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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg



Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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• (1535)

[*English*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 119 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(5) and the motion adopted by the committee on November 28, 2024, the committee is resuming its study of the Supplementary Estimates (B), 2024-25.

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.

As usual, I would like to welcome the veterans who are here in the room as well as those who are listening to us remotely.

We also had the pleasure last week of receiving a Ukrainian delegation. We had an excellent meeting. I would like to inform committee members that I agreed, on behalf of the committee, to accept a plaque, which you can come and see here.

[*English*]

Mr. Terry Dowdall (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Do you have to declare that? It's over \$50.

The Chair: It has to be evaluated first.

[*Translation*]

Before beginning, we have to adopt the budget. I think it is correct to do that before going any further with this meeting.

You have received a copy of the budget. The amount requested is \$1,250.

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the budget?

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): On division.

[*Translation*]

Le président: Noted, Mr. Richards.

The budget is therefore adopted on division.

For the first hour, we have with us the Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor, Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence. With her are representatives of the Department of Veterans Affairs. First we have Steven Harris, Senior Assistant Deputy

Minister, Service Delivery Branch. Second is Mitch Freeman, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance Branch. With us too, by videoconference, is Jonathan Adams, Director General, Finance.

I know that when the minister and representatives of the department appear, committee members have a lot of questions to ask. I would therefore request that members ask clear, precise questions and witnesses give equally precise answers. That will make things easier for us and the interpreters, as well as maintaining decorum.

With that, I invite the minister to give her opening remarks.

Ms. Petitpas Taylor, the floor is yours for the next five minutes.

[*English*]

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for the invitation to appear before the committee to discuss supplementary estimates (B) for Veterans Affairs Canada. This process is an essential part of our ongoing commitment to transparency and accountability and to ensuring that the needs of veterans and their families remain at the forefront of our priorities.

Canada's veterans have dedicated their lives to protecting our values, our freedom and our way of life. It is our duty to support them in return with concrete actions and resources that reflect our gratitude for their sacrifices. The investments we are making through the supplementary estimates (B) are critical to delivering care, benefits, services and recognition that veterans and their families deserve after service to Canada.

[*Translation*]

As you know, over 90% of Veterans Affairs Canada's budget is dedicated to payments to veterans for the support and services hard-earned by the men and women who served in the Canadian Armed Forces and their family members who supported them at home.

The \$954 million increase provided for in the supplementary estimates includes \$942 million for programs and services that guarantee every eligible veteran access to benefits, regardless of the number of requests.

This funding is proof of our government's commitment to offering the support our veterans need, whether for mental health, rehabilitation, financial aid or other essential services to improve their quality of life.

[*English*]

Such investments demonstrate this government's dedication to honouring the sacrifices made by veterans and ensuring their needs are met.

You will see that the estimates also include \$4 million in funding to commemorate significant Canadian military milestones, including the 80th anniversary of D-Day and the beginning of the Battle of Normandy.

One of our most profound responsibilities is to always remember the sacrifices that millions of Canadians made during the world wars to defend global peace and freedom. Our domestic and international events last June paid solemn tribute to the veterans of these conflicts and to the hundreds of thousands of our fallen who gave their lives while serving our country.

At the same time, we must recognize the efforts that the growing number of modern-day veterans have made to safeguard peace and security in the world. Whether that's through programs that meet their needs or commemorative events that honour their service, we're taking more steps to be there for veterans.

Last month, we supported a delegation of Canadian veterans and their families to revisit Cyprus to mark the 60th anniversary of Canadian peacekeeping there. It was a journey that held deep personal significance for those who served in Operation Snowgoose. They were able to connect with fellow veterans who served there over the years and share stories of their service with them.

[*Translation*]

Veterans Affairs Canada will use \$2.75 million of the supplementary estimates to continue its commemoration campaigns, for Canadians to honour the men and women who have served, and its services campaigns, to inform veterans about the supports available.

The supplementary estimates also provide for an additional \$2 million for the Veteran and Family Well-being Fund. That money is in addition to the Fund's present \$3 million budget.

• (1540)

[*English*]

This funding assists organizations and initiatives that support veterans' health and employment, as well as women, indigenous and 2SLGBTQI+ veterans.

Allocating funds towards programs and services that address the needs of equity-deserving veterans allows us to promote equality, dignity and empowerment. It allows us to recognize their diverse experiences and challenges and preserve these chapters in Canada's military history.

[*Translation*]

I also want to thank the members of the committee for the work they do in studying the experience of indigenous and black veter-

ans. I am very interested in the committee's findings, which I eagerly await.

In total, the Supplementary Estimates (B), 2024-25, add \$954 million to Veterans Affairs Canada's budget. This additional funding represents a necessary investment in the health and well-being of veterans and their families.

It will now be my pleasure to answer questions from members of the committee.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[*English*]

Now, by video conference, I'd like to invite the vice-chair of the committee, Mr. Richards, to question the minister.

You have six minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Blake Richards: Minister, you're now the Minister of Employment, the Minister of Workforce Development, the Minister of Official Languages, the Minister of Veterans Affairs, and the Associate Minister of National Defence. Can you tell us which of these files will be your priority?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you so much, Mr. Richards.

I have to say congratulations. I hear that you're a new father, so congratulations on that.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you so much, Mr. Richards, for that question.

A few weeks ago, the Prime Minister put his trust in me and asked me to take on these additional responsibilities for a short-term period, and I am pleased to do so.

I have to say that I'm hard-working and I'm not scared of hard work, and I will continue to meet all of my commitments as Minister of Veterans Affairs and also assume the additional responsibilities that have been asked of me.

Mr. Blake Richards: I think veterans are just a little bit concerned. They have already seen struggles with your department in terms of getting the quality and timeliness of services that they think they deserve, and that they do deserve. Now they see you as a part-time Minister of Veterans Affairs, and there's no other way we can put that. You have several files. You cannot be full time on any one file, so you're a part-time Minister of Veterans Affairs.

How do you think it makes veterans feel to know that they have a part-time minister?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Well, I certainly disagree with the premise of your question, Mr. Richards. I think that people who know me know that I'm hard-working and that I'm not scared of working long hours. I will continue to meet all of my responsibilities and requirements as Minister of Veterans Affairs.

To be frank, the day that I was sworn in, that same evening, I was at The Pepper Pod, as I had committed to doing an event there. All of my events that I have committed to have been fulfilled, and they will continue to be fulfilled.

For veterans who are listening out there, I am a full-time minister. I'm committed to serving them, and I will be continuing to do so.

Mr. Blake Richards: Well, are you telling us that you believe that the Minister of Employment, the Minister of Workforce Development and the Minister of Official Languages aren't also full-time jobs? I mean, how many full-time jobs can one have? You simply cannot devote full-time attention to any one of these files unless you're not going to do any of them justice.

Minister, I struggle to understand how you can say that you're anything other than a part-time minister at this point. I guess what I'd like to ask you is whether the Prime Minister consulted with you on this decision before giving you a second and third role within cabinet?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Well, I certainly don't know how it works in your party, Mr. Richards, but our Prime Minister consults with his caucus and his cabinet all the time. He approached me to take on these responsibilities because he felt that I had the skill sets and was able to do it, and he has trust in me.

Again, this is a short-time appointment for a period of time. I have taken on the responsibilities, and all departments are very important. The veterans who know me know me well and know that I will continue to serve them full time and that I will be making sure that all of my engagements are met.

• (1545)

Mr. Blake Richards: What you're telling us, then, is that both you and the Prime Minister felt that veterans weren't important enough to warrant more than a part-time minister. Is that what we're hearing here? Don't you think veterans deserve more than a part-time minister?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I think you're putting words in my mouth, Mr. Richards. Veterans who know me know me well and know that I'm a hard-working Minister of Veterans Affairs, and I am absolutely committed to making sure that the job is done.

Mr. Blake Richards: Well, we'll be watching, because I think there are a lot of veterans out there who are concerned. I don't doubt your intentions and your willingness to work hard, but one cannot have as many files as you have and give them all full-time attention. I certainly hope that veterans will see that they do get some better attention than they deserve under a part-time minister.

Let me turn instead now to this issue I want to raise with you about 82-year-old veteran Jim DeMarce. He's the president of the Pentiction Legion. He was violently attacked by a number of thugs on his way home from the Legion one night. He expressed, because of the lack of a proper criminal justice system under your govern-

ment and of proper punishment for criminals, that he was even reluctant to report the crime because he felt like the offenders would just get off scot-free.

Of the veterans that you are there to represent, one of them was violently attacked as a result of the weak criminal justice policies of your government. Would you now, after knowing that, finally support the commonsensical proposal of Pierre Poilievre to ensure that it's jail and not bail for repeat violent offenders?

Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Richards, I have a point of order, so I'll stop the time.

Go ahead, Mr. May.

Mr. Bryan May: We asked the minister to appear today on estimates. I have yet to hear a single question from the member opposite that's even remotely relevant to what we're talking about today.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Oh, on that point, Chair.... Could I just add to that point? I mean, first of all, the questions around the minister's part-time nature of her role are relevant to all of the expenses, of course, within the department, so I believe these questions are relevant. Frankly, I think it's really unfortunate that a Liberal member would try to step in to try to cover for the minister. Let her answer the question.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Richards, in but the second part, you were talking about justice and things like that. As you know, we are discussing the budget, the supplementary estimates (B), so try to focus on that, please. Thank you.

Mr. Blake Richards: Well, Minister, the question is relevant to veterans and to the department, because this is a veteran whom the department is supposed to represent who was violently attacked. I'm asking the minister a relevant question about whether she will support the commonsensical proposal of Pierre Poilievre to ensure that it's jail and not bail for repeat violent offenders so that we can protect veterans and all Canadians.

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Richards, but as I said at the beginning, I know that the minister is there and people are accompanying her too, but I don't think talking about party policy is relevant to the budget that we are discussing.

Mr. Blake Richards: Let's let the minister answer if she'd like, unless she'd like to evade the question as well.

Mr. Bryan May: That's not how this works, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Richards, would you please try to present your question in another way? You have one minute left, and leave the time also for the minister to answer. Please.

Mr. Blake Richards: As I said, it is the department's responsibility to ensure that veterans are taken care of, that we are there to provide services, but also that we're there to take care of any of the issues veterans have in terms of the services and support they need. This is an area where the government is failing our veterans and all Canadians, so I believe that the minister should step up and answer the question.

Will she support the proposal to ensure jail, not bail, for repeat violent offenders, so that people like 82-year-old veteran Jim De-Marce can be protected within this country from violent offenders?

The Chair: Mr. Richards, I'm so sorry. I think that we are still on the same page, so if you don't have any other questions, I think we'll go to another—

Mr. Blake Richards: No, Chair, I think you should ask the minister to respond to the question. This is a relevant question. Veterans will be incredibly disappointed if the minister doesn't respond to this question.

Minister, I ask you to please answer the question so that veterans can hear where you stand.

The Chair: Mr. Richards, as I said, we are discussing budget, and you're talking about policy.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay, well, this is a minister who professes to be more than a part-time minister.

• (1550)

The Chair: No, listen—

Mr. Blake Richards: I think she's just proven that all she is here is a part-time minister. She won't even respond to a relevant question about the safety and security of our veterans.

The Chair: Okay, Mr. Richards, you're still on the same page, and I'm not going to give the floor to the minister to answer that question.

For now, we're going to go for six minutes to Mr. Miao.

It's your turn, please.

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

It's great to see you back here, Minister. It's always a pleasure seeing you at our committee.

Through you, Mr. Chair, I'm quite proud of the fact that my home province of British Columbia will be hosting the 2025 Invictus Games for the world and allowing us to watch veterans and members of the armed forces compete in the games.

Two weeks ago, Vancouver hosted the Grey Cup, and I was honoured to present the Jake Gaudaur Veterans' Award to Jorgen Hus of the Saskatchewan Roughriders. Throughout the Canadian Football League season, Jorgen best demonstrated the attributes of Canada's veterans, and the Invictus Games use the power of sport to inspire recovery, support rehabilitation and generate a wider understanding of, and respect for, wounded, injured and sick service members and veterans.

Can you share with this committee your hopes for what the 2025 Invictus Games will accomplish?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Well, thank you so much, MP Miao, for that question.

Again, Canada should be very proud that next year, in 2025, we'll be hosting the 2025 winter Invictus Games. As a country, we are very privileged that we've been chosen a second time to host these games.

The unique part about these games this time is that it's the first time we'll be hosting winter games—hybrid games, if you will—with outdoor activities like the skeleton in Whistler, and other outdoor sports. Also, we'll be hosting the traditional sports as well, which will be held inside in Vancouver. Canada will have more than 530 competitors, representing 20 nations, in our country to compete.

I truly hope that Canadians will take the time to watch these sporting events, because to me they truly show the resilience, the tenacity and the endurance that our veterans have. It's an opportunity for them to get better through sports. I had the privilege of joining a team in Düsseldorf in Germany last year when they competed, and I have to say that it was life-changing to see these individuals, these athletes, these competitors really give it their all.

I'm looking forward to being there, and I'm certainly hoping that many of our committee members will be able to take part to witness it, either in person or on TV, because it certainly will be a show to watch.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you for that.

Earlier this year, we heard that there were some issues with insurance for the participants. You committed to rectifying this. Can you provide us with the latest update?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Yes, I can, absolutely.

The situation with respect to the lack of insurance came up this year, and going forward we wanted to ensure that insurance coverage would be made available for our athletes. Some folks on the committee actually brought that matter up—Ms. Blaney, I believe it was.

I'm happy to report that the insurance coverage for our 2025 athletes is certainly going to be in place. Our officials will be meeting with the athletes in January at their winter training camp in order to ensure that they're properly advised of this insurance and what it entails.

From there, Veterans Affairs Canada has assigned a case manager to the team because we also want to make sure a follow-up will be done three weeks after the game, three months after the game, six months after the game and a year after the game. This is a matter we take very seriously.

Again, we want to ensure our athletes have access to the coverage they deserve.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Minister, since you were last here at the committee, our nation and Canadians from coast to coast to coast marked Veterans' Week and Remembrance Day. I know you were visiting communities across Canada during that time frame. Could you tell us about some of these engagements and what you have learned from those experiences?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you so much for that.

As it was for many of you around the table, Veterans' Week was a very busy week for me. I'm sure many of you attended many events in your ridings or perhaps in other parts of the province or the country.

We embarked on a coast-to-coast tour, if you will, making sure that we weren't only here in the nation's capital. We went into small rural communities as we went to the bigger city events. We wanted to make sure we were seen and that we took part in these many events.

I have to say that the highlights for me were probably meeting with the many children who were at the events as well. I think it's truly important to make sure that we have ambassadors, that they don't forget our past and that they will continue to share these stories of these brave men and women who have served.

I also had the privilege of meeting with many veterans, either modern-day veterans or more senior veterans. Again, I was able to share and to hear many of their stories.

I also had an opportunity to meet with General Rohmer in Toronto. I had the honour of meeting him back at the 80th anniversary, and I certainly wanted to go and say hi to him. He was in fine form and talking to me about his plans for the year ahead.

Overall, we participated in some really great events. We attended events in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario and British Columbia. We really wanted to make sure there was a good representation and that we were able to participate in different types of events.

• (1555)

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

We recently had a representative from the aboriginal First Nations Veterans Council as part of our ongoing study, and they mentioned their letter of understanding with Veterans Affairs. Could you tell us the benefits that have been realized as a result of this collaborative approach with aboriginal first nations?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Are we talking about the letter of understanding with the AFN? Is that the one?

Mr. Wilson Miao: Yes.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Okay.

My predecessor, former minister MacAuley, was able to sign a letter of understanding with the AFN. I believe it was in 2023 or thereabouts. It was before I arrived.

The letter of intent really had four pillars. Number one is that we want to make sure that we assess and expand the outreach activities to include first nations people as well. We also want to ensure that we establish clear points of contact between indigenous veterans and Veterans Affairs Canada. As such, we have engagement teams that have been put in place to make sure that this work continues.

We also agreed that we want to have greater representation when it comes to commemorative types of events, making sure that indigenous veterans are always included in those events. Finally, we

want to make sure we support historical records of indigenous veterans.

Very quickly, that's a bit of the overview of the letter of intent, and I look forward to working with the AFN.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

I now invite the committee's second vice-chair, Luc Desilets, to take the floor for the next six minutes.

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

Hello to all my colleagues.

Thanks to our esteemed guests.

Minister, I have a very specific question for you. You probably will not have an answer, but I would hope that a bit of research could be done on it.

We are talking about money. The Department of Veterans Affairs contributed \$3 million to a project that is part of the Highway of Heroes, for which total funding comes to \$10 million. I don't know whether that means anything to you. Mr. Harris seems to know a bit about what this is regarding, at least.

The project includes the installation of two identical commemorative sculptures in two roadside rest areas. It was completed almost two years ago. I have personally received complaints about this from two veterans. The sculptures are meant to honour 67 people for their ultimate sacrifice. We are well aware of what that expression means. The problem is this: of the 67 people whose profiles appear on the two sculptures, only 20 died in service; four were never in uniform, and 12 are still living and in good health.

You all know Captain (retired) H  l  ne Le Scelleur. Her name is there. Her profile is part of the sculpture. She called me about this. She told me she was obviously not dead and that she was alive and well. I also spoke with her this morning.

Also on this sculpture, which, I reiterate, honours men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice, is the name of Rom  o Dallaire, whom we here all know. There are also the names of francophones who are still alive and well, such as Guylaine Lamoureux, Natacha Dupuis and Vivian Jean Baptiste.

So there are 67 names on these sculptures that, I reiterate, honour men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice. Obviously, this creates a bit of a problem.

I don't know whether one of you is able to give me any information about this.

• (1600)

Mr. Steven Harris (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs): This project was funded in part by a Veterans Affairs Canada program. We have received several complaints about it, as you have also noted, Mr. Desilets. We are working with the organizers responsible for the monument to find out more about what they are going to do to fix the problems there.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Have the plaques been removed?

Mr. Steven Harris: I don't know what the final decision is on this subject, but we can certainly follow up with committee members.

I know that this is what has been requested, or that this was what was expected at the very least.

Mr. Luc Desilets: What do you mean when you say this was what was expected?

Mr. Steven Harris: I mean that people expected that the plaques would be removed.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Right.

Obviously, the veterans in question are frustrated. They learned that people were going to be bowing to them before the monuments, when they are alive and well. This is a major mistake, in my opinion. Obviously, there are calls for an apology to be made to these people. Ms. Le Scelleur has never received a telephone call from anyone. She learned through a friend that her name was on a monument erected in memory of people who had died.

I reiterate: there are 12 people in this situation, including Gen. Dallaire.

Ms. Le Scelleur would like to get an apology, as would the other people in the same situation. She is even going so far as to ask that the monument be removed. Her profile appears on the sculpture, but there is no reason for it to be there, in my opinion.

So I would like you to follow up with us about this.

I would also like to get some details about the decision-making process. Veterans Affairs Canada nevertheless paid out \$3 million on this project. How did the list of names happen to get approved?

If you could send that information to the committee, we would be very grateful.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Desilets, I give you my word that we will follow up on this.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I don't doubt you, Minister. As well, I forgot to congratulate you on your appointment.

Now, Ms. Petitpas Taylor, earlier, you mentioned the fact that your department had injected \$4 million into commemoration activities. I understand that this is new money. Is that correct?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: It is money that we invested in commemoration activities this summer on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of D-Day. Part of that money was also used for the delegation that travelled to Cyprus.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Do you mean there will be another D-Day commemoration activity?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: No. It is the money that was spent for the events held in June of this year.

Mr. Luc Desilets: So the money has already been spent.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: That's correct.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I understand. So it is not new money.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: No.

In fact, it is new money that was used to fund the activities in June 2024 that we participated in, and to fund the mission of the delegation that arrived in Cyprus a few weeks ago.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Perfect.

You mentioned a \$2 million investment in the Veteran and Family Well-being Fund. Is that new money?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: It is an increase in the budget envelope we already had. Community groups can apply for funds in order to offer various programs for veterans and their families across Canada. That money is in addition to the funds that already existed.

Mr. Luc Desilets: That is excellent news. Thank you.

Can you say, generally speaking, what concrete measures will be taken to respond to urgent requests from veterans? Maybe there is already a response.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I don't understand your question, Mr. Desilets. I'm sorry.

Mr. Luc Desilets: A lot of money is being injected inside the department. Are there funds provided to respond to requests of an urgent nature?

I am thinking of the veteran our committee was to hear last week, although I don't want to go back over what happened, today.

Is there money provided under one rubric or another to respond to urgent requests made by veterans?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Absolutely. Our government has created an emergency fund precisely to respond to urgent requests for which we do not have a specific envelope.

Veterans may apply for funds in order to meet various needs. For example, these funds can be used to pay for medical services, a month's rent, or a hydro bill. They can be used for any emergency that arises. A person can apply to the Department of Veterans Affairs, the request will be assessed, and the person can receive funds.

I also have to say that there are a number of legion branches or community groups that work with veterans. Often, they will contact us directly to make sure we are able to send them money.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

[English]

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

Ms. Blaney, go ahead.

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

I thank the minister and her team for being here with us today.

Our office has been a bit inundated, Minister, in the last week or so, with a new VAC policy on VIP benefits for veterans with mental health conditions. What we've heard from multiple veterans is that they are now being required to have paperwork—a questionnaire, actually—filled out every year to prove that they still need the VIP benefits. They were quite shocked to receive this. Many veterans are calling, and their understanding is that this policy does not apply to veterans with physical injuries or conditions.

I have two questions around this.

One, I know that the department has had a very clear commitment to conducting a gender-based analysis of every policy. I'm concerned that it wasn't done on this one because, of course, this will disproportionately impact women veterans who have MST claims.

The other thing I am concerned about is why an extra step of red tape is being added to this benefit that previously didn't require this paperwork.

I want to add that I've also talked to a lot of medical professionals who are resisting filling out paperwork. They are reimbursed for filling out the paperwork for VAC, but often they have to wait very long to get the reimbursement. They are now telling veterans that they won't do it.

When I put all of those things together, I'm really concerned about what that's going to mean for vulnerable people with mental health issues who will now have to prove every year that they still have that mental health issue. It also goes back to what I've been talking about around trauma-informed care. To me, this is another example of a complete lack of trauma-informed care.

I'm wondering if you could help me understand what's happening.

• (1605)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you, Ms. Blaney, for bringing this matter up. Again, I'll certainly be following up with the department.

I can tell you that when it comes to accessing services, especially for individuals who are living with mental health conditions, we certainly don't want to add another layer of complexity to that. We want to make sure they have access to the services that they deserve and need.

With respect to the other part of your question, about ensuring that our staff have trauma-informed training, again, with the priorities that have been laid out in the 42 recommendations that this committee brought forward in the women's report, that is top of mind for me and a priority for the department.

With respect to the change, however, I'm going to have to ask one of my officials. I really would like to hear a bit more about that, but I certainly will follow up on the matter.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I think what would be helpful for the committee is to get a response back in writing that says that if this has changed, why it has changed and whether a gender-based analysis was done on it. I think that's really important for us.

I was very pleased to see that the women veterans advisory committee was announced today. There are a few names I wish were on there that are not, but we'll talk about that at a later time.

I have a few questions. One of them is around the terms of reference.

The report talks about having quarterly meetings. We know that a federal election is going to be happening next year. We know that these folks have to get together and learn a lot. I'm wondering if you can talk about whether there is any focus on having more meetings prior to the election so that they can start getting up to speed.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Ms. Blaney, I, like you, was very pleased that we were finally able to announce the council. I was very anxious and eager. It took longer than I thought and than I hoped for, but today we were finally able to make the announcement.

Last week, I called all the members personally, and I was thrilled that every one of them agreed to take part in the council. If you guys look at the names of the candidates, you'll see that they're very well suited. Many others applied. We had hundreds of people who applied to be on this council.

I've committed to the advisory council that we will be meeting in January. My team has already been in touch with them, and they've already started having those conversations. We're planning on having our first meeting in January in person, probably here in Ottawa. From there, we'll be able to look at the calendar moving forward.

They are really eager out of the gate, as I am, and really want to hit the road running and start to do the important work that we expect of them.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

It also brings me to another important conversation, and I'd love to hear from you. I am concerned that some of them have known relationships with the CAF, DND and VAC, which could represent competing interests for them to be able to speak really freely. For example, some of them are still serving. Some of them presently work for the government or work for groups or organizations that depend on VAC for their funding.

I have some examples here that I won't name, but there are people still serving. I'm wondering how this is going to be addressed. These competing interests could be a barrier for these women to speak as openly as we would like to see them speak.

• (1610)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: We certainly want to ensure that the representation of the council reflects serving members and retired members of both the RCMP and the CAF.

If we look at the selection process, we see that the women's council told us that they wanted to ensure that the selection of the members was not going to be by the members or by the department. The board was set up, and they worked really hard at interviewing these individuals and making sure that we had a good representation of folks who are working—CAF, RCMP—but who also have retired experience.

We expect these individuals to speak freely, of course, and to share with us their issues and their challenges.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: How is that going to be addressed? Are there any discussions happening about how you address those issues that are a conflict? How do you make sure this is a safe space, especially for women in uniform, to be able to share things that could be happening without experiencing retaliation?

Again and again, and during the women's study, we've heard women speak about coming out and speaking on things, and they faced really hard things during their service.

I hear you and I'm not negating any of their skill sets, but how are we making sure that those potential conflicts of interest do not become issues that delay or disrupt the work that this council is doing?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: It's an important question that you raise, Ms. Blaney, and again, we'll have those conversations with the council members in January, because I want to ensure they feel absolutely free to speak their mind.

If we want to address discrimination and barriers that women are still facing today in the Canadian Armed Forces and the RCMP, to me, it's really important to have individuals who are still presently serving now. Issues that happened 20 years ago may still be happening, but there may be new issues that are happening today as well, and that's why I feel it's really important to make sure we have folks in different parts of their career represented on this council.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

As you know, we have a second round of questions. We have to give time for colleagues to ask the questions.

I'll start with Mrs. Cathay Wagantall for five minutes, please.

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

Thank you, Minister, for being here, and Mr. Harris and Mr. Freeman as well.

The voted appropriations in the supplementary estimates (B) for 2024-25 are for \$942.5 million. It indicates that the vast amount of that, \$819.4 million, is for pain and suffering compensation. I'm looking at this, and that's a 51.6% increase compared to what was in the main estimates.

In the explanation documents in regard to this, it says that it's because of an increased number of applications, but also “a higher-than-expected number of Veterans opting for a lump-sum”, and then it goes on to say that when they apply for their pain and suffering compensation, it goes into monthly installments by default and that they have to submit a written request for a lump sum.

The goal was that they thought this would incentivize our veterans to go with a monthly installment because they have the potential to live longer than the time the lump sum will last. It's surprising to me that this is the route this is going.

I have a question right away around having to submit a written request for the lump sum. When they're applying for the compensation, are they aware that it's a default? Is there not a way to say you can make a choice here for a monthly payment or for a lump sum? Is that not part of the application?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I'll answer part of your question, and then I'll turn it over—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Answer as briefly as possible, please.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Absolutely.

With respect to the numbers that you've shown, we are seeing, year after year, a 10% increase in applications for benefits. This year alone, we are on track for 94,000 applications to come through the department.

With respect to the lump sum and the information there, perhaps, Steven, you can just explain what is given to the—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: How many are going to the lump sum?

Mr. Steven Harris: About 60% to 65% are going to the lump sum.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Are they able to say immediately that they would prefer the lump sum versus the monthly payment?

Mr. Steven Harris: They're not. In the legislation, it's described initially as monthly, and then they have the opportunity to select a lump sum payout.

One of the recommendations that we've had from numerous committees and others is to be able to speed up that process for veterans, and that's resulted in having the form go out with the decision letter as well, allowing decisions to be happening more quickly.

• (1615)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay, so they can't process it for the lump sum when they are actually applying. They have to wait to get it awarded, and then they get to make that decision.

Mr. Steven Harris: That is correct.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Have you followed up? If so, how have you followed up to find out why there's this preference for the lump sum? That seems contrary to what the expectations were.

Mr. Steven Harris: As you noted, I think the design of the program was meant to encourage people to take the monthly amount. People can make their own decisions with respect to how they wish to receive their disability compensation, and many are doing that. In some cases, it could be small amounts. Their disability pain and suffering compensation is not a very small amount, maybe \$25,000, so over a long period of time it may not be worth it.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Yes, I hear you. Thank you.

According to the Office of the Ombudsman, VAC's data from December of 2022 indicated that 65% of veterans eligible for pain and suffering compensation were choosing a lump sum. That was back in 2022.

Are you aware of the percentages now for 2023-24 and 2024-25, yes or no?

Mr. Steven Harris: What I have for the figure right now is still between 60% and 65%. It's consistent.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: It's comparable to what it's been, and so the amount.... Okay.

How have you followed up with those who chose the lump sum to do any kind of research to find out why they're making that choice?

Mr. Steven Harris: I think there have been many conversations that have happened through veteran engagements, forums and others.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Do you have anything in writing that shows why this change is taking place? I wonder if it isn't because they feel safer having their money in their hands to improve their own life quality. Are they moving into small businesses and needing those? What is the rationale for doing that? Do we not know?

Mr. Steven Harris: I don't. Every individual situation may be different.

To your point, somebody may wish to have that money immediately to put it to use for something specific to them.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I think it would be good to find out why, because that's a significant percentage.

On the appropriation of \$2 million for the veteran and family well-being fund, with a focus on equity-deserving groups, give me just a very brief description of what that means—for what purpose with equity-deserving groups?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: With respect to under-represented groups that we've seen, oftentimes they perhaps haven't had access to the services that they needed. Again, monies were put aside to ensure that community groups could apply for funding in order to ensure that the needs of those veterans were met.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you.

Regarding the \$2.75 million for government advertising programs, obviously, if you have the money, you know what you're going to be advertising. How are you targeting women veterans and

those transitioning to civilian life? What are the actual advertising programs that are going to take place?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: That's a very good question, Ms. Wagantall.

Most of those programs are during veterans month. They're to make sure that we promote veterans month and also promote veterans, but it's also to ensure that veterans are aware of the services and supports that are available to them.

The ad campaigns that we have certainly will depict what a veteran looks like. It can be a male or a female. We really want to make sure that it's very reflective.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Do you have them laid out already so as to come to the number of \$2.75 million?

The Chair: That's the last question.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I didn't hear your question.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: To come up with an amount, you have to decide what it is you're going to spend it on in advance. What that money will go towards has been laid out. It's more funding, so—

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: One priority that I've heard from veterans time and time again, and from members of the committee, is that they want to ensure that veterans are aware that they are entitled to services and benefits. A big part of the ad campaign that we're doing is really encouraging them if they are a veteran, and making sure that they self-identify as a veteran—

The Chair: I'm so sorry. Thank you very much.

Now let's go to Ms. Lisa Hepfner for five minutes, please.

Go ahead, Ms. Hepfner.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister and team, for being here with us today.

I know that my colleague Rachel Blaney has already brought up the Women Veterans Council, whose members we just learned about today, and I want to go back there as well.

I'm not sure whether there's anything that you didn't have a chance to mention about the selection of the candidates today, but perhaps you can go back and fill in any blanks that you may have left.

Also, tell us more about the significance of this council. What do you hope comes out of this whole exercise?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you so much, Ms. Hepfner, for that question.

In the report you did in the women's study that you did, one of the recommendations was to form a women's advisory council. I have to say that it was well on its way to being created, but I was very pleased to see it as one of the recommendations in the report. It's truly important, because women have indicated to us that they feel invisible. We don't want them to feel invisible anymore.

I think it's really important to ensure that we have an advisory council that will provide me with advice with respect to the barriers, the obstacles, the discrimination and the needs of women veterans. Moving forward, I'm looking forward to receiving advice and recommendations from these women.

As I've indicated to Ms. Blaney, hundreds of people applied to be members of the council. I was really quite pleased to see the level of interest that we had from folks from coast to coast to coast. The selection committee took their time and interviewed the candidates, and today, as indicated, we were able to announce the 12 members of the council.

For those individuals who are watching or listening to us, if you don't mind, I would like to share with the committee who these folks are, because I know that many of them have already appeared before the committee here in different ways.

We have Constable (retired) Jennifer Chorney, from the RCMP; Warrant Officer (retired) Celine Fillion, from the CAF; Major Dawn LeBlanc, from the CAF; Corporal (retired) Sarah Lefurgey, from the RCMP; Captain (retired) Hélène Le Scelleur, from the CAF; Sergeant (retired) Jessica Miller, from the CAF;

• (1620)

[Translation]

Colonel (retired) Telah Morrison, from the CAF; Dr. Wenshuang Nie, from the CAF; Corporal Ellen Peters, from the RCMP; Captain (retired) Lindsay Shields, from the CAF; Constable (retired) Vivienne Stewart, from the RCMP; and Lieutenant-Colonel (retired) Eleanor Taylor, from the CAF.

As we can see, the RCMP and the Canadian Armed Forces are well represented.

[English]

We also see here that there are individuals from all parts of the country, not just here in Ottawa. It's really from coast to coast. We have francophones and anglophones. We really wanted to make sure that we had a good representation.

Again, as I've indicated, I spoke to every one of them that I was able to reach last week to congratulate them. We'll be having our first meeting in January.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: You said they were excited about this opportunity. Can you tell us more about what they really want to do with it and what they've told you?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I think they see this as an opportunity to share some advice to the minister and also to the department. They certainly have a lot of lived experience, and that's why they were chosen to be on this council as well.

Yes, their professional experience is stellar, but also, we really want to hear about their lived experience within the forces, the RCMP or as a CAF member. We're looking forward to hearing their advice and being able to work with them.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: What sort of influence will their discussions have on the greater VAC?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Well, I'm asking them to take on some serious work. As you know, we are talking about women in

the forces—women in the Canadian Armed Forces and women veterans—and we certainly want to make sure that we improve the lives of those who serve our country. I'm looking forward to receiving their advice, and I'm going to be taking their advice very seriously as we move forward with our policies and decisions.

Just as in the women's report, the ACVA report with the 42 recommendations that you guys have brought forward, there's a lot of work that needs to be done here, and I'm ready to roll up my sleeves—I already have—and really want to hit the ground running in making sure that we're able to do as much as we can in order to better the lives of our women veterans.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: I have full confidence in you in all of that. Thank you for your work, Minister.

Also, last week we had visits from some members of Parliament from Ukraine. I know that they visited us at the status of women committee. We talked about things like gender-based violence. They also visited with members of this committee.

Would you tell us what sort of advice Veterans Affairs Canada can give to Ukraine? Is there anything we can do to help them?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I was really pleased to hear that the delegation met with folks here in Ottawa. Last year I met with First Lady Madam Zelenska and a group of her delegates from Ukraine as well. They came here.

The First Lady's priority is really the mental health of veterans when they return home. She wants to ensure that those services are put in place. They're starting from scratch. Mental health services are not something that they talk about openly in Ukraine, as we do here in Canada. They want to look at best practices and how they can put in place the services that veterans need. Last year, when we met with them, we signed a letter of understanding indicating that we would share as much information as we can with them, any practices and any research we have. We are willing and able and we want to take part in that sharing of information.

Just two weeks ago, there was another delegation here. I believe that many members from the committee perhaps met with them as well, again, in wanting to share that information.

Inside of Veterans Affairs Canada as well, we've set up and organized an internal committee to make sure that sharing that information is easier. We want to work collaboratively with the Ukrainian government and with the embassy here in Ottawa to do all we can to provide them with the assistance they need.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[Translation]

I will now give Mr. Desilets the floor for two and a half minutes.

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

Mr. Harris, how do you interpret the rise in the number of applications for disability benefits? It is actually quite enormous, when there are not very many missions abroad at the moment. We have to go back practically to the Afghanistan mission.

Mr. Steven Harris: We talked before about things we are doing to publicize these benefits and the services offered to veterans. I think that encourages people to submit requests for services.

We know that health is complicated, whether it be mental health or physical health. Obviously, people in the Canadian Armed Forces are placed in very dangerous situations. That puts enormous pressure on them, both mental and physical, and there will inevitably be injuries.

So even though there are no wars or other things of that kind, they are serving all over Canada in other fields, where they may also be injured.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Listening to Ms. Blaney's question just now, I was surprised to learn there was a new form to fill out. Has any thought been given to making efforts to reduce the bureaucracy? There are more and more employees, it keeps on growing and the bureaucracy keeps on getting more complex. Obviously, it is increasingly difficult for our veterans who come home in bad shape from some missions.

Would it be possible to set up a pilot project in which case management officers could refer individuals to appropriate resources when they are just flatly not able to fill out their paperwork?

Mr. Steven Harris: We continually review the forms and applications that veterans have to fill out, to make sure they are able to do it. In some cases, we can get assistance not just from legion branches, but also from medical and mental health experts, to help people fill out the forms.

The process to which Ms. Blaney referred has not yet been initiated. We are currently making sure that people can easily access benefits. Things should not be more complicated. People a veteran knows, such as their family doctor or someone in their community, would be asked to determine whether they need something, instead of that being done by a bureaucrat in an office somewhere.

Mr. Luc Desilets: What you are telling me is fine, in theory. Veterans can be referred to legion branches, but we all know that legion branches are not in the best position to help them. A lot of branches are struggling to survive.

Veterans can be referred to community organizations, but does the Department of Veterans Affairs not also have responsibility for helping veterans who are having problems respond to requests?

Mr. Steven Harris: Yes. In fact, we are currently setting up a network of people, including mental health specialists, who will not only be able to help veterans fill out the forms, but also be able to help them in their healing.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris.

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

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, I know that you've probably been watching this committee closely, as I'm sure you always do. We're currently just finishing up a study on indigenous and Black veterans, and I want to say that I've been really disappointed with the lack of engagement from the Black community.

We reached out a lot in our office and connected with multiple Black veterans who were very clear in their discussions with us that they had no faith in the process and that they would not attend any of our committee meetings. That concerns me a lot, so I have more than a question: I want to say that I think there's something happening there that is probably really serious, and I hope that the minister will take some time to maybe explore that a little bit, because it always makes me sad when a particular group of veterans feels left out and feels that their contribution in a committee like ours wouldn't make a difference.

My next question for you is around women-only housing. We heard very clearly and repeatedly through the testimony on the women veterans study that a lot of women felt that they couldn't access veterans housing because there's a mixture of people there who can make them feel really unsafe. They also spoke quite clearly about having current serving members popping by to visit, which might be a great experience for some veterans, but for some of the women veterans who had experienced MST it was very traumatizing to see someone come into their space wearing a uniform.

I know that some money has been given to The Pepper Pod, but I'm not clear on what that's for and if that's actually moving towards having some women-only veterans housing.

Could I get some clarity on what's happening on that and if there's any commitment to actually building some women-only veterans housing to especially support women who we know are often facing higher rates of homelessness, especially indigenous veteran women?

Is there anything happening that we can be excited to look forward to as support for these women to keep them safe and keep them housed?

● (1630)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I promise that I'll be concise.

With respect to the first part of your question, which was about Black veterans, please know that is something I'm seized with as well. We've done some work with the No. 2 Construction Battalion and some of the family members as well. During Veterans' Week, we actually were in Toronto, where we unveiled a plaque in memory of all the battalion's members who served in the forces.

Again, engagement continues with me. I'm sorry to hear that they didn't want to appear at committee here, because I think it would have been very valuable to hear their points of view, but know that I'm seized with that as well.

With respect to housing and women and specifically to women veterans, again, it is an issue that I continue to hear about across the country as well. The \$80-million announcement we made through Infrastructure Canada is to provide rent supports as well as wraparound services. If a female veteran chooses that she wants to live in a specific apartment building, let's say, and needs that additional support, those types of rent supports would be able to follow her. We want to make sure that they are the ones who choose, and if they don't want to stay in a specific building, they don't have to do so. The rent support is a support that follows them, as opposed to being attached to a specific building.

The other thing is that ensuring that people have access to the wraparound services they need is truly important. We want to make sure that we set veterans up for success, and sometimes they need a hand. If the wraparound services we provide can help them, I think it will be beneficial, and beneficial in keeping them housed even longer as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. I know we started a bit late. I think all members would like to have a full hour with you, Minister, and afterwards with the officials.

Mr. Dowdall, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here today. Thank you as well for your team.

I'm going to go back for a quick second here. I found my colleague's questions a bit earlier quite interesting.

As we know, you're definitely a busy minister as Minister of Veterans Affairs. Now you're going to be Minister of Employment and Minister of Workforce Development as well. I'm sure it's an honour to be asked. Certainly I would think that from anyone's perspective, it's probably a nod that you're doing a good job.

My question is more along these lines. With over 150 members of your party, why wouldn't you look for somebody else who was there? I know that you were asked, but just for each department and the amount of time.... I know how busy I am in my riding, just as a member of Parliament and not being a minister, in taking care of all the individuals we have. Out of 150 other members in your party, was there any suggestion on your behalf that perhaps someone else could have an opportunity?

On the other side of it, is there not a minister who perhaps isn't putting their name forward again who would have that experience in a ministerial department and could probably dedicate more time? Quite honestly, Minister, I think it doesn't matter what ministry this is: You can't really dedicate the same amount of time that you did before.

My question, I guess, basically, is that maybe you can keep up on this file, but are we doing justice on the other file, and why wouldn't you as a leader...? I know that it's a great nod for you to get the accolades and be chosen—and, as I say, with a great track record, obviously, for your party—but did you ever put forward the idea that you really want to concentrate on what you have here and that someone else would probably do a better job if they could dedicate 100% of their time?

• (1635)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I'm going to respond to that question this way. I think my track record speaks for itself. I'm a hard-working MP, I'm a dedicated MP and I'm a dedicated minister.

As I've indicated, I'm not scared of hard work and I'm not scared of long hours. This is a short-term commitment that the Prime Minister has asked me to assume, because there are probably going to be some appointments made in the very near future.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: I'm not trying to pick on what you do in your role, because, as I said, it's a compliment to be asked. There's no doubt about it. It would be a certain honour, and it speaks well, I guess, to your work ethic, but is there not anybody else, out of 150 individuals, who probably could have dedicated more time to either one of the files?

Then, second, you said that there's going to be an announcement. How long do you think it will be that these two departments will not have a dedicated minister?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: First of all, I don't agree with the premise of your question. I am dedicated to these three responsibilities at this time. I was the former official languages minister. I know the file very well. I know this file very well, and I am certainly getting briefed up on ESDC—

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Once again, Minister, I'm not asking about your qualifications or what you do. I'm going to just say that for the departments themselves, I understand.... Obviously, as you said, it's fantastic. However, I think, for those departments, out of the number of people who are part of the Liberal Party, even if you didn't suggest it, you would think that the government might suggest it. The fact is that there were other individuals who had been ministers before who could dedicate 100% of their time. That is my point.

It's no slight to you as the minister doing your role here. It's just an overview of running an operation. It's the same as if it were a hockey team. You wouldn't do that. You would be busy running your hockey team. That's my question or comment. It's not about you or your ability; it's just that in the government overall, do you not think that it would be a better opportunity, not only for the individuals who are in the government but also for each department, to have one individual to talk to and to call?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Again, my response to you is that I'm a very hard worker. I'm not scared of long hours, and that's exactly what I'm doing right now. I'm thrilled to be able to continue being the Minister of Veterans Affairs. It is a portfolio that is near and dear to my heart, as is official languages, and I'm briefing up on the other portfolio at this point in time. This is a temporary measure, and, again, I look forward to continuing to work with the committee members here.

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

The last questions are from Mr. Randeep Sarai for five minutes, please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here.

As noted in your opening remarks, the bulk of the estimates funds for VAC are benefit payments for supports that go directly to veterans for a variety of programs.

I think we all remember when Conservatives obstructed the estimates process last year with a marathon of votes, voting against, I think, every single program and every single penny of investment. If we fast-forward a year, we see that not much has changed, as they're paralyzing the House and preventing the advancement of key legislation while voting against a tax cut for all Canadians.

Can you tell us why it's so important that we pass the estimates? What are the impacts of these benefits?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thanks so much, MP Sarai.

Again, the investments that we're making in order to help support veterans and their families are imperative. As we've indicated this year, when it comes to supplementary estimates (B), we're talking about \$954 million in additional benefit payments that we'll be providing to veterans and their families. It's important to ensure that the supplementary estimates (B) go through the House quickly, because we want to ensure that no payments are going to be delayed. These are services and benefits that our veterans are counting on, and I certainly hope that all members of the House of Commons are going to vote in favour of the estimates.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Minister, we know that the Conservatives made deep cuts to VAC's commemoration work, but in this year's estimates, there's a line item to invest \$3.8 million to support the Juno Beach Centre. Can you talk about the significance of the Juno Beach Centre and tell us why our government has made the investments to help the centre preserve the legacy of all Canadians who served during the Second World War?

• (1640)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I'm really pleased to see the department and the government continuing to support the Juno Beach Centre, as it is an important museum of the Second World War and of Canada's contributions and the sacrifices that were made. We continue to provide the support that the centre needs in order to ensure that those operations continue. Many of us who attended different types of commemorative events visited the centre, and I can say that the work they do there is really important.

The other part of the work at the centre, which I think is pretty important as well—and I found this out just recently—is that the staff, the young people who work there, are university students. They're Canadians, and they're proud bilingual Canadians who are working there and making sure that they're able to answer the questions of the tourists who attend the centre.

Just this week, I'm going to be meeting with the new president of the centre, Monsieur Christopher LaBossiere, who was recently named and is just starting his term. I'm looking forward to meeting with him and finding out what his priorities are going to be as he begins this new journey as president.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Minister, I found it a little appalling that my Conservative colleagues, in two rounds of questioning, only asked about whether you're competent enough to have multiple portfolios. I actually found it quite misogynistic, I think, that this was a question asked to a female minister who was given multiple portfolios.

You may not know the answer to this question. Have you heard of a question such as this being asked by other parties to other ministers, male ministers, when they were given multiple portfolios as a cabinet minister?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: No. I can say that I haven't.

Mr. Blake Richards: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Excuse me, Minister. There's a point of order.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: That struck a nerve there, eh?

The Chair: I can't see you, Mr. Richards. I think it's you, but can you turn on your...?

Mr. Blake Richards: I didn't realize the camera was off.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm sorry, Chair.

I guess what I wanted to point out, Chair, is that throughout today's meeting there have been a number of questions asked that... You ruled that my question wasn't relevant, even though it related directly to a veteran, directly to something that is supposed to be a responsibility of the government to ensure for our veterans. Since that time, there have been a number of questions asked that certainly weren't on the estimates either.

I think you were correct in not ruling any of those other questions out of order, because I think there should be latitude on that, but that being said, you've made that ruling, and now someone is asking a question that is essentially trying to slander individuals of this committee—

The Chair: Excuse me—

Mr. Blake Richards: —and I think what you should be doing here is holding this member to the same standard that you held me to, because, frankly, the questions had nothing to do with the minister as an individual. It had to do with the role and the responsibility of the minister.

If someone slandering other individuals, I think you should rule that question out of order, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you for your intervention, Mr. Richards, but I think you do remember that when I made the ruling on your question, it was not about how many files the minister has, and you also have one colleague of yours who asked questions about that, and I didn't rule.

We can understand that people can ask questions about how many files she has, so this is not.... Sorry, this is not a point of order.

Mr. Blake Richards: Chair, the question had nothing to do with her files. It had to do with trying to slander other individuals. I think your bias needs to stop showing.

The Chair: Okay, but I already made the ruling on that.

Now we have one minute and a half left. I'd like to listen to the answer from Minister Petitpas Taylor.

Please go ahead, Minister.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Again, no, I have never been asked that question by any other member, actually, Mr. Sarai.

I'm a bit surprised to hear this type of questioning today when I'm here for the supplementary estimates (B). We're here to talk about benefits and supports to veterans, and I would hope that the members of the committee would be focusing on that and not make partisan attacks.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you, Minister.

Lastly, can you update the committee on your government's veterans employment strategy and how we can continue supporting CAF members when they're preparing for their next chapter?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Yes. Actually, it kind of folds well with ESDC right now as well, because when it comes to veterans' employment, when we talk about employment workforce, both departments certainly go hand in hand in a lot of ways.

Just this year, we launched the veterans employment strategy. We're working with veterans and making sure they can find meaningful employment. We are also making sure that we are working with employers so that they are aware that, as you know, in any given year we have approximately 8,000 members of the Canadian Armed Forces who are retiring. These are skilled, qualified and able individuals, and many of them want to start another career. We're working with that pool of individuals as well.

Finally, we're working with many other organizations that provide services to veterans. I'm really excited with the work that's being done there. We just launched it this year. There's still a lot of work that needs to be done, but the feedback I've received from veterans so far has been very positive.

As well, the department has also started a LinkedIn app—I don't know what the word is—

A voice: Account.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you.

It's an account, if you will, for veterans. Again, it has served as a very useful tool to our veterans as well.

We continue to try to improve the services and benefits, and making sure that veterans are meaningfully employed and not underemployed is a priority of mine. Again, we'll continue to work in that vein.

• (1645)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

I know that Mr. Harris and Mr. Freeman will be staying with us for the next hour of the meeting.

Minister, I have to say I was very pleased to see the appointment of the members of the women veterans advisory group. That was one of the 42 recommendations made by the committee in its report titled, "Invisible No More. The Experiences of Canadian Women Veterans", on completion of its study of this subject. We hope that more of the committee's recommendations will soon be implemented by the department.

Thank you again for being here at the committee, Minister.

We are going to take a break for a few minutes and then we will continue the meeting with the officials from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

• (1645)

(Pause)

• (1650)

The Chair: Resuming the meeting.

I would like to welcome the new witnesses, who are joining us by videoconference. With us are Amy Meunier, assistant deputy minister, commemoration and public affairs branch, and Pierre Tessier, assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and corporate services branch.

With us still is Jonathan Adams, director general, finance, who is participating in the meeting by videoconference. He was with us during the first part of the meeting, as were Steven Harris, senior assistant deputy minister, service delivery branch, and Mitch Freeman, acting assistant deputy minister, strategic policy, planning and performance branch.

Given that there will be no opening remarks, we will go immediately to the question period. I will take this opportunity to warn committee members that the meeting will go on until 5:35 p.m.

To begin, I invite Mr. Richards, who is attending the meeting by videoconference, to take the floor.

• (1655)

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards, go ahead for six minutes, please.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you all for joining us today.

I have a number of things I'd like to ask you about.

I'd like to start with the fact that you now have a part-time minister for the department.

Can you tell us how that's going to impact the senior leadership within the department, and the roles, responsibilities and duties of the senior leadership, when you're dealing with a part-time minister?

Mr. Steven Harris: I'm happy to take that question.

We continue to work with the minister and her office to make sure that any support we need from the minister and the minister's office is available when we need it. We continue to brief the minister on key files, and she continues to make herself available for us to do so. From our perspective, we continue to work as we did previously.

Mr. Blake Richards: Does this mean you're saying the minister is so uninvolved in the running of the department that her presence—or, in this case, lack of—won't have any major impact on the operation of the department?

Mr. Steven Harris: I don't think that's what I said at all.

I just said that when there is a requirement for the minister to be briefed.... As I think the chair and members know, there are a number of documents, approaches and other things that require the minister's support and signature, whether those are Treasury Board submissions, budget submissions or any number of things the minister is involved in from a decision-making point of view. We continue to brief the minister on the ongoing work of the department in areas of importance for veterans and others.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

I'd like to return to a question we asked one of the officials in the department a couple of weeks ago, when they were at the committee as part of our ongoing study about Black and indigenous veterans.

At that time, I asked whether indigenous veterans who receive benefits from Indigenous Services Canada would have those benefits counted as income as part of income testing and therefore potentially have any of their VAC entitlements lowered. We received a commitment to have an answer provided to the committee. No answer has been forthcoming yet.

Do you have an answer to that question now?

Mr. Steven Harris: We'll make sure the answer is provided to the committee chair, but I can confirm for you that no one would be affected regarding the indigenous benefit you referenced in the earlier meeting.

Mr. Chair, we've gone back and looked at it. It's not one of the things offset for income from a Veterans Affairs point of view. In fact, I believe the benefit being referred to, from the indigenous point of view, is really only available for individuals who are in very dire need and circumstances—in other words, have a very low income.

Indigenous veterans who are with Veterans Affairs tend to have income supports that would probably make it impossible for them to get the benefit in the first place, because they're being funded at a higher level.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

However, could you go and confirm that about all of the various benefits? Could we ask that you provide this to the committee before the House rises for the recess in December?

Mr. Steven Harris: We'll certainly endeavour to do so. If it's for the benefit you raised the other day, that's no problem. We will

make sure we get that for you. If there are other benefits you are referencing now, we would have to look at what the other ones are.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. That's fair enough.

I want to ask you as well about the \$250 cheque the government is going to be sending out this spring.

My understanding is that it will be counted as income, which would mean it will be calculated as part of income testing for veterans programs.

Is there a possibility that a veteran who receives this cheque could then find they've crossed the income threshold for certain benefits through VAC, such as for diminished earning capacity? Could they then potentially lose benefits, or have them lowered, as a result?

Mr. Steven Harris: Mr. Chair, I've not seen any legislation around that particular payment or benefit at this time. I'd have to wait to see what the legislation looks like and how that is defined before we could make any assessment on what that would look like.

● (1700)

Mr. Blake Richards: Could you commit to providing us with a response to that in writing as well?

Mr. Steven Harris: Mr. Chair, I don't have any legislation to go on to be able to look at it at this point in time. I'd have to wait until such time as there's formal legislation in place, or even proposed legislation, to be able to verify whether there's an impact somewhere else.

Mr. Blake Richards: All right. When you do have that available to you, would you commit to providing us with a response?

Mr. Steven Harris: Certainly. Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

Let me ask you about homeless veterans.

We're seeing more and more homeless veterans in this country. I've asked this question a number of times, and yet I never seem to really be able to get a full response: How many homeless veterans are there in this country?

When I talk to organizations across this country, whether it be veterans food banks or those who help homeless veterans across this country, for their own particular cities they're often able to give me an exact number of how many homeless veterans there are in their communities. For some reason, VAC can't seem to provide accurate numbers of homeless veterans across the country.

Have you done any work on this? Do you have a better sense of how many homeless veterans are out there? Can you tell us if the problem is growing or not?

Mr. Mitch Freeman (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs): What I would say to the member is that the current count from a national point of view is 2,600 homeless veterans across the country. We work very closely with—

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm sorry, but before you carry on, there's research out there that's been reported on. For example, a Maclean's magazine article reported a number that came from a study saying that there are probably well over 10,000 veterans. Why does that number differ so much from the number that you have? You seem to have a much lower number.

Are you underestimating the problem out there? Is VAC not doing its job to ensure that we're accurate there in not only finding these veterans but ensuring that they're receiving the services and support they need?

Mr. Mitch Freeman: I think this is part of the work under way with our colleagues at housing, infrastructure and communities around providing supports to and identifying the homeless veterans across the country—not just in one community, but across the country, coast to coast.

As you—

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm sorry to interrupt, but there's only so much time. I'd like to ask specifically why the numbers are so different—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Richards. Maybe you can come back to that. We're already at seven minutes.

I will go to Mr. Casey for six minutes, please.

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

I want to direct my first question to Mr. Freeman.

Mr. Freeman, I understand that now you are the acting assistant deputy minister for the strategic policy, planning and performance branch. In taking on that role, did you continue on with some of the responsibilities you had before taking the acting assistant deputy minister role?

Mr. Mitch Freeman: Certainly I've appeared before the committee a number of times as the director general of policy. I'm now taking on additional responsibilities around acting assistant deputy minister that are inclusive of the policy, planning and performance roles, which would contain things like cabinet business unit and affairs intergovernmentally, or federal-provincial relationships.

Mr. Sean Casey: Have you been questioned quite a bit about being a part-time assistant deputy minister?

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Mitch Freeman: You would be the first one asking me that question.

Mr. Sean Casey: Okay.

I think this is for the finance people on the call, but maybe you want it, Mr. Harris. It's a straightforward question that I know you all know the answer to. What is the total expenditure for Veterans Affairs Canada?

Mr. Steven Harris: Mr. Chair, we might ask Jonathan Adams to answer that question.

The Chair: Mr. Adams, go ahead, please.

Mr. Jonathan Adams (Director General, Finance, Department of Veterans Affairs): As highlighted through the supplement-

tary estimates (B), we are seeking to increase the departmental budget to \$7.7 billion. Over 90% of that funding is directed to veterans' benefits and services. That's where all of the funding and the allocation of the spending go.

• (1705)

Mr. Sean Casey: The total annual expenditure is \$7.7 billion, and 90% is paid out to veterans. Is that it?

Mr. Jonathan Adams: That's correct.

Mr. Sean Casey: Okay, thank you.

I don't know whether you've been following this, but right now there is a filibuster happening in the House of Commons that has the potential to result in no supplementary estimates being approved because they won't get to a vote.

If that happens—and it appears that it's entirely likely that it could happen, if that's the Conservatives' choice—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: It's your choice.

Mr. Sean Casey: —what will that mean to veterans?

A voice: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Mr. Steven Harris: Again, I might ask—

Mr. Sean Casey: I'm getting some heckling on the other side.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I'm not heckling—

Mr. Sean Casey: You do not have the floor.

Before we get to this, in the House, just so that you know, we are engaging in a debate in which only the Conservatives are delivering speeches, because they don't want it to get to a vote. If it never gets to a vote, we have to continue talking about it. That has the potential of taking over the entire agenda so that we don't get to vote on the supplementary estimates.

What impact will that have on veterans?

Mr. Steven Harris: Mr. Adams, would you answer that question?

Mr. Jonathan Adams: Yes, thank you.

As highlighted, the core of the supplementary estimates is to support the significant increase we continue to receive in applications from veterans for disability compensation and support. In addition to that, it is also veterans then seeking additional income support and rehabilitation support.

With these estimates here, what we've seen is an increase of over 15,000 veterans applying for disability benefits and programs. These estimates are absolutely critical to providing the ongoing funding and support for veterans to access those programs for disability compensation, income support and rehabilitation. Without the approval of these estimates, we would then not be able to support all veterans who come forward with a need for income support, rehabilitation, or health or disability compensation.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you.

Can someone before us here today give us an update on where we are with respect to backlogs? I know that's been a major effort on the part of the department for some time now. I wonder if you could give us an update on where that stands.

Mr. Steven Harris: The current figure that I have to share is as of September 30, when those files beyond our service standard, meaning longer than 16 weeks, numbered 6,246. That's a reduction of 72% since 2020.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you, Mr. Harris.

What about digital solutions to streamline processes? Can you let us know where that stands? I know that was another one you were working on that went hand in hand with the backlog issue.

Mr. Steven Harris: Just as an example, we're always looking for ways to improve benefits and services delivery and applications processing, not only for our staff but also, of course, for veterans.

I'll give you an example of something like VAC Healthshare, which we put online just a little while ago. It's now a year or so. It allows for certain categories of medical professionals to be able to upload and share sensitive, confidential, secure health information related to applications that veterans may be putting in. That allows them to get information to us in a secure way, in a quick way, and overall it allows us to reduce processing times.

We're always looking at opportunities for that kind of work to reduce the burden on veterans and reduce the burden on medical professionals, or ultimately on our staff, so that we can get to decisions more quickly.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you.

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

[Translation]

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

I would also like to inform Mr. Desilets and Ms. Blaney that in view of the time, they will have only six minutes each, so I suggest they make the most of them.

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

Mr. Harris, I would like to come back to the issue of the backlog. It is all very well that the backlog has been reduced by 72% as compared to 2022, but what percentage of applications is the department managing to respond to within the time allowed, at present?

Mr. Steven Harris: The 16-week response rate is around 60%.

• (1710)

Mr. Luc Desilets: Have you set targets, or do you plan to put in place, or modify, ways of doing things so these times can be reduced?

Mr. Steven Harris: I am going to give you somewhat the same answer as I gave another member of the committee a little earlier. We are still looking for ways to facilitate the process, both for applications and for decision-making. However, we are seeing a big increase in the number of applications. Every year, we get 10% more applications. Even though we are very productive, responding to all of the applications is still a big challenge.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I understand.

I don't have a lot of time, so I will move on to my next question.

Can you give us the current figures showing the response time for applications submitted in French, as compared to applications submitted in English?

Mr. Steven Harris: The current figures show a difference of 0.4 weeks. The response time is 19.5 weeks for applications in English and 19.1 weeks for applications in French.

Mr. Luc Desilets: We are not going to let up on that, Mr. Harris.

Mr. Steven Harris: It is not far off being equal.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I have to say the figures are very similar.

Mr. Harris, there is some information in particular that I would really like to get, and it would be nice if you could provide it to us. I am not asking that you provide it today, but you could send it to the clerk. I would like you to give us a concrete picture of benefits in the following categories: mental health, pain and suffering, and support for veterans' families. I would like to know what percentage of benefits is currently being paid in each of these various categories, as compared to how things stood a year ago. For example, I would like to see whether there has been exponential growth in mental health and where things stand for family support. If it were possible to get that information, we would be able to do comparative mini-studies.

Mr. Steven Harris: We will see whether it is possible. Putting together a picture of veterans is a big ask, but we will do whatever we can.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Right. If it were possible, we could then see where energy should be directed in future.

Mr. Freeman, you are very probably aware of the study we have underway relating to Indigenous and black veterans. It has required a lot of our time and we are still working on it. In that study, Indigenous witnesses have told us that when they live outside major centres, which is very common, they have to drive two hours to get help, and then drive two hours back again.

Does the present budget provide additional funds that would make it possible to go and meet these people where they live, or get closer to them somehow?

[English]

Mr. Mitch Freeman: Mr. Chair, I would ask Mr. Adams to chime in on any financial aspect to that.

Prior to that, I would say to the member that there are policies in place to assist veterans in travelling to medical services as part of their service-related disability conditions and the treatments that come from those. There are services available to help with travel and whatnot.

[Translation]

Mr. Steven Harris: Ms. Meunier may be able to add something about the work done by her team, which works to raise awareness among the communities concerned.

[English]

Ms. Amy Meunier (Assistant Deputy Minister, Commemoration and Public Affairs Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs): I'm happy to add more.

Since our indigenous veterans engagement team was stood up, we've met with close to 4,000 indigenous veterans, whether that was at larger events like powwows or annual general assemblies or in going into communities like Pabineau First Nation in New Brunswick. We are constantly engaging with individual veterans and communities to figure out how we can close gaps.

As my colleague Mr. Freeman mentioned, though, there are programs available for veterans who have to travel a distance to access benefits and services.

We're quite pleased with the work that the engagement team is doing. Through that, we're learning first-hand of the opportunities we can put in place to improve processes and programs.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

I have a little question for you, Mr. Adams. Can you confirm that the budget currently allocated to benefits for veterans is fully used up?

[English]

Mr. Jonathan Adams: At this point the requested increase of \$7.7 billion, through supplementary estimates (B), is not fully used up. This is the forecast of what we will need to support all veterans who will come forward during the fiscal year. There is still budget available for all veterans who do come forward.

• (1715)

Mr. Steven Harris: Jonathan, do you want to answer that question? Are we forecasting any kind of surplus?

Mr. Jonathan Adams: I'm sorry. There was an audio error.

Could you repeat the question, please?

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: For this type of benefits, are you forecasting a surplus for 2023?

[English]

Mr. Jonathan Adams: I'm very sorry. It didn't come through.

The Chair: Mr. Harris, could you...?

[Translation]

Mr. Steven Harris: We can follow up on that. That said, the very easy answer is that we always have a slight surplus every year, because we ask for more money than we need. This is to make sure we never find ourselves in a situation where a veteran who was eligible for a program could not receive the funds they needed.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Are the surpluses for budget items like those transferred to the same budget items the next year?

Mr. Steven Harris: No, they are returned to the tax centre. However, the funds remain available and we can ask for them the next year.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Right.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

[English]

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

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

I am happy to have you folks here to answer our very good questions.

Often, forms of discrimination are not documented. We heard from witnesses we've had for the women's report, and again for the indigenous and Black study, that when things are not documented, it's very hard when people who serve get to VAC in terms of getting the correlation in place to have their suffering recognized and cared for. Right now, we know there is the CAF racism class action. There are a lot of people looking to be compensated for very horrendous racist activities that happened in the CAF.

As part of your process at VAC, is there any work being done to figure out how to accommodate that reality, which was not documented properly by the CAF? When the CAF hasn't documented these complex issues, but when they've obviously been documented by the legal system, how do you deal with this so that services for veterans can be appropriate?

Mr. Steven Harris: Mr. Chair, I'd add, in response to that question, something quite specific that we've done. We've updated the eligibility entitlement guidelines around a number of existing suites of psychiatric benefits, for example. These include guidance for decision-makers when they're reviewing this, in order to understand that repeated unjust conduct or being subjected to prejudicial treatment can not only cause but also exacerbate mental health issues. That is guidance we've added directly into the decision-making guides our frontline staff use to render decisions on service relationships and things of that nature.

On the example you provided, if somebody was subjected to unjust behaviour, it would not necessarily be something documented in a service file. However, it's understood, based on a number of class actions, reports and studies that were completed. This guidance is now included in the documents our staff use to help render decisions as well.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that answer.

I want to put in the connection between that response and the changes that are potentially happening with the VIP program in order to encourage this, which is that there should be a different process to address those issues.

My next question is on the gold digger clause. We know that in 2019, \$150 million was put aside. I've asked questions about it since then. Figuring out who to give the money to is the challenge.

Have you guys gotten any further along? Are there any people, largely women, who have been identified as gold diggers by an old policy that is from something like 1901? Is any of that money actually flowing to the survivors of veterans who married at 60 or older?

Mr. Mitch Freeman: Mr. Chair, work continues on this very important file. As the minister noted in one of her appearances, it's very much a priority for the department to determine and understand this group of survivors, and what best would support them in to the future as they go through this very difficult situation. Unfortunately, it is not yet complete.

Therefore, there's nothing detailed at this particular moment. However, that work remains a priority and is under way within the department.

• (1720)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Well, it's been five years. I've talked to a lot of women, and if you need a list, I'm happy to provide it. Some of those folks are women who, in some cases, are dealing with pretty economically challenging times. This would make such a big difference, especially after you've spent, as in one example, 25 years caring for a veteran who needed a ton of care, and you are now living in poverty as a result of that marriage.

The last time I had a chat with Mr. Ledwell in this committee, I was talking about the need that I see for trauma training. I've heard through the grapevine—please correct me if I'm wrong—that a lot of folks who are starting to work for VAC are coming from the corrections background. They are coming from one department to another department, which makes a lot of sense. They have some understanding of the skill, but I wonder if they have the trauma training they really need. I think that if you're used to dealing with people from the criminal element, you might be a little bit more abrupt, and we don't want to have that happen for any Canadian, quite frankly, but especially for veterans.

Mr. Ledwell said that there is work happening around the “tell us once” policy so that veterans didn't have to repeat, but unfortunately, I'm still hearing that veterans are having to repeat their story. I'm just wondering if you have any update on this and whether there's actually any comprehensive trauma training happening. If so, how has it changed from the previous online component?

Mr. Steven Harris: Mr. Chair, we have been working through, as was noted by the member's question.... There are a number of trauma-informed training elements that are already in place for Veterans Affairs staff members, and something called specifically “trauma-informed” training. Then there are lots of other elements and segments of training that involve elements of trauma-informed training as well.

That has been in place for some time, but we do recognize the need to update it and make sure that it's staying consistent with new approaches and best practices for all of our frontline staff. We're looking at the best way to do that right now, so that we can roll out that training not only to existing staff but of course to any new staff we're bringing on board who are either from other departments or are new to our department.

With respect to the “tell us once” principle, we absolutely want to have that as the rule that's in place for veterans. We may ask them how they're feeling about something rather than to tell us about the trauma they've actually suffered. What kinds of things can we do to help them feel better rather than having them retell their story? What is the barrier they're facing? Rather than the actual incident itself, what barrier might they be facing? How can we address that with ourselves and mental health professionals and others who are part of the overall suite of practitioners who help to support veterans as well?

We want to do that from a paper point of view, from a submission point of view and from a phone call point of view, all the way through.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

There are two more interventions. The first one is from Mr. Fraser Tolmie.

You can split your five minutes, please, Mr. Tolmie.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the department for coming. For those who are online and joining us, thank you very much.

We've spent a lot of time listening to some very heartbreaking stories. I'm sure you watch the videos. I'm sure you've seen or witnessed what we've seen and what we've heard.

This past summer in the city of Moose Jaw, the food bank was threatened with closing down because there was a lack of donations and because the cost of food is increasing. People have less to give. The financial donations weren't going as far, because the cost of food has gone up. What we're also seeing, not only in the city of Moose Jaw but across Canada, is the increased use of food banks. We know that to be so for a lot of veterans, and in fact for a lot of serving members in the military.

My question that comes to you is this: How do you track the number of veterans using the food banks? Do you have something in place to track the number of veterans who are using food banks or have to rely on food banks?

Mr. Steven Harris: Mr. Chair, we can't track individual veterans' usage of food banks across the country. What we do have in place is a series of programs and services that are meant to ensure financial security for veterans as well.

That may be compensation they receive for illness or injury. More importantly, it may be compensation in income replacement benefits, so that if a veteran is unable to work or is undergoing a rehabilitation program, they're going to be supported at 90% of their pre-release salary.

We also have a veterans emergency fund that's been in place for about seven years now, and that fund has helped over 8,000 unique clients.

• (1725)

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Thank you, Mr. Harris, for pointing that out.

How do veterans identify in accessing that fund? We know you can't track how many people are using food banks, but is that not a way to track how much need is out there?

Mr. Steven Harris: I think the answer to the question is one that Mr. Freeman talked about a bit earlier.

It's a combination of programs. It's prevention by making sure eligible veterans come forward and are being supported through significant VAC programs. That's the reason we're here to ask for an increase in the supplementary estimates. It's so more money can go to veterans who've come forward and are eligible for those things.

Second, it's about what we can do from a homelessness point of view. Mr. Freeman spoke earlier about the initiative, as the minister did, to put more places in spots for veterans to prevent homelessness, and to ensure that if they end up on the streets for one reason or another, there's a place for them to come back in and re-establish themselves.

Then there are things like the veterans emergency fund, through which we can track for shelter, food, heating and those kinds of things. We have seen various increases, over a number of years, in people using it, and we continue to support the program.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Thank you, Mr. Harris, for your answer.

It's absolutely heartbreaking that veterans have to use these programs. It's showing the cost of living crisis we're going through right now. It's a cyclical event, and unchecked spending is creating the problem. You're in the middle of it.

I want to share my time with Mrs. Wagantall. She has a question.

The Chair: You have one minute.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Is it one minute?

The Chair: Yes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: You're welcome.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you for being here.

I appreciated hearing about the improvement in the backlog. I want to make sure I heard correctly that 60% of applications are now being processed within that 16-week time frame so that at the end of those 16 weeks, there is some form of care.

When does that 16-week time frame start? Is it when every piece of information VAC needs is in your hands? I hear from veterans a lot about how they struggle with providing everything in a timely way. I have veterans who thought they were ready, but then you

say, "Oh, no; we need a new report from your specialist." Of course, that takes weeks or months.

Are we counting that time from when you have every document you need to process it?

Mr. Steven Harris: I think we need to be fair about it. If we get an application that has no information, rather than just.... There's a balance to be found. Most applications come in well filled out. Some are missing some information.

The Auditor General has been quite clear about how they view those 16 weeks: You get an application and you have to pay them within 16 weeks—not just a decision rendered, but actually paid out. We've implemented that. That's the service standard we're referring to now. Somebody actually gets paid within 16 weeks.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Do you have anyone in your department focused on assisting with getting what isn't there so that you can do that within 16 weeks?

Mr. Steven Harris: We absolutely do. We have staff members who reach out all the time with respect to an application that may be missing something. They go back to the veteran and say to them, "There's this piece that might be missing." As you know, it might be medical information, but it could be other things as well.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Is that the only role of that particular staff?

Mr. Steven Harris: No. It would be one of their roles.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now, for the last intervention before we adopt—or not—the supplementary estimates (B), we have Mr. Randeep Sarai for five minutes.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you, Chair.

Ms. Meunier, I don't think you were here to answer it, but Mr. Desilets raised a question about the Highway of Heroes project.

I'm wondering if you could add to that. Perhaps it will answer Mr. Desilets' question as well.

Ms. Amy Meunier: Sure.

I want to assure members of the committee that we did not provide funding to the memorial the member was discussing. While we provided funding for Trees for Life, a specific project to plant many trees, we didn't contribute any funds to the memorial.

That said, as soon as we were made aware of the issue by a veteran, we contacted the organization. We continue to work with that organization to ensure material is taken down, addressed or revised to the adequacy of the veteran in question.

I just want to assure the committee that we did not contribute funds to that specific project and that we are working with the organizers to make sure the problems are addressed.

Thank you.

• (1730)

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

I'll continue by asking you another question, Ms. Meunier.

Ms. Amy Meunier: Sure.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: The current study is focusing on Black and indigenous veterans. I imagine you've followed the meetings that we've had since the appearance by the department. I'm wondering if there's anything else you can add or want to add to the conversation to help inform the work that we've done and that we will continue to do with Black and indigenous veterans.

Ms. Amy Meunier: With regard to Black veterans, we're learning a lot through the program related to recognizing the No. 2 Construction Battalion. While that's a specific effort, it certainly has brought us much closer to a number of Black communities to hear much more clearly about some of the obstacles that they may face and discrimination that they may have experienced.

As my colleague Mr. Harris said, we working within the department to ensure that our employees are very well aware of what may have been experienced in service and elsewhere in society, that we are very informed, and that we process claims and work with individuals in the most sensitive way possible.

I'd also like to flag or highlight that... We talked about the Invictus Games earlier. With regard to indigenous veterans, we're really pleased to see the strong reconciliation connection between the Invictus Games 2025 and the indigenous communities, the four host first nations, who have completely been in partnership with the organizing committee from the bid all the way to right now. We're really excited to showcase, profile and recognize the service of indigenous veterans; to learn a little more about how we can continue to evolve our work with the AFN on the letter of understanding with Métis veterans; and to strengthen our relationship with Inuit veterans across the country.

Thank you for the opportunity to share a bit more about that.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

Mr. Adams, Veterans Affairs continues to work to reduce the backlogs while at the same time the department continues to see a rise in interest in its applications. Could you give us a sense of the growth of applications that VAC has seen over the past few years, and maybe some statistics that you have at this point for 2024?

Mr. Jonathan Adams: Absolutely. I'm happy to provide a little bit of information on this.

As Mr. Harris and the minister mentioned earlier at the committee, what we've been seeing is a very consistent increase of approximately 10% growth in the number of veterans coming forward

seeking support with disability adjudication and disability compensation. This year alone we've seen an increase of 15,000, and we are on pace to receive 94,000 applications from veterans for disability compensation.

These supplementary estimates are the funding that we require to support that increase in disability compensation. Then, once those veterans are approved, it's supporting them with rehabilitation support and income support as well. It's been a very steady trend of increased demand and need from veterans that we're positioned to support.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Sarai.

[*Translation*]

Colleagues and committee members, before calling the vote, I would like to tell you that for the purposes of the vote, I am going to group the motions dealing with the votes under Supplementary Estimates (B), 2024-25 that were referred to the committee.

Do I have unanimous consent?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Vote 1b—Operating expenditures.....\$33,723,667

Vote 5b—Grants and contributions.....\$908,783,000

(Votes 1b and 5b agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall I report the votes to the House?

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: On division.

I'm still on division.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Excuse me.

Ms. Blaney...

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I just try to make Blake happy.

The Chair: You try to make Blake happy. Wow, Ms. Blaney.

On behalf of the members of the committee, I'd like to congratulate one of our members, the new father, Blake Richards, and the mother of the new baby, and say welcome to your new baby. We don't know if it's a boy or a girl, but welcome.

• (1735)

[*Translation*]

I want to thank the representatives of the Department of Veterans Affairs who participated in the second part of this meeting: Steven Harris, senior assistant deputy minister, service delivery branch, and Mitch Freeman, acting assistant deputy minister, strategic poli-

cy, planning and performance branch, who were with us in person, and Jonathan Adams, director general, finance, Pierre Tessier, assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and corporate services branch, and Amy Meunier, assistant deputy minister, commemoration and public affairs branch.

The meeting is adjourned.

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