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• (1610)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)): We will now begin the public portion of the meeting.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on January 29, 2024, the committee is resuming its study of the experience of indigenous veterans and Black veterans.

Before we begin, since members are returning after spending a week in their constituencies, I would like to remind you of a few rules to follow very carefully so as not to create interference that could injure the interpreters' hearing. When a person is speaking, they should not be wearing their earpiece; they should set it aside. The card on the table includes a QR code to obtain more details on the measures to follow.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Some witnesses are participating on Zoom.

I will now introduce the witnesses who are joining us for the first portion of this meeting.

[*English*]

From the Department of Veterans Affairs, we have with us Amy Meunier, assistant deputy minister, commemoration and public affairs branch; Madame Nathalie Pham, director general, field operations, service delivery branch, by video conference; and Joel Pedersen, senior operations manager, indigenous veterans engagement team, by video conference from Winnipeg.

[*Translation*]

I'd like to extend a very warm welcome to all the witnesses.

We'll start with you, Ms. Meunier. You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

[*English*]

Ms. Amy Meunier (Assistant Deputy Minister, Commemoration and Public Affairs Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members, for having us here today to speak about the experiences of indigenous veterans and Black veterans.

In the spirit of reconciliation, I'd like to begin by acknowledging that Ottawa is built on the unceded Anishinabe Algonquin territory and that the peoples of the Anishinabe Algonquin Nation have lived here for millennia.

When it comes to military experience, Mr. Chair, we know that indigenous people and Black Canadians have historically faced significant discrimination, notably in the form of overt exclusion and systemic racism. From discriminatory enlistment policies to forced assimilation, the treatment endured by indigenous people and by Black Canadians is a stain on our history.

We've worked hard to address this regrettable legacy, both by recognizing the generational impact of the wrongs committed and by taking action to eliminate any barriers that have kept indigenous people and Black Canadians from receiving the care and support they are entitled to as veterans. We've made some progress, but there's still much more work to do.

The minister's mandate letter contains several commitments designed to achieve results for equity-deserving veterans. Specific to those who are indigenous, we are working to reduce barriers to accessing services, including improving outreach to indigenous communities and expanding the offering of culturally appropriate services, which our department has been doing through our indigenous veterans engagement team.

In its first year, VAC's indigenous veterans engagement team conducted over 80 in-person engagements with indigenous communities and veterans. This included participation in five trade shows, conferences and annual meetings, as well as presentations to CAF leadership, to Canadian Rangers, to indigenous leadership opportunity year participants and to the RCMP.

The team also made more than 40 community visits, attended six festivals and powwows and took part in two international events. Notably, they supported a delegation of families and community members who travelled to the Netherlands to commemorate indigenous soldiers at their graves through the indigenous legacy project.

Veterans Affairs Canada has been working to improve indigenous veterans' access to culturally appropriate services. We're working with other government organizations to create a process that ensures indigenous veterans can smoothly connect with programs, such as traditional healing and elder services. This approach respects the vital role of indigenous communities in identifying and delivering culturally specific supports.

We've also listened closely to indigenous leaders and to community members, including the Southern Chiefs Organization, which has shared its perspectives on improving these services. Through ongoing dialogue and based on feedback, VAC continues to adapt and refine this process, ensuring that the services align with the unique needs and the cultural perspectives of indigenous veterans.

Our department signed a letter of understanding with the Assembly of First Nations in April 2023 that highlights joint priorities in veteran engagement, outreach and commemoration. In 2019, we signed a Métis veterans recognition payment contribution agreement to address concerns raised by the Métis National Council with regard to the treatment of Second World War Métis veterans.

• (1615)

[Translation]

We are also committed to recognizing the military service of indigenous peoples and Black Canadians and their achievements in the Canadian Armed Forces.

[English]

Since 2020, our commemorative partnership program has approved a total of more than \$865,000 in funding for 80 projects in indigenous communities or projects commemorating the contributions of indigenous veterans.

You may know as well about the particular focus our department has placed on telling the story of the No. 2 Construction Battalion. With funding from our commemorative partnership program, organizations are encouraged to plan commemorative activities, develop educational materials and build or improve community war memorials that commemorate the battalion, its members and its legacy. This dedicated funding responds to a recommendation from the national apology advisory committee, which conducted consultations with descendants of the No. 2 Construction Battalion and members of Black communities on their vision of a meaningful apology.

Following the first call for proposals last February, 15 organizations received funding for 16 projects that honoured the legacy of the No. 2 Construction Battalion: interactive websites, educational events, new memorials and learning exhibits.

[Translation]

Exhibits, plaques and commemorative ceremonies are unique ways to commemorate these people, who left such an indelible mark on Canada's military history through their courage, sacrifice and determination to serve despite the obstacles they faced.

[English]

We have also supported a number of indigenous and Black veterans through our veteran and family well-being fund, which provides grants and contributions to private, public, academic or indigenous organizations to conduct research and implement initiatives and projects that support the well-being of veterans and their families.

[Translation]

While Veterans Affairs Canada is taking many steps to ensure that indigenous and Black veterans receive the support and services

they need and deserve, we recognize that much more needs to be done.

That is why we eagerly await this committee's recommendations on how we can improve these veterans' experience.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your opening remarks, Ms. Meunier.

I now turn to you, members of the committee. Given the in camera portion of the meeting, I have a proposal. The second part of the meeting, which will take place with the next panel of witnesses, could last 45 minutes, as it did for the Veterans Affairs panel, rather than an hour as planned. The meeting would therefore continue until 5:45 p.m. That way, each party would get a six-minute round. That time could be shared among colleagues. Then we could hear from the other witnesses. Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

• (1620)

The Chair: Excellent.

I would also remind you that Ms. Meunier is not our only witness. There are two other witnesses joining us by video conference. You can ask them questions as well.

[English]

I'll start with Mr. Richards, the first vice-chair of the committee, for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

I'd like to start by giving notice of the following motion:

Given that:

a. During a recent Remembrance Day ceremony at Sir Robert Borden High School, the school played an anti-Israel protest song associated with the ongoing war in Gaza instead of playing music associated with the service and sacrifice of Canadian service members;

b. The principal of the school defended the choice, complaining that Remembrance Day is too often about "a white guy who has done something related to the military";

The committee report to the House its opinion that the principal of Sir Robert Borden High School should be terminated for his actions.

Obviously, this is a disgraceful situation that dishonours the memory and sacrifice of many of our Canadian soldiers, and I want to put this motion on notice today.

I'll now turn to some questions I have.

I'd like to know if indigenous veterans who utilize other programs, such as the on-reserve income assistance program, have their benefits or entitlements from VAC affected by that.

For example, would these indigenous-specific programs be counted against income-tested benefits, such as the income replacement benefit from VAC, and would indigenous veterans have their incomes and benefits reduced as a result of their heritage?

Can you tell me if that, in fact, occurs?

Ms. Amy Meunier: The income replacement benefit is intended, as the name suggests, to replace income, and then there are certain types of payments that would be offset from that if they were deemed income. I can't say offhand if that is one specifically. I can ask my colleague—

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. Perhaps there's someone who can answer. Otherwise, if you could just commit to providing the answer...

Ms. Amy Meunier: Sure, we could do that.

Mr. Blake Richards: Is there someone who could answer that, by email specifically?

Ms. Amy Meunier: I will look to my colleague Ms. Pham.

Mr. Blake Richards: Give just a quick yes or no on that, please.

The Chair: Excuse me, Ms. Pham. Please turn on your microphone.

Ms. Nathalie Pham (Director General Field Operations, Service Delivery Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs): I apologize, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

As Ms. Meunier said, the purpose of the income replacement benefit is to replace income. There are criteria and there are—

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm sorry, but we have only six minutes. I don't want to use it this way, please. I'd like to just have a yes or no: Is the income replacement benefit, for example, reduced if an indigenous veteran receives other assistance?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nathalie Pham: Each case is unique. If you have a question about a specific veteran's case, we can provide you with an answer later.

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. Thank you. If you could provide that information to us, that would be very helpful. Obviously, it would be completely wrong if it turns out to be the case that an indigenous veteran is being penalized in their earnings due to their heritage, so I hope that the answer is no, but please provide that to us.

There are studies that have been done by organizations like the Atlas Institute that show that indigenous veterans have the lowest satisfaction rate with Veterans Affairs around the services they receive. Can you tell us why that is?

Ms. Amy Meunier: I can tell you that we're working very diligently to try to make stronger connections with indigenous veterans and their families, and in particular with indigenous communities. For a long time, as I mentioned in my opening remarks—

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm sorry, but in those communications that you're having, what is the indication you're receiving as to why those satisfaction rates are so low?

Ms. Amy Meunier: Information and feedback we've been hearing are that in some instances, individuals did not recognize they were veterans themselves and therefore were not coming forward to seek support, and also that perhaps government hadn't treated them well in the past, and so there's hesitancy or reticence to engage.

We've been very focused on creating trust with communities and indigenous veterans—

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm sorry to interrupt, but because the time is limited, would you say that the low engagement you've seen and the low satisfaction are a reflection that the department's policies are inadequate?

Ms. Amy Meunier: No, I would not say that, not at all. In fact, over the last number of—

Mr. Blake Richards: No. Okay. Then are you suggesting that these indigenous veterans are incorrect in having a low opinion of VAC's programs?

Mr. Bryan May: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Richards. I have a point of order.

Mr. Bryan May: I understand Mr. Richards has time and he can choose to use that time, but we're missing critical content here in these questions. There's not a question that's been asked when Mr. Richards has not interrupted the witnesses. I think we're doing a disservice to our witnesses by not actually listening to the answers.

The Chair: I stopped the time.

I understand that.

Listen, I know that I said six minutes for each group, but at the same time, we have decorum. We have questions and answers. I used to say that if you have a question that lasts one minute, you can allow about a minute for the witnesses or witness to reply, please.

As a last thing, we have our interpreters there, so if we have it like that, then it's chaos. It will be tough for them, so please...

• (1625)

Mr. Blake Richards: With that, hearing that you believe that it's not the case that your programs are inadequate, are you saying that you believe that these indigenous veterans are incorrect in having this low assessment of VAC?

Ms. Amy Meunier: No, I'm not saying they're incorrect. What I'm saying is that it's our responsibility to make sure that indigenous veterans and their communities and families are well aware of the programs so that they can avail themselves of those programs and that we can make sure, when there's an indigenous veteran or service person in need, that they know who to reach out to quickly. It can be anybody at Veterans Affairs Canada or someone within their community, which is why we're trying to build partnerships not just at the individual level but also at a community level.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. You're of the position that the programs themselves are adequate, and you just need to do more to communicate the programs. Is that what I'm hearing?

Ms. Amy Meunier: I think that the programs are very effective, but if people are not participating in them or aware of them, then they can't benefit from them.

In my opening remarks, I also made mention of greater access to traditional and cultural healing, which has been a priority for the department, based on feedback from indigenous veterans.

Mr. Blake Richards: I'll point out, Chair, that we asked for the officials to come at the end of this study and respond to what we've heard from veterans. That is not, in fact, what has occurred here.

I will simply indicate that I certainly hope you're going to be listening to the study, because I think what we've heard—in the bit we've heard so far—is that this is not the case. I don't think indigenous veterans feel they're being served appropriately. I hope you will be paying close attention to this study and that you'll make yourselves available to answer to the inadequacies we may hear about from veterans as we go forward in this study.

Again, I ask that you please provide information about whether any of VAC's benefits are income-tested against other programs that indigenous veterans may receive through their indigenous heritage. I would certainly indicate that it is absolutely inappropriate if veterans of indigenous heritage are having their benefits from VAC—or any other income—reduced as a result of their heritage. That is completely inappropriate.

You talked a lot about historic wrongs. There are current wrongs happening. I certainly hope your government is paying attention to those.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Richards.

Before I go to another member, you can see that I let you ask questions and answer. However, we all know that questions and answers should be addressed through the chair. If I have to, I will be strict about that. I let it go, guys.

Now let's go to Mr. Miao for six minutes.

Mr. Wilson Miao (Richmond Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for being here and online today.

Through you, Mr. Chair, I'd like to address my first question to Ms. Meunier.

What steps is VAC taking to ensure the contributions of indigenous and Black veterans are properly recognized in Canadian military history and public commemoration?

Ms. Amy Meunier: Thank you very much for that question.

As you know, recognition is a key component of veterans' well-being. It can come in many forms: benefits and services, honouring and recognizing, and storytelling.

With regard to indigenous or diverse veterans, we're expanding that recognition. If you look on our website, you'll see dedicated pages telling the true history of what occurred among under-repre-

sented groups. We've built, over the last number of years, quite a few educational packages specifically relating to Black veterans, women veterans, 2SLGBTQI+ veterans and other marginalized groups.

We also have our commemorative partnership program. In 2021, the terms and conditions were changed to increase the eligible amount for projects that focus on commemorating or recognizing indigenous veterans. We're quite pleased with the significant take-up. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, a significant amount of money has gone into communities to tell that story.

As well, on behalf of the Department of National Defence, we have a dedicated stream of programming that focuses on Black veterans, with an emphasis on the No. 2 Construction Battalion and others, in order to make sure we're telling the story of their fantastic service. Perhaps these weren't as prevalent or as easy to find in the past, so there is a big effort on our part to make sure the information is readily available.

● (1630)

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you for sharing that with us.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to go to Mr. Pedersen, who is online.

This is related to a recent witness at this committee who was very complimentary of the work of VAC's aboriginal liaison officers. The witness said, "I wouldn't have been able to access some of the programs that are available if it weren't for these liaison officers". That's a testament to the work you and your engagement team have done and are currently doing.

Could you share some insights with our committee about this team, its composition and the impacts you have seen through this work?

[*Translation*]

CWO Joel Pedersen (Senior Operations Manager, Indigenous Veterans Engagement Team, Department of Veterans Affairs): Yes, thank you.

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

[*English*]

[*Witness spoke in Cree and provided the following translation:*]

Hello. My name is Joel Pedersen. I'm from Saskatoon.

[*English*]

My name is Joel Pedersen. It's an absolute pleasure to be with you here today.

Thank you for the kind words, sir.

Mr. Chair, with regard to the questions asked so far, I'd like to also just indicate that we've got a lot of space to cover and a lot of people to meet with. We're doing a lot of heavy lifting here.

Our team is composed, right now, of three persons. The first one is in Victoria. She has been with Veterans Affairs for a number of years and knows the ins and outs really well. The second member is from Edmonton; he's a former Canadian Armed Forces member as well, and has been working with Veterans Affairs Canada for a number of years. The remainder of our team works out in P.E.I. and assists us quite a lot with the administrative portion.

What we've seen over the last year and a half is a lot of engagement. As Madame Meunier mentioned, we've been able to meet with current serving members and retired members of the Canadian Armed Forces and the RCMP. For the majority of indigenous members whom we have been able to work with, we've been able to facilitate and assist them with their questions and also assist them with their files. We're finding that a lot of the engagement with leadership in the first nations, Métis and Inuit communities has been really significant and we look forward to continuing these meaningful engagements.

I'd like to also just add, Mr. Chair, that when we're talking about TRC and UNDRIP, we really are doing some heavy lifting here. I think if there's anything that's moving, that's what we're doing, and we're really honoured to be a part of this.

If anyone has a question, please go ahead.

Mr. Wilson Miao: To follow up with that, has the work of the engagement team helped identify any gaps or issues that could then be relayed to other parts of the department so that they could be looked at or, hopefully, resolved in the future?

CWO Joel Pedersen: It's a great question. We work also with the area office. I actually just got off, before this meeting started, with the area office in Winnipeg and the Southern Chiefs' Organization, which looks after close to 34 first nations in Manitoba. Connecting and liaising with them provides them with the capacity to meet with the community's needs. I feel that we're really augmenting what a lot of the area offices are doing, but we're also providing some professional development and some real insight as to how we network with the indigenous communities in a meaningful way.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you. Does the engagement team also travel to remote communities to engage directly with indigenous veterans? If it does, can you talk about the value of those experiences?

CWO Joel Pedersen: Lee-Ann Lavoie is out of Vancouver, and she does the majority of the very far north. She's been to all of the far north communities, meeting with the Ranger patrols, Ranger patrol leadership, and with the RCMP detachments. David and I criss-cross across the country, and all three of us have facilitated commemoration events, with the last one being for the 60th anniversary of the mission in Cyprus.

• (1635)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Miao.

[*Translation*]

I will now give the floor to the second vice-chair of the committee, Mr. Luc Desilets.

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

Good afternoon, colleagues.

I'd like to thank our three guests for being here and sharing their knowledge with us.

Ms. Pham, are you the director of case managers for a given region of Canada, or for all of Canada?

Ms. Nathalie Pham: For all of Canada.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Very well.

Are there many indigenous or Black people working as case managers?

Ms. Nathalie Pham: Yes, a number of our case managers are indigenous or Black.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Roughly what percentage do you think that is?

Ms. Nathalie Pham: I don't have that information with me, but we can find it for you. I have to say that our workforce is constantly evolving, but we have indigenous and Black representation in each of our offices.

Mr. Luc Desilets: We would appreciate it if you could send us that data. It would be quite relevant to our study.

Do case management officers who have to work with indigenous or Black people without being indigenous or Black themselves receive specific training to manage this type of case?

Ms. Nathalie Pham: Yes, absolutely. Our case managers work with veterans taking their unique circumstances into account. So whether it's a Black veteran, an indigenous veteran or a veteran with specific issues, our people are trained to give them the necessary support.

We are also forging ties with the various communities. For example, in Nova Scotia, our case managers liaised with the Black Managers Association of Nova Scotia and took part in training on trauma in the Black community. Soon, they will also take part in training with the indigenous community to better understand its culture.

This is training taken by our case managers on an ongoing basis to improve their tool box.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Although you don't have the figures, do you think you have a sufficient proportion of case managers who are indigenous or Black to work with indigenous and Black people who do indeed have very specific issues?

Ms. Nathalie Pham: As you know, when it comes to recruitment, case management is a specialization that we look for among our workforce's members. As to whether we have enough indigenous case managers or Black case managers, I would say that it's always beneficial to have more. That said, if a veteran wants their file to be processed by an indigenous or Black case manager, we can find a person in their community with whom they can identify.

Mr. Luc Desilets: When you post these positions, are there any specific criteria set out in them? For example, do you indicate that preference is given to indigenous or Black candidates?

Ms. Nathalie Pham: Yes, absolutely. We put up targeted postings. We make it clear that we're looking for people from employment equity groups, and indigenous and Black people are among those.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Ms. Pham, two or three weeks ago, we heard from an indigenous veteran who gave us appallingly disturbing testimony. He said he applied five times before his application was accepted—after many, many years.

Do such cases occur often, in your opinion?

Ms. Nathalie Pham: With respect to the case you mentioned, I don't have the file in front of me, so I can't comment on it.

However, depending on the program and the type of application, people sometimes do have to submit several applications because we're looking for specific information. It can take several tries before we gather all the required information.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I'll give you an example and you can tell me if it's something you see often. This veteran's military file was impossible to find, among other things. That's something fairly basic, after all. It was as though it didn't exist.

Does it often happen that a veteran's military file is not found when their application is processed?

• (1640)

Ms. Nathalie Pham: It's definitely a challenge when a veteran's military file doesn't exist, as in the case you're talking about. We work closely with the Department of National Defence to ensure that military members, when they leave the Canadian Armed Forces, have access to their file and that all their documents remain accessible in the department's archives.

Officials at the Department of National Defence are in a better position to answer that question. For our part, in such cases, we do research with the veteran to track down the military documents.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you very much, Ms. Pham.

Ms. Meunier, I have a quick question for you.

In 2019, the committee produced a report on indigenous veterans. Recommendation 12 is that Veterans Affairs Canada review the eligibility criteria for its programs to support the erection of memorials in order to promote the well-being of communities.

Were those two things done, in your opinion?

Ms. Amy Meunier: Yes, absolutely. As I said before, we changed our program in 2021.

[English]

In order to ensure that there were dedicated funds for indigenous communities, we increased the amount that they would be eligible for. As I mentioned, a significant number of indigenous communities—

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: There was talk of a monument at the time. You were the one who alluded to it in 2018.

Ms. Amy Meunier: It's up to the communities.

[English]

They can have money for a ceremony or a cenotaph.

[Translation]

That is a choice for them to make.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

[English]

Now let's go to Ms. Blaney for six minutes, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank Ms. Pham, Ms. Meunier and Mr. Pedersen for being here with us today.

I will ask questions and I am happy to hear from whoever is the best person to answer those questions.

We had testimony not long ago from the Veterans Association Food Bank about some very concerning language that was extremely racist. We heard from Ms. Blackburn that she heard from workers at VAC that they didn't want to give money directly to indigenous veterans because they were worried that they would drink it up. I found that really concerning.

I want to understand better what the capacity is of organizations that are working to support veterans to bring forward a complaint.

I think this is a huge concern. We heard very clearly that indigenous veterans—and I would say probably veterans from the Black community and veterans who are people of colour—often feel afraid to come forward because they think they're going to lose their benefits by voicing what they see happening to them. Service providers often don't have the ability to advocate without putting forward a name.

I'm wondering what the process is for bringing forward these kinds of complaints. How can service providers bring forward those complaints without naming a veteran, to protect that veteran? How do we make sure that something like this doesn't happen again?

I want to be really clear: I believe her, 100%. I've heard this so many times. It's a very unfortunate stereotype. It resides in Canadians, and it's not every person, but it doesn't matter, because every time a veteran asks for services and is told that they can't access them because of an assumption about who they are, we're really losing those supports.

I'm just wondering if the committee could learn a little bit more about that process and what that might look like.

Ms. Amy Meunier: I'll start by saying that I am saddened to hear that. Of course, when I heard the testimony, that's not a response that's acceptable for our department. We certainly would not condone that kind of stereotyping.

There are a number of ways for any individual—in this case, a service provider—to elevate a complaint without necessarily identifying a contact. If you're a service provider with the department, there are escalation channels that come as part and parcel of being a service provider with the department or Medavie Blue Cross. There is also going directly into the department through the national client contact network or if they happen to know an individual.

We also have area offices in many locations across the country that have relationships with those organizations. Potentially there is a direct linkage there. I do understand that in the context, that might not be the most effective route, based on what you're suggesting.

There is also the Office of the Veterans Ombud. While it's certainly in place to look at systemic issues, that would be a place. We work actively with that office.

I might look to my colleague Ms. Pham to see if she has additional information from a service delivery perspective.

• (1645)

Ms. Nathalie Pham: Thank you, Ms. Meunier.

As Ms. Meunier said, this is very unfortunate. I am saddened by what I hear. In our offices we should not have stereotypes, as you mentioned. We should not be discriminating against any of our veterans.

I know it's hard, but I encourage providers or veterans themselves to come forward—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you. I'm sorry; I only have a couple of minutes left.

I hear that, but the frustrating part, of course, is that these systems are intrinsically built to make people who feel marginalized not feel included, not feel like they participate. As much as I hear that, there needs to be some serious work on how we make those things work more effectively.

My next question is around anti-racism training. I'm curious about the level of anti-racism training. I'm going to ask if that information can be given to the committee in terms of what level, what type of training and for what positions. I think it's really important. Often, only a few people are given that training. If it's going to be meaningful, it has to be done at all levels.

I'll go to my next question. We know that there's not enough data around indigenous and Black veterans. We know that it's also challenging on the service side. I'm curious about what's happening around collecting that data so that there can be better analysis of where people are falling through gaps.

The next part of that question is that we know that sometimes harm is done by the military while people are serving in the military. We've heard this very clearly from the BIPOC community—

Black, indigenous, and people of colour—that they're harmed, not necessarily from the action of service but from internal issues. That's not documented, so how does VAC respond to that, and can you respond?

Ms. Amy Meunier: I might start by indicating that in 2021, as you know, there was a veteran question on the census that started to give us more specific information. We know that there are about 23,000 indigenous veterans in Canada, about 11,000 Métis, about 11,000 first nations and about 700 Innu, give or take.

Recently we had the community health needs assessment. It really targeted those marginalized or under-represented voices. I'm sure that someone much more intimate with those details could provide a solid briefing to the committee about what that tells us.

That information will really help us drill down into areas where there may be barriers we're not seeing through conversation and engagement. It'll be a little more precise in that regard.

In terms of discrimination or poor treatment that somebody may have experienced in the military or in society, it's difficult to change what they've experienced, but we're certainly well aware, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, that when individuals who have been marginalized come to us, our staff, in particular those frontline staff, are working on being trained to be culturally sensitive and making sure that we're adapting the training. As you indicated, there is quite a fair bit of discrimination prevention training and racism prevention training that happens in the department at all levels, with a great emphasis on our frontline staff.

We can certainly provide that to you in writing, as you requested.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Meunier.

[*Translation*]

Unfortunately, that's all the time we have. As I—

[*English*]

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: Go ahead on a point of order, Mr. Tolmie.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: My colleague Mr. Desilets came up with a very good question earlier with regard to how many Black and indigenous employees Veterans Affairs employs. The reply was that it was proportionate.

I wonder if the department could respond in writing if the proportionate numbers are those of who have served or those who are within our population numbers. We would appreciate it for the committee.

• (1650)

Ms. Amy Meunier: Absolutely. I'm just fiddling here and couldn't find it, but we can send that to you quite quickly. I apologize.

The Chair: Thank you. We know that Ms. Meunier is used to coming to our committee. Do not hesitate to send it to the clerk, and we'll share it with members.

[Translation]

On behalf of the committee members and myself, I want to thank the three representatives from the Department of Veterans Affairs who appeared before us for their participation: Amy Meunier, assistant deputy minister, commemoration and public affairs branch; Nathalie Pham, director general of field operations, service delivery; and Joel Pedersen, senior operations manager, indigenous veterans engagement team.

We'll take a very short break while we welcome the next witnesses.

• (1650)

(Pause)

• (1655)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

I would remind you that our study is about the experience of indigenous veterans and Black veterans.

For the second part of the meeting, we have two groups of witnesses.

[English]

First of all, from Aboriginal Veterans Autochtones, we have Randi Gage, Manitoba chapter, chair of the united veterans of Manitoba.

We have Wendy-Anne Jocko, indigenous liaison, Innovation 7, by video conference. She was with us there in the first hour.

From the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research, we have Nicholas Held, assistant scientific director, and retired Major Paul Hook, managing director.

Welcome to our meeting.

Each group will have five minutes for their opening statement. After that there will be some questions from the members.

I'd like to start with the Aboriginal Veterans Autochtones.

Ms. Randi Gage, you have five minutes for opening remarks, please.

Ms. Randi Gage (Manitoba Chapter, Chair of Unified Veterans of Manitoba, Aboriginal Veterans Autochtones) : I'm claiming six minutes because I want to say something that I want you to listen to very carefully: Stop using "BIPOC". The community does not want that used. Just stop.

I'm moving on.

The Chair: Could you repeat it, please?

Ms. Randi Gage: Could I do it again?

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. Randi Gage: It's about "BIPOC"—Black, indigenous, people of colour. Stop using that terminology. The communities do not want it. It separates us. It's divisive. It is another way in which the government can say, "Oh, we've already done that for them." Well, we're not all "them".

I'm indigenous. I'm also black. Huh? That's another story. It's very divisive, so just stop.

Now, are you ready for the other part?

Boozhoo Migizi-ikwe indegneecas, ogichidaawikwe, mong doodem.

I bring greetings to this gathering located on the traditional, unceded, unsundered territories of the Anishinabe and Algonquin peoples from Treaty 1 territories located on the ancestral lands of the Anishinabe, Oji-Cree, Dakota, Dene, Cree and Inuit nations and the homeland of the Red River Métis from Manitoba.

With respect to the spirit and intent of the treaties and the treaty-making process, I remain committed to working in partnership with new arrivals to our lands in the spirit of truth, reconciliation and collaboration. The topics I chose to speak to you about today are physical health, mental health, some safety concerns and sexual trauma during service.

Female health is at the top of the list, as is the lack of proper accommodations for personal needs. It is painfully evident that those in command do not understand the personal needs of their female soldiers. During field operations, not being allowed a simple blanket to shield a female soldier while using the toilet is seen as a sign of disrespect and harassment, and the female requesting such is usually tormented and picked on.

There is a lack of understanding of the extended wear of a personal hygiene product and how dangerous that is. Further to the lack of accommodations is the lack of understanding of the dangers for the female soldier. We're not allowed to change personal hygiene products. Prolonged wear of such items can result in toxic shock, which is clearly stated on the Tampax box itself, which gives the instructions, "Don't wear this longer than eight hours".

I've had several female soldiers who have been deployed into rural areas or into active combat areas who have had locals come to them who were scared because they noticed the stain on their pants and thought they'd been hit by a bullet or a ricochet or something, so this is something that needs to be addressed. It needs to be looked at. The harassment that women go through during that time of the month should not be happening.

The lack of recognition of the health needs of the mature females in the forces is clearly documented. Around the time of menopause, many females experience physical symptoms, such as hot flashes and night sweats, which are normal things that we all have to go through, and there's nothing you can do about it. However, the impact on the person's quality of life and the range of this stuff becomes very severe. It can be from mild to severe. It starts perhaps in the 30s, and it's inevitable.

Now, not to let you guys off easy, but you also go through something, and it's not being recognized either. It's called andropause. You might know it as the "little red convertible syndrome".

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Randi Gage: These are real things that happen to your body, and Canadian Forces does not recognize them in men or women, but women have a worse time of it because we have to do things that you don't have to do. Something as simple as a bucket in the corner with a blanket to show a little bit of respect would go a long way to help the ladies. These things impact mental health as well.

Now, I'm going to say something here that may ruffle a couple of feathers, but you know what? I don't care. Having presentations from misogynistic, racist and divisive civilians and veterans causes great confusion to this committee and to the government at large.

First of all, I am not going to tell you the name, but if you ask me a specific name, I will say yes or no to it. When people who do not represent indigenous soldiers or indigenous veterans are presenting at any of the committees and are questioning reputations, there's a ripple effect that goes out into the community, and it's a very hurtful thing.

Yes, I see your sign, and it's not going to work.

• (1700)

It's something that you need to think about and know who you're asking questions of. Harassment, racism, hazing, general mental health and abuse—I'll send you some of that stuff, because I have with me two documents of people who have lived through it.

As for the lack of acknowledgement and understanding of access to the supports that various indigenous peoples need for traditional ceremonies and things like that, such as not allowing us to go to a ceremony or saying "You can't use that" because you have to have a piece of paper that says you're from Queen's University or McGill University or whatever, I have news for you: Our elders, our people who actually know these things, know the herbs, and they know what happened. I have two legs that I'm walking around on today because I said no to mainstream medicine and went to an herbalist, and I'm alive.

Regarding safety concerns, there's a whole raft of things here, like sexual trauma. I think I'll just send this to you and scare you with it, because that way it gives me more time to expand on it.

In closing, this document here has recommendations. This was presented here 32 years ago by me. Of these recommendations, number one is the only one that's been addressed. This was reported 32 years ago, 27 years ago, 12 years ago and seven years ago.

Okay, guys; let's get busy.

• (1705)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Randi Gage.

Colleagues, the clerk told me that each witness would like to say a few words, and I know that one of our colleagues would like to leave around 5:30 or 5:45, so I'm going to let them share maybe five minutes.

Now I'm going to ask Chief Wendy-Anne Jocko, indigenous liaison from Innovation 7, to take a few minutes for her opening statement, because this is a different organization.

Chief Wendy-Anne Jocko (Indigenous Liaison, Innovation Seven, Aboriginal Veterans Autochtones): Thank you very much, Chair, but I would actually like to rectify my title page, because I sit on the Assembly of First Nations Veterans Council and I'm the interim vice-president for Aboriginal Veterans Autochtones. When I filled in the sheet, that's the company I work for. It has nothing to do with veterans, although the owner of the company is indeed a veteran.

I just want to thank the committee for inviting me here today to share a few things. I have written down 10 points that I would like to share with you.

Just to let you know, and you probably already know, indigenous veterans played a crucial role in Canada's military history, serving with distinction in various conflicts. However, they have faced and continue to face unique challenges that require attention and action, so I have a brief overview to highlight these issues for presentation to your committee.

Number one is historical context and recognition. Indigenous people participated in every major battle and peacekeeping mission involving Canada, from the War of 1812 to modern-day operations. Despite their significant contributions, these veterans have often been overlooked in historical narratives and official recognition.

As for the lack of formal acknowledgement, as we know, for many years the contributions of indigenous veterans were not adequately recognized in official histories or commemorations, and this could be for a few reasons. I did hear somebody earlier say that the word "indigenous" does include first nation, Inuit and Métis people, but we also forget about the status and the non-status first nation people. Many indigenous people were enfranchised when they joined the army, and, unfortunately, there still are many people who are trying to find their way home and gain their status. There has been delayed access to benefits. Many indigenous veterans were initially denied access to the same benefits and supportive services offered to non-indigenous veterans upon their return from service, which, of course, had a collateral effect on their families, to this very day as well.

Point number two is that there are cultural and social challenges. Indigenous veterans have faced unique cultural and social challenges, both during and after their military service. There's a cultural disconnect. Military service often requires indigenous soldiers to leave their communities, leading to a disconnection from their cultural practices and languages. Many indigenous veterans experience discrimination, both within the military and upon their return to civilian life, and this still holds true today, as we heard. The transition back to civilian life has been particularly challenging for indigenous veterans, especially those returning to remote or isolated communities.

Point number three is that there are health and wellness issues. Indigenous vets face specific health and wellness challenges that require targeted support and intervention. Indigenous veterans may experience PTSD at a higher rate because of the compounded effects of military trauma and historical trauma related to colonization. Many indigenous veterans struggle to access health care services that are both culturally sensitive and equipped to address their unique needs. Higher rates of substance abuse have been reported among indigenous veterans, often linked to PTSD and difficulties in reintegration.

Point number four is that there are economic and employment challenges. Indigenous veterans often face significant economic and employment challenges upon return to civilian life. Many indigenous veterans return to communities with limited economic opportunities, making it difficult to secure stable employment. There can be challenges in translating military skills to civilian job markets, particularly in indigenous communities. Some indigenous veterans may lack access to education and training programs that could help them transition to civilian careers.

Point number five is housing and infrastructure issues. Adequate housing and infrastructure remain significant concerns for many indigenous veterans. Indigenous veterans are at a higher risk of homelessness compared to the general veteran population. Many indigenous veterans return to communities with inadequate housing conditions. Remote and isolated communities often lack the necessary support services for veterans.

● (1710)

Point number six relates to the intergenerational impact. The challenges faced by indigenous veterans often have far-reaching effects on their families and communities. The effects of military service-related trauma can be passed down to subsequent generations. Extended periods of service and difficulties in reintegration can lead to family breakdowns and social issues within communities.

Point number seven relates to ongoing efforts and future direction. While progress has been made in addressing these issues, there is still much work to be done. On policy reform, continued efforts are needed to reform policies to better address the unique needs of indigenous veterans. Increasing cultural competency within veteran support services is crucial for providing effective assistance, as is developing and supporting community-based programs that integrate traditional healing practices with modern support services. We need more comprehensive research and data collection to fully understand and address the challenges faced by indigenous veterans.

Point number eight relates to the sexual trauma and challenges faced by indigenous soldiers. Indigenous soldiers, both male and female, have faced significant challenges during their military service, including experiences of sexual trauma and difficulties related to participation in foreign missions. These issues are compounded by historical trauma and ongoing systemic barriers. Indigenous soldiers have reported higher rates of sexual trauma compared with non-indigenous counterparts. It includes sexual harassment and assault within military ranks, under-reporting due to fear of reprisal or lack of culturally appropriate support, and intersectional discrimination based on both indigenous identity and gender.

Point number nine relates to challenges in foreign missions. Indigenous soldiers may encounter unique difficulties when called to participate in foreign missions. These include cultural disconnection from traditional lands and practices; language barriers, especially for those whose first language is indigenous; conflict between military duties and indigenous values or beliefs; and limited access to culturally appropriate mental health support during deployment.

Point number 10 relates to Veterans Affairs Canada programs and supports. VAC has developed some programs to address the needs of indigenous veterans, including those who have experienced sexual trauma. The aim of the indigenous veterans initiative is to recognize and commemorate indigenous veterans. There is cultural competency training for VAC staff to better serve indigenous veterans, and there are also partnerships with indigenous organizations to provide culturally appropriate mental health services and dedicated support for survivors of sexual trauma in the military, including specialized counselling services.

However, many indigenous veterans report that these programs are often insufficient or difficult to access, particularly in remote communities. There is an ongoing need for more comprehensive, culturally informed support services that address the unique experiences of indigenous soldiers.

It is crucial to approach these sensitive topics with respect and to prioritize the voices and experience of indigenous veterans in developing and implementing support.

● (1715)

The Chair: Mrs. Jocko—

Chief Wendy-Anne Jocko: I want to let you know that I myself am a 23-year veteran. I have had some positive experiences with VAC, I must say. However, that's not to be said for some people, including my son, who unfortunately passed away last year when he was only 38 years old. His story is not so good.

In conclusion, addressing the unique challenges faced by indigenous veterans requires a multi-faceted approach that acknowledges historical injustices, respects cultural differences and provides targeted support.

Meegwetch.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Jocko.

Colleagues, we have the testimony of Ms. Jocko. When we have it in both official languages, you will have a copy of that as well.

We will now go to the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research and Mr. Nicholas Held, assistant scientific director.

Please go ahead.

Dr. Nicholas Held (Assistant Scientific Director, Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research): Thank you. I'll make this brief. We won't go through it all. I believe you have access to it. If not, you will have access.

Good evening, Chairman and members of the committee. Thank you very much for having us here.

My name is Nicholas Held. I'm the assistant scientific director of the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research. The acronym I'll be using is CIMVHR, just so you have that background.

Before we begin, I'd like to take this time to acknowledge that CIMVHR is situated on the territory of the Haudenosaunee and the Anishinabe, otherwise known as Kingston. We are grateful to be able to live, learn and play on these lands.

Our mission at CIMVHR is to enhance the lives of Canadian military personnel, veterans and their families by harnessing the national capacity for research. Since 2010, CIMVHR has built a network of 46 Canadian universities that have agreed to work together to address the health research requirements of the Canadian military, veterans and their families. This institute acts as a conduit between the academic community and research-funding organizations.

On behalf of funding organizations, CIMVHR distributes requests for proposals for research to researchers through its network of universities and manages all the tasks from there, through scientific peer review process to the completion of the projects.

We also publish a peer-reviewed academic journal, called the Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health. We conduct knowledge translation of the research that's out there and we host an annual conference that involves anywhere from 600 to 1,000 people every year across Canada. Our latest one was CIMVHR Forum 2024, which recently took place in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

CIMVHR is committed to equity, diversity, inclusion and indigenization. We fully acknowledge that there has been a gap on our end institutionally on researching the two respective populations we are discussing today. In the past few years, however, we have worked towards bridging this gap to ensure that we leave nobody behind in the discourse of military and veteran health research.

Within our journal, we have mobilized important information on indigenous and Black veterans, including a complete special edition of our journal completely dedicated to these groups. It was in 2022 and was entitled "The many faces of diversity in military employment". I won't go through all the other papers that are part of this; they will be part of a note.

The same thing goes for our annual forum. Indigenous and Black veterans, as well as other minorities in the military, such as women, are topics of discussion for a lot of presentations that take place at our forum, both at the podium and as poster presentations.

From there, I'll pass it over to Mr. Hook. We'll be able to chat about the rest of this, and it will be sent to you as well.

The Chair: Please go ahead, Mr. Hook.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Hook (Major (Retired), Managing Director, Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning. My name is Paul Hook. I'm a veteran. I spent 25 years in the Canadian Armed Forces as an officer in the Armoured Corps.

[*English*]

Since my retirement last year, I have been the managing director at CIMVHR responsible for human resources, finance, outreach and strategic planning. I use my lived experience as a military dependent—I'm the fourth generation serving in the military—as a military officer and now as a veteran to work with my colleagues, such as Nicholas Held, to make sure that the research that is being put out has all the merits that are required.

Over the past year, CIMVHR, as part of its work to complete our strategic plan that takes us to 2030, has had some hard discussions. As my colleague discussed, there is a research gap. We've looked at hiring an indigenous adviser as well as a diversity adviser, both of whom we should have in January 2025. That will allow us, as we move forward with our research areas of focus, to ensure that we're meeting the needs of all of our military veterans and their families when we do research.

As a point for discussion at our annual conference, we were very happy to have Randi as well as other people from Manitoba attend our conference. There was a specific push, especially as we were in Manitoba with the Red River Métis and many other organizations there, such as the Southern Chiefs' Organization, to ensure that we had indigenous veterans and indigenous serving members at our conference, because we know and we understand that having groups at our conference, especially marginalized groups that the Minister of VAC brought up as a priority for research, makes it that much more special. We talked about how great it was and how ironic it was that six weeks ago, when I sent an email to Randi saying that she was more than welcome to come to our forum, we would be on the same panel.

Part of that discussion that my colleague talked about was the research that happens. I'll give an example of last year.

In our call for abstracts for new and emerging research, we spoke about well-being, sex, gender, EDI and intersectionality, service-related injury and illness, and mental health. One of the streams that we had in 2023, because we know there's a gap in research in Canada, had four titles. The research topics were racial disparity, female veteran homelessness, the lived experience of Black service women in the United States and using cultural safety and competency as a lens to understand BIPOC CAF members' experiences utilizing health services. The "BIPOC" was in the title, so I'm just using it there.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Paul Hook: We do know that there's a gap, but there is research going on, and CIMVHR is committed to ensuring that we do more. We are working towards a potential targeted engagement grant through the Department of National Defence to ensure that we can have that discussion with the indigenous community for research with, by and for indigenous military members and veterans and their families.

Thank you, Chair.

• (1720)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Hook.

Now we're going to start our round of questions.

I should note that at the beginning we didn't know we would have so many witnesses. We have a limited study. Maybe members of the committee will re-invite some of you, because we have a lot to discuss, and also ask you, as witnesses, to send us more information.

For now, I'd like to know from the members of the committee if we can have a tour of six minutes each.

The second thing is that Mr. Desilets will leave at 5:30. In cordiality, I'd ask the members if we can start with him for six minutes and then come back with the regular tour? Is that okay?

[*Translation*]

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

I therefore give the floor for six minutes to the second vice-chair of the committee, Mr. Luc Desilets.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Mr. Chair. That's very kind of you.

Ms. Gage, you referred to a study that goes back 30 or 35 years; that was long before I was born. Would it be possible to send a copy to the clerk, please?

• (1725)

[*English*]

Ms. Randi Gage: Yes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: You lived through the Vietnam War. Would you be able to tell us about the treatment of American indigenous people compared to that of Canadian and Quebec indigenous people?

[*English*]

Ms. Randi Gage: That's a difficult one. That's not completely as bad, but it's quite bad. What happened here in Canada to indigenous veterans was wrong on so many levels.

Down there in the United States, when you were Black and you were going into the military, when you put on the uniform, you were a soldier. We didn't turn and ask if you're Black, white, green, purple or whatever. It was whether you could cover my behind. They went in and did their job like any other American soldier who went in. I don't remember having faced too many issues in the same way that indigenous soldiers up here faced. When I came to Canada a long time ago, I had never faced the amount of racism and terror down in the States that I did up here. It's comparable, but not completely compatible with it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Very well.

Mr. Hook, in your research on veterans' health, did you notice any significant differences between the health of indigenous veterans and that of non-indigenous veterans?

Mr. Paul Hook: As Mr. Held said, there will be a lot of research on intersectionality in the future, but there isn't really any at the moment.

[*English*]

There's a dearth of research. There's been research done, but never with a view to looking at the difference between white serving members, Black serving members and indigenous serving members. We know there's a gap there.

There have been maybe one or two researchers who have looked at that as a specific thing. We know, looking forward, that this needs research to be committed. That's why we have the SAGER guidelines, the sex and gender and race guidelines, within our research. It's to ensure that we're looking at those questions and that they're answered in the research.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Didn't you conduct a comparative study of different countries—including New Zealand, if I'm not mistaken—on the treatment and health of indigenous veterans compared to the situation of non-indigenous veterans?

[English]

Mr. Paul Hook: I'll have to refer to my colleague on the research side, as he's the expert on research.

Dr. Nicholas Held: Thank you.

The countries you're naming would make sense within the Five Eyes, and New Zealand would be a part of that. I'm not discrediting what your statement is, and there's probably research on that.

An important thing for us to note at CIMVHR is that we don't do internal research; we facilitate and mobilize fund research. We work with researchers, but there wouldn't be any in-house research by CIMVHR that worked on this.

I'm not exactly sure of the piece you're looking at. I will look into that, but I'm not exactly aware of the piece you're speaking to.

[Translation]

Mr. Paul Hook: Was that Grazia Scoppio's study? I know that a few researchers at the Royal Military College of Canada have done research on indigenous people in Australia and New Zealand.

Mr. Luc Desilets: It could be related to that study. I'm unable to cite the exact source.

That could be an interesting element. We do a lot of work internally, we determine what the issues are for indigenous people here, but we mustn't forget that there are indigenous people everywhere on the planet. Can we compare ourselves? The idea is not to compare ourselves to say that we're not as good. It's more a matter of comparing ourselves to see what is done differently elsewhere and what works better.

So you don't have a study in mind to compare our situation to that of other countries. Is that right?

Mr. Paul Hook: Not at the moment, but we have discussed that topic with our colleagues in Australia for 2025. We're talking about international research with countries like Australia, Canada and England.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Based on the discussions you're having, do you think we're on the right track when it comes to dealing with the particular experiences of indigenous veterans?

• (1730)

[English]

Mr. Paul Hook: We have lots of room. There's a start.

[Translation]

As I said before, it's my second year at the institute. My colleagues and I are in the process of improving our research. For example, we're going to hire an indigenous adviser and a Black adviser so that the research we're doing better reflects those populations.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

We will now go back to the first vice-chair of the committee, Mr. Blake Richards.

[English]

I'm sorry. It's Mr. Fraser Tolmie for six minutes, please.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Any time you want me to take over, just let me know. I told you earlier.

Thank you to our witnesses for joining us today. We truly are grateful. To those who have served, we are very grateful.

Ms. Jocko, I'm so touched and sorry to hear about the passing of your son. Obviously it's very close to home, and it's been very recent. I want to thank you for sharing that with us and for being open. Our hearts go out to you.

I have a couple questions that I'd like to go through. Obviously, this study is very important to our committee. What we're looking for are the experiences of indigenous and Black people who have served in the Canadian military. We would like to see, from our committee's standpoint, how we can help them and how we can ensure that they're getting proper care and treatment.

My first question will go to Ms. Jocko.

You were sitting there for quite a while during the previous testimony. What are your encounters with VAC? You said that you've had an okay engagement, but then you've heard other horror stories. Could you share a little about what you've experienced from your perspective?

I'd then like to ask a couple of questions to those who are present here.

Chief Wendy-Anne Jocko: Thank you very much.

I'd say that I have had an okay experience with VAC. That's not to say that I've had an okay experience with being in the military and with my subsequent release.

With any issue that I encountered when I made the application to VAC, I always went through the Legion headquarters in Ottawa, so I always had an advocate. It seems to me that if you have an advocate, VAC seems to take your situation a little more seriously. There are other veterans I know of, indigenous and non-indigenous, who have tried to do things themselves and have come up against certain obstacles.

Just to let you know, the downside of my experience was in connection with my son, an indigenous man. We reached out to Veterans Affairs for help with his mental health issues at the time, and I had absolutely zero help there, which was very unfortunate. VAC knows his story. That's for sure.

When it came time for me to get some support myself—

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: I'm sorry. I don't mean to interrupt you.

Do you think that if he'd had better service, it would have helped him? Is that something that is a part of this?

Chief Wendy-Anne Jocko: Yes, I believe so, because the VAC agent who answered the phone when I reached out for help didn't really have a grasp of the policies and procedures available for a situation like that. We were swept under the carpet. Of course, the eventuality was his death.

I needed help myself. This is where I didn't have a good experience. I needed aftercare, counselling and bereavement support. I was put in touch—I can't remember what program it was—with a peer. However, it was not a peer. A civilian woman called me, not a veteran and not even a currently serving member of the forces. To me, that is not a peer. On top of that—and I apologize—she was not indigenous. When you're in a situation like that, you don't want to have to start, at the point of contact, explaining what happened to you along the way. She had no clue about military service. She had no clue about being an indigenous person.

The point I'm trying to make is that the Assembly of First Nations and Aboriginal Veterans Autochtones have advocated for a peer support service that could be indigenous veterans helping indigenous veterans. This was brought out in Saskatchewan. It is called the Burns Way. You may have heard the horrible story of the James Smith Cree massacre, where veteran Earl Burns was killed. There was a program called the Burns Way made in his honour. It's an online application that puts you directly in touch with an indigenous veteran in 24 hours.

I didn't even care if it was a male veteran who phoned me, as long as it was an indigenous veteran.

• (1735)

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: You were looking for someone who could relate to the experience and to your culture, and that was not provided. That is one of the reasons we asked this question in the first round: How many indigenous and Black employees are at Veterans Affairs, and how many have served?

Thank you very much. I wish we had more time. I am so sorry, but I wanted to reach out because you have been very gracious to sit here and participate.

I'm afraid to ask Ms. Gage any questions. I have to ask a couple, though.

You said you moved to Canada, so you're not originally from here. Is that correct?

Ms. Randi Gage: That's right.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: When did you move to Canada?

Ms. Randi Gage: Shame on you. That will tell you how old I am.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: You don't know what else I'll ask later on.

Ms. Randi Gage: I was an infant. I moved here about 40 years ago.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: You served in the U.S. military.

Did you serve in the Canadian military?

Ms. Randi Gage: No, I did not, but I have done a lot of work with the veterans over time. I'm the founder of Indigenous Veterans Day.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: I'm very interested to hear about the difference in support for veterans in the U.S. versus veterans in Canada. Is there any way you could share that information? I know Mr. Desilets was asking about New Zealand.

Then I have one more question, but I think we're going to be out of time.

Ms. Randi Gage: Are you talking about mainstream veterans, or are you talking about indigenous and Black veterans?

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: I'm talking about indigenous veterans.

Ms. Randi Gage: Up here, the disrespect and racism has been horrible. In the States, it's not so bad, because we respect our veterans down there. We have Veterans Day there. We have all kinds of things whereby veterans are respected by veterans.

I don't know what's going to happen now, with this newest regime, but I can tell you that when I was coming home to see my mom, I got into a taxi in my uniform, and the taxi driver threw me out. I was leaving the Kennedy airport, or whatever it's called now. He threw me out of the taxi because I am a “baby-killing whore”. That was a civilian. It was during my “un-war” war.

Yes, I see you, Mr. Chair. You hate me with that thing.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: He hates all of us with that.

Ms. Randi Gage: Man, I'll tell you....

However, we'll have coffee. How's that?

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Okay. I do have a couple of questions.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Gage, you understand my job. I have to do it. I'm sorry, but you can still—

Mr. Blake Richards: He's worse to me. Trust me.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: No, that's not true. He's a friend of mine. It's not true, no.

Seriously, I have my fellow MP Sean Casey for six minutes, please.

Mr. Casey, please go ahead.

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

Thanks to our witnesses for being here. For those who have served, thank you for your service.

I'd like to start with Dr. Held and Mr. Hook.

You referred in your earlier testimony to some work that you're doing along with the Five Eyes partners. I understand that there is a formal relationship between CIMVHR and the health research branch of the Five Eyes. I wonder if you could expand on that in terms of the work that's being done in collaboration with our international partners.

• (1740)

Dr. Nicholas Held: I can start there.

I'll talk about two pieces. One relates to the demographics that we're talking about today with indigenous veterans.

For everyone's information, the Five Eyes are the U.S., the U.K., Australia, New Zealand and Canada, just so that we're aware of all the countries involved. We do a mental health research innovation collaboration. It's thought leadership from leading experts in the Five Eyes; it's not generating any new research but is synthesizing some of the most important topics that are there by writing commentaries and providing strategic direction.

Another point that we spoke about in our opening remarks was about indigenous veterans or indigenous service members within Canada. Our hope is to help to provide a bit of a strategic framework around research that needs to be done within Canada, recognizing that there's a gap and recognizing that we, as one institute, shouldn't be the one solely setting research for indigenous veterans. We are looking to work with indigenous organizations across Canada to make sure that the questions that are being asked are appropriate, are needed and can start driving research the way it needs to go from everybody's perspectives.

Mr. Sean Casey: Ms. Gage, you indicated that you're the founder of national aboriginal veterans day. Can you tell us a bit about how that came to pass and how it has evolved?

Ms. Randi Gage: In 1991, a group of indigenous veterans went to the November 11 ceremonies to lay a wreath, and they were refused. They were told that they were not welcome and that they could do it after everybody left. I believe it was the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples that got some funding and decided that it was going to rectify the whole situation.

I was working at The St. Norbert Foundation. A gentleman came in with two elders and said, "Would you do some typing for me?" I said, "Sure." I helped him pull together their constitution bylaws. The next thing I knew, I had been elected as the new secretary-treasurer for the Manitoba Aboriginal Veterans Association.

That meant that on August 22 we came here to Ottawa for the national meeting. I ended up being being nominated as "the lady in the pink sweater" as vice-president of the National Aboriginal Veterans Association. They didn't even know my name. At the end of the—

Mr. Sean Casey: I bet they do now.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Randi Gage: Oh, yes, and they haven't heard the end of me.

Throughout the whole meeting it kept coming up: "We need a day. How about June 21?" They were like, "No, because we'll just be another line on the the program," and so, stupid me, I said, "What about November 8? If you take the 8 and turn it on its side, it's the infinity symbol for the Métis people." A lot of traditional people know that there are seven.... Well, you know the number seven is quite important to first nations people. The reason is that there are four levels above and four levels below that meet on the surface as a 7. They said, "That's a great idea. We'll be able to get our uniforms out, polish our shoes and learn how to march, figure

out what's left and right, and do that." They gave me a mandate to go out and do it. That's what they said: "Go and get us the day."

As you can tell, I'm very shy—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Ms. Randi Gage: —and I was thinking, "How am I going to do this?" I pulled a shenanigan or two, told a little white lie—maybe—and got Mayor Susan Thompson of Winnipeg to declare November 8, 1993, as the indigenous recognition and remembrance day. I believe that's what it was.

A gentleman by the name of Eric Robinson was the minister of Indian and northern affairs in Manitoba at that time, and I bugged him for two years to do it as a province. He finally said, "Do you know what, Randi? I will put it on the table. It's going to be voted down, and when it is, will you shut up and leave me alone?" I said, "Sure," so he tabled it and there was a unanimous vote to do it. In 1993, it started, and it just....

I just push things. I just don't take no for an answer, and I'm really expecting next year to have it on the calendar as a national day of recognition instead of just a little sub-thing.

That's the story, and I'm sticking to it. It's been a labour of love. I faced horrible, terrible racism. It was unbelievable. When we laid the first wreath at the memorial in 1992, a group of Legion ladies were behind us, and the things they said.... Luckily, Sam was able to control me. I didn't go back and put blood on the memorial. It has all completely changed around that now, and the Legion is very supportive and very much there for us.

Just give me a job. I'll do it for you.

• (1745)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Casey. She said that she's shy.

Mr. Sean Casey: Yes, I caught that.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: For the last intervention, I invite Ms. Rachel Blaney for six minutes, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair, and I thank our witnesses for being here today. I'm going to start with Dr. Held and Mr. Hook from CIMVHR.

I appreciate that you identified that there's a gap in research, and I think that's an important first step. I'm just wondering, as you're moving towards having more research, who decides that. What is your internal process to make sure that what you're researching is important to those people who actually are from those communities?

Dr. Nicholas Held: That's a very good question, and that's something we just worked through in our proposal that we put forward for a grant to run this. We invited individuals from Inuit communities, Métis, first nations from across Canada and indigenous organizations to come forward in a round table. There would be three round table discussions to start to speak to some of the priorities.

In some research we've been involved in to date with other organizations, we were just asking the wrong questions. It wasn't ill-intentioned, but when we ask these questions from our perspectives and we bring them to indigenous communities, we realize that it's not important to them or that they're the wrong questions. We recognize at CIMVHR that it's not appropriate for us to ask those questions, no matter how well-intentioned we are.

For our internal process right now, we have no government funding for research, which I think is an important distinction, so we are looking for funding in order to complete that process and make sure all groups are represented so that we can start talking about some key themes.

It's also recognizing.... We say "indigenous veterans"—and of course there would be other people who could answer this better than I can—but the priorities of each individual indigenous organization are going to be different, and each indigenous veteran is going to be different, so it's also, at a higher level, understanding some of the questions that we can be asking to make sure that the research is what's needed.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that. I really appreciate your awareness of the difference between intention and impact. Figuring out how to manoeuvre that can sometimes be really challenging.

Ms. Jocko, I'll go to you for my next question, and then I'll follow up with Ms. Gage on the same question.

First of all, I just want to say, Ms. Jocko, that I'm so sorry for the loss of your son. I thank you for sharing that with us. I will carry that with me.

I heard a couple of things in testimony that I think are really important, things about traditional ceremony and about addressing the needs of isolated communities, especially indigenous communities, around veteran services. I know what a challenge that can be. I've seen that. One witness who testified here talked about having an annual event where indigenous veterans were brought together to talk about all the issues they were facing and experiencing to better educate Veterans Affairs to the realities on the ground for indigenous people and to create a place where there could be ceremony or different actions, depending on the people who came together.

Based on other testimony, I think it's probably a very good idea to actually hear from the community itself and all the diversity within that community. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts you'd like to share on that.

I'll start with you, Ms. Jocko, and then go to Ms. Gage.

Chief Wendy-Anne Jocko: I've heard that myself. I guess the concern for me is that when you say "indigenous", you need to make sure that you are including first nation, Inuit, Métis and non-status Indians. There are still, unbeknownst to you and probably the country, a lot of non-status Indians out there who deserve to be part of the conversation. I know that the military went around in days gone by, when I was in, asking who was indigenous and who was not. Where does a non-status person come into the equation?

The reason I say that is the Michel band. You can look it up. I know people from the Michel band. The entire band was enfranchised. It was not just veterans or people who had the nerve to be

educated when, in the old days, you were enfranchised; the entire band was enfranchised. They're fighting for their rights. Some of them are veterans.

You need to make sure that it is inclusive. There's a big problem with accepting people. My mom's from Scotland, just so you know. I guess the protection I have is that I live here on the reserve, but if people don't know your outward appearance and you say you're indigenous and they don't believe you, how do you...? People need to be taken at face value and to be treated with respect and dignity. Just as long as you're taking that into consideration, I think that's a positive thing.

• (1750)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I think that's so helpful. Thank you for that. We can talk about our opinions on that, but I think indigenous communities get to make that decision. That it's held by the Indian Act is not necessarily good.

Go ahead, Ms. Gage.

Ms. Randi Gage: Ceremonies are very important. They're hugely, hugely important.

It depends on who you're talking to in terms of first nations. As she says, with first nations you have treaty, non-treaty, status and non-status. It gets very confusing. Being able to have access to an elder or to have access to a medicine person, or, when you live in the city, to simply hear a drum.... When you hear a good, honest, clean drum, it's amazing what that does to you. It's sort of like, "Whoa! Okay. I'm not dead yet. My blood's pumping." That's the heartbeat of our mother the earth. It's about having that connection, and things like that.

One thing I've experienced in the work I do with veterans is with regard to a lot of the programming that happens. I'll tell you about a husband and wife in Manitoba.

They served together in Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. I mean, they've been through the mud and the blood and the beer. They've been there. They wanted to go to a counselling program. They were sent to Deer Lodge. When they got to Deer Lodge, she had to sit in the hallway, because she couldn't be in there listening to what the men were saying. When they walked in and were sitting there—this is no disrespect to any religion around here, people; this is just the truth—the person who walked in to do the counselling and help them debrief was wearing a turban. How many years had they just spent with those people in their crosshairs? Does no one ever think about that?

For me, the first time I saw a Vietnamese person walking into my apartment block, I reacted with, "What the hell's going on here?" You have to think of these things. It's a simple thing, but you have to think about it.

We need to have access to our traditions and our culture and be able to go to an elder, go to a sweat lodge, go to a sun dance, or go to a square dance or whatever it is, be it first nation or Métis. We need to have that. We need to be able to have that for our community and for our guys and girls to heal.

The Chair: Ms. Gage, I'm afraid to show you my red card, but I have to. Thank you very much, and as we said, thank you for your service for those who serve in the army.

[*Translation*]

In closing, on my own behalf and on behalf of the committee members, the clerk, the analyst and the entire technical team, I would like to thank the two witnesses from Aboriginal Veterans Autochtones for their participation: Randi Gage, representing the Manitoba chapter and chair of Unified Veterans of Manitoba, and Wendy-Anne Jocko, indigenous liaison officer at Innovation Seven, who appeared by video conference, as well as Nicholas Held, assis-

tant scientific director of the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research, and Major (Retired) Paul Hook, managing director at the Institute.

If you have any documents for us, please do not hesitate to send them to us through the clerk. We will gladly accept them.

With that, is it the will of the committee to adjourn the meeting?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

● (1755)

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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