



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 118

Thursday, November 28, 2024

Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg



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• (1110)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 118 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[Translation]

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

Today's meeting is being held in hybrid form, in accordance with the Standing Orders. As a reminder, all comments should be directed to the chair.

Since this is the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, I would like to extend the warmest of welcomes to the veterans who are with us, as well as to those who are listening to us remotely.

[English]

For this hour, we have the following witnesses with us.

From the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families, we have MaryAnn Notarianni, deputy chief executive officer and executive vice-president, knowledge mobilization; and Gabrielle Dupuis, director of research partnerships.

From the Indspire board of directors, we have Yvan Guy Larocque, clinical counsel, University of Manitoba faculty of law, and William Shead.

From the Last Post Fund, we have, by video conference, Maria Trujillo, project coordinator, indigenous veterans initiative.

Welcome to all of you.

Ms. Lisa Hefner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.): The bells have started ringing, Chair.

The Chair: We have a lot of votes in the House of Commons today. I know that we can vote with our phones, but I have to ask members of the committee if they would like to continue because we have witnesses or if they want to stop and go back to the House of Commons to vote.

Go ahead, Mr. May.

Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

If we can get unanimous consent, what I would like to propose is that we hear from witnesses.

My app is currently working, but it gave me some trouble yesterday, so I'm a little nervous.

We have witnesses here. I want to hear from them. We can hear their statements and then come back afterwards for questions. We have 28 minutes until the vote, and we have three witness statements. Could we maybe compress them and get them in in 15 minutes, and then we can be out the door?

The Chair: The votes are in 25 minutes, so with three opening remarks, we'll have enough time without cutting.

Mr. Bryan May: That gives us enough time to get over there and into our seats.

The Chair: Yes.

Go ahead, Mr. Tolmie.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): Just to be clear, we're going to hear from the witnesses, and then—

The Chair: Then we're going to stop.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Yes, we're fine with that.

Mr. Bryan May: Mr. Chair, you'll need to be cutting people off.

The Chair: It depends. I will try.

First, I'd like to welcome one of our members to the committee, Mr. Scott Reid.

Welcome.

Mr. Terry Dowdall (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Welcome, Scott.

The Chair: We're going to start with the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families.

Ms. Notarianni, you're going to start, and you have five minutes for your opening remarks. Please go ahead.

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni (Deputy Chief Executive Officer and Executive Vice-President, Knowledge Mobilization, Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families): Good morning to all.

Thank you for the invitation to attend this important hearing on the experiences of indigenous veterans and Black veterans.

I'm MaryAnn Notarianni, the deputy CEO at Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families.

I recognize that many of you are familiar with who we are, but just to recap, we were stood up a few years ago by Veterans Affairs Canada as an arm's-length organization to improve the mental health and well-being of Canadian veterans and their families. We do this through conducting and funding research, developing resources to educate and inform, building capacity among mental health service providers, and convening stakeholders to reduce silos, share knowledge and advance collaborative work. Relevant to this study, we take an intersectional approach across our work and strive to be inclusive of diverse veterans and families, including indigenous veterans and Black and racialized veterans and their families.

I wish to applaud this committee for its work on this file, as we too recognize this as a gap that requires attention.

I'd like to highlight the minority mosaic study, led by our clinical research team in partnership with the LGBT Purge Fund, which explores how experiences of discrimination and oppression based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender impact mental health outcomes. It looks at how multiple interconnected identity factors interact and how the stress tied to these identities influences mental health.

To inform some of our direction early on, we commissioned a research and knowledge gap analysis to identify research gaps and knowledge needs specific to PTSD and related mental health conditions. There was a significant gap in the research for specific veteran subpopulations, such as women, Black people, indigenous people and people of colour and, notably, gaps in research around treatment interventions for these groups.

We've now embarked on a new priority-setting process to inform organizational priorities for the next few years. Eight distinct priority areas have emerged. Two of these areas of focus include under-represented populations, including women, indigenous, 2SLGBTQIA+, racialized and disabled veterans, and equitable access and delivery of care for veterans and their families.

My colleague, Gabrielle Dupuis, director of research partnerships, will now discuss two initiatives relevant to your study.

Ms. Gabrielle Dupuis (Director, Research Partnerships, Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families): Thank you, MaryAnn.

Thanks to all of you for providing me the honour of presenting and, perhaps by proxy, sharing the messages we've heard in our engagement with indigenous veterans and their family members.

What was brought to our attention quite early on in our mandate was the need for knowledge products that are specific to the unique experiences of first nation, Inuit and Métis veterans, as well as their families. In response, the Atlas Institute has initiated a project with the aim to co-develop these products in collaboration with a first nation, Inuit and Métis advisory council, co-led with two senior strategists. These senior strategists are Tim O'Loan, a Sahtu Dene first nation veteran, and Shauna Mulligan, a Métis Ph.D. student in indigenous studies and CAF reserve corporal, retired.

I'd like to mention that this work is a marathon. It is not a sprint. It has a critical aim of implementing meaningful engagement strategies, and this will be ongoing over the next several years.

As MaryAnn has noted, throughout our priority-setting exercise, two of the eight critical areas of focus were under-represented populations and equitable access to care and treatment.

In light of this, the Atlas Institute hosted a round table in October, where we asked veterans and family members, policy-makers, service providers and other system-level players to give us a sense of their experience of barriers—as well as success factors and possible solutions for change—in relation to their experiences and understanding of the access to mental health care in rural and remote locations in Canada. What we learned from indigenous veterans and their families from this round table falls into the following distinct themes.

The first theme we heard was the importance of culturally relevant care and models of healing. Many first nation, Inuit and Métis veterans find that accessing traditional ways of healing can support their mental health journeys. Community leaders have shared that they'd like to see the adoption of policies that allow for traditional healing approaches within communities, with the costs being covered.

The second theme we saw is that trust is essential. As with many veterans, trust needs to be built, and it needs to be earned. This is especially true for first nation, Inuit and Métis veterans, where there has been a mistrust in systems, including health care, because of histories of colonialism, systemic racism and discrimination, culturally insensitive care and mistreatment.

Lastly, the third theme we saw was regarding the provision of mental health care services. We've heard that there's a need for clarity on who is responsible for mental health coverage for indigenous veterans and families on reserve.

Although there are many other nuanced themes and recommendations that came from this round table, we felt that these were the most pressing. There will be a full synthesis in the report of this round table early in the new year, and we'd be happy to share that with this committee.

Thank you. We would welcome any questions.

• (1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much to both of you, Ms. Notariani and Ms. Dupuis.

[*Translation*]

I now invite Mr. Yvan Guy Larocque, from Indspire, to make his presentation.

You have the floor for five minutes, sir.

[English]

Oh, Mr. William Shead, please go ahead.

Mr. William Shead (Board of Directors, Indspire): Thank you very much. Thanks for the opportunity to be here.

I'm going to urge my colleague and shipmate Yvan to carry on.

Go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvan Guy Larocque (Board of Directors, Clinical Counsel, University of Manitoba Faculty of Law, Indspire): Thank you, Mr. Shead.

[English]

Good morning.

My name is Yvan Guy Larocque. I am a Red River Métis and a citizen of the Manitoba Métis Federation. I'm currently a serving veteran, having joined the Royal Canadian Navy reserve at the age of 16. I have served for almost 23 years, in both the Royal Canadian Navy and the Royal Canadian Air Force throughout my career. I am currently a reservist holding the rank of petty officer 1st class in His Majesty's Canadian Ship *Chippawa* in Winnipeg, Manitoba. I am also a lawyer and clinical counsel in private law at the University of Manitoba faculty of law.

My colleague Bill and I are appearing on behalf of Indspire, a federally registered charity with a vision to enrich Canada through indigenous education and by inspiring achievement.

Indspire's history is intertwined with the recognition and support of indigenous veterans. In 1995, the Senate Committee on Aboriginal Veterans, co-chaired by the late Senator Len Marchand, recommended that the Government of Canada establish a scholarship and bursary program to commemorate aboriginal veterans. Canada established the aboriginal veterans scholarship trust with a \$1.1-million contribution, and Indspire was given the responsibility of administering the trust. Indspire was tasked with investing the initial \$1.1-million fund and distributing scholarships from the return on the investment capital of the fund, along with additional donations received.

Indspire has successfully managed the trust and has awarded more than \$1.3 million to more than 400 indigenous learners to assist with their post-secondary studies. Many of those supported have written to Indspire to share that, while they appreciated the financial support, receiving money from the trust was especially meaningful as they have either lived experiences in the military or a family connection to a first nation, Inuit or Métis veteran.

After taking responsibility for this trust, Indspire redirected its efforts to expanding its scholarship and bursary programs and initiating other, complementary programs directed to assist and promote indigenous education.

Since 1996, Indspire has distributed nearly \$250 million through 75,000 scholarships and bursaries. In the 2023-24 fiscal year alone, nearly \$31 million was distributed through more than 8,300 scholarships and bursaries.

I am one of the beneficiaries of this funding, having received Indspire bursaries throughout my undergraduate and my graduate degrees. I can truly say that I would not have been able to achieve the success that I have without the support of Indspire and the Canadian Armed Forces and its tuition reimbursement program.

In addition to providing scholarships and bursaries to indigenous learners across Canada, Indspire has also implemented programs and events to support indigenous students and educators while promoting indigenous excellence.

The Rivers to Success program, for example, provides indigenous students in high school and post-secondary education, as well as those making their career transition after graduation, access to supports, including tutoring, mentorship, financial literacy, culture and language resources, résumé writing and interview preparation. The annual national gathering for indigenous education provides a forum for educators to network, learn strategies for engaging with students, share best practices in the classroom and examine emerging trends affecting indigenous students in Canada.

Each year, the Soaring indigenous youth empowerment gathering provides indigenous high school students from across Canada opportunities to learn about career and post-secondary education options so that they can be inspired to complete their studies and make informed decisions about their future.

Finally, the annual Indspire awards honour first nations, Inuit and Métis individuals who exemplify indigenous excellence and whose stories inspire, uplift and educate Canadians about the tremendous contributions of indigenous people in Canada. They serve as role models to indigenous youth.

Indspire can provide these critical funding supports, impactful programs and events because of our partnerships with indigenous and private and public sector supporters, including the Government of Canada.

Again, we thank the committee for the opportunity to contribute to this important study of the experience of indigenous veterans and Black veterans, and we're pleased to address any questions you may have.

Thank you.

• (1120)

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

Mr. Shead, would you like to say something?

Mr. William Shead: I don't think I have anything more to say than what I said on the visual network that we had two days ago, except to thank you very much for this opportunity. It's an absolutely unique one. I should have done the first one in person.

The Chair: It's different, isn't it? Thank you so much.

For the last presentation, I'm going to invite the Last Post Fund.

Ms. Trujillo, the floor is yours for five minutes, please.

Ms. Maria Trujillo (Project Coordinator, Indigenous Veterans Initiative, The Last Post Fund): Thank you.

Thank you for this invitation to speak. I'm speaking with you from Tiohtià:ke, Montreal, the traditional and unceded territory of the Kahnawá:ke, Mohawk and the Anishinabe Algonquin peoples.

I have been the project coordinator for the indigenous veterans initiative at the Last Post Fund since the inception of the initiative, in March 2019. I will refer to the initiative as the IVI going forward.

The IVI has been made possible by the generous funding of Veterans Affairs Canada. We work to provide indigenous veterans in an unmarked grave with a grave marker and a traditional name inscription when the traditional name is available. We will also go back retroactively to add a traditional name that may not have been added to grave markers that the Last Post Fund or Veterans Affairs previously placed.

For new grave markers, we offer the family the choice of adding a culturally relevant symbol to the grave marker as well. We commissioned a Cree artist by the name of Jason Carter to design seven symbols that can be used in perpetuity by the Last Post Fund for the indigenous veterans' grave markers. Carter provided us with symbols based on the seven sacred teaching symbols.

In the last five years, the IVI has placed over 270 grave markers for indigenous veterans who were in unmarked graves throughout Canada. We have provided grave markers in at least six distinct traditional languages, working as far north as the north of Northwest Territories, where we placed a tombstone in Aklavik last year, and placing a grave marker as far east as Nova Scotia two years ago. We have worked in every province and territory so far, except for Yukon and Newfoundland and Labrador.

The IVI works closely with local communities in finding these unmarked graves. Either we will work directly with a department in the band office, or the band office will help us find a local community member who will help us search for the graves. These community members either are provided a honorarium or are volunteers by choice. So far, we have worked with 45 communities and 25 researchers.

Having a dedicated IVI coordinator like me means that the grave markers for indigenous veterans get processed quite quickly. Once the family returns the paperwork and the veteran's service is confirmed, I'm able to place an order for a marker quite quickly.

Finally, we celebrated the success of this initiative with the culmination of a short documentary film sponsored by the Bank of Montreal. In 2021, the Bank of Montreal approached us with a generous grant to further support the work that the IVI was doing. We used that to create a documentary. This documentary is currently being used as a visual aid for outreach to communities and to spread public awareness of the IVI. We had the pleasure of recently showcasing this documentary at the Canadian War Museum and had over 150 attendees, many of them being secondary school classes, as well as many registrants from the Canadian Transportation Agency.

A secondary effect of the IVI has been that it's an excellent tool to educate non-indigenous Canada and the new generation on the contributions of indigenous veterans in the Canadian Armed Forces and the importance of commemoration.

Thank you again for inviting us to speak. We're open to any questions.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you so much, Ms. Trujillo.

As I said, because of the importance of the vote.... First of all, I have to say that, by the time the members go to the House of Commons and come back, there won't be enough time, because we only have one hour with you today. Maybe we can try to invite you to come back for this study. If not, you can always send notes to the clerk so that we can share them with all of the members and have them for our report.

Mr. Tolmie would like to say something.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to move a motion:

That the Minister of Veterans Affairs appear before the committee for no fewer than two hours to consider the Supplementary Estimates (B), 2024-25, for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2025, on or before Thursday, December 12, 2024.

My understanding is that the minister is available to meet.

The Chair: I apologize to the witnesses; we have to discuss this little thing.

I know that the minister is available only next Monday for an hour, but it's up to the committee what they're going to do.

Mr. Bryan May: We don't have time to debate this, so hopefully this isn't a big deal. Normally, the minister appears for an hour, and then we have an hour with officials, if everyone is okay with that.

We're okay with that. Let's go.

I have to pull my consent, because I have to be on the move.

The Chair: Mr. Tolmie agrees to that, but I'd like to confirm.

Ms. Blaney, are you okay with that?

[*Translation*]

It will be an hour with the minister and an hour with the public servants on Monday. The minister is available on Monday.

[*English*]

Mr. Shead, go ahead quickly, please.

Mr. William Shead: I know that you don't have time for questions, but I would suggest that, if you do have questions for any of us, please send them via the clerk to us, and we'll try to answer them as best we can.

The Chair: That's really great.

Just before you leave, I'd like to have unanimous consent to adjourn the meeting, because we won't have time when we come back. I'll remind all of you that we have a meeting with the Ukrainian delegation here, in room 410, right after the vote.

Is that agreed, everyone?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

• (1130)

The Chair: Just before I close, I'd like to say thank you to all of you.

Ms. Notarianni, Ms. Dupuis, Mr. Larocque, Mr. Shead and Ms. Trujillo, thank you for coming. It was a pleasure to have you, and we'll stay in touch.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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