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Chair: Charles Sousa



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• (1545)

[English]

The Chair (Charles Sousa (Mississauga—Lakeshore, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

This is meeting number four of the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence. Pursuant to the motion adopted on September 16, the committee is meeting to receive briefings by the National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces Ombudsman and the sexual misconduct support and resource centre.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

Before we continue, I would ask all in-person participants to consult the guidelines written on the cards on the table. These measures are in place to help prevent audio and feedback incidents and to protect the health and safety of all participants, including the interpreters. You will notice a QR code in front of you, which links to an awareness video for you to be apprised and aware of the issues.

I'd like to make a few comments before the briefings for the benefit of the witnesses and members.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic. Please mute yourself when you're not speaking. For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen, you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation—floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

Just as a reminder, all comments should be addressed through the chair. For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For members on Zoom, please use the "raise hand" function. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can. We appreciate your patience and understanding in this regard.

The agenda today will be a public briefing from the National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces Ombudsman. We will go in camera for the next panel, which will be with the sexual misconduct support and resource centre. Then, if I may, I'd like to save an additional 10 minutes for other business in camera to manage a few issues that are before us. I recognize that some issues have developed.

Mr. James Bezan, go ahead.

James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake—Eastman, CPC): Mr. Chair, earlier today you tabled in the House the reports from the

previous session into this Parliament. Usually, it is the courtesy of the chair or the clerk to contact the opposition members who had supplemental reports to table them at the same time that the reports are tabled. That was not extended to our side.

I just want to put it on notice that we want to make sure that the parliamentary rules are followed, that our rights as members are respected and that when you table reports in the future, we get ample notice that you are going to table them so that we can be in the chamber to respond with our own supplemental comments, if and so deemed necessary.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bezan.

He makes a valid point. I was unaware. I mean, we had the option of doing it today; Wednesday, when we're going to be in Petawawa; or Thursday, which may not make available...so I chose to do it as soon as possible.

I have referred to the protocol, and the clerk advises that you should have had that courtesy afforded to you. I apologize for not having done that. I was, as I said, not aware of that protocol, but I'm not going to lay blame. I'm going to take responsibility, sir. We'll proceed to do it properly as we go forward.

James Bezan: Thank you.

Cheryl Gallant (Algonquin—Renfrew—Pembroke, CPC): Three strikes and you're out.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: All right.

I would now like to welcome the witnesses. We have Mario Baril, the ombudsman, and Robyn Hynes, the director general of operations.

Mr. Baril, you have five minutes to make your opening statement.

Mario Baril (Ombudsman, National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces Ombudsman): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, esteemed committee members. Thank you for the invitation to appear before this important parliamentary committee. I understand there is a long-standing history of engagement between this committee and the office of the ombudsman, spanning over the last 27 years.

I am joined today by my director general, Robyn Hynes.

It is truly an honour to serve as the ombudsman for the Canadian Armed Forces and the Department of National Defence. This Sunday I attended the Canadian army run in Ottawa, and I felt so proud of the defence team.

My mandate is clear. It is to contribute to substantial and long-lasting improvements to the defence community. My appointment took effect on July 2 of this year. I bring with me 28 years of experience, including 18 years as an executive in the public service of Canada. Over the years, I've had the privilege of advising deputy ministers as chief of staff at Public Services and Procurement Canada and at the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, specifically within the office of the chief human resources officer. I've also provided strategic and business communications advice to ministers' offices.

For the past seven years, I've served as an organizational ombudsman, first at Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, and then as mental health ombudsman at Public Services and Procurement Canada. Through these experiences, I've seen first-hand the growing need for psychologically safe mechanisms to address workplace concerns without fear of reprisal. That is the value proposition of any ombudsman's office, and in this case, it's to offer a trusted and confidential space where CAF members, their families, rangers, cadets, DND employees, staff of the NPF, and now, Canadian Coast Guard members can share their lived experiences.

[Translation]

In addition to my ombudsman experience, I hold accreditations in mediation, workplace mental health, executive leadership coaching, workplace assessments and arbitration.

My goal is clear: to ensure every constituent feels heard, and that our investigations are evidence-based, our recommendations are actionable, and our follow-up is consistent.

Since assuming this role, I've spent my initial months reviewing past reports, meeting with senior leadership, and listening to the defence community. This has helped shape my priorities.

[English]

First and foremost, there is visibility. Beginning in January, I plan to visit bases and wings across the country to hear directly from constituents, identify emerging issues, raise them with the appropriate authorities and develop actionable recommendations, where appropriate. Our first visits are already being planned for CFB Trenton and CFB Petawawa.

From my initial meetings and readings, I've noted several common themes and challenges impacting the defence community: delays and barriers in the recruitment process; low retention rates; lack of availability, accessibility and affordability of housing; family strain from postings and separation; staff shortages in health services, leading to inconsistent access to physical and mental health care; a fragmented transition from military to civilian life; and continued reports of harassment, racism and discrimination.

We are also paying close attention to several emerging areas that will be important to this committee in the coming months. These include, for example, the increasing reliance on the reserve force

despite persistent challenges with pay, benefits and employer support; the growing role of the Canadian Rangers in northern sovereignty, while many still face equipment and support shortfalls; the impact of new compensation measures and whether they meaningfully address the financial pressures members are facing; the strain on infrastructure such as housing, medical care and training facilities, if recruitment targets are achieved without matching support; and the transition of the Canadian Coast Guard to DND, an expansion that will add approximately 7,000 employees to our constituent base.

● (1550)

Ombudsman offices serve as a vital check and balance, or safety valve, in how employees are treated under policies and mechanisms such as grievances and harassment complaints. Their importance has been recognized internationally, including by the United Nations, which endorsed the Venice principles in 2020 and 2024. These principles affirm independence, objectivity and transparency as global standards—and, I should say, gold standards—for ombudsman institutions, cornerstones for advancing good governance, oversight and accountability. It is within this global context that I remain keenly engaged in the review of the National Defence Act and, in particular, recommendation 103, which directly concerns the independence of our office.

[Translation]

In closing, I want to acknowledge the exceptional work of our Canadian Armed Forces members and their families—both at home and abroad. Their recent efforts in combatting wildfires across the country exemplify their unwavering commitment to service.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to working collaboratively with this committee to advance and strengthen systems.

I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

[English]

The Chair: I'll proceed now with questions.

Thank you for your opening remarks.

Mr. Bezan, you have six minutes.

James Bezan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to congratulate you, Mr. Baril, on becoming our new national defence and Canadian Armed Forces ombudsman. You have some big shoes to fill. We had Gregory Lick, who did an amazing job, and before him, there was Gary Walbourne and all the others before him. Also, you have Robyn Hynes sitting right beside you, who did an amazing job filling in as the interim ombud, and I can tell you that she leads a very strong team in support of what they do.

I know there have been some budget cuts in the past that have affected your office. Have you looked at the budget? How is it, overall, going to impact the work that you do?

Mario Baril: Thank you for the question.

This is such a good question because I've been in this position now for almost 90 days, and this is obviously one of the first questions of interest to me: Do we have capacity within the ombud's office to be able to deliver on our mandate?

I would say that most of my management meetings have been about the pressures we're facing, how we're going to address these pressures and how we reallocate resources internally to be able to cope with this increased demand. For example, in my opening remarks, I did speak to the fact that we have the Canadian Coast Guard joining us now, and we also have the reconstitution measures—

• (1555)

James Bezan: Just to be clear on that—the Coast Guard joining the national defence team—do the members of the Coast Guard now report in to you as ombudsman if they have any issues?

Mario Baril: Absolutely, yes.

James Bezan: Has there been any adjustment to your budget to accommodate for that?

Mario Baril: No.

James Bezan: There's \$9 billion that was promised in the supplemental estimates, yet at the same time, you haven't seen an increase in the budget for the ombudsman to take on this extra responsibility.

Mario Baril: Not at all.

James Bezan: Okay.

I appreciate that you have only been on the job for 90 days and that you come with quite a bit of experience in the public service, including being an ombudsman in other departments such as PSPC. What have you been doing over the last 90 days to get yourself familiar with how those in national defence and the Canadian Armed Forces function with the roles and responsibilities they have and the stresses that are built into the amazing work they do?

Mario Baril: Thank you for the question.

I think the most important part of my job in the last 90 days was not only to read all of the documentation that is obviously on the public record, but also to get briefings with senior officials within the department so that I could get a feel for what the issues are. For example, in terms of that new compensation package, I was briefed a couple of days prior so that I would understand the goal and the purpose of establishing this new compensation package.

I did meet with the vice-chief of the defence staff, chief military personnel, the deputy minister, the associate deputy minister and, as of last week, the Minister of National Defence. All of these briefings allowed me to get a better feel, but I also intend to quickly get on the ground. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, it will be important for me to be on the ground, because in my experience in the last seven years as ombudsman, you cannot do this job properly if you don't hear, in a confidential setting, what the issues are that our members are facing.

James Bezan: Are you planning to visit bases across the country and hold town halls and/or private meetings with members as you're travelling?

Mario Baril: Absolutely.

James Bezan: That's awesome. I'm glad to hear that. The office of the ombudsman has put together great recommendations and reports year in and year out. Are you currently working on any reports to bring to Parliament so that we can have you back to talk about some of the issues you're researching right now?

Mario Baril: Absolutely. I'll mention what we're doing right now. I was happy that Robyn and the team got me up to speed with the latest report, which we're still drafting. It is a review of former recommendations dating back, I would say, 10 years. These were recommendations that applied to the reserve force and for which we haven't seen much progress. For us to be able to capture progress from an ombudsman's perspective, we need to see how many recommendations we made to the department or the Canadian Armed Forces and how many were accepted, but also whether we have made progress on them. The purpose of that next report, which we intend to complete in the fall, would be precisely that.

James Bezan: You guys actually did a systemic review in 2025, and that one was tabled. We now know that the Canadian Army is restructuring and that reorganization includes the Canada sovereignty force, which is the reserves. That would be very timely.

You're saying it's just on the reserves, but how about all the recommendations that were made? We know the office did, as you mentioned in your remarks, a housing review. We're short 6,700 residential housing units right now for those who are serving, never mind the stresses on those who are buying in the marketplace. There have been changes to the post living differential allowance that has undermined even the raises that they're getting now. Some people are bringing home less than what they were before. How are you going to address those issues going forward?

Mario Baril: Part of my plan is to do a series of strategic planning sessions with my management team, but also with investigators within our office so we can get really up to speed with all of these recommendations.

I will turn it over to Robyn to explain in more detail—

• (1600)

The Chair: If I may, we're going to defer that one and go to another questioner, James. We can come back to it.

We're going over to you, Ms. Lapointe, for six minutes.

Viviane Lapointe (Sudbury, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for appearing before the committee today. We've noticed that recent reviews have noted confusion around definitions of misconduct. From your perspective, how does clarity in definitions affect survivors' confidence in seeking help?

[*Translation*]

Mario Baril: Thank you for your question.

It is crucial to define terms clearly. When people don't fully understand definitions, it's difficult to provide them with the appropriate services.

An example comes to mind from my previous role as an organizational ombudsperson. When people don't fully understand the definition of a term, such as “harassment”, they can obviously raise that term for the wrong reasons. In our opinion, understanding definitions is extremely important. One of the office of the ombudsperson's areas of focus is education. We put a lot of effort into publishing the correct definitions on our website to ensure that terms are understood correctly.

[*English*]

Viviane Lapointe: The new “Addressing Wrongful Behaviours” annual report is absolutely a step forward towards creating more transparency. How can this type of reporting be made more useful to survivors and to those who are working on prevention?

Mario Baril: I will turn it over to you, Robyn.

Robyn Hynes (Director General, Operations, National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces Ombudsman): That's a great question. As the ombudsman alluded to before, having information readily available to people so they can better understand any supports that might be available to them, I think, is really good, so they can make informed decisions. I know the SMSRC is coming to the table afterwards as well, and I would expect that they'll have quite a bit to say on this topic, given their mandate.

Viviane Lapointe: I would expect that culture change is often much harder to measure than policy changes. From your vantage point, what progress is most meaningful and what work still lies ahead around that?

Robyn Hynes: From a culture change perspective, I think the department has undertaken a number of really great initiatives in terms of updating the website and which initiatives they've moved forward on. I think it's too early to tell what the outcomes of some of those initiatives are going to be, because they haven't been in place for a long time.

I know, for the external monitor report, there's going to be another report coming in the fall, and we're monitoring that closely to see what comes out of that as well.

Viviane Lapointe: In looking broadly across all the feedback you've received, what is the one area that you feel deserves urgent attention to improve the trust and safety for survivors?

Mario Baril: This is a very good question. In my experience as an ombud for the last seven years—an organizational ombudsman, which is a bit different from a classical ombudsman—I think that psychological safety, creating a space where people can tell their true lived experience, is critical to any ombudsman's office. In the past, during my career, I often referred to the national standard for psychological health and safety in the workplace, in which there are 13 psychosocial factors.

In a nutshell, what we have to remember is this: How do we have an internal mechanism, within a department or organization, that will allow people to feel safe? If we don't have that, we don't hit the mark, basically.

Viviane Lapointe: It's becoming evident that access to services continues to be a central issue. What are the best practices that could be implemented, using what we've learned about reaching survivors, especially those in remote, francophone or indigenous communities?

Robyn Hynes: We've seen quite a few positive advancements in terms of telehealth and services that can be available to people and reach them wherever and whenever they need them. I think that's a start to getting there, because, as you noted—and we noted in some of our reports about the Canadian Rangers, for example—in remote communities across this country it can be very difficult to access the services that people need in a timely way.

• (1605)

Viviane Lapointe: In your opening comments, you talked about serving as a check and balance, or as a safety balance. How do you achieve that?

Mario Baril: That's the most beautiful challenge of any ombudsman: How do you communicate in a way that makes people feel that what we're saying is true? How do we create a mechanism so that people will say, “If I go through this mechanism, I will feel that I can tell my true story”?

That's why I've been referring to the independence of this office and the Venice principles. The Venice principles are, basically, this: How do we measure all of the activities within an ombudsman's office so that people feel the independence, impartiality and confidentiality, as well as our ability to deliver impartiality and fairness to our constituents? For me, this is the foundational piece that is non-negotiable. If you don't have that, people will not use the channel.

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur Savard-Tremblay, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot—Acton, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Actually, it's fitting that the last topic discussed in the last exchange was impartiality.

Although I heard what you said, I would like to ask you the following question.

Given that you report directly to the minister, what measures are in place to ensure confidentiality and prevent political interference and pressure?

Mario Baril: I am really drawing on my professional experience of the past seven years.

Previously, I reported to a deputy minister's office.

In my opinion, the most important part is to let the person you report to know that these standards are non-negotiable.

Throughout my career as an ombudsperson, I have never been asked to reveal names or told which side I should take. For me, that is a non-negotiable standard.

Whether you report to a minister or to anyone else, the same principles of impartiality and independence must apply. I will always defend them.

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Please understand that my question is not personal in any way. I am not questioning your integrity. That is not the issue, of course.

I was wondering if something could be done at the institutional level to ensure that there is a clear boundary.

Mario Baril: Absolutely. In the office of the ombudsperson's standards of practice, we often see the term "at arm's length." All decisions made in my office are free from interference.

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: If I understand your operating procedures correctly, you begin your investigations after receiving complaints, but you cannot launch your own investigations based on a suspicion you may have, in other words.

Mario Baril: I'm glad you asked me that question, because the directive that created the office of the ombudsperson 27 years ago includes a provision that allows the ombudsperson to initiate his or her own investigations based on the information he receives. I think that gives the office of the ombudsperson a broad mandate.

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Have you ever invoked this provision, or have you only investigated cases based on complaints received?

Mario Baril: As far as I'm concerned, given that I've only been in this position for 84 days, I have not done this yet.

[*English*]

Robyn, you may have experienced the ombudsman's office doing its own investigation based on its own motion.

Robyn Hynes: We almost exclusively do investigations based on our own motions. The minister has the ability to ask us to look into a particular area should he wish us to do so, but in the 11 years that

I've been with the office, that has only happened one time. All the other investigations we have done, we have done based on our own motions. We will inform the minister, the department and the other relevant authorities that we're going to be launching an investigation, but we don't need to ask permission to do so.

[*Translation*]

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Does this mean that very few investigations are carried out as a result of complaints? Can we say that there is still a culture of silence that means that, despite the promise of confidentiality, the natural reflex to think about filing a complaint is not present?

● (1610)

Mario Baril: No, not necessarily. That's why, as soon as I took office, I thought about international standards of practice relating to, among other things, openness, transparency and accessibility. In fact, according to the Venice Principles, to which I refer, one of the aspects that must be measured is accessibility to the ombudsperson, free of charge, without cost or barriers.

That being said, our office still receives a very large number of people who come to us with their concerns. Last year, more than 2,500 people contacted our office for all kinds of reasons. Based on this information, our team can determine whether a trend in a certain direction warrants investigation.

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: What are your powers, in the aftermath? Do you have the power to compel individuals to testify?

Mario Baril: The directive is very clear: Any document that is necessary for the ombudsperson's office investigations must be provided within a reasonable time frame. Without this, we would not be able to do our job properly. The directive is very clear in this regard.

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: I assume that an oral report can be considered like a document.

Mario Baril: We interview people who are responsible for policies or guidelines, and yes, investigators have the authority to conduct interviews.

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Are the current powers sufficient?

Mario Baril: Personally, I don't see a problem.

[*English*]

Robyn, what do you think?

Robyn Hynes: There have been a couple of circumstances in the past where we have requested information or we have requested to talk to somebody specific about an investigation we were doing, and we faced push-back. Generally speaking, when that happens, we provide the ministerial directives or we go up the chain of command a little bit further, and we tend to get co-operation.

[*Translation*]

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: What consequences would someone face if they refused to comply?

Mario Baril: Penalties are provided for in the directive. Everything is covered.

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Thank you.

How much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

[English]

The Chair: That's it. I'm going over to Mr. Kibble.

[Translation]

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: I shouldn't have asked you that question.

[English]

Jeff Kibble (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, CPC): Thank you to the panel.

Congratulations, Mr. Baril, on taking this important role. I agree with your comment that your office is an important barometer. I thank you for the excellent work you've done in the past and going forward. My questions are taken from that framework.

First, there were 2,500-plus requests to your office in 2024-25. What is the most prevalent type of request?

Mario Baril: They're segmented into five different categories. If I'm not mistaken, the one ranked first is related to benefits that are available to the Canadian Armed Forces. If they do feel that there are any barriers, there's going to be either an individual or a systemic investigation into those matters.

This one has been ranked number one for many years.

Jeff Kibble: That is for the largest number of calls. What is number two?

Robyn Hynes: The top five stay the same year over year. They sometimes switch order—other than benefits, which is always number one. The other categories in the top five tend to be release, medical, harassment and recruitment. Like I said, it depends on the year. They may change places, with the exception of benefits.

Jeff Kibble: Thank you. That's a good barometer, to use the term again.

You mentioned benefits. The recently announced pay increase has an uneven distribution, between 20% and 8%, depending on rank level. Have you received comments or complaints on that? I'm going to assume yes, based on its being the number one topic.

Mario Baril: I've asked this question—if we received any calls or not—just to be able to monitor this in terms of compensation. We have not at this stage.

The benefits would be related to other areas by which Canadian Armed Forces members are affected, but it's not compensation at this stage, if I'm not mistaken.

Robyn.

• (1615)

Robyn Hynes: It's early for us to have received any complaints on the new compensation and benefits package just yet. This is just because, generally speaking, if people have concerns, they will raise it first through their chain of command.

We haven't received formal complaints on this yet. Generally speaking, what we have heard through the engagements we've had is that, overall, the benefits package has been well received, al-

though I understand that there are a couple of places I expect we may hear more from in the coming months.

Jeff Kibble: Thank you for that.

I'm going to move on to a slightly different topic.

As a veteran, I'm very well aware of the mental health challenges faced. Have you heard or are you aware of resiliency training that's done to prepare members' mental health in advance of deployment to help mitigate challenges?

Mario Baril: I'll pass that over to you, Robyn.

Robyn Hynes: I understand that the surgeon general and the health services group have developed several tools for before and after people are deployed on both domestic and international deployments and operations.

Our office has been monitoring this pretty closely over the past few years. Specifically, Mr. Bezan raised the report we did last year, which was focused on mental health for reserve force members on domestic operations. We're keeping a close eye on things to see what the impacts of these initiatives will be.

Jeff Kibble: Thank you.

To confirm, it is happening for predeployment, and you're monitoring but there are no results yet. Is that fair to say?

Robyn Hynes: There has been predeployment training for international operations; that's existed for quite some time. There has been some for post-deployment, but yes, we're keeping an eye on what that's going to look like in terms of some of the changes that they've made over the past few years to update what that training looks like.

Jeff Kibble: Thank you.

That's been going on for some time. Are there quantitative results that have been generated to establish its effectiveness or not, that you're aware of?

Robyn Hynes: I haven't seen anything on this yet. We do keep an eye on a joint program between Veterans Affairs Canada and the Canadian Armed Forces regarding mental health and their joint suicide prevention strategy, which also speaks to mental health and resilience. I think there's another update of that coming out in the coming months.

Jeff Kibble: Thank you. I feel that this would be an important metric.

As for PMQs, I think we're well aware of, as mentioned earlier, the shortages. Do you feel that this has an impact on both recruiting and retention?

Robyn Hynes: With regard to PMQs, our office has noted several challenges with the residential housing units across the country. I know there have been quite a few announcements and plans in place to address this moving forward. A lot of the plans that have been made to address this—that I've seen, anyway—have been more long-term plans. We are in talks with the department to see, with all of these reconstitution efforts that are coming, what's going to happen in the short to medium term to accommodate the new people coming in.

Barracks are also an area of concern for us; this is where people are generally living during training. I understand the ADM of infrastructure and environment has plans in place. I haven't seen those yet or what that's going to look like, but we continue to receive a significant number of complaints about the quality of barracks across the country.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kibble, for those important questions.

I'll turn it over to you, Mr. Malette, for five minutes.

Chris Malette (Bay of Quinte, Lib.): Thank you.

Further to Ms. Hynes' reference to benefits, I saw in December 2024 that the Office of the National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces Ombudsman and the Canadian Armed Forces itself launched a new collaboration on an interactive tool for looking up military benefits. Can you elaborate more on this? How's it been going over the last nine months? Have you been able to quantify any results there?

Robyn Hynes: Sure. The product you're speaking about is called the military benefits browser. It was something originally created by our office back in 2018. It focused on the transition for Canadian Armed Forces members as they transitioned to civilian life with illness or injury. It's since been expanded. We worked very closely with the Canadian Armed Forces to expand the product to now include all the benefits and services that may be available to someone throughout their military career.

The purpose of the product was really to make information about benefits and services accessible to people so they could make more informed decisions. Someone who is applying to become a Canadian Armed Forces member can see what benefits and services they may be entitled to. A family member can access that information to say, I'm being posted from this location to another, what benefits might be available to me? I have a special needs child, what supports are there? It breaks things down in a very user-friendly way. You can sort, for example, by financial, mental health or physical health. There are a lot of supports there.

The last stats that I looked at, which are probably about a month old now, had 11,000 visitors total, but 9,000 new since the launch of the product. I understand it's being used across the Canadian Armed Forces and in the transition centres as well to help people prepare for different stages of their careers and meetings they may have.

• (1620)

Chris Malette: Just further to that point, has it been reported that it's a user-friendly format? As we know, in some of these cases, some of these programs can have all of the best intentions but when

you get into it you're so far into the weeds that some people give up. Is it fairly user-friendly?

Robyn Hynes: Yes, we've tried to make it so that people can get to the results they need in the fewest number of questions possible.

For example, the first question speaks to who you are as a constituent: Are you looking as an applicant? Are you looking as a regular force member, as a reserve force member? This is because your benefits and services will vary quite significantly depending on who you are when you're looking into the system. We really try to do it so that, in two or three clicks and answers of questions, you can get an initial list, which you can then filter and make smaller, depending on what your needs are, by answering additional questions.

Mario Baril: If I may add on this—

Chris Malette: Please do, yes.

Mario Baril: I could test the system as well because I was new in my role and I found that—

[*Translation*]

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Mr. Chair, there is no interpretation because the microphone is off.

[*English*]

Sherry Romanado: Chris, close your mike.

Chris Malette: Okay. I didn't know it was on.

Mario Baril: Basically I was able to test the system, if I can say it this way, because I was one of the users three months ago, and I found the tool to be quite effective, to Robyn's point. Some other country—I can't remember which one—actually asked us to do a presentation about the military benefits browser as a best practice. I thought, this is fantastic; this is a beautiful initiative that is well regarded.

Chris Malette: That's encouraging because I have CFB Trenton in my riding. I deal quite closely with them on a regular basis. I was speaking with the folks at the MFRC there, and of course, they work with a range of these. It is a program that they were pleasantly surprised by, let's say. Thank you on that.

I have one more question. What are the DND-CAF Ombudsman office's main observations concerning the CAF's grievance process? More specifically, how could the length of time it takes for the grievances to be resolved be shortened, or is that a real concern in your estimation?

Robyn Hynes: We do still receive a number of complaints about delays in the grievance process for the Canadian Armed Forces.

I know there have been a number of changes in terms of increasing digitization, which I think will yield results moving forward. We've seen improvements in the response time at initial authority. For final authority, they have made quite a bit of progress addressing their backlog, but the delays are still substantial. They've improved since the previous time we were in front of the committee, when we would have given you numbers where people were waiting at final authority for years. The numbers have improved, but it's yet to be seen, I would say, how far the initiatives will go in terms of actually reducing it to a timeline that we would think is more appropriate.

The Chair: Ms. Hynes, thank you.

Monsieur Savard-Tremblay, you have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Could I ask you to always keep your earpiece in, to avoid situations like this where you don't understand what I'm saying and then ask me to repeat myself? Especially if someone needs to be interrupted in the middle of their speech or if there is a problem with the interpretation, for example, it would be good if you had it in.

I will now return to my questions.

In June 2024, you published your report entitled "Defending Wellness: A Systemic Investigation of the Canadian Armed Forces' Health Care Complaint Process". The investigation revealed the absence of a formal process for handling health care complaints, which is a particular issue.

In addition, recommendation 1 of the report states the following: "By January 2025, that the CAF dedicate resources to implement a Canadian Forces Health Services Instruction on the administration of CAF health care complaints."

Has this been done?

• (1625)

[*English*]

Robyn Hynes: We have seen some progress on this front. As I just noted with the regular grievance process, they have also implemented a digitized complaint system for medical complaints.

There has been a request put forward for additional resources for health services because, even with this new form, they were having trouble keeping up with the number of requests coming in, which was causing a significant backlog. I understand that some of this hiring has been done. I haven't seen the latest numbers for what those delays are looking like, though.

[*Translation*]

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: I imagine you are referring to the other recommendation in the report, which concerns a centralized monitoring system and is scheduled to be achieved by May 2026. Is that what you just mentioned?

[*English*]

Robyn Hynes: I would say that there are two different pieces on digitization. One is to allow people to submit complaints online and to do so in a way that is more efficient than the paper-based way

that they were doing before, where it had to go through several different hands. The tracking system is something different. It's equally important. It's such a new system that is in place that I don't think they've been able to track and trend very much so far.

[*Translation*]

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: The recommendation is scheduled to be implemented in May 2026. Do you believe that the target will be met?

[*English*]

Robyn Hynes: We follow up on our reports usually on a yearly basis. We haven't done the follow-up on this report yet to see where they are on it. Once that follow-up report is done, we would be happy to send it to the committee.

[*Translation*]

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Very well.

In addition, our committee has agreed to conduct a study on the issue of recruitment and retention. This will undoubtedly involve the treatment of francophones and indigenous people. You may be invited to return here to discuss this with us, but I would like you to tell us one thing. Do a significant number of your audits focus on the treatment of francophones and indigenous people, whether these audits are conducted in response to complaints or on your own initiative?

[*English*]

Robyn Hynes: With almost every investigation that we do, we do see complaints from people who are unable to access benefits and services in their first language, whether that is French or English, depending on the area they are in.

We don't get a lot of complaints from the indigenous population in terms of the traditional way we receive complaints, which is through our 1-800 line. A lot of the time when we are working with indigenous communities—we deal mostly with them in the Rangers, to be honest—we get them when we visit. We really hear the concerns coming from that area when we are on the ground. It is going to be part of our travel plan with the new ombudsman.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Savard-Tremblay.

Cheryl Gallant, you have five minutes.

Cheryl Gallant: Thank you.

Congratulations to you, first of all, for taking on this important role.

It may be that it's too early to receive feedback on that compensation program because, despite being promised for April 1, they still haven't received their raises.

How did your predecessor, Mr. Gregory Lick, convey to you, upon taking the position, the biggest challenge that your office must overcome when overseeing DND and CAF?

Mario Baril: Thank you for the question.

I did meet with Greg a month or a month and a half ago. We spoke generally about the office, and he didn't have any concerns about how we're set up or how we are responding to the mandate. It was more about sharing his own experience, but there was nothing related to specific challenges that he would have shared with me.

Cheryl Gallant: In Mr. Lick's previous appearance at this committee, he repeatedly advocated for the ombudsman's office to act separately from DND and CAF.

Would this still be your initiative now that you are the ombudsman?

Mario Baril: I'm sorry; can you repeat that question?

Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Lick wanted the ombudsman's office to act separately from DND and CAF. Would that be your initiative as ombudsman?

I noted a nod from the ombudsman.

Since taking office as ombudsman, have you seen any actions from DND or CAF that might influence or impair your office from carrying out its mission?

• (1630)

Mario Baril: Not at all.

Cheryl Gallant: Okay.

Has Mr. Lick conveyed to you any attempts from DND or CAF that might impair your office's function, and how did he advise you to ensure the office's integrity?

Mario Baril: I didn't ask him any questions related to this. I did share my thoughts based on my own experience, because in his case he had probably started five or six years ago and I started seven years ago. In terms of the challenges, he never actually expressed concerns directly to me with regard to independence.

Cheryl Gallant: As ombudsman, what would you like to see rectified at DND and CAF in regard to the issue of the backlog of ATIP requests, first, and then the issue of the backlog of grievances filed by the members of CAF?

Mario Baril: I would certainly appreciate it if the department would look at how they could address this. What I hear from various people is that it's not specific to DND, as there are other departments that have the same types of challenges. It may be worth looking into a long-term solution to address these concerns. At the end of the day, it is about the legislation, and the legislation does provide some very precise timelines as to when to respond to these requests.

Cheryl Gallant: In 2015, the previous government launched Operation Honour to address sexual misconduct and harassment in our military. Former Supreme Court justice Marie Deschamps released 10 recommendations for CAF to fulfill. A decade later, many of those 10 recommendations have maybe not been fulfilled.

How many have been completed?

Robyn Hynes: I'm not sure how many of the 10 recommendations have been implemented. I expect the SMSRC, when they're here later, will be able to answer this question. We can also put the question to the department later.

Cheryl Gallant: Is it the same thing for the 48 recommendations from Justice Louise Arbour's report?

Robyn Hynes: It's my understanding that they are reporting on these on a cyclical basis online.

Cheryl Gallant: How did Mr. Lick view the decision to fold the Canadian Coast Guard into the Department of National Defence?

Mario Baril: I did ask him this question because of his background and knowledge, and he knew about the organization. He also thought it was a very positive thing.

Cheryl Gallant: What did he advise you when the government made the decision to include the Coast Guard's expenditures in our defence budget as a means to reach our previous NATO commitment of 2% of GDP?

Mario Baril: We haven't discussed this point specifically.

The Chair: We'll go over to you, Mr. Watchorn. You have five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Tim Watchorn (Les Pays-d'en-Haut, Lib.): Good afternoon.

I would like to thank you both for being here today and for the good work you do for the members of the Canadian Armed Forces. Your service is essential to their well-being.

Mr. Baril, I have heard you speak several times about what are known as the Venice Principles. Could you list them for us and explain how these principles help make your work more effective?

Mario Baril: Thank you for your question.

The Venice Principles include 20 or 25 criteria that provide a specific method of assessing whether each existing ombudsperson office complies with the principles of independence, impartiality, autonomy, ability to deliver its mandate without interference, and so on.

These principles relate in particular to accessibility to services. They also aim to verify that an ombudsperson has full autonomy and authority in terms of their needs and budget, as well as to determine their budget and needs, which is another extremely important criterion. They also cover the process of appointing the ombudsperson, including the selection of individuals to serve on the selection committee responsible for this appointment and the appropriateness of this process.

They also deal with everything related to autonomy in governance. There are parliamentary ombudsperson offices across Canada, including one in each province. These offices are completely independent. Each office is able to determine its own mandate and needs. It also reports directly to the legislature.

If I had to summarize the Venice Principles in simple terms, I would say that they aim to ensure that every client of an ombudsperson's office feels that, if they have access to services, those services will be provided to them completely independently. This prevents the creation of false barriers or false perceptions among the people to whom the ombudsperson reports. For example, it would be unfortunate if an ombudsperson were perceived as part of the bureaucracy, because this could result in the loss of extremely relevant information from a member who fears that the office is not fully impartial or independent.

Established by the European Commission for Democracy through Law, the Venice Principles set out very rigorous standards for the establishment of ombudsperson offices.

At this time, my office is working with an expert in the field of ombudsperson services to review potential candidates who are capable of conducting a proper review of my office, so that an appropriate recommendation can be made to the minister on how the office of the ombudsperson for national defence and the Canadian Armed Forces should be governed in the future. This could result in very significant changes for the office.

• (1635)

Tim Watchorn: Thank you very much for your answer.

Your comments shed a great deal of light on how you will be carrying out your work in the future.

For my part, I would like to discuss the French fact with you.

Quebec members of Parliament are very concerned that members of the Canadian Armed Forces be served in both official languages. The armed forces have been officially bilingual for 50 years.

Do francophones who wish to access the services of the office of the ombudsperson for national defence and the Canadian Armed Forces face systemic barriers?

Mario Baril: It's a little early for me to answer that question, because I haven't been out in the field yet. However, since you bring it up, I will certainly look into it when I get back to my office.

Tim Watchorn: In your previous experience as an ombudsperson in other departments or offices, have you observed the existence of such barriers?

Mario Baril: No, that has not been the case.

Tim Watchorn: I have one last question for you.

As indicated in the 2024–2025 annual report, a report on the systemic review of the Reserve Force should be completed soon.

What prompted the office of the ombudsperson to conduct this review? What are the main topics and concerns that were examined?

Perhaps Ms. Hynes could answer that question, since you were not there, Mr. Baril.

[English]

Robyn Hynes: Thanks for your question.

As we mentioned earlier, we follow up on our reports year over year to see if the department or the Canadian Armed Forces has

made progress in terms of implementing the recommendations that they have accepted. For the two reports we did in 2016, all of the recommendations we made were accepted by the department, yet we have seen very little movement in terms of their implementation.

Rather than continuing to follow up and show the public that there hasn't been very much movement in terms of implementation, we decided to try something different. What we did this time was, instead of just saying, "Here are the recommendations. Yes, they were accepted and, no, they have not been implemented," we went back and asked, "Can you tell us what the barriers have been?"

Everyone agrees that all of these recommendations are still valid, they're still relevant today and they should still be implemented, but what has prevented the implementation of these recommendations over the past decade? The report is really focused on what those barriers have been so that we can try to unblock or find a way to mitigate them and to implement. Most of the recommendations in both of those reports were focused on communication of awareness and access to health care benefits for reserve force members.

[Translation]

Tim Watchorn: The first examples would be benefits and access to health care. Are these the same five priorities you noted in the previous questions? I assume that's the case.

You say that's the case. Okay. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chair, if I still have time, I'll ask one last question.

What systemic issues are currently affecting recruitment in the Canadian Armed Forces Reserve?

• (1640)

[English]

Robyn Hynes: One challenge that remains for recruitment, both on the regular force and the reserve force side, is the delays. There have been some improvements in terms of digitization for recruitment, but we still receive a significant number of complaints about delays in the recruitment process for both the regular force and the reserve force.

The Chair: Thank you.

We are nearing the end of our session here. We have about three minutes left.

It's over to you, Mr. Genius, for two minutes.

Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Then Sherry will get the other two minutes.

Garnett Genuis: It's good to be here, and seeing you reminds me of all the good work we did together at the government operations committee. I'm sure those are exclusively fond memories for you, Mr. Chair, as they are for me.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to move a motion:

That the committee invite the Minister of National Defence and the Secretary of State (Defence Procurement) to appear before the committee for no less than 1 hour each, within 14 days of the adoption of this motion, in relation to their mandates and NATO defence spending.

I understand that this motion was put on notice previously, and of course it's important for the committee in the furtherance of its mandate to hear from the ministers responsible.

I understand that my colleague, the shadow minister, has more to say on this topic, so I'll leave my comments there on the motion.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

It's over to you, Mr. Bezan.

James Bezan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll be quick on this, because I think that when we were putting together business for committee, we moved to bring in the minister but forgot to add the secretary of state; therefore, I want to amend this motion so that it is more relevant.

I'll take out "the Minister of National Defence and", and we'll change "1 hour each" to just "2 hours", and "mandates" will become "mandate". Then it will read, "That the committee invite the Secretary of State (Defence Procurement) to appear before the committee for no less than 2 hours, within 14 days of the adoption of this motion, in relation to their mandate and NATO defence spending."

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Romanado.

Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoyne, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We already voted on this motion to—

James Bezan: No, we didn't.

Sherry Romanado: Can I finish, please?

We already voted on a motion to invite the Minister of National Defence. He's scheduled to come, I believe, on October 7 or 9. It's already been agreed upon, so I'm not sure why we're bringing forward another motion that deals with something that's already been scheduled. I'm just getting clarity that the committee has already voted on inviting the minister. He's already coming, so I'm not quite sure why we're having another motion to invite the minister.

The Chair: That point is well taken. My understanding, regardless of the motion put forward, is that it already does exist. You're requesting an amendment to the motion that was already tabled and voted upon.

James Bezan: It takes out "the Minister of National Defence".

The Chair: We've already agreed to the motion.

Sherry Romanado: You cannot amend a motion that was already passed and voted on.

James Bezan: It wasn't passed.

Sherry Romanado: It did. It's scheduled.

James Bezan: No, it was a different motion. There are two separate motions on the minister.

Sherry Romanado: The minister is coming already on NATO and on his main—

James Bezan: It's a different motion.

Garnett Genuis: I have a point of order.

The Chair: If I can get clarity here, I think Mr. Genuis has put forward a new motion.

A voice: That's correct.

The Chair: Knowing that we have an existing motion and an existing notice that the minister is attending, Mr. Genuis has arrived—thank you very much for your attendance today and creating a little havoc before the time is up—to now put forward a new motion. What we're dealing with—

James Bezan: No, it's not a new motion. This is a motion of Scott Anderson that was tabled in June. It's not a new motion. It was not dealt with at our meeting. We dealt with a separate motion inviting the minister that you then added to and amended yourselves. We invited the minister on supplementary (A)s, and you added "the mandate and NATO defence spending" to that motion.

That's a separate motion from this motion. This motion was on notice. We're moving it today. I amended it to take out "the Minister of National Defence". We've already dealt with the Minister of National Defence, then. This is for the Secretary of State for defence procurement. It's a separate issue.

Sherry Romanado: I don't mind if he comes.

[*Translation*]

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Mr. Chair, before continuing—

[*English*]

The Chair: Give me one moment.

James Bezan: We're speaking to the amendment.

[*Translation*]

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: I will be very brief.

Before continuing, may we allow our guests to leave?

[*English*]

The Chair: Absolutely.

Thank you for attending, and we will hopefully see you again.

Should we suspend for a moment? Is that what we're looking for?

• (1645)

Sherry Romanado: No. We have witnesses coming, like, 15 minutes ago.

I would like to see the amendment circulated in both official languages. In the past, we have always shared those in writing. That's all I'm asking for.

Garnett Genuis: I have a point of order, Chair. Is there anyone on the speaking list, or should we proceed to a vote?

The Chair: We're just getting translation.

• (1645) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1650)

The Chair: Are we all good? Okay.

We have an amendment to the motion. If I'm reading this correctly, it's asking for only the secretary of state and not the Minister of National Defence.

James Bezan: I deleted the Minister of National Defence.

The Chair: Okay.

James Bezan: I changed it to two hours from one hour, and to "mandate", not "mandates".

The Chair: Okay.

Are we all in favour of the amendment to the motion?

[*Translation*]

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: We want this to last an hour, correct?

Let's clarify what we're voting on, please.

[*English*]

The Chair: We're voting on the amendment.

[*Translation*]

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: The amendment is to change the duration to one hour, isn't it?

A voice: No, it's two hours for—

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Am I to understand that we must vote on the amendment without being able to modify it?

Can we propose a sub-amendment?

[*English*]

The Chair: Sure.

[*Translation*]

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: I move that the duration be one hour.

[*English*]

The Chair: One hour is the subamendment.

Can we agree on one hour?

James Bezan: We oppose that. We always believe that ministers are bound by parliamentary accountability, and they should be sitting at the end of the table for two hours, the length of time the committee sits.

That's on the record. Call the question.

The Chair: Fair enough.

The other amendment is the removal of the Minister of National Defence.

James Bezan: We're voting on the subamendment to change my amendment from two hours back to one hour.

The Chair: We're voting yes to that, so now we're back to one hour. That was the subamendment.

James Bezan: Do a show of hands. We want a vote.

The Chair: All those in favour of one hour...?

(Subamendment agreed to)

The Chair: Now we're back to the amendment. The amendment was to remove the Minister of National Defence from the motion.

[*Translation*]

Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: That is the motion before us. Agreed.

[*English*]

The Chair: Now we're voting on that amendment to the initial motion for one hour.

(Amendment as amended agreed to)

(Motion as amended agreed to)

The Chair: All right, folks. Before we suspend, I want to ask members if they would agree to allow the staff from the Department of National Defence to attend the in camera portion of today's meeting to take note of any required follow-ups to the committee.

Is there agreement to allow staff from National Defence to attend the in camera meeting on September 23?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now suspend to prepare for our next panel.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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