understand cultures. In institutions like the Canadian Armed Forces and the RCMP, this is our family. This is our world. The hardest part of transition is going on to nothing. You lose purpose. You get called "Ms." or "Mrs". We lose a lot of pieces.

That is not an issue in and of itself, but what can happen with the improvement of services is that, if you have a community of people who are used to having structure around them—not because we're automatons and can't think for ourselves but because it's the world we come from—it makes transition smoother. This is why that cinch between VAC, the RCMP and the Canadian Armed Forces is so important and you don't leave people struggling with "Who am I?" Connection and making people feel like they're put together are going to be quite important.

I would recommend that, as a committee, you look at transition services. Name this for what it is and remember that women veterans are less likely to seek follow-on VAC services than men are because we don't always see ourselves in them. If you can, make recommendations surrounding transition services, naming this for what it is and having a push system for veterans rather than having them chase you down.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you.

• (1905)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you.

Ms. Normandin, the floor is now yours for six minutes.

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would first like to thank the three witnesses who are here with us.

Thank you not just for your participation in the study, but also for your service. You are very inspiring women. I feel spoiled to be participating in the meeting with you this evening.

I would like to address my first question, which will be preceded by a brief preamble, to Senator Patterson. The government made an announcement today concerning the problem of homelessness among veterans. The announcement stated that veterans from Indigenous, LGBT or black communities had more problems with housing. Women veterans were not mentioned at all.

I would like you to tell us about your experience in relation to women veterans and the problem of homelessness.

[*English*]

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: Thank you very much. Would you mind if I responded in English?

[*Translation*]

It's easier for me. I don't have all the vocabulary.

[*English*]

I have worked with homeless veterans through Soldiers Helping Soldiers, and while it's a small group—with groups in Ottawa, Montreal, Vancouver and Toronto—the one thing we notice is that women veterans are absolutely invisible. They could be living rough, meaning they're couch surfing, or they are homeless and lost in the system. You can't find them. When you bring them in, you can clump them with other men veterans, but many have suffered significant abuse—military sexual trauma, etc.

I was certainly excited to hear about the announcement today. However, I think it's going to be critical that we look at pushing forward with sex- and gender-specific research on who homeless women veterans are, as well as on some of the—I say root causes—complex issues that contribute to homelessness among women veterans. Of course, there is also a requirement that VAC step up and look at sex- and gender-specific programs to move them beyond homelessness into benefits.

It is a very dire problem. What we aren't talking about are those who don't make it—those who overdose, who commit suicide, who die at the hands of violent abuse. I think this announcement is promising, but I didn't once hear the word "woman" in there.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Were you surprised that the announcement said nothing about women veterans? Are there very often an announcements that concern women veterans?

As well, the Gender-based Analysis Plus, or GBA Plus, relating to the various programs may be a little slow, if not completely absent.

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: Yes, that's right.

I agree with that completely.

Ms. Christine Normandin: My next question is for all three witnesses.

Ms. Quinn talked about advertising of resources. I would like you to tell us about access to resources. I will give you a specific example, but I invite you to address the issue more broadly.

When the Department of National Defence created the Community Support for Sexual Misconduct Survivors Grant Program, it became apparent that the services were offered far from military bases, far from the places where members of the military were located.

In the case of the services offered, is there not a problem in terms of access, geographically or in various other aspects?

[English]

Mrs. Karen McCrimmon: Thank you.

I think Lee-Anne hit it right on the head, in that it starts at transition.

Let's go back. Homelessness is often a result of a loss of community, loss of family. It's in the first two to four years after release from the military that they're most vulnerable. If they're removed, they're far away from their support structure and that makes it even worse. That's why when we talk about transition from CAF to VAC, we have to make it stronger.

People who have suffered psychological injuries from inside the CAF or RCMP are going to have a really tough time during transition. It's going to hurt.

As some people have suggested, why not for that first two or three years, that transition period, allow them to come to VAC, no questions asked? Let's say, "Don't wait until it's a crisis. If you're struggling with something, don't wait for a crisis; come and see us." As the Senator said, let's keep track of them. Let's not just let them go. It's the transition period that is absolutely key.

● (1910)

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: If I may, Mr. Chair, I will build on that.

If you think about it, most people who leave the Canadian Armed Forces, men and women, are not homeless or living rough. Some are, but most are not. What is key in that transition period is not expecting only VAC to do all of this, because that is not going to be possible. We have veterans in every corner of this country and internationally, and that's where one of VAC's challenges comes from.

I think within Canada, within the domain we can control, I believe there is a place, whether it is through the justice system or through health care systems, for a global sensitization to what a veteran is. We have obligatory reporting in health care for people who have challenges in terms of suicide, homicide or pedophilia. This is not what I'm referring to, but if we can also sensitize the Canadian public to acknowledge that veterans exist, and particularly women veterans, and ensure they're getting into care and support to begin with or ensure that policing and our justice system are aware, we can build into that at least a point of contact to call, whoever it is, so that these people don't fall through the cracks.

That's especially for women, because they are invisible. If a woman has been experiencing domestic violence, say, or has experienced severe military sexual trauma that has had them hospitalized, people don't know what to do with them: "Well, you're a veteran." It's like you went to the University of Ottawa—I went there, so I said that—and we forget that this comes from another life.

I think if we could sensitize beyond VAC into our Canadian system, it would be very helpful. If you could make a recommendation like that, I'd be so proud.

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)): Thank you, Ms. Normandin.

[English]

I want to thank the vice-chair of the committee, Mr. Richards, who replaced me.

Now I'd like to invite Ms. Blaney to take the floor for six minutes, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Chair. It's good to see you back.

I want to thank all three of you for being here to testify. Thank you for your incredible service. I did a bit of research on all three of you before I came here. I just have to say that it's overwhelming to see the amazing things you've done. I want to recognize all three of you for your incredible service to our country and to humanity as a whole.

Going through this study, I hear two things. One, and you've all said it today, is the word "invisible". Women are invisible. The other thing I've heard from a lot of veterans is the lost opportunity. If our CAF, our RCMP and our VAC actually served women more meaningfully, the opportunities that would come out of that would be profound. I'm hoping we can identify how women become invisible and how to change that so we can see the opportunity increase on the other side.

I'll ask all of you the first question. Going back to the word “invisible”, I heard clearly that when things are gender-neutral, we just ignore women. Women veterans again and again have told me that when they have a health issue, they're often told that it has nothing to do with their service. However, we also know that no research has been done to actually find out if it is the service. It doesn't seem to be of interest. Often they are put in a position where they have to appeal repeatedly to try to get their issue addressed. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on that and on what we could do differently.

Lee-Anne, if I could start with you, I would really appreciate it given your expertise in this subject.

Ms. Lee-Anne Quinn: Thank you very much.

Regarding invisibility, unfortunately numbers speak volumes. We know that when you compare the number of male veterans with the number of female veterans, the male numbers are much higher. Just in general, it doesn't matter what you're looking at; the greatest number gets the majority. I think that in itself is part of the issue. It's simply the small volume. If you look at the number of homeless female veterans in comparison with the number of male homeless veterans, you soon find out that there are a lot more male veterans than there are female. Obviously, what I think is happening is that we are just ignored or are invisible because of our small numbers.

I don't know how to fix that. I don't have any magic pill to make that better. I do know that the awareness of Veterans Affairs in reference to this invisibility of the female population needs to be brought to light.

• (1915)

Mrs. Karen McCrimmon: I think that's an excellent question. How do we deal with that?

If you look at the homelessness issue, the big problem for women veterans is that they are invisible because we can't find them. They don't go to the homeless shelters. The homeless shelters are too dangerous for women. What they do, as the senator mentioned, is couch surf. Some of them live rough. We don't see them immediately. That's why they're invisible.

I think this goes back to making sure that VAC tracks these people, especially people who are on a medical release. They should be tracked. They should not rely on them to come back to VAC. VAC should say, “Where are you, and how are you doing?” I think that's one thing that could make a difference.

Again, for me, I think the transition issue is also something.... As Lee-Anne mentioned, she didn't go back to VAC for five years. Me neither. I said, “I'm fine; there's nothing wrong. I'm strong. I can do it.” We don't want to admit that we could use some help. A lot of my veteran friends feel exactly that way. They don't want to admit it.

If there was a way—without having to go through all the paperwork and without having to end up in a crisis—to go back to VAC and say they would like to talk to somebody, let's make it easy for them during that period. Let's make it so it doesn't have to become a crisis.

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: I'm going to go a bit more macro.

We talk about being invisible, and I can give examples of research. You have to do research on this. The numbers are too statistically small to track, but it's being used to not do anything. We have to move beyond that. This is where you start partnering with other nations to see how they're tracking things—the U.S., for example. That's why we talked about the board. You start there.

If Canada is truly committed to their women veterans—it's all veterans, but I need to talk about women—we will take those statistics, blend them with what we have and start. Even if we overprogram to begin with and we move back afterwards.... If you build it, they will come.

I would suggest that we not accept these statistically insignificant numbers we often get in research, whether it's women suicide in the Canadian Armed Forces or as veterans. If there is a way of building a recommendation into research that says statistically insignificant numbers are not an excuse to do nothing—that has so many negatives, and I'm sorry—we can then look at getting boards together and partnering with other nations so we can at least start somewhere.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

Now let's go to Mr. Sean Casey for five minutes or less, please.

I'm sorry, Mr. Casey, but it will be my friend Fraser Tolmie.

You have the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): I really like being your friend. Thank you, Chair.

We've faced some difficult subjects while doing this study. One thing I want to address, which came up in a previous study, is the Afghan monument that has not yet been built. It has not been decided upon. I think it's been in the design phase since 2019, and it hasn't been finalized yet.

This is the first conflict in which we've had female soldiers and female combat losses. I would like to get a sense of the witnesses' ideas on recognition and having a monument in the nation's capital for this.

Ms. Quinn, can I ask you this first? Again, I want to thank you for your service. That's important. I'm very proud to be sitting in this room with you and online. I'm proud of your service and what you've done for our nation. Thank you.

• (1920)

Ms. Lee-Anne Quinn: Thank you very much, sir.

In reference to a monument depicting a female, I would be ecstatic to see a female soldier in any monument—a female soldier with a combat flak jacket on, with a helmet on, with a weapon strapped over their shoulder and with a ponytail. If you cannot distinguish if they're male or female, put the ponytail in there. I think we're severely lacking in that department, across the country.

I was part of a steering committee that established a peacekeeping monument in the city of Peterborough. There were five bids on the monument, five artists. Not one of the artists presented a maquette of the monument with a female in posed position. That was so disappointing to me.

It was a 14-year project, and we ended up choosing a beautiful monument that is neither male nor female but instead has two large pillars with some words of wisdom from Major-General Lewis MacKenzie, as well as some words of citizens from the city of Peterborough.

So yes, it is missing, and yes, I would love to see it, because we deserve it.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Thank you, Ms. Quinn.

While I have you—and I'm sorry for not addressing the other witnesses here—you mentioned recognition. One of the great things about being in the military is becoming an honorary colonel. You mentioned in your introduction being treated differently as an honorary colonel. Could you expand on that for me, please?

Ms. Lee-Anne Quinn: Yes. Listen, I was extremely honoured to be asked to be the honorary colonel of the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment. I was the first female in 100 years to hold that position. I entered it and stayed with it for four entire years, giving it my all because, number one, that's what I do, and number two, that's what the regiment deserved and that's what the soldiers deserved.

My huge disappointment came when any of my requests as the honorary colonel were second-guessed, were given a back seat. To that extent, for the unveiling of this peacekeeping monument—and this is one small example—Major-General Lewis MacKenzie, retired of course, our number one peacekeeper in Canada, had agreed to come to the event. I had city members, members of Parliament and peacekeepers from across Canada coming to this unveiling event, along with the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment, who told me they would have six honorary guards to take the salute for Major-General Lewis MacKenzie.

Two days before the unveiling of that monument, I received an email from the captain of the regiment—not even from the commanding officer of that regiment—to tell me there would be no soldiers present to take the salute from Major-General Lewis MacKenzie, period, the end. It was holiday time, and there would not be anyone. It was two days before that event.

I will sit here and tell you that there is no way those comments and that reason ever would have been presented to the male honorary lieutenant-colonel who was filling my boots prior to when I took the position. It would not have been that way, but because it was me, we were going to take it and suck it up, and there would be nothing done in reference to it.

• (1925)

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: I'm sure that was very difficult for you to share, but I do appreciate it. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tolmie.

Now let's go to Mr. Sean Casey for five minutes or less.

Please, go ahead.

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

Thank you to all of our witnesses for being here and for your service.

I can't help myself. I have to pose a question to my former colleague, Ms. McCrimmon.

The reasons a woman won't go into the Canadian Armed Forces now are pretty darned obvious given all of the recent developments, so my question to you is this. As someone who has served and someone who's been a parliamentary secretary and been in this seat, what advice do you have for government? What advice do you have for us? What advice do you have for the department in terms of the recruitment and retention of people choosing this as a career?

Mrs. Karen McCrimmon: That's an excellent question. As I said in my remarks, women are 50% of the future recruiting pool. If we don't fix this, if we don't make CAF and the RCMP the employers of the 21st century, a place where women can go and serve and feel respected, safe and valued, then we're not going to be able to hire women. In the military, as time goes on, it's about the brain power we're wasting. We're wasting brain power. Brilliant women are having to deal with and put up with a system that's 100 years old. It needs to change, but it takes leadership to change it and the will. We need the will and the acknowledgement that this is what's going on.

It's not just the military or the RCMP. This kind of thing happens in our society as a whole. I think in the military—because we track things, do statistics and follow up on cases when there has been abuse and neglect—we're always targeted first, but I would say that the same thing happens in just about every single workplace in this country. Women are mistreated.

I would say this to the government, to CAF, to VAC and to the RCMP: Lead the way. You know how to lead. You know what needs to be done. Set the example. If the rest of the country looks at CAF and sees that they have this figured out and people want to be part of that organization, then CAF will want the same thing, with the same quality of candidate working for them.

That's what I would say: You know what leadership is and you know what needs to get done. I think there are some tweaks and some advice we could possibly offer in that regard, but choose to be the example of the future. The whole country will be better off because of it.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you.

My next question is for the other two witnesses here, Senator Patterson and Ms. Quinn.

I ask you this question because of your experience with the homeless community and the fact that there was a significant announcement today. It has two funding streams. One is for supports and services, and the other is for capacity building. This capacity building is for funding research on veterans homelessness. The portal opens today and is open for the next eight weeks.

Based on what you've said already, it strikes me that you have people within your network and organizations you know—because you're in this space—who could benefit from this funding, particularly as it relates to the unique challenges of women homeless veterans. This is as much a plea as a question: Please help get the word out there that this funding is available to fill the gap that you've identified.

I'd be happy to hear from either of you on that and your perspectives as to the potential benefit of an investment like this.

• (1930)

The Chair: Ms. Quinn, you can start, but we have only 40 seconds for the answer. Please go ahead.

Ms. Lee-Anne Quinn: I would simply say that in my position in my clinic, yes, it would be my responsibility to get that message out to the homeless females, because they have no communication ability. You gave the information to me. I will get it to them.

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: To build on that, you need to put in research money and you need to attract people, or VAC does, to do the research we need, which I talked about a bit earlier. There has to be investment there. You're looking at capability building. You need to build a very strong peer support network that has whatever platform possible.

I know we're running out of time. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

[*Translation*]

We have two short turns of two and a half minutes.

Ms. Normandin, you have the floor.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for whoever would like to answer it.

We know that women veterans are more likely to be released for medical reasons. The committee recently learned that Veterans Affairs Canada had a team of researchers exclusively examining the situation of women veterans, but they were looking more at the symptoms than the causes of the problems.

Do you think there should be better collaboration between the Canadian Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Canada so there could be better identification of causes and better treatment of symptoms as a result?

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: Thank you.

As I said earlier, there has to be an exchange of data.

[*English*]

We need to build that into mandate letters. We need to state this in order for you to do cause and effect. Let's stop creating harmed veterans. Let me be a veteran because I served in an amazing career and have moved forward.

In the absence of appropriate feedback mechanisms, let's put that into mandate letters for National Defence, for Veterans Affairs and, I would suggest, for the RCMP, although I'm not quite as knowledgeable there. I'm going to say that as a first intervention, knowing you have only two minutes.

Lee-Anne, do you have anything? I'll pass it to you.

Ms. Lee-Anne Quinn: I have nothing else to add. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Along the same line, to your knowledge, do Veterans Affairs Canada and the Canadian Armed Forces have different ways of analyzing health problems that are specific to women veterans?

[*English*]

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: You're actually looking at two completely separate datasets. Because the Canadian Armed Forces has their own health care system, they provide health care. They have access to what we would call epidemiological data to look at things like diagnosis, and sometimes you can find mechanisms of injury.

Veterans Affairs, on the other hand, doesn't provide health care. I apologize if anyone from Veterans Affairs is listening, but they're like an insurance company. They provide benefits and programs and they support them, but they deliver some, not all. They're going to have different datasets.

What is key is that there is collaboration to determine what data needs to be collected so that it becomes useful information to create the cause and effect you were talking about. As I said, data might prevent more people from being injured, especially data on women.

• (1935)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Now let's go to Ms. Rachel Blaney for two and a half minutes, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much, Chair.

I want to come back to the idea of data, because it goes back to the idea of invisibility. Again, if you don't track it, you don't know it and then it's invisible. The other part is the feedback loop, which I think is really important.

I'm going to start with Senator Patterson, if that's okay. The departments are not very good at talking to each other. The communication between CAF and VAC is very poor. Trying to support veterans when they get to that stage of their career can be very hard because the data isn't smoothly passed over in such a way that they can look at it and make decisions.

We need to get some ideas. How would that work and how can we encourage those two—and the RCMP as well—to work together?

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: I have to speak very positively of the Canadian Armed Forces and the Department of National Defence and the efforts they put into creating these transition working groups. However, in order to do that, you have to have someone to receive data and someone who wants to receive it. That isn't a criticism towards VAC; I just wanted to establish that framework.

There are already mechanisms in place between VAC and CAF—I cannot speak for the RCMP—to actually create that space. I think they can do it. They know what they're doing and what they need to look for. They have access to funded research through CIMVHR. I'm sure you've heard about that group.

Part of a recommendation would be that we need them to work together to get feedback loops and exchange data so it becomes information. That is what I'd recommend. It's pretty macro level, but there are mechanisms in place that need to be enhanced.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I've heard a couple of times about having a women veterans advisory. I'm wondering if you have an idea of a model you think is successful or ideas of what that could look like.

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: I think we have to remember that we're not the United States of America. While they are our fabulous cousins to the south, we are not them. Our experiences in service are similar but not the same.

If you ask me, “Is there one ideal model?” the answer is always no. We need to look, do the research to figure out what this should look like and talk to veterans.

I think a recommendation could be to consider the development of a model by looking to other models and then coming up with one that is going to work. However, it must include “women”—you have to use that word in it—and go that direction.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Unfortunately, we have to stop there.

Before thanking our witnesses, I would first like to say something to the members of the committee.

You have undoubtedly noticed that we have two clerks this evening, one male and one female. This is because our clerk, Audrée Dallaire, has to leave us. She has been promoted and she is off to another committee. On behalf of the members of the team and myself, I want to thank her for all the work she has done so we are able to hold our meetings the proper way. At the same time, I want to wish Alexandre Sacha Vassiliev, who is succeeding her, a very warm welcome. We will all be available to work with Sacha. Our analyst is always available. He has been here since 2015. It is important to mention that.

Thanks to the witnesses for participating in this meeting, whether in person or virtually, to tell us about their experience and give us their recommendations as part of this important study we are doing on women veterans.

With us were the Hon. Rebecca Patterson, a senator from Ontario, our former colleague Karen McCrimmon, retired lieutenant-colonel, and Lee-Anne Quinn, retired major and nurse practitioner. I invite you to continue to follow our proceedings.

Before suspending the meeting, given that we will be going in camera to discuss committee business, I would remind everyone that only committee members are allowed in the room.

Once again, thanks to the witnesses for participating in our study.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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