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# Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

EVIDENCE

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Chair: Marie-France Lalonde





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Tuesday, October 21, 2025

• (1535)

[*English*]

**The Chair (Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order.

Hello, everyone.

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

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to the motion adopted on September 18, 2025, the committee is meeting for a briefing by the Minister of Veterans Affairs and department officials.

I would like to welcome them.

The minister will be with us until 4:30 p.m., and the officials will be with us until 5:30 p.m.

Before we continue, I would like to 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.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow for the minister, the witnesses in the room and all members. You must wait until you are recognized by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your microphone, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking.

As for interpretation, participants on Zoom have a choice, at the bottom of their screen, of floor, English or French. Those in the room can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

A reminder that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

[*English*]

For members in the room, if you wish to speak please raise your hand, and for members on Zoom, please use the “raise hand” function. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can.

[*Translation*]

I would now like to welcome the witnesses.

We have with us the Honourable Jill McKnight, member of Parliament and Minister of Veterans Affairs.

From the Department of Veterans Affairs, we have Christine McDowell, acting deputy minister; Steven Harris, senior assistant deputy minister, service delivery; Amy Meunier, assistant deputy minister, commemoration and public affairs branch, joining us by video conference; Pierre Tessier, assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and corporate services; and Mitch Freeman, acting assistant deputy minister, strategic policy, planning and performance branch, participating by video conference.

[*English*]

I would like to invite the minister to start.

I believe you have five minutes, and then we'll start a round of questions.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Jill McKnight (Minister of Veterans Affairs):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon, everyone.

[*English*]

Thank you for inviting me to share an update on the work of Veterans Affairs Canada.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging that we are gathered on the unceded ancestral territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe nation.

It's a pleasure to be with the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs for the first time as the Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence.

[*Translation*]

Colleagues, thank you for your ongoing commitment to the well-being of Canada's veterans and their families.

All Canadians benefit from the contributions and sacrifices made by those who defend our freedom in times of war, armed conflict and peace, and we remain truly grateful to them.

[English]

I firmly believe that it is our collective responsibility to ensure that those who have selflessly served our country receive the support they need and the recognition they deserve. During my first few months in this portfolio, I've had the privilege of meeting with veterans and Canadian Armed Forces members across the country. These invaluable conversations have deepened my understanding of the impact of our programs and services. They have reinforced for me how essential it is that we listen to and consider the input from veterans to best match our benefits and services with their need, and how vital it is that we also consider the perspectives of the families that support our veterans. As we know, no veteran serves alone.

My priority as minister is to ensure that VAC's programs and supports adapt to the evolving needs of the modern veterans. Today, the average age of release from CAF is 34, significantly younger than in the nation's past.

Military service has also evolved from fighting for freedom in the Middle East to working with our allies to promote peace and global stability and supporting other countries as they fight to maintain sovereignty. These are some of the missions of today. Disaster relief and humanitarian aid are becoming increasingly important as our Canadian Armed Forces protect Canadians at home while helping our neighbours. These experiences equip our modern veterans with new skills and present them and us with new challenges.

As minister, I'm focused on continuing to improve the way in which VAC's benefits and services are delivered to our veterans, expanding the national veterans employment strategy to empower veterans in the post-service career of their choice, and meaningfully recognizing Canada's veterans for their service, both in conflict and in peace.

Ensuring that Canada's veterans receive benefits and supports in a timely, accessible and responsive manner will always be a top priority for me and our government. As we increase efficiencies, I'm pleased to report that the implementation of the My VAC Account has seen significant uptake, with almost two-thirds of veteran clients using it in the past 12 months. Ninety-two per cent of users report improved communication with Veterans Affairs Canada.

Further, we are responding to the emerging needs of modern veterans, including in the area of mental health. The mental health benefit for veterans provides immediate access to treatment for conditions like PTSD, depression and anxiety without administrative barriers. The health and well-being of our veterans is a responsibility that extends to supporting them through their post-service transition and reintegration into the civilian workforce.

In 2024, the national veterans employment strategy launched as a first step towards supporting the more than 7,200 CAF members who release annually. In collaboration with the private sector, I will implement an expanded strategy to directly connect our veterans with employers and entrepreneurial opportunities.

A core responsibility of Veterans Affairs is the meaningful recognition and commemoration of the service and sacrifice of all veterans. VAC is actively working to increase awareness for the modern-day veteran, including through the department's education-

al offerings in schools. By helping young people learn and better understand who our service members are, what their service entails and its impacts, it is my hope that we can further inspire generations towards service in the Canadian Armed Forces.

Our commemorative efforts must also evolve to reflect the increasing diversity of the CAF. I'm encouraged by the work, including the work here at ACVA, to increase awareness of the contributions of Black, indigenous, women and 2SLGBTQI+ veterans. As we move forward, we will continue considering these unique perspectives.

I thank the many individuals and groups that have shared their lived experiences and whose input and work are helping us modernize the work of Veterans Affairs Canada.

● (1540)

[Translation]

I'm happy to take your questions.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Minister.

We'll start with our first round of six minutes for each member. I will invite Mr. Richards for the first six minutes.

**Blake Richards (Airdrie—Cochrane, CPC):** Minister, in your opening remarks you referenced the veterans employment strategy that your government launched in June 2024, about 16 months ago.

Can you tell me how many more veterans are employed since June 2024?

● (1545)

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** In the time that I've been with Veterans Affairs Canada, we have been working to roll out this program, to build engagement and to ensure that we are working on connecting the skills that veterans are releasing with.

**Blake Richards:** I have zero doubt about any of that. I'm sure you're doing everything within your strategy.

What I would like to know is what the results are. How many more veterans are employed? Has veteran unemployment reduced?

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** At this moment, we are in the process of rolling the strategy out to make those connections so that we can track for that information—

**Blake Richards:** I have only a limited amount of time, so I'm sorry to interrupt.

You're telling me that, 16 months in, you're just starting to roll out the strategy. You have no way to tell us if there have been results in 16 months.

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** There have been results in terms of the engagement of employers.

**Blake Richards:** What about the results in concrete terms? How many veterans are employed? At the end of the day, an employment strategy should be about having more veterans employed, should it not?

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** Very much so, and—

**Blake Richards:** Do we know how many were employed?

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** —as you can imagine, collecting that information will take time, because we will need to connect with the veterans to—

**Blake Richards:** When would you be able to get back to the committee to tell us a number?

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** We will continue to share information as it becomes available.

**Blake Richards:** What about your veterans homelessness strategy? That was introduced in April 2023, two and a half years ago. Do you know how many homeless veterans there were in 2023 versus how many there are now?

I would hope you're not still rolling that one out; that's two and a half years.

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** That program has been moving forward and, simply put, one homeless veteran is too many.

As you mentioned, that program has been rolling out in conjunction with the ministry of housing and infrastructure.

**Blake Richards:** Do we know what the results are from that? Do we know the number of homeless veterans now compared to what it was in 2023 when it was introduced?

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** The last data that we have from the census was in 2021. We will see new information following the 2026 census.

I can speak to—

**Blake Richards:** I'm sorry to interrupt again, but I have only a limited amount of time.

In April 2023 you put out a strategy. Two and a half years later, in late 2025, you're telling me that the best data you have is from 2021. You have no way of knowing whether what you're doing is working. If you're going to measure success, don't you need to know what you've accomplished? You don't even know your starting point, let alone where you are now.

Perhaps we'll move on, then, since we don't seem to have any information there.

Let me ask you about services. In the time that your government has been in office, 10 years, the budget has more than doubled for the department. I think there was a 26% increase in the last year alone. I think you'd be really hard pressed to find a veteran anywhere who would say that they think services are twice as good or twice as fast in that period of time. In fact, I don't think I'd have to

bet. We can look at your departmental plans, because they contain some metrics. They're a bit subjective, but they're metrics nonetheless.

In those reports, on just about every measure, veterans report lower satisfaction in a number of different areas that your department provides. It seems as though what your government's response has been is to push back the timeline to achieve your targets. You've pushed back most of them in this year's plan from March 2025 to March 2027.

I guess the question I'd have for you is this: If you're not achieving success, even by your own measures, wouldn't it make more sense to change what you're doing rather than just make veterans wait longer for better results?

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** I can appreciate that waiting for benefits is incredibly frustrating for veterans. Many of them started their period of waiting perhaps long before their application was submitted.

You referenced the fact that funding has gone up, and so has the number of veterans coming forward looking for supports. We have continued to deliver services for all of those veterans. Whether one veteran or 10,000 come forward, we will ensure and deliver supports for every one of them who is eligible.

• (1550)

**Blake Richards:** I guess the challenge is that veterans themselves, according to your own metrics, are reporting that their satisfaction in the quality of service they're getting from VAC, in their adjustment to post-service life and in the quality of programs they're receiving from VAC—all of those things—are showing that they're finding less satisfaction in those things, yet you have a bigger budget with fewer results.

You're a fairly new minister. Can you tell us what you've identified that you think isn't working right now and what you're going to do to fix it? What are specific items that you think aren't working right now and specific suggestions on what you'll do to fix them?

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** I will counter your assessment that things are not working.

**Blake Richards:** That's not my assessment; that's your own assessment—

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Mr. Richards. I will have to interrupt you to allow the minister to answer. It's up to you. We can hear her comments, or you can interrupt her again.

Minister, I will allow you to end your conversation, and then we'll move on to our next round.

Please go ahead, Minister.

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** I disagree with your saying they're not working.

With that said, there are actionable steps we are taking to improve the process, including redesigning the disability benefit application form. We are making it more inclusive and the questions clearer, and we are simplifying and standardizing the medical questionnaire to make completion of the forms easier and quicker, incorporating technology to support decision-making so our decision-makers can be focused on that and be supported with summarized information that can then help them spend time engaging in the decision-making.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

I want to remind all members that the minister is here to answer questions. If we want to play monologue, I'm fine with that, but I would urge each of you, out of respect, to allow the minister the time to answer the questions being asked.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Auguste, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Tatiana Auguste (Terrebonne, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Minister, I'd like to understand your medium to long-term vision.

What are your department's priorities for veterans beyond immediate and ongoing management?

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** Thank you for your question.

I will answer in English. However, I continue to work on learning French.

[*English*]

Thank you for the question about the priorities.

I spoke to three of my priorities right now in my opening statement as they relate to ensuring we are making the benefits system more accessible and ensuring delivery and access to them. In my response to MP Richards, I spoke to some of the tangible steps we're taking to do that.

As I also referenced, we see an increasing number of veterans coming forward to access benefits, so we need to make sure we are able to respond to that increase in numbers with services and systems to be able to welcome all of them and make sure they have access to the supports. I want to make sure we're continuing to move forward.

Is there the opportunity to improve user experiences? Always. There should always be a growth opportunity. I embrace that.

Second, I am looking to advance that national veterans employment strategy. We know the individuals who are releasing are incredibly skilled. We know there is great community that also comes from our employment and from the neighbourhoods we live in, and I want to make sure we're supporting all veterans with that type of community.

My hope is that we can build on this program, roll it out and then, in time and over the long term, continue to build it so that the skills translation we've identified becomes a model that can be replicated throughout other areas as well.

Third, the conversation I've had out in communities about the modern veteran, for many people, is new, and I hope we can re-frame that conversation. I hope we can have conversations daily about recognizing veterans and the fantastic contributions they've made to our country and continue to make to our communities.

[*Translation*]

**Tatiana Auguste:** You touched a bit on the issue of bureaucratic barriers that veterans and their families face when trying to access the support and benefits to which they are entitled.

Could you tell us both about the red tape that you have sought to eliminate and about what motivated the streamlining of those processes?

• (1555)

[*English*]

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** Certainly.

Some of the feedback we have received is that the forms can feel challenging. They can feel confusing and they can create barriers to completion, so we are going back and reworking the forms with simpler language. We are trying to reduce those barriers so that doesn't become an additional challenge to a veteran having access to the services and funds they need.

I'm sure we may talk about it again later, but with regard to mental health, rather than having individuals wait for a claim to be processed, we've made access to mental health available immediately. Those are two examples.

[*Translation*]

**Tatiana Auguste:** Concerning mental health, as you know, we are currently studying issues related to suicide and suicide prevention to better understand those aspects.

If supports are not currently available for veterans and their families, is there anything you would like to add in light of this study on suicide?

[*English*]

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** First, I would like to acknowledge and thank the ACVA committee for hearing testimony and conducting a study on this very important topic. I would also like to acknowledge all the individuals who are participating as witnesses and sharing their personal stories. It's a challenging topic. It's an emotional topic, and my appreciation goes to those who are sharing.

We need to continue investing in mental health supports for our veterans for suicide prevention. We acknowledge the impact of what the veterans are feeling, but we also acknowledge family members, including spouses, children and caregivers. Again, much like service, it is life-changing. We need to make sure that we are helping and giving support to veterans before we get to this point.

Again, I acknowledge the importance of this topic and thank you for undertaking a study on it.

**The Chair:** We have 10 seconds, so I will respectfully move on. I apologize.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, go ahead for six minutes.

**Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ):** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon, everyone.

I think we have the very essence of what we can hope for when it comes to services for veterans.

One of my colleagues felt very strongly about certain problems, which unfortunately still exist.

It should be noted that the Minister of Veterans Affairs has been in her position for five months. I wanted to know what commitments were in her mandate letter. They are certainly described in a general way. I checked the Veterans Affairs website. Of course, the information provided on this matter is also very general.

I want to ask you a very simple question.

As part of the commitments in the mandate letter, what is your priority and how much progress have you made in terms of your commitments or your priority?

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** Thank you for the question. I will answer in English.

[*English*]

You mentioned the mandate letter and how that connects to Veterans Affairs.

Within the mandate letter there were seven key missions. Of those, we identified that the engagement of Veterans Affairs aligns with three, so I'll speak to all three, if possible.

The first is that one of the topics is specific to housing, so that connects with the veteran homelessness program that has been undertaken. We are making progress with it and connecting veterans, so that we don't have a homeless veteran. I've had the opportunity to be engaged with some of the housing developments that benefited from that funding supporting them. I have connected with some of the veterans, specifically those who have gone into their transitional housing through the program in Kingston, the Homes for Heroes there. I met a couple of veterans who went through that program and had funding from that strategy. They are now in permanent homes because of what was possible through the transitional housing. We are also funding a number of programs through this. That includes housing, but it also includes the wraparound supports that are necessary, with the housing, to address their needs. Again, I've had the opportunity to meet with a few of the funding recipients and to talk with the veterans about how key that is related to them. That is specific to the housing mission.

Second, there is a mission to increase government efficiency, or, as some put it, reduce red tape. This goes back to some of the steps that we are undertaking, as a department, to make it easier for vet-

erans. We want to make sure that veterans are able to get the supports they need. We want to make the processes easier, reduce redundancy and focus on that experience.

Third, we talk about building and protecting Canada. Well, that comes back to investments we are making in CAF and in service members who are protecting Canada. We know that when an individual enters CAF, we have a commitment to take care of them for the long term, for their life, and that's when Veterans Affairs supports that. As we're making investments in CAF and supporting new members joining, we also have a responsibility to take steps to prepare to engage with them for the long term and to be here to support them.

• (1600)

[*Translation*]

**Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** With all due respect, Madam Chair, I would like to remind you that many people are listening to us and watching us.

I would like to come back to the department's three priority objectives. At this time, we need to have a picture of the real situation to see if any progress has been made.

I want to trust you. However, the veterans I have met have all told me that they do not trust the promises of services. I give the example of the My VAC Account.

How can someone living in a tent with mental health issues access their file online? That's a major problem.

In order for the committee to give hope to the people who dared to serve us, it will be important to know whether progress has been made. If none has been made, we'll have a problem. I expect that we will have a picture of the situation and a set objective. We will then inform you of the most pressing priority areas as part of our study on suicide prevention among veterans.

I know my time is up. I'll come back to that later.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** This concludes our first round.

[*Translation*]

We are moving on to the second round of questions.

[*English*]

I invite Mr. Richards to go ahead for five minutes.

**Blake Richards:** Thanks.

Minister, including the women veterans council, how many ministerial advisory groups do you have advising you?

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** We have six advisory groups. We have the women veterans council. I believe there's one other departmental one.

I turn to my officials to add to and clarify that.

• (1605)

**Blake Richards:** Okay, that's fine. We'll have some time with them in the next hour.

Can you tell me how many of them you've sat down and met with personally?

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** I have met with the chairs of all of the advisory committees, and I have met with the women veterans council. I've also met with a number of the other stakeholders and advisers, including the ombud and a number of stakeholders who represent veterans across the country.

**Blake Richards:** How often do you plan to meet with those advisory groups?

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** My plan is to meet with them on a consistent basis, but I do not have a set schedule per se.

**Blake Richards:** We had a witness here two weeks ago who sits on the women veterans council, and she indicated that she felt like there was absolutely no access to you as the minister. She went on to say that she felt like they were just treated as a prop rather than as something that is actually designed to provide advice, and also that everything seems to be filtered through the department.

What would you say to that, and what would you do to try to improve that?

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** First off, I thank Captain Le Scelleur for her service and for her participation in the women veterans council. I believe she is the witness you are referring to, and I had the opportunity to watch her testimony. I thank all of the members of the women veterans council specifically and all of the advisory groups for participating and volunteering their time to be a part of this. I appreciate the value that the women bring from the women veterans council specifically, informing public policy and sharing their experiences. I've heard and I appreciate the captain's feedback specifically about the women veterans council and the request for more clarity on a mandate.

**Blake Richards:** I suspect that probably part of this comes down to.... Madame Gaudreau was alluding to this, too. Although you may spend some time with them and may hear what they're saying, they don't really feel listened to, because nothing changes; there are no results that come from it. It goes back to some of the questions I was asking earlier. There don't seem to be any results. We've come up with a strategy, and then you can't even tell us whether there are really results from it. I think that's probably why the veterans feel that they're not listened to. They might have physically been in a room, but they don't feel like they were actually listened to and that their suggestions were taken into account.

I guess that's really where I think there needs to be some improvement, and I'll just turn to an example of that: the construction of the monument to the mission in Afghanistan. You know, it's been on the books for a long time now. Over two years ago, there was a design that was announced, but there's been no construction. Your annual report says:

The construction of the National Monument to Canada's Mission in Afghanistan is a priority for the Department.

I think veterans see things like that and say, "If that's how you treat your so-called priorities, how can I ever expect to get any results?"

Tell us where that monument's at in terms of its construction. Tell us why veterans should believe that when you say things are going to be better, they will be better, when your answer—as I know it will be—is that there is no construction happening on that monument. Why should veterans believe what they're hearing? Why should they expect better results?

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** That monument is incredibly important as a symbol of reflection and commemoration to recognize all those who served and their families. We took in feedback from thousands of veterans about how they wished to be acknowledged for their contributions, and progress is being made. To give you more specific updates, I will turn to one of my officials, who would be able to share those details.

**The Chair:** We will look at the officials' details in round two, Minister, with your permission.

I will invite Mr. Clark for five minutes.

• (1610)

**Braedon Clark (Sackville—Bedford—Preston, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Minister, very much for being here.

Thank you to the officials here, as well.

Minister, one of the things you said in your opening statement that really stood out to me is the fact that the average age of release of a veteran now is 34. That certainly is a lot different from the conventional definition that we have in our minds of a veteran. I think it also presents both challenges and opportunities for the department, which you've touched on.

If we think that the average veteran is coming out at the age of 34, that means that they have decades of employment service, hopefully, going forward. In an earlier round, you touched on the national veterans employment strategy. I'm just wondering if you can talk a bit about that: the goals, what you're trying to achieve through it and how the department is working with employers in both the public and private sectors to make sure that those veterans, many of whom, as we say, are in their early to mid-thirties, are being supported as they move through the rest of their lives.

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** The veterans employment strategy is an opportunity to connect veterans, with their incredible skills, to the private sector. Right now, there is a disconnect. An incredible skill such as project management—which is phrasing that lands very much in the private sector—is not necessarily something a veteran is going to acknowledge on their list of skill sets, because you may not see that on a job description in the CAF.

Part of the process of this strategy is to create that skills translation. We have identified over 100 roles within the CAF that could then translate over to skills for the private sector to make those connections.

I'll give you a very tangible example. As an entrepreneur who hired employees all the time, very seldom would I put on a job description that one of the skills I'm looking for is for you to show up on time. When you're serving in the forces or in CAF, punctuality is essential. In fact, many have said that if you're not five minutes early, you're late. For an employer, that's a valuable skill. It's a valuable asset to me to hire someone with that dedication to punctuality. That will not necessarily be something they put on their résumé, yet if I know that is a core value of someone coming from a service background, then I'm going to see that and recognize it.

Second, I mentioned the fact that I'm an entrepreneur. Entrepreneurship is an incredible opportunity for a wonderful life, to support a family, to embrace creativity and to pursue your dreams. For a veteran, a lot of the skills that I used as an entrepreneur, whether it was working with budgets, planning resources, acquiring supplies.... Again, going back to project management, a lot of those items are the same skills that I was using as an entrepreneur, but I don't know that most veterans release from CAF thinking, "I could start my own business. I have the skills to do it." Some of them have told me that they don't have a business background, so how do they start a business? However, those skills they have....

There is this opportunity for us to work with veterans to help them see the skills they have and expand the possibilities of what they can do with them. As I said in my opening remarks, my goal is to connect them with the career that they want going forward, so they don't feel that they have limited options or opportunities. As we can move this forward, these are some of the ways we can make those connections.

Part of the engagement, as I've been out in communities across the country engaging with veterans and with current service members, has also been engaging with businesses. I've been talking with them and hearing what some of their needs are. I recently spoke with a business that has an incredible need for individuals to work on airplane engines as mechanics. I can't remember the exact acronym right now. When I mentioned to them that there are 7,200 individuals releasing from the CAF right now and some of them will have some of those skills they're looking for, it was something they had never considered. They had never considered the opportunity to make that connection—that the workforce they are looking for could already be trained.

Perhaps we need to add specific courses to add a few skills to their overall offering, but they could be ready to go with a much quicker turnaround than somebody who is just entering an education system.

• (1615)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. This would complete our five minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I speak slowly, there is interpretation and I have only two and a half minutes. I want to take the time needed. I also invite the minister to take the same amount of time to answer my questions, as I have four left and only two minutes of speaking time.

Minister, how many times in the last five months have you met with your office's women veterans council?

[English]

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** I've met with the entire council once, but I have met with members of the council in other engagements. I don't know specifically how many times, but I've had other engagements with them.

[Translation]

**Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** On the platform, you say that, thanks to the experience of the members of that council as serving women and veterans, documentation and services will be provided. I hope it won't be a one-time meeting, but rather regular meetings.

I must say, Madam Chair, that there are two people here who are waiting for an apology and a detailed explanation about the infamous monument on the Highway of Heroes, Highway 417, I believe. I call them "my brave women". These are women who have been declared dead, but they are alive and well. If you want to meet them after the meeting, they are here.

There's nothing better than understanding the context of trauma and its aftermath, especially when we want to help our future veterans. However, our process contains barriers. We need to know what the situation is. We talk about jobs and employability, but there are also people living in tents. Veterans have serious mental health issues. Others, once they leave the system, are abandoned because doctors sometimes find their cases too cumbersome to manage. Those doctors don't know the context.

When will we be able to focus on the fact that military service is part of a specific culture that must be honoured and respected?

Will this be a priority for you in the coming months?

[English]

**The Chair:** Answer very briefly, Minister.

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** I heard a few different things, but I believe what I heard was, how are we going to focus specifically on meeting the needs that we're hearing from women veterans? Am I correct in that? Okay.

The "Invisible No More" report was undertaken as one step in addressing 42 recommendations that could be undertaken to meet the needs of these specific veterans. By the end of this year, all of the actions will be either implemented or commenced. We have more work to do, and we can follow up at another time with more details.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Mr. Viersen is next, for five minutes.

**Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

Minister, you've achieved more than your two predecessors in the fact that you're here. Your two predecessors never actually made it to our committee. I thank you for being here today.

I noted at the top—I didn't realize this—that you're also the Associate Minister of National Defence. I appreciate that as well.

We have reports in the media around the chaplains. We've had this problem in the past as well. The chaplains are being given directives that in their capacity as Canadian Armed Forces chaplains they are not allowed to pray or participate in their particular religious faith in Remembrance Day services. Can you confirm or deny or explain where these reports are coming from?

• (1620)

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** As you mentioned, I am still relatively new in the role. I haven't gone through a season of Remembrance Day activities yet. We are just heading into that part of it.

With that said, I would turn to my officials who have been involved in that to perhaps speak to it.

**Arnold Viersen:** We'll be able to hear from them in the next hour. Thanks.

I'll turn my time over to my colleague, Mrs. Wagantall.

**Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC):** Thank you so much, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister, for being here today.

Minister, Veterans Affairs continues to struggle to serve veterans in a timely manner—we know that. In 2021 VAC made the arbitrary decision to move administration of the provision of medical, psychosocial and vocational rehabilitation out of the day-to-day operations of Veterans Affairs to a third party provider, actually an international contractor, namely, Partners in Canadian Veterans Rehabilitation Services, PCVRS.

On June 9, 2021, they were awarded \$560 million for a five-year contract, which has been increased to \$572,751,466 with a contract end date of December 31, 2026. That's an increase of about a half-year and \$13 million on the contract.

More than three years later, the November 2024 overview of your mandate letter states that all commitments are under way, on track, except for one, wait times. Some challenges or delays exist, and you recognize some challenges in meeting the target of achieving service standards over a 12-month period. It actually states, "While processing times have improved overall, a growing number of applications are exceeding the 16-week standard". Reasons given include one very important one—challenges are happening with retaining temporary employees, because the funding is ending in 2026. I'm assuming people are thinking that they're not going to have a job, and perhaps they're moving on.

It appears that, in four years, engaging PCVRS has not improved outcomes, and VAC's need for internal decision-makers, the overview says, has not diminished.

I'm a little confused about the lengths we went to to move everything out of VAC's day-to-day...and we're not getting the improvements that I would think we would have by now.

I'm wondering how often you meet or plan to meet with Life-mark or WCG International to brief you and senior officials specifically on the progress of that program and to see where those shortfalls are. Also, how often do you plan to meet with departmental employees? Will you meet regularly with those two groups? What specifically are the departmental employees, the decision-makers, who are in VAC and impact PCVRS, doing?

Do you understand my question? It sounds a little convoluted to me, but the question is basically if you will be meeting with them to see what's happening here. We're not making the improvements that I think we should be seeing for almost \$600 million and for services by international companies. This is what they do. Why are we still struggling so much, and will you be in touch regularly with them to see how we can make things better?

**The Chair:** Minister, answer the question briefly, please.

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** Okay. I will start to answer and then you may wish to follow up with the officials to answer more parts of the question.

As we've talked about, we want to ensure that veterans are getting the best care possible, and we know this is a large country to service. By connecting and moving into the service contract, we were able to increase the number of overall service providers available for our veterans to 12,000, and we are continuing to review the process.

In terms of some of the specifics, I will let the departmental officials answer those for you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

For the last five minutes, we'll go to Mrs. Hirtle.

**Alana Hirtle (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon, Minister. Thank you for being here today with the officials.

The topic of veterans' homelessness is very important to my riding. There is a former armory in Amherst, Nova Scotia, that I and the community are hopeful can be turned into veterans' housing, and I'd very much look forward to having further discussions with you about this topic, as I've brought forward a private member's motion. It will be debated later this fall and deals with federal surplus buildings.

Here is my question for you. There was a question earlier about homelessness that didn't really address it. Will you outline to the committee, please, your perspective on the importance of the veteran homelessness program?

• (1625)

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** Certainly. Thank you for the question.

As you mentioned, we spoke a bit about housing. The number one priority is to ensure that no veteran is facing homelessness. We know that homelessness is complex and spans a variety of different circumstances across this country.

With that said, we are working in conjunction with the Minister of Housing and Infrastructure to improve housing for veterans and their families. The veteran homelessness program pilot is in its second year, and the learnings from year one are improving the program. We're strengthening it based on the results that have come from this first year. We have made progress, and there's more to do.

Veterans Affairs Canada recognizes that we need to have both short-term transitional housing and long-term supportive housing to meet the needs of our veterans. By strengthening partnerships with community organizations and engaging veterans and their families, we're going to ensure that we're bringing those pieces together.

Recently, I had the opportunity to meet another one of our veterans, who is at one of the veteran housing units here in Ottawa. He was a more senior veteran who, prior to moving into Veterans' House, was living on the street. He now has a permanent home. He welcomed me into his home. He took great pride in touring his home with me to share the experience. Veterans' House is something that is possible because of investment through one of the programs—the veteran homelessness program. It has changed this individual's life.

I also had the opportunity to meet with another veteran this summer, while I was in Kingston. They are an individual who was released while dealing with some long-term, ongoing substance challenges. They were able to go into the transitional housing that Homes for Heroes had and get things stabilized, so they could still engage with their children in a safe environment. That individual has now gone on to be in permanent housing, with her children living with her. In the week following the day I met her, she was also going to become the guardian of her nephew, who was in need of care. That investment in housing and supportive housing with wraparound supports was able to change the trajectory of the path this individual was on in that moment.

That was a really poignant moment for me, because that is the tangible impact. We talk about programs. We talk about our briefing papers. We talk about things that are intangible. When we connect with a veteran who had this experience, it brings it to life.

We're able to say, "This is the difference we're making by making these investments."

I hope that answers the question.

**Alana Hirtle:** Thank you very much. It does.

You've been asked a lot of questions today about meetings with stakeholders and advisory groups. I would like to give you an opportunity, if there is anything else you would like to add or clarify about plans for further meetings.

**Hon. Jill McKnight:** Thank you.

Regarding engagement with veterans, each veteran is going to have a unique experience and a unique story, because they're a unique individual. The most important thing is that we try to do our best for every veteran out there. We want to make sure they have the care, support and service they need. That comes from hearing feedback on their individual experiences, because that's what can inform the opportunities for growth. As I said, I believe opportunities for growth are always possible. As we continue to invest in our veterans, this is one way we can do that.

I will continue to meet with veterans as frequently as possible.

• (1630)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Minister McKnight, for joining the Veterans Affairs committee this afternoon.

Colleagues, we will be suspending for a few minutes to allow the minister to depart. Once the committee resumes, we will continue our rounds of questions with department officials.

Thank you.

• (1630)

(Pause)

• (1635)

[Translation]

**The Chair:** We are starting the second part of the meeting.

We'll jump right into questions.

[English]

Mr. Richards, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Blake Richards:** Let me start with this, and whoever feels it is appropriate can answer.

This is standard for the Liberal government. It's been about a decade now, and there have been nine different ministers of veterans affairs. That averages out to about a new minister every year. Some of them have been there for just months, and I think in one case even just weeks. I would think that from a departmental perspective, having unstable leadership like that, where there is constant change, can't really be good for the department and the direction that is needed in order to better serve veterans.

Could you elaborate on what difficulties those constant leadership changes at the ministerial level would have on the department and on your operations?

**Christine McDowell (Acting Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Madam Chair, I would say that veterans certainly deserve stability and consistency in the benefits they are provided. They expect a level of coherence with respect to their services. One of the things we're really proud of at Veterans Affairs are the values, which we take very much to heart with respect to service to our veterans and their families. Those are values that endure over the course of leadership changes and form part of the business that we and the hard-working public servants deliver each day.

**Blake Richards:** I appreciate it's almost an unfair question to ask, but it's an important one. When you have that constant change in leadership, it can be difficult in any organization. I appreciate that you do your best to try and endure through those things, and there are certain principles and values and all that, but there must be some challenges that go along with it. What sorts of challenges do you see from that constant leadership change?

**Christine McDowell:** We're certainly very much focused on continuing to deliver the services and benefits that our veterans are depending upon us for. Those things are grounded very much in the culture and the practices and policies of Veterans Affairs. We are fortunate to have consistent leadership and staff who are very familiar and experienced with those services and benefits and able to deliver them in a way that is stable and consistent for veterans.

**Blake Richards:** No, that's fine. It almost makes it sound as though the minister isn't important to the operation of the department, and that would also concern me. If the ministers in this government really don't run anything at all, that is also a problem.

Let me turn to something else that I want to ask about.

We had Veterans Transition Network here as part of this study a couple of weeks ago. They talked about having to use the charitable donations they receive to pay for the attendance of clients who would be VAC eligible to do their group counselling programs, for example, because VAC cannot or will not process the funding in time. We heard from a number of service providers that they don't want to turn them away, obviously, but what happens is they get into the program for a while and then VAC won't pay, because they have already been involved in the program for some time. We've also heard from some providers that there has been about a 60% decrease in the rate of funding approvals as a result of that. There is no change in the number of clients they're serving who are VAC eligible, but they're seeing fewer and fewer being covered by VAC because of delays, I think, which is really the challenge.

What are you doing to try to increase access to those specialized mental health services, specifically for veterans who are at risk of suicide? It's obviously concerning when someone is VAC eligible but organizations are having to use charitable donations that they could have used for other things when they shouldn't have to.

• (1640)

**Christine McDowell:** Before I turn to my colleagues to respond to that, I want to clarify the fact that the minister has very clearly established priorities for Veterans Affairs. As she said in her opening remarks, it is around veterans employment, it is around com-

memorating modern veterans and it is around making sure we are delivering consistent and effective service.

With that, I'll turn it over to my colleague.

**Steven Harris (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Thanks very much.

We appreciate the work of Mr. Thorne and the Veterans Transition Network, along with a number of organizations that help to support veterans. We work to help pay for those veterans when they go into eligible programs, which includes the ones that are offered by the Veterans Transition Network and others. There are a large number of programs across the country that are trying to help and support veterans. We want to be able to help them in finding ones that are appropriate for them and that suit their well-being needs and their rehabilitation objectives.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, Mr. Richards. Your six minutes are over. Thank you.

**Blake Richards:** We'll get back to this.

**The Chair:** We will. Thank you very much.

Mr. Casey, you have six minutes.

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

I think this first question will go to you, Mr. Harris. Mr. Richards asked the minister about the employment strategy. He left the impression that there was only one thing that mattered on the employment strategy—the number of jobs as a result of it. How do you measure success in connection with the employment strategy? Can you speak to it in a little more detail?

**Steven Harris:** We want to measure success for the employment strategy in a number of ways. Ultimately, employment is certainly one of them. We have a number of individuals leaving the Canadian Armed Forces on an annual basis, including reservists, who are already employed in one way, shape or form. The employment strategy, for us, is about supporting our four different pillars.

One pillar is for the veterans, making sure they understand their own skills and how they can gain additional skills through training, through vocational rehabilitation and through other means. It's helping employers understand where they can find veterans and help to employ them, and how to basically accommodate them and help to support them when they come into their employment and into their companies. It's helping the public service to recruit veterans. Many veterans who leave the Canadian Armed Forces want to continue to serve at public service levels, be that at federal, provincial or municipal levels or in other ways. It's helping organizations to be able to effectively train and support veterans as well. Third party organizations may be able to assist them in certain ways.

The unemployment rate for veterans is actually lower than the unemployment rate for Canadians as a whole. That doesn't mean there isn't value to add in the employment space. Underemployment can certainly be an issue for veterans, and there are other reasons.

So we are doing that. I'll give you an example of success for us. We do online career webinars. Just next week we're doing one. One thousand veterans have signed up to be part of the career webinar next week, which includes 50 employers coming to recruit them.

These are things we can do to help connect throughout the delivery of the employment strategy.

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

I think this one is for you, Mr. Freeman. Mr. Richards was looking for some specific numbers with respect to the homeless strategy. I think that's under your bailiwick. Can you give us some more detail around the homeless strategy and the facts and figures associated with it?

**Mitch Freeman (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Certainly.

I would highlight a couple of things. First and foremost, over 1,400 veterans have been assisted through the veterans homelessness program since its inception in 2023. That's a huge measure of success. Of course, this is a program that saw in 2023 a veteran homelessness estimate of a little over 2,000 veterans who needed some supports and services over the course of a year with respect to being homeless or at risk of being homeless. Today, that number, estimated on 2024 numbers, has decreased to a little shy of 1,800. It's very positive in that particular regard that the program is having the impact.

I would say, colleagues, that the measure of success on this is that 34 organizations that are in communities across the country from coast to coast are part of the veterans homelessness program and are out there reaching veterans. You heard the minister speak of some of her personal interactions over the course of the last number of months in that regard. This has certainly given us the opportunity to collect better data on understanding this particular problem as we go forward and how we can help more veterans.

I mentioned that a little over 1,400 have been helped and assisted. That includes wraparound support services, or the services that veterans need in order to be stable, and at the same time an assistance to veterans to find long-term housing and transitional hous-

ing, etc. That program has certainly been impacting veterans positively from coast to coast.

Thank you so much.

● (1645)

**Sean Casey:** Thank you, Mr. Freeman.

I'll go over to you, Mr. Tessier.

In the first round of questions, we heard that the budget at Veterans Affairs has doubled in the last 10 years and somehow that was a bad thing because there are some veterans who are unhappy with how those dollars are spent. My understanding is that in the distribution of the funds that are spent by Veterans Affairs, 90% of them flow straight through to the veterans. Could you offer some comments with respect to the significance of the growth in the Veterans Affairs budget from the time we came into power?

**Pierre Tessier (Assistant Deputy Minister, Chief Financial Officer and Corporate Services, Department of Veterans Affairs):** The budget for Veterans Affairs in 2015-16 was approximately \$3.7 billion. The budget forecasted for this fiscal year is \$7.8 billion. The current percentage of department budget funds towards veterans programs, benefits and services is 94%. The programs for veterans and their families are quasi-statutory in nature. What that means is that as the demand increases, if more veterans and their families come forward, that funding is available throughout the year for us to adjust our budgets to ensure all veterans are served.

**Sean Casey:** The amount of money spent by the Department of Veterans Affairs has increased significantly in the last 10 years, and 94% of it has been paid out to veterans. Is that what I'm to understand?

**Pierre Tessier:** That is correct.

**Sean Casey:** Thank you, everyone. I very much appreciate you for being here.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Harris, are you satisfied with the delivery of services to our veterans?

**Steven Harris:** I think the right answer is that we can always do better.

**Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** On a scale of one to 10, where two means "woefully inadequate" and eight means "very good", how satisfied are you?

**Steven Harris:** I would say I'm at 7.5. We have the right programs and systems in place to meet the needs of veterans. However, it's not perfect. We will have to work even harder to—

**Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Okay, but I'd like to understand something. Achieving 80% is considered a success. I get that; I'm in business, and I've worked with community organizations. What about the other 20%? Is there a department for those who've been abandoned?

I mentioned earlier the two women who have been asking for a public apology for two years, because, although they're alive, their names were added to a monument for fallen soldiers. I can't imagine what they're going through. I mean, it's been two years. Something's got to happen. Is there a department for those who've been abandoned?

I have people coming to my office every week telling me they can't reach anyone on the phone, much less in French—that takes another six months. Others tell me they can't find a doctor willing to help them, because their case is too complicated. These people have mental health issues; they've been to war. Come on. It makes no sense. It's like we're in another world. We have to reflect collectively on the respect and honour we owe them.

It scares me, because the government wants to increase military spending, but doesn't even have the necessary equipment. Representatives from the women veterans council come to the committee in the hope of changing things, but then get asked, “What have you done? What did you say?” I hear stories like that every week in my office and I can't believe it. It has to stop.

What are you missing to take concrete actions?

I'd like to hear from each of you on this. I have four minutes left.

• (1650)

**Steven Harris:** What I can say is that, every day, my team works very hard to help all veterans, men and women, those who show up in our offices just as much as those who are less visible. It's very hard, but they keep going. They contact the veterans' family members, friends and others to help them, particularly through the many programs we offer.

**Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Does that happen?

**Steven Harris:** Others can add to my answer, but when it comes to service delivery, we are there to support our veterans, and it's a difficult job.

I, too, speak every day with men and women veterans who have issues that our programs and services can't always help with. It's not easy.

We work very closely with everyone on that, not only those who have it the easiest or whose situation is more obvious.

I can assure you that the people in my field, in my department, work very hard to support our men and women veterans.

**Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Madam Chair, I'm not criticizing the quality of the service.

We have 10 fingers, two arms and one head. At some point, we'll have to face the facts. If this is so important and veterans have our

respect, then let's show it, whether it's with funding or in another way.

A minister with only five months' experience in the position can't know everything.

I don't know how long you've been in your position, Mr. Harris, maybe two years, five years, 10 years, but the problem is cyclical.

I wonder whether those working at the department have any compassion. I mean, 80% or 75% is considered a success rate.

I apologize; I'm getting quite emotional, because at every committee meeting, we meet traumatized people and we traumatize them even more when we end up abandoning them.

It's been going on for too long. That's true. People tell us their problems are piling up.

Is there a place or a department that can help those who have largely been forgotten?

We tell people that we want to help them, that that's what we're here for and that if there's an emergency, we will take action. Then we apologize and say that we dropped the ball on something, that we weren't thorough. It's time to face the facts. The current situation makes no sense.

Maybe another witness, someone on video conference, can answer.

**Steven Harris:** I totally understand your question, and the fact is we work very hard to support everyone.

What else could we do? Every day we should be trying to improve the well-being of those we can help. That's the reality. Sometimes we help them early, sometimes late. The situation could go on for 10 years. They will always need our help. Even when we intervene late, we make sure their file keeps moving forward.

That's what my team does. It works hard to deliver services to our men and women veterans.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

This completes our first round of questions.

We will now start our second round.

Mrs. Wagantall, you have the floor for five minutes.

[English]

**Cathay Wagantall:** Thank you, Chair.

I want to get clarity on something. A growing number of applications are exceeding the 16-week standard. That was what was found in the status overview of the mandate letter in November 2024. It also stated that it is critical that we receive a new funding decision as soon as possible to arrest the current level of attrition among temporary decision-makers and to support ongoing efforts in leveraging new technologies. This was an ask, and you indicated, Mr. Tessier, that, in 2025, \$7.8 billion was spent. Did that include taking care of this issue, or are we waiting until the November budget to see some improvements in this area?

• (1655)

**Pierre Tessier:** In terms of the \$7.8 billion, that includes forecasted funds for current resources not beyond April 2026.

**Cathay Wagantall:** Were any of those resources applied to this request to deal with this?

Mr. Harris, do you have something to say to that just briefly? I have one more question that I would like to ask.

**Steven Harris:** Those resources are applied to work on reducing wait times, including disability backlogs, absolutely.

**Cathay Wagantall:** Specifically in response to the need for more decision-makers, I don't know what that means exactly. Maybe if I have time, I'll get an answer to that, too.

The Prime Minister also instructed every department to find cost savings of 7%, but we're saying here that 90% flows to the veterans. The veterans are asking where this cut is going to take place. Does the department assist in determining where that could be done to cause the least impact in that process? It has to be done by the summer.

[Translation]

**Christine McDowell:** Thank you for the question.

[English]

I believe I'm going to turn to Pierre and Mitch.

**Mitch Freeman:** I'm happy to start.

As you are pointing out, all departments are part of the particular exercise you are referencing. Veterans Affairs, of course, is part of it as well. That is a process that's in flight at the moment and without decisions, so I'm not in a position to speak any more broadly to that, simply because I don't know the answers.

Veterans Affairs is part of it, like all of our other departments across government.

**Cathay Wagantall:** You can respond briefly.

**Pierre Tessier:** Just to be more precise in terms of where the exercise reductions are being made, the focus is really on the remainder, not on the 94%. It's really internal efficiencies.

**Cathay Wagantall:** This is a bit of a unique question.

I have a passion for the service dog program and how that could be making a huge difference in our veterans' lives. I know it's the Wild West out there right now. We still don't have standards federally; we do need them.

At the same time, it's very clear there's so much information that shows this makes a huge difference in veterans' lives, to the point

where they need far fewer pharmaceuticals and drugs to treat themselves, which cost this department a huge amount of money.

I would like to hear whether the department is strongly going to encourage our new minister to take this really seriously. Let's get this done.

[Translation]

**Christine McDowell:** Thank you for the question.

[English]

Madam Chair, I'd like to turn to Mitch Freeman to respond to that, please.

**Mitch Freeman:** I would highlight a couple of things.

Certainly, Veterans Affairs is always looking for ways to benefit the veteran community, and service dogs are a recurring theme in this particular item. As you said, it's also the Wild West from a standards and applicability point of view.

There are a couple of things. Veterans Affairs is, of course, taking it seriously to the point of funding some organizations, particularly Wounded Warriors, through the veteran and family well-being fund, in order to progress their work on service dogs. They've done some tremendous work.

In parallel, we're really closely monitoring the work that the U.S. VA is doing. They have a program around training dogs by veterans. They invite veterans in.

**Cathay Wagantall:** I totally hear you, and I affirm that.

I would encourage you to look within Canada. If you need some suggestions, I can let you know where it is being done remarkably and credibly. They already have accreditation. Those dogs work with the veterans from the very beginning, and they do not cost the veterans anything. We have dogs that are being sold to veterans for \$30,000 when that is not needed. We have wonderful organizations in this country that are charitable and can do the work. Please look within. Saskatchewan is a good place to look.

**The Chair:** I'm so sorry, Madam Wagantall. I was listening to the conversation myself, but I will have to ask Madame Auguste to go ahead for five minutes.

• (1700)

[Translation]

**Tatiana Auguste:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

During its October 9 meeting, the committee heard from Captain Hélène Le Scelleur regarding the Highway of Heroes incident.

What measures has the department taken to ensure that veterans aren't the victims of identity theft or a privacy breach, not to mention the trauma that comes with that?

Are there safeguards to make sure that this type of situation won't happen again?

**Christine McDowell:** Thank you for the question.

Ms. Meunier, I'd like to comment on this.

We consider this to be a very unfortunate incident, I assure you.

[English]

We have undertaken internally a series of reviews to make sure we have the checks and balances set up so that when we are funding organizations, they are clear on their responsibilities and we're executing oversight to ensure these kinds of errors don't happen with these funding arrangements.

Amy, can you offer more, please?

**Amy Meunier (Assistant Deputy Minister, Commemoration and Public Affairs Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs):** Yes, of course. Thank you.

I would just add that, as part of our contribution agreements, we've added clauses so that applicants and recipients understand their responsibilities. As well, on our website, we portray many stories of veterans. We are making sure there is language available anywhere the personal information of veterans is contained, so it will be clear that the appropriate privacy consents and processes need to be adhered to.

As part of a funding package, recipients will also receive best practices in managing personal information, as well as where to go for fact-checking of historical information, whether that be Library and Archives Canada, the directorate of history and heritage or Veterans Affairs Canada.

As the deputy indicated, it is a very regrettable situation, and we look forward to working with those impacted individuals to find a positive resolution.

[Translation]

**Tatiana Auguste:** Thank you very much.

You were asked a number of questions on the national monument to Canada's mission in Afghanistan. I'd like to give you a chance to clarify a few things. I don't think you had the opportunity to fully explain what has been done on the project.

I'd like to hear from you on that.

**Christine McDowell:** Thank you for the question.

[English]

Madam Chair, we are very interested in and care deeply about recognizing our modern veterans and commemorating those individuals. We are working very closely [Technical difficulty—Editor]

Concerning the updates, perhaps I'll turn to Amy Meunier to talk about the next steps on the Afghan monument.

**Amy Meunier:** Thank you very much.

As the deputy mentioned, this is a very important file for us. We've been working closely with Canadian Heritage and the National Capital Commission. We work with their architectural board to ensure that the design is buildable. We fully appreciate all the necessary steps in the building process.

I'm really happy to say that the National Capital Commission has granted us the authority to proceed with tendering. That tendering process should begin in the next month or so. We hope to have a contract in place early in the new year. Shortly after that or as soon as the ground thaws, we would be keen to begin construction.

[Translation]

**Tatiana Auguste:** Thank you.

What measures has Veterans Affairs Canada taken to make sure front-line decision-makers have the necessary skills and training to work with veterans in a respectful, considerate and thoughtful manner? As MPs, we've had our own training.

I'd like to know more about that.

**Steven Harris:** I can confirm that all our front-line people working with men and women veterans have access to training. There's an important training course on trauma, for example, and a course that provides applied suicide intervention skills training, also known as ASIST. There are also training sessions to learn how to respond properly to reports of sexual trauma in the armed forces and other settings.

We provide a series of training courses to make sure our staff is equipped to respond to inquiries and information from our men and women veterans. We encourage all of our front-line people to take these training courses. Training is also mandatory for our contractors.

• (1705)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** There is a lot of talk about military veterans, but I didn't hear the minister mention the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, or RCMP, veterans. The women veterans council includes women veterans from the RCMP.

Could you give us more details on what Veterans Affairs Canada has done specifically for RCMP veterans? They would like to know what's been done regarding the recommendations in the 2020 Bas-tarache report.

By the way, you'll have to come back so we can understand where you're at in the process and sound the alarm if specific requests need to be made. We are here also to help you. We might not be very familiar with command posts, but our men and women veterans are always on our mind, whether they were in the Canadian Armed Forces or the RCMP. It would be very important for us to learn about the process.

Finally, tell me honestly, do you listen to the committee hearings? Do you read the committee's reports?

I know you're very busy, but do you follow the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs' proceedings?

**Christine McDowell:** I will answer the member's last question.

My colleagues and I read the committee's reports very closely and with a lot of interest.

[English]

I want to thank you all for the wonderful work you do here in support of veterans. We use the material and very much rely on the reports and studies that you do to inform our work.

[Translation]

I will let one of my colleagues answer your other questions.

**The Chair:** Unfortunately, I have to interrupt.

I apologize, but the preambles are often very long.

[English]

Mr. Viersen, go ahead for five minutes.

**Arnold Viersen:** Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the department for being here today.

I have just a little bit of commentary before I ask the question.

The Conservatives have been pushing the government to balance the budget for as long as this government has been around. We point out that a lack of a balanced budget causes inflation. Inflation causes things like groceries to be more expensive. When groceries are more expensive, our veteran communities struggle, so we need to then up the benefits. We get into this vicious cycle.

Over the last number of years we've talked about the budget doubling. In some respects, that's just a reflection of the inflation. If services are going down and the budget is doubling, that's just purely a measure of inflation. We've been pushing the government to rein that deficit spending in to bring inflation down.

It's interesting to me to learn just today that 94% of the department's budget goes to veteran benefits, and the government is seeking a 7% reduction in the funding or expenditure of the department. It then appears, if you do the raw math of it, that they're looking for an elimination of the department.

That's a little bit of a joke there, folks. I imagine that's not what they're after.

One of the recommendations that's coming from our side of the table is the service dogs. There is pursuing reduction in drug prescriptions across this sector.

What are some of the other things that you're looking at, due to trying to meet this 7% target that's been set by the government?

• (1710)

**Christine McDowell:** We certainly understand the affordability issues and the financial pressures that are facing veterans today. VAC has a number of supports in place to support veterans with respect to the increased cost of day-to-day living, including enhanced emergency support programs, expanded access to financial supports—

**Arnold Viersen:** That's not really where my question was going. It's more like, how is the department going to be reining in some of these expenses?

It's going to take some unique thinking on some of these issues.

**Christine McDowell:** I want to assure the committee that, given that 94% of our budget does in fact go to veterans, we're paying very close attention to the way we can support those veterans with the cost of living.

With regard to the latter part of the question, I'm going to turn to Mitch to respond to that, please.

**Mitch Freeman:** I just wanted to highlight that we're very much alive to the situation of affordability within the veteran community and the task that's at hand that all departments have been asked to do.

You're highlighting that it is kind of interesting or requires thinking out of the box. As I said earlier, these are decisions that are in flight and in progress by government. I do not have decisions or responses to get into any sense of specificity with this. I look forward to government decisions as we move forward in that regard.

**Arnold Viersen:** Can you maybe enlighten us? Will the budget be the time when we get illumination onto some of these things? Is that what we're waiting for?

**Mitch Freeman:** It is unclear to me where the decision processes will come in the following weeks or months. I'm not in a position to confirm that it would be or would not be.

**Arnold Viersen:** This government has been in place now for several months. It's frustrating, sitting here asking questions about what's happening around the 7% target. It's extremely frustrating to see that there have been no decisions made on this.

I'll go back to you, Ms. McDowell.

Is there anything that you think I should know, coming out of this meeting today, around the 7% piece?

**Christine McDowell:** What I would say in response to that question is that 94% of our budget does go directly to veterans. As we heard my colleague, Mr. Tessier, talk about earlier today, whether it's one veteran or 10,000, the supports those veterans need actually come financially. We are awaiting the results of the next phases of this review.

**Arnold Viersen:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Viersen.

I would like to now ask Mr. Clark to take the floor for five minutes.

**Braedon Clark:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I just wanted to go back to an issue that was raised earlier in the meeting by Mr. Viersen around the question of prayer at ceremonies. I can speak only from my own personal experience, of course. The last number of years, as a member of the provincial legislature in Nova Scotia, I have attended Remembrance Day ceremonies in Bedford, where I live. There has always been a prayer component or a religious component from multiple faiths in most years.

Mr. Harris, I'm not sure if this is a question for you, but could you just comment on that question, just so we can get clarity on it? It is an important point that was raised.

**Steven Harris:** My understanding is much the same. There's no specific direction. The direction is actually one of people being allowed to reflect or pray in whatever way is suitable for them. I've had the same experience, where whatever commemorative ceremony I have been at there's been a component of reflection or prayer. Whoever is leading that offers that the crowd or the assembled masses there can do that in whatever faith or to whatever perception they want to have. It has been a component of all the ceremonies, certainly, that I have witnessed.

• (1715)

**Braedon Clark:** As I've said, I would agree with that. I've been to ceremonies where you have had a priest, a rabbi and an imam. That's not the beginning of a joke; that's the reality of what we've seen. I appreciate that clarity. I just wanted to make that point, because I think it's important.

As we've also touched on earlier in the committee here, in 2023 a contract of a little over \$500 million or so was awarded for administering the rehabilitation program through VAC and PCVRS. I'm just wondering—again, perhaps this is for Mr. Harris, but I'll let you guys stick handle it—what the successes of that program are and what are the challenges of that program are. How are you working to address the challenges component of it in particular?

Thank you.

**Steven Harris:** I know there was a question earlier around the rehabilitation contract and how it interplays with a different program that we have, disability benefits. Those two are different. There's one benefit that allows for individuals to receive compensation for illness or injury that they face as a result of their service. This program that you're referring to is actually a program that helps for rehabilitation supports. That program is the contract that was referred to a bit earlier. It has been a process of implementation

and support. It provides medical, psychosocial and vocational rehabilitation to veterans who require it for a barrier that they're facing to integration into civilian life.

I will give you two stats that I think are the most telling with respect to the success of the contract to date. Participants completing the rehabilitation program, which includes working through the contract provider of PCVRS, report an 82% improvement in functional capacity or overall health and well-being and an 83% improvement in life satisfaction. In both of those cases, it's demonstrating that the program of rehabilitation is working for veterans and helping to make them better. It's helping to make them more independent in their ability to pursue their post-military choices and well-being. I think that's the most important takeaway that I can offer with respect to the progress of the contract at this point.

**Braedon Clark:** Thank you. Those are obviously encouraging numbers, Mr. Harris.

I assume there's some sort of survey or feedback mechanism for veterans, and that's where those numbers are coming from. How many responses would you have, roughly? Do you have any idea of that?

**Steven Harris:** Let me just see here. I know we have had about 10,000 people who have gone through the program to its completion, to its conclusion, at this point in time. We have about 350 to 400 new veterans who come into the rehabilitation program every month. There are always somewhere in the neighbourhood of about 10,000 veterans who are participating in it at any given time. Over the course of the time since the program started, it's about 10,000. I can't tell you that every single one has answered the survey as part of this but, yes, that is where it comes from in terms of data gained from surveys of individuals going through it.

**Braedon Clark:** Okay.

For the rehabilitation program, what is the average length of the program for veterans? Are we talking about a period of months or a year or two? What does that look like from a time perspective?

**Steven Harris:** I would suggest that the average time of somebody in a rehabilitation program is about two years. It can vary for veterans, depending on what their needs are, what their barriers might be and how much support they might need from a rehabilitation program. On average, we would say usually about two years, depending on the barriers they're facing.

**Braedon Clark:** Okay. Perfect. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Mr. Harris, could I ask that you share some of those stats with our committee? I think it would be appreciated. Speaking as a numbers person, I think we would appreciate those stats.

We are now at our last round. Just out of principle and to allow Madame Gaudreau to have a chance, we will have Mr. Richards for three minutes, then Mrs. Hirtle and then Madame Gaudreau for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Richards, go ahead for three minutes.

**Blake Richards:** I want to get back to where we were earlier, Mr. Harris, but before we do that, I want to get this question in real quick, because I have only three minutes.

I don't know who should be answering, but for whoever it is, in 2027 we have the 110th anniversary of Vimy Ridge coming up. It's a little over a year away. I'm wondering if you can share with the committee what plans, if any, your department has for commemoration of that event and what work, if any, has been done on it to this point? Answer fairly quickly, please.

• (1720)

**Christine McDowell:** I'm going to turn that right over to Amy Meunier in the interest of time.

**Amy Meunier:** Thank you very much.

You are correct. We have a team that actually resides in France, taking care of the Vimy monument as well as Beaumont-Hamel. They are actively working with all of our partners in France, as well as other countries, to build quite a series of activities that will take place in and around that time.

We're also looking to include a companion piece here in Canada, so that more Canadians can participate in those activities. We will come back as more of the details are refined.

**Blake Richards:** I guess I would just say that I know there are partners like the Vimy Foundation and others that are really wanting to know far in advance so they can be a part of these things as well. I'll just put that in your ear.

To go back to the issue we were talking about earlier, Mr. Harris, let me try to succinctly summarize it. Essentially, what these providers like the Veterans Transition Network and others are finding is that VAC won't process the applications in time. They get the client into their programs, but then VAC won't process retroactively, so they end up stuck in this spot where they're paying through charitable money for things that the client should have been eligible for through VAC.

That's obviously a problem. I've had them report as much as a 60% decrease in terms of the rate of funding approvals. It's pretty significant. As a result, that requires a lot of charitable donations to be used. There has to be something we can do to fix that. Can you comment on that at all?

**Steven Harris:** Madam Chair, the quick comment I'd offer is that there is a pre-approval process for people who want to go and participate in a program, be it the Veterans Transition Network or any number of other programs that help to support individuals.

We want to make sure that happens as quickly as possible—

**Blake Richards:** If I can just interrupt you on that, obviously we're not talking about a small-time organization here. This is a pretty major organization. If they can't figure out how to make this work, there has to be an issue. Is there something we can do to fix it?

**Steven Harris:** I think it's about timing and intake to make sure we get veterans who want to attend those kinds of programs—who will benefit from those kinds of programs—in quickly for the approvals that are required, so that places like the Veterans Transition Network aren't put in a position where they feel as though a veteran needs that immediate help and yet it's not in time for approval.

You're quite right. We can't approve retroactively. We need to do the pre-authorizations. We need to make sure, as part of a veteran's

rehabilitation program, of their well-being plan, that those kinds of things are included earlier, so that we can approve them earlier and make sure that places like Veterans Transition Network and many others can do their good work on their side.

**Blake Richards:** Yes, and it is many, isn't it? That's the thing. There's obviously something we need to do in that process. I appreciate that you're providing a suggestion, but it sure seems to me from the things I'm hearing that there needs to be something done to streamline this. I really hope you'll take that back and give that some consideration. Maybe next time we can have a further conversation about it.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Richards.

For three minutes, we have Mrs. Hirtle.

**Alana Hirtle:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I think this question is for Mr. Harris, but any of you can jump in.

At committee recently, we heard from the veterans ombud, who, when asked by one of our colleagues who Canada should be looking to internationally as an example of leadership in working with and supporting veterans and their families, replied that in fact Canada is the leader that others often come to.

I'm hoping that you can elaborate on what this means. How does Canada compare to international counterparts, either in the services offered or the range of services, or in the depth of benefits that veterans and their families have access to here in Canada?

**Steven Harris:** Madam Chair, straight comparisons are very difficult, because different considerations exist in different countries. An example would be the United States veterans association, which provides all health care because they do not have a health care network in the U.S.

We compare very favourably with organizations in many international settings that deliver services to veterans. We use groups like the Five Eyes to speak regularly about benefits and services that are available and experiences people have in other areas. I think Canadian veterans' benefits compare very favourably with those across the world. All of my colleagues speak regularly with our international counterparts to try to share and learn how we can get better at providing benefits for veterans as well.

**Alana Hirtle:** It is certainly something to be proud of, though.

I still have one minute. Quickly, the committee noted in its recent report on the transition from military to civilian life that the proportion of veterans experiencing difficulties during the transition went from 30% to 40% in the last decade. What measures are planned to support the transition of veterans who are medically released?

• (1725)

**Steven Harris:** We support medically released veterans in many ways. We have a direct ability to help support veterans who are transitioning from the Canadian Armed Forces to Veterans Affairs and have benefits and services in place in time for their departure.

In other instances, people leave the Canadian Armed Forces and may have difficulty with the transition. That could be because of a mental health issue or a physical health issue. It could be because of an issue of belonging and a sense of purpose. That can come later as well. In any of those cases, veterans can come back to Veterans Affairs Canada for assistance at any time. It doesn't have to be during the release process, although we want to make sure through transition interviews and others that we can immediately identify any challenges they're facing. If they develop challenges after they're released from the Canadian Armed Forces, they can still come to us. We have lots of programs we can help them with as well.

**Alana Hirtle:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Harris.

Madame Gaudreau.

[*Translation*]

**Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to remind everyone that a lot of people are watching our proceedings.

Why do men and women veterans have to wait when we know that a systemic approach is not a good idea for them?

I hope people in the sector will realize this. It means having new, adaptable ways of doing things.

I'd like to give you the opportunity to explain how you're going to get back on track and why wait times are from a year to a year and a half. I don't want to hear you say you're doing what you can.

Why do they have to wait? What are you missing?

**Steven Harris:** I thank the member for the question.

I can explain a few things. It's important to understand that the process can be complicated. It can take time to gather the necessary documents, like medical or military service documents.

The number of cases where wait times were more than a year has gone down significantly in the last two to three years. Making sure decisions are rendered faster has been a focus of the department. I

can tell you the wait times in service delivery have gone down by 50% in the last couple of years. We're not there yet, but we're making progress.

**Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** That means that when you come back, it'll be even better.

Do you listen closely to what's said during the committee's proceedings? Do you read the committee's reports?

**Steven Harris:** I always read the committee's reports, and I always listen closely to what is being said in the committee's meetings. We follow the committee's proceedings closely and pay a lot of attention to the committee's recommendations.

**Marie-Hélène Gaudreau:** Excellent.

We'll try and make sure everyone shows leadership to help our men and women veterans.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Gaudreau.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for joining us today.

I'd also like to take a moment to acknowledge some of our guests in the room.

[*English*]

We have many guests with us. I cannot assume they are veterans, but I think they are. To all of our veterans who were with us during today's committee, thank you for your service to Canada. I really want to make sure that we say thank you to all of you.

**Some hon. members:** Hear, hear!

**The Chair:** Before we adjourn, I have one housekeeping note. On the topic of the suicide prevention study, a study budget was prepared by the clerk last week and distributed to all of our members on the committee. I need to seek the committee's approval to adopt this budget.

Is it the will of the committee to adopt the budget for the study on suicide prevention among veterans?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Is it the will of the committee to adjourn the meeting?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

• (1730)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.







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