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Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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• (1110)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (John Williamson (Saint John—St. Croix, CPC)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 30 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

[*English*]

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.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(g), the committee is meeting today to consider the report entitled “Housing Canadian Armed Forces Members”, taken from the fall 2025 reports of the Auditor General of Canada and referred to the committee on Tuesday, October 21, 2025.

[*English*]

I'd now like to welcome our witnesses.

From the Office of the Auditor General, we have Karen Hogan—it's nice to see you—Auditor General of Canada, along with Stuart Smith, director.

From the Department of National Defence, we have Christiane Fox, deputy minister. It's nice to see you back at committee in a different role.

We also have Peter Hammerschmidt, assistant deputy minister of infrastructure and environment, and Lieutenant-General Erick Simoneau, chief of military personnel. It's nice to see you as well.

From the Canadian Forces Housing Agency, we have Paola Zurro, chief executive officer. It's nice to see you.

There will be some opening statements. Ms. Hogan, you'll kick us off for approximately five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Karen Hogan (Auditor General of Canada, Office of the Auditor General): Mr. Chair, thank you for giving us the opportunity to testify before the committee today to discuss our audit report titled “Housing Canadian Armed Forces Members”, which was tabled on October 21, 2025.

I would like to begin by acknowledging that this hearing is taking place on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

Overall, National Defence did not manage living accommodations in a manner that would meet its operational needs and be responsive to the needs of Canadian Armed Forces members and their families. This is particularly important because the Canadian Armed Forces are planning to add additional members in the future. National Defence should have sufficient housing in appropriate locations to meet its operational needs and promote the morale, well-being and retention of members. National Defence did not have reliable data on furnished housing, also known as quarters. In particular, there was a lack of information on the number and location of beds intended for members in training, on short-term assignments, or in transit to other locations.

[*English*]

The audit team visited three bases and found that many quarters were in poor condition, with problems such as a lack of safe drinking water or working toilets. Quarters must meet minimum standards for size, amenities and physical condition. However, during our audit period, 32 out of the 35 buildings we examined needed at least one high-priority repair.

In addition, the Canadian Forces Housing Agency, which manages residential housing units, did not plan to build enough new housing units to fill existing gaps. On March 31, 2025, there were more than 3,700 Canadian Armed Forces members with outstanding applications for residential housing units. However, there were only 205 units available to be occupied. Plans to build new housing units were based on data from 2019, leaving a significant gap. Work being done to update the assessment of housing needs did not account for plans to expand the Canadian Armed Forces to their authorized full strength.

Canadian Armed Forces members can be required to move frequently. It's important for their morale and well-being that they can access affordable housing in good condition to meet their needs, as well as those of their families.

[*Translation*]

That concludes my opening remarks. We would be pleased to answer any questions committee members may have.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hogan.

[English]

Ms. Fox, you have the floor for approximately five minutes.

Christiane Fox (Deputy Minister, Department of National Defence): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. Good morning.

Thank you for the opportunity to come and discuss the Office of the Auditor General's report on housing for Canadian Armed Forces members.

Before I begin, I want to start by acknowledging the report of the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner. I take this matter very seriously. I respect the role of the commissioner and the office, and I need to focus on my role as a public service leader and my role at National Defence.

I'm joined by my colleagues to speak to the very important issue of military housing.

For CAF members, housing is more than a place to live. It is a fundamental part of their readiness. It provides our members with a place to rest and recharge so that they are prepared to carry out their duties.

[Translation]

It ensures that our military families—the partners and children of those who serve—are well taken care of. It also helps us attract and retain the skilled personnel we need to assert our sovereignty and defend our security.

Even in my short time at the Department of National Defence, I've learned a lot about the challenges we've faced providing suitable and affordable residential housing units, and the steps we're taking to address these challenges. I welcome the OAG's findings and recommendations on how we can build on these efforts.

The report in question, published in October 2025, examined how the Department of National Defence manages living accommodations to meet operational needs. That means ensuring we have the right number of housing units, with the right number of bedrooms, at the right locations so that members can access housing where they need it and when they need it. The report looked at residential housing units managed by the Canadian Forces Housing Agency and furnished quarters overseen by bases and wings. It also assessed whether National Defence is meeting its obligation to provide CAF members with housing that is affordable, suitable and adequate.

• (1115)

[English]

Ultimately, the OAG determined that there were several key areas of concern regarding how National Defence manages and maintains military housing and how we collect data around housing requirements, as well as the number of units available for CAF members and their families.

To begin addressing these issues, they provided recommendations across several key areas, including defining how quarters will be allocated to support CAF operational requirements; ensuring that inspections, maintenance and repairs are completed; and regularly

assessing CAF members' residential housing needs. This includes updating cost estimates, planning to meet any shortfalls and implementing those plans in a timely manner, as well as accounting for the growing number of CAF personnel and changes in their geographic distribution.

[Translation]

The minister issued a written statement on October 21, 2025, accepting the report's recommendations and reiterating the department's commitment to making real, measurable improvements for CAF members and their families.

[English]

In response to these recommendations, we are developing a comprehensive framework to define the role of quarters in meeting CAF operational needs. This is going to set a standard process for assigning quarters, supported by better data and a tracking system. In this way, we're placing members where they need to be based on operational requirements. The department will also ensure that quarters are regularly inspected through formal reviews every three to five years and through local routine checks.

[Translation]

We're also in the process of implementing the living accommodation optimization program. As part of this program, we'll develop plans for scheduled inspections and routine maintenance. This will help ensure current and future accommodations are suitable and have longevity. The Canadian Forces Housing Agency also developed the residential housing response plan, which identifies portfolio shortfalls by location and updates cost estimates to ensure our housing portfolio evolves and adapts.

[English]

We're also taking broader steps to ensure that CAF members and their families have access to suitable housing. Our defence policy commits \$1.4 billion over 20 years to modernize housing of CAF members. This builds on \$490 million over 10 years.

In February, the minister also announced that the second phase of Canada's national housing construction program is under way.

[Translation]

Together, phases 1 and 2 will add up to 7,500 new residential housing units in 25 locations across the country. We have made progress, but we know there is more work to do. We will continue taking action to ensure that members and their families have access to housing.

[English]

We appreciate the Auditor General's oversight and input to help us improve and address challenges to housing for CAF members.

I look forward to taking your questions. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll begin with our first round, which consists of three members with six minutes each.

Mr. Bezan, you'll lead us off, please.

James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake—Eastman, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It is indeed a pleasure to join the public accounts committee today to deal with the Canadian Forces housing issue.

Deputy Minister Fox, I wasn't going to bring up the Ethics Commissioner's report, but since you did, can you assure Parliament and Canadians that you won't be using your office as a public office holder to further the interests of private individuals?

Christiane Fox: I can assure the committee that I will continue to demonstrate a commitment to public service, building on the strong commitment I've had over my career, and that, yes, I will take my responsibilities seriously, as I always have.

James Bezan: Okay. Thank you.

How many housing units are we short today? What's the wait-list?

Paola Zurro (Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Forces Housing Agency): The gap—reassessed in October, based on our latest requirement—is between 7,000 and 10,000 housing supports. We base our housing response plan on this gap. We're looking at leaning forward and meeting the 10,000 units, the higher spectrum of the range.

James Bezan: I know that when we did the study on military housing at the national defence committee that was reported in October 2024, at the time, the gap was around 6,700. The situation continues to get worse. We're not building fast enough. Are we also seeing a large portion of the current housing stock being retired or taken out of availability for our troops?

• (1120)

Christiane Fox: First, I would say that the construction program will deliver 7,500 residential housing units, but given the urgency and given the need, we are also expanding our housing supply with flexible housing options. We've bought 37 units in Esquimalt, for instance. We've bought units in Dartmouth.

James Bezan: Let's talk about those. You've gone into local markets that have already been short of housing, if you want to talk about Dartmouth and Halifax. We've had stories of military members who have been living rough, who have been couch surfing or who have been living out of their cars. There's even one story of a guy living in one of the tent cities. In Esquimalt, I talked to military members who are working two jobs just so they can afford a one-bedroom apartment and raise a family of three.

You guys go into the market and buy up existing housing stock that could have gone to help alleviate the local situation. It's good for the forces members, but it actually exacerbates the problem on the ground in those housing markets.

When are we going to get the new builds?

Christiane Fox: We are expediting new builds, but we're also working in lockstep with Build Canada Homes, because we need to have a strategy for the country when it comes to housing. It is about

how the military can step up and accelerate the builds, how we can offer appropriate housing for military members, but also how this fits into the broader objectives of building more housing across the country.

James Bezan: We have to do both. We have to alleviate the housing crisis. This means we have to build new for our forces so that we aren't taking away from the civilian side.

Auditor General Hogan, you talked about the conditions of the housing, with toilets that don't work and with no running water. Some homes don't even have proper insulation. As you characterized it, none of us would ever want to live there.

I was just in Gander at 9 Wing. We heard that there were not enough units for single members. They were occupying two- and three-bedroom homes and taking away opportunities for families who were being transferred there. The barracks were in poor condition. There wasn't potable water on the base where the barracks were located. They're hauling in water.

What else did you find out in your study to demonstrate that this hasn't been taken care of over the last decade?

Karen Hogan: I want to clarify that we went and looked at quarters, which are on the bases, and not the residential housing units. It's a slight difference, for those who might not know. Obviously, the experts are here, but I would tell you in layman's terms that a housing unit is unfurnished whereas quarters are furnished and are usually meant for temporary, short-term stays.

We went to three bases across the country, with one in B.C., one in New Brunswick and one in Ontario. In the buildings, we found that about 32 out of 35 of them needed one major repair at a minimum. It could have included damage to exterior walls or a lack of safe drinking water, as you previously mentioned, functioning toilets or sanitary systems. They were the kinds of conditions that I know none of us sitting around this table would want to live in and that we shouldn't expect our Canadian Armed Forces to.

James Bezan: Would your office say that those units on base would have been condemned if they weren't on base?

Karen Hogan: I'm not an expert in housing. I'm not sure exactly what it takes to condemn a unit. Some of the witnesses from the Canadian Forces Housing Agency may be in a better position to answer that. I know that I would want my family to have safe drinking water and a functioning toilet. I would want to be sure the building was structurally sound. That's why some of our findings were around the need to regularly inspect both residential units and quarters. It's essential. It's to help you identify preventative maintenance so that you don't get to a place in which it's a major repair.

James Bezan: Do you at the Canadian Forces Housing Agency have your own guideline for assessment of the quality of the housing stock you manage? When we did our report at the national defence committee, we recommended that this be standardized with civilian standards. We know that the regulations you operate under are more subjective rather than quantitative as to the quality of the housing available to our members of the Canadian Armed Forces. Has this changed at all, or are you still making your own decisions on what's good and what's not?

Paola Zurro: The health and safety standards the Canadian Forces Housing Agency follows are based on the national building code and all appropriate standards. I can assure you that all occupied residential housing units meet all the health and safety standards.

• (1125)

James Bezan: However, the national code is substandard for most provincial codes.

Paola Zurro: We are using the latest national building code, and provincial codes are usually based on the national building code.

James Bezan: Or—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bezan. That is your time, I'm afraid. We'll come back to you later, I'm sure.

Mr. Osborne, you have the floor for six minutes, please.

Tom Osborne (Cape Spear, Lib.): Thank you.

Could someone from National Defence elaborate on the number of units that you have newly acquired, either owned and operated by National Defence or supplied by other sources—contractors or developers, for example—and that you are planning to put into inventory? What are the numbers and the timelines for these units?

Paola Zurro: Since the announcement of budget 2024, the Canadian Forces Housing Agency has been working to make rapid progress with the urgency the times require.

Last year, we launched phase one of the national housing construction program, as the deputy minister mentioned, with the aim of building 668 units. We are always looking at opportunities to expand. Now our phase one is delivering 800 units.

In February, our minister announced phase two, which will be looking at building up to a total of 7,500, but we are not stopping there. We are also looking at other ways to include more units.

In 2024, we agreed with Public Services and Procurement Canada to transfer 189 units in Yellowknife. We are rapidly increasing and expanding our portfolio through this agreement in Yellowknife to support the north.

We also added more units through the acquisition programs, as the deputy minister mentioned, in Halifax, in Comox and in Esquimalt. We are looking at adding more and more units through the national acquisition program as they become available.

We are also looking at leases. We are in the midst of concluding leases in Yellowknife to add more units there. We are updating our leases in Masset, and we are looking at launching a national leasing program.

We are looking at piloting as well. In Trenton, we just did a pilot with landlords in which Canadian Armed Forces members have the first right of refusal in units that are vacant in the market. We are making rapid progress.

So far in the past two fiscal years, with just the alternative solutions, we have finished the year with almost 200 units. This is in addition to our construction program, which aims to build 7,500 units.

Tom Osborne: Thank you.

Can you elaborate and share the data on the current number of Canadian Armed Forces members who reside on base, who reside off base in CAF housing and who reside in housing that is not owned and operated by the CAF?

Christiane Fox: The data we have currently is that about 60% of CAF members do not use CAF housing, about 16% do and about 4% are in quarters—so they would be in training. The percentage of members who use a form of CAF housing would be about 20%.

Tom Osborne: Some of your members perhaps want to stay on base, and others would prefer to look for private accommodations. We understand that. However, with the increase in pay for our women and men who serve in the Canadian Armed Forces, has there been a noticeable difference in the affordability of housing for these members when looking for accommodations outside of those supplied by the Canadian Armed Forces?

Christiane Fox: Definitely. By increasing both the allowances and the pay, and with a lot of the benefits package that was announced, members are well positioned to compete in the housing industry to purchase their home outside a base, should they choose not to live on the base. I think we're seeing an ability to access the market as a result of the increase in pay.

I don't know if Lieutenant-General Simoneau would like to add something.

• (1130)

LGen Erick Simoneau (Chief of Military Personnel, Department of National Defence): I can add that we heard earlier of a waiting list of 6,700. At the time of the OAG report, the waiting list was 3,700. As of recently, it's 1,200, so we see a clear decrease in the number of people waiting for residential housing units.

Now, with that being said, it would be premature to make a direct link between this number and the salary increase, the new posting allowance and the military service pay because some of those initiatives have yet to be implemented, but it's certainly a step in the right direction. Meeting the demand—you heard the number 10,000 earlier—hinges on stable and predictable funding, which we now have, so the gap will be closed by the two officials here.

Tom Osborne: I have time for a small question, I'm told by the chair.

In the application process, when does the application come out of the queue? Is it when a member removes the application for housing through the Canadian Armed Forces?

In other words, could you clarify the accuracy of the number of people on the list? If members have to remove their application from the list, but they have acquired suitable housing, is it possible that your waiting list number is in fact higher than the actual number?

Paola Zurro: Usually, the members stay on the wait-list until they notify the agency that they do not need housing anymore. We also, with my site offices, try to reach out to members to see if the wait-list is accurate, but it is a work in progress. We are trying to update it, but I cannot tell you necessarily how much of the wait-list is accurate at this point if the agency has not been notified.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Osborne. When members are on a roll, I try to give them time if they have a few extra seconds remaining, which you did, but I appreciate it. The time might come when I'm forced to be a little closer to the clock, but we're not there yet.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lemire for six minutes.

Sébastien Lemire (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Under the circumstances, I would like to extend a special thank you to the technical and interpretation teams.

My first question is for Ms. Hogan.

First, thank you for your report. Thank you for highlighting situations that, without your work, would remain hidden.

According to your report, the assessment of the Canadian Armed Forces' needs is completely inadequate. One of the things that shocks me is the fact that the analysis of local housing markets was based on the 2011 national household survey, which is over 10 years old. Obviously, since then, rent prices have skyrocketed across Canada.

In your report, you write: "In addition, there have been changes to compensation and benefits paid to members since 2019, which could impact the ability of members to find suitable housing in local markets."

If I understand correctly, our military personnel receive financial assistance to find housing, at least since 2023. In your opinion, is this assistance adapted to market realities?

Karen Hogan: I must admit that our audit did not focus on this key element. However, we did examine whether the Canadian Armed Forces provided support to its members, and we found that housing costs were capped at 25% of an individual's income. So, yes, the market will have an impact. We found that the information used to assess needs was outdated. The compensation data was from 2019 and the market data from 2011. When you use outdated data, needs are bound to be underestimated. We therefore made recommendations for the Canadian Armed Forces to improve their needs assessment.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you very much.

Ms. Fox, thank you for joining us today to help us get to the bottom of this issue.

Were you surprised when the Auditor General told you that 32 of the 35 quarter buildings inspected needed a high-priority repair? What immediate actions did you take?

• (1135)

Christiane Fox: Thank you for your question.

When the report was released in October, I was serving in the Privy Council Office, but I took note of the report and its findings. When I joined the department, I spent time with the team from the very beginning to better understand the complexities of housing, the department's action plan, and how we would implement the Auditor General's recommendations.

It is a challenge, given the urgency with which we must act in this context. We are trying to be creative and recognize that we need new housing, but it's clear that we need temporary solutions as well as investments to renovate the housing we currently have.

I would also say that having a rigorous inspection system is extremely important. We need the governance and tools necessary to ensure ongoing inspections.

So, indeed, the team is fully aware of the importance of housing for our military personnel. We will continue to work on this over the coming weeks and months. Beyond that, there are many activities and discussions with the industry, which must be our partner. Even today, there is a series of virtual meetings to advance housing projects across the country.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you.

In Quebec, an infrastructure assessment system has been implemented to monitor, for example, road conditions, which can obviously be affected by freezing and thawing.

Do you have a dashboard or document that makes it easy to identify infrastructure maintenance deficits and plan for the future?

Next, could you send us an update on the current condition of the 32 quarter buildings requiring repairs out of the 35 that were inspected? You could also send us information on the other three, since their condition may have worsened since then and they may also require high-priority repairs.

Christiane Fox: It is certainly important to maintain inventories to track and better understand the condition of each building—including those assessed by the Auditor General—and of all infrastructure under the Department of National Defence. Indeed, we need rigour, data and systems that allow us to regularly report on the progress made. DND is committed to producing very detailed reports on the necessary progress.

Sébastien Lemire: I would obviously like to have that information.

Similarly, the Auditor General's report mentions 205 available units and 3,706 applicants.

Can you tell us what the current situation is and provide that information to the committee?

Christiane Fox: To answer your question, yes, we can provide the committee with that information.

I will let Ms. Zurro speak to you about current needs.

Paola Zurro: Thank you, Ms. Fox.

As Lieutenant General Simoneau mentioned, current needs vary because our waiting list fluctuates constantly in the spring and summer. We typically receive a large number of requests during this time, as it is when Canadian Armed Forces members are being transferred across the country. Starting in the fall, the list stabilizes.

The latest data indicates that nearly 1,300 people are set to be transferred and are still on the national waiting list. There are even more who have housing in the local market and would like access to military housing. This is what we call priority level 3. As for priority levels 1 and 2, they are assigned to members who apply after being transferred and who must relocate elsewhere in the country. This is our top priority.

Currently, as previously mentioned, we are working very hard to expand the Canadian Forces Housing Agency's portfolio, and we publish our plans annually. We publish an annual report that details our finances and the distribution of our funds, as well as our projects—that is, what we've accomplished over the past year and what's coming up.

The last fiscal year has just ended, and we're currently preparing our report. I encourage you to take a look at it, as it contains all the information on renovation projects, acquisitions, and the portfolio, as well as how we spend the funds. Most of the funds—84%—are reinvested in the housing portfolio.

• (1140)

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

We'll now begin our second round, which consists of five members for various times.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Deltell for five minutes.

Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent—Akiawenhrahk, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning to my fellow members.

Welcome to your parliamentary committee, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to say a special hello to General Simoneau, who is from the Quebec City area and has served his country well, including as commander of a tactical helicopter unit in war zones in Haiti, Kosovo and Afghanistan. Thank you very much.

General, through you, I would like to recognize all the men and women in uniform serving their country, be it in the army, navy or air force. They put their lives on the line, and that is why we feel so strongly when we read such a scathing report, one that points to a lack of respect for our men and women in uniform and especially their families. We are talking about housing. These people put their lives at risk, and when they come home—they can hardly be called homes the spaces are so cramped.

Ms. Fox, how is it that, in 2026, our soldiers don't have access to running water where they live?

Christiane Fox: Thank you for your question.

We absolutely recognize the enormity of the challenge. We have to make sure that armed forces members have housing. It's essential that we deal with the important issues you raised through a comprehensive approach. We have to focus on housing improvements and availability, but we also have to focus on child care and compensation, among other things. We are really looking at the full range of services and speeding up approvals for housing construction and renovations. We urgently have to address the deficiencies the Auditor General identified in her report.

Gérard Deltell: Deputy Minister, how did things get to this point? This isn't something new. We're talking about our military housing. It's not something that started two weeks ago. This goes back decades. How did the situation get this bad?

In her report, Ms. Hogan said that only two out of 40 high-priority repairs had been completed. That means that when a member of the military comes home from the battlefield, where they were defending their country, there is a 90% chance that their home is in need of repair, and the same is true for their family.

Why was this allowed to drag on for so many years?

Christiane Fox: The department's action plan shows that we are taking the matter seriously. We have the necessary funding to fix the problems that emerged long ago, as you pointed out. Today, we have the funding to move forward and support Canadian Armed Forces members. That is absolutely part of our plan.

Gérard Deltell: To look ahead is a very good thing. As we know, the government has been boasting about what it calls its biggest defence budget ever. That's fine, but they've been in power for a decade.

Let's look solely at the needs assessment. We all know that housing needs are soaring across the country and that we have a housing problem. How is it that the Canadian Army was using data from 2011 to assess its housing needs?

What happened during the past 10 years to put us in this mess?

Christiane Fox: There were systems in place in recent years, but they weren't stringent enough to meet the requirements. That's why we are fixing the processes, we are implementing an action plan, and we have the necessary funding. In the past, the department probably had to make choices about which investments to make, and those choices may not have addressed all the needs across the country. Now, investments are being made for members of the military, and it's up to us to do the work and improve the housing situation across the country.

• (1145)

G rard Deltell: Things can't get worse, that's for sure.

General, you work alongside the men and women in the air force every day and you're in contact with army people. You were at Valcartier. Yes, there are people in the air force, but there are also people in the army.

In your various roles, what problems have you observed these last 10 years? Obviously, you're a high-ranking member of the armed forces, and we are very proud. What stories have our army, navy and air force personnel shared with you about their housing problems?

LGen Erick Simoneau: Thank you for your question.

The Canadian Armed Forces, as the force of last resort, and the department will always prioritize operations, whether at home or abroad, to ensure Canadians are well supported. Oftentimes, that's done on the backs of our members when we're constrained by budget.

Right now, the reason we need to invest in housing is that we move many of our members and their families within Canada and elsewhere in the world. I was in contact with families, and I still am.

Having to move all the time makes it tough for families to make any money when they sell their home. They often have to sell it too soon, before it's gone up in value, regardless of any renovations they may have done. Then there's the problem of finding child care, as was mentioned earlier. In the early days of a deployment, families often have to make decisions involving thousands of dollars, such as buying a home—on a single salary, no less, because a second salary isn't guaranteed, especially at the beginning of a posting.

That makes it somewhat of a unique situation, and that's why it's important to give members flexibility. Of the 10,000 housing units you heard about, 7,500 are new construction and 2,500 are rental options in local markets. That will put money back into local markets. It's a very positive step, and I think our members are happy about it.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Up next is Ms. Yip.

You have the floor for five minutes, please.

Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We are very thankful for the service and sacrifice of Canadian Armed Forces members, which is why the report is so important.

My first question is for Lieutenant-General Simoneau.

You were talking about some of the unique needs of the military service. Could you expand more on this, given that they must be ready to move to any location they are going to? What is being done to make it easier?

LGen Erick Simoneau: Thank you for the question.

I will break it into two buckets, if you will. We've been discussing the residential housing units, which are for members and their families. As I mentioned earlier, this hinges on the fact that when decisions are taken for a rotation, people need to plan for single-income family levels, and therefore the availability of housing is really important.

I would also like to bring up the fact that as we grow the Canadian Armed Forces, contrary to what is perceived from social media and the public domain, we are attracting people to our doors. We had some issues in processing them, which we're ironing out and working through as we speak.

However, my real limiting factor in growing the Canadian Armed Forces right now is the second bucket of units. It's the duty quarters. I need beds. I need bed space and quarters to host basic training in Saint-Jean and Borden, for example.

Addressing this requirement is very well done. My colleague Mr. Hammerschmidt is working on replicating half the big megastructure you see in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu in another form in Borden, for example, and that's only for basic training. If we don't invest in duty quarters, we won't be able to grow the CAF, but that's being addressed.

I wanted to make sure that I addressed both buckets of requirements.

• (1150)

Jean Yip: Ms. Fox, given that the armed forces are in the process of adding 6,300 members, will the acceleration of the housing strategy be enough?

Christiane Fox: That's exactly why we need flexibility, and the strategy we've deployed is very much that we can't lose our sight and our focus on the new builds—the 7,500 units—but we also have to think creatively about how we are going to supplement that. This means purchasing commercial units to offer more military housing options; it means looking at a continuous evolution of our recruitment plans, when we see the increase and how we match it to need.

I also think we have to be creative around modular housing and other types of innovations to move faster. Yes, the plan is in lock-step, and we work together very closely in asking, as we grow the military, what the housing stock looks like and how we can use creative techniques to make sure we meet the demand.

Jean Yip: What are some of the creative techniques you're using with the private partnerships?

Christiane Fox: These alternative solutions are really for looking at those partnerships for residential units. I mentioned Esquimalt. We have 37 units there and 140 in Dartmouth. We are looking at how DND can advance procurement in order to access and get on the market. The partnerships allow us to offer more immediate housing options and relieve some of the pressure.

We talk about Yellowknife and Masset. These are sites we're pursuing across the country. We've deployed in these locations, but we're looking at other locations to see how we can meet the demand as it comes in.

It won't necessarily be limited to what we're presenting today, but these are what we've advanced so far.

I'm not sure if you want to add anything, Paola.

Paola Zurro: Yes. I would add the dual-use pathfinder announced in budget 2024. The department is going to be using underutilized land to leverage the private sector to build housing for Canadian Armed Forces members and Canadians.

Three locations were announced: Toronto, Esquimalt and Halifax. We are getting ready to leverage. We've already hired brokers to work with industry for the private sector to build, operate and maintain all the houses. There will be more progress soon on that front.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That is your time, Ms. Yip.

[*Translation*]

We now go to Mr. Lemire for two and a half minutes.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Fox, I'd like to talk about the situation in Quebec City. In Valcartier, the municipality welcomes the housing construction, but expanding services is a problem for the municipality of Shannon. Last month, Sarah Perrault, the mayor, reported that the real estate assessment of the military base was 7% below the value assessed by the city.

How do you explain the difference between your department's assessment and the city's, and are you going to try to fix the problem?

Christiane Fox: Yes, we are working closely with the municipality. Ms. Zurro can provide more information on that.

Paola Zurro: If I understand the question correctly, you're asking about the assessment of our buildings and the difference between military housing and city housing. Is that right?

Sébastien Lemire: No, I was really asking about the property assessment. I want to know about the difference between the number the municipality of Shannon was expecting from the Canadian Armed Forces and what you actually pay.

Paola Zurro: It's still too soon to give a number, because we're starting the planning for the thousand or so housing units that are going to be built. We don't have the plans or drawings yet, but we will definitely keep working with the municipality once we have the plans. We will also work to support the municipality.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you. We wouldn't want it to have negative repercussions obviously, because municipalities already have enough challenges to deal with.

Would it be possible to get a breakdown, by province and by base, of how much you've allocated to housing maintenance and renovations in your new plan? Specifically, I'd like to know the condition of military base housing in Quebec. You can send us that in writing.

Ms. Fox, you recently announced that you were building one- and two-bedroom apartments, but I'd like to know how you did the needs analysis. Who did the assessment? Does it take into account the push to recruit more personnel? Are we necessarily talking about single young people? Might older people be interested?

Could you provide that analysis to the committee, as well as the current housing stock needs?

• (1155)

Christiane Fox: Yes. That's a very good question. We use tools and an assessment mechanism to determine what the current requirements are. We need a variety of options, of course, but we look at the data for the past five years and we look at the profiles of recruits to determine what's needed. We can send the committee more information on that, but we do have a methodology.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Up next, we have Mr. Kuruc. You have the floor for approximately five minutes.

Ned Kuruc (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, CPC): Thank you all for coming today. I appreciate your attendance.

Ms. Fox, I want to turn back to you. You mentioned the ethics report. In your answer to my colleague and in some of the reports I've read since Friday, you haven't really acknowledged any wrongdoing or errors. Is this because you believe your conduct was in line with the government's diversity, equity and inclusion guidelines in the federal public service?

Christiane Fox: As I noted earlier, I'm taking this extremely seriously. I believe I had genuine intentions, but as a leader, I am reflecting heavily on the way I make a change and how this is as important as the change itself.

The totality of my actions when it comes to diversity and inclusion is well beyond this particular context. In every job I've held, I've put diversity at the forefront of what I do. I've put together systemic changes, such as including the call to action in executives' performance management agreements, promoting talent and looking at data within the department to identify gaps and challenges.

Some of the departments I've worked in, such as Indigenous Services Canada and Immigration, have had systemic barriers and resistance to change.

As a leader, I genuinely believe in these issues. It is important to lead by example. I have to reflect on the impacts of my decisions. I am taking this enormously seriously.

Ned Kuruc: That's fair enough. Thank you for the answer.

This specific person couldn't speak French. They were unfamiliar with software. They had no experience in government and lacked expertise. Again, you still haven't acknowledged any wrongdoing or any errors in judgment.

You don't have to answer this if you don't want to, but I find it very concerning, because now you're in a portfolio where we need to move things forward. We're here to collaborate on that. Your answer to my colleague was a bit jarring, because you used the word "continue". Your answer was quite fine there, but again, if you don't acknowledge any wrongdoing or errors, the Canadian public is going to want to know how you will move forward.

Christiane Fox: An individual I went to university with 25 years ago reached out with a genuine interest in joining the federal public service. The ADM responsible for the program had asked me to share CVs that came in for this particular unit. The individual had experience in client service, which is something the government struggles with. We don't do client service particularly well, and in this unit, it was obvious that we didn't. As I looked at the interest and the gap, and as I looked at the data we had in our departments about the experiences of Black men, I decided to refer the person, as requested.

I have to reflect on the actions in this particular context, of course. I have to think about the role I occupy and whether it's best to administer change differently, but this was a context of trying to change an underperforming unit within the department that occupied a lot of my attention.

• (1200)

Ned Kuruc: That's fair enough, but the person couldn't speak French. For service and communications, this is a key factor on the Hill.

I will leave it at that. Thank you very much.

I'm good, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'll move now to Mr. McKinnon. You have the floor for five minutes.

Ron McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I'm going to start with Ms. Hogan.

You mentioned that you studied three bases. Could you tell me what the three bases are?

Karen Hogan: We visited three bases so that we could cover the navy, the army and the air force when we visited. We went to Esquimalt in B.C., Gaagetown in New Brunswick and Trenton in Ontario. Those bases had about 45 buildings across them in which there were quarters, and we looked at a sample of 35. That's where we found that 32 out of 35 needed at least one major repair.

Ron McKinnon: Would you say your data from these bases is fairly representative of the situation at large?

Karen Hogan: I'll see if Stuart can add something here, but I can tell you a bit about the three bases. The average age of the buildings was about 60 years old. About 20% of them had not had their inspections in the required time.

This gives you a sense of the three bases, but I'll see if Stuart wants to add to that.

Stuart Smith (Director, Office of the Auditor General): I'm happy to add to that.

In terms of the data we looked at for the conditions at those bases, certainly they're representative of the situation at those three locations. We also chose the bases by considering factors such as geographic coverage of bases within the Canadian Armed Forces, covering army, navy and air force, and we engaged with the CAF to look at what would be good representative bases to examine.

We're comfortable saying that the results we observed at those bases indicate the actual situation at quarters at other CAF locations.

Ron McKinnon: Okay. Thanks.

I also note that this study was done from, I think, March 2024 to April 2025. That's a year ago. Do we have any idea of how things may have changed, improved or gotten worse?

Karen Hogan: Our period under audit went from April 2023 to March 2025. We released the report in October 2025. Yes, I acknowledge that an entire year has elapsed since we looked at things. In October we got a bit of an update. We saw that there were fewer residential units available than we had seen at the end of March.

The two organizations here can give you much more up-to-date information.

Ron McKinnon: Thank you.

Ms. Fox, when people are assigned to a new base, is it the general expectation that they will find accommodations in the general market around them, or is it the expectation that they will find something on base?

Christiane Fox: We respond to the needs we receive. I think there are choices that military members would make about whether they prefer on the base or residential housing outside the base. The training elements are different. It is in the context of their training requirements, but there is a choice. At the moment, about 16% choose to live in CAF residential housing.

Ron McKinnon: For a place like Esquimalt, you have Victoria, Sidney and that whole area. You have a large area of market-based availability for residences. For someplace like Yellowknife, it's quite different. How does this affect your decisions and the planning for residences?

Christiane Fox: That is exactly it. For all of them, there are different market conditions as well. We look at housing allowances in this context.

The review of where the military needs to build is very much based on the availability in a particular area. This is why the partnership with Yellowknife was so important in light of the lack of housing then, as are our big investments now into infrastructure in Yellowknife for multi-purpose facilities for the CAF, for our Joint Task Force North.

We look at the market conditions. We look at availability. We look at need. Where are we going to deploy armed forces? How do we match the work of the housing strategy with that? We definitely put a geographical lens to this before we make determinations about the various builds.

• (1205)

Ron McKinnon: I don't know if it was you, but someone mentioned 189 units in Yellowknife. This sounds like a lot for Yellowknife, but we have to get to 10,000 units eventually. We'll never get there if we do 200 here and 200 there.

How do we do this? Who is responsible? Whom do we hold accountable for meeting this requirement?

Christiane Fox: You're absolutely right that it has to be a multi-pronged strategy. In terms of the instances in which we're making significant investments, we have 800 new units that are going to be built across locations. In addition, we have several funding sources. To give you a sense of scale, in Gaagetown, Valcartier, Kingston, Petawawa and Edmonton, there are about 1,000 units that we will need to build in those locations. In Halifax, Trenton and Esquimalt, we're probably looking at 500. There's a combination of new builds and scale with some quick solutions to offer housing right away. You know, 37 units is not a ton, but it is important for the need we have there now, and it allows us a bit of flexibility.

There are definitely different strategies to address this growing need.

Ron McKinnon: Whom do we hold accountable for making sure this is done?

Christiane Fox: It's National Defence, with our housing agency.

The Chair: Thank you.

That is your time, Mr. McKinnon, but there will be a few more spots down the road if you have follow-ups.

We'll begin our third round. Again, we'll have five members with various times.

Mr. Stevenson, you'll kick us off for five minutes, please.

William Stevenson (Yellowhead, CPC): Thank you to all of our witnesses. I appreciate your coming, and of course, I appreciate the efforts of our military on behalf of our society.

I'll start with Ms. Hogan.

With regard to the audit, you talked about how certain things haven't improved. Was it more of a process that was lacking, or was it more of a following through with the process? When they're looking at the evaluations of housing, would you say they have an adequate process so that they can say, "This is how we judge it, and this is where our needs are", and they just didn't follow through, or would you say it's more that the process itself is lacking to understand what they need?

Karen Hogan: There are many elements that contributed to not having reliable information on the number of quarters and the condition of those quarters. Many of the bases manage this on their own. A global picture is needed so that you can decide how you use the limited resources you have.

For us, it was difficult to see where they tracked maintenance on residential units and the quarters, because of how National Defence would budget for maintenance and repairs. It's the whole organization, so we couldn't zero in and ask them why they did or didn't spend on these quarters. Their budget was about 2% on repair, but they didn't spend all of it. Why they're not spending all of it will be a conversation to have with National Defence.

We saw assessments done, but 26% of assessments were not done on residential units and 20% were not done on quarters. This means a large amount were done, but without a comprehensive picture, you don't know the needs you have. How do you fund it, and how do you decide where to allocate the limited resources?

William Stevenson: Did you have more recommendations for how to improve the process other than having a global picture, considering that, as we've discussed, you can't just add 200 here or 200 there? We have to have a national strategy.

Would you say your recommendations were accepted and we have something going forward as a plan to have specific numbers by specific dates rather than the full 10,000? Are we going to have 200 by the end of June and another 2,000 by the end of this year? We need some dates in order to measure when we're going to accomplish this.

• (1210)

Karen Hogan: All of our recommendations were agreed to, but we give the department limited space to respond in our report, as you can imagine. The committee plays a big and important role in this. You get a very detailed action plan when the department comes here, and I would expect you to see some concrete dates and deliverables so that you can hold the department accountable.

What's important in my recommendations is that I've had a tendency since I've been Auditor General not to issue a recommendation that says, "Do what you already committed to doing", because we'll go through all of this work for a department to say, "Well, we'll continue to do what we're doing." We really try to drive a change that we hope will help improve how this all goes forward. You'll tend not to see a recommendation that just says, "Go inspect your buildings as you said you would."

William Stevenson: Thank you.

My next question is for Lieutenant-General Simoneau.

You mentioned the lack of training. You said duty quarters is what you have to use. In your opinion, we've had this goal of expanding our military and adding personnel. Is the amount of housing that we have going to be a limiting factor? What's coming first? It's the cart before the horse. Are we going to get those people and not have them in tents before we get them in training, or are we going to try to get the housing first? To me, we need the additional military personnel, so we have to have them too.

What plan do you see, and what's going to be the limiting factor?

LGen Erick Simoneau: Thank you. That's an excellent question. The limiting factor is that we need, just for basic training, 2,000 quarters, beds to host recruits. This comes first, before the other—

William Stevenson: Do you have a time frame that you can see, in which this is going to work for the number of recruits to get them in within the next year or two?

LGen Erick Simoneau: The CDS has given me the mandate to grow the force, the regular force, to 71,500 by April 2029, so that's what I'm going for. We were at 63,000 four years ago. We closed the gap by 2,000 last year and 2,000 this year. We're at 67,000 as we speak, so we're well en route to meet this number.

The Chair: I'm afraid that is your time, Mr. Stevenson. We'll come back to you. There will be time later.

Ms. Sudds, welcome to public accounts. You have the floor for five minutes, please.

Hon. Jenna Sudds (Kanata, Lib.): Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

As we've heard a bit about in the previous questions, there has been a commitment to grow the presence of the CAF in the Arctic and in the north, so two questions in my mind stem from this. First, can you outline what the plan looks like to ensure that there is the required housing in the Arctic and in the north to meet the growth? Second, I'm thinking about the impact of the increased presence in the north on local infrastructure and whether there is a plan to assist. Typically, it falls to municipalities, but is there a plan to ensure adequate local infrastructure investment?

Christiane Fox: Thank you for the question, Mr. Chair.

I would say there is going to be significant investment in our three territories as part of our emphasis on Arctic sovereignty and defence. The Prime Minister announced \$32 billion, and this is very much about military capability. However, as for your point, we're spending a lot of time working with territorial governments, Inuit organizations, first nations and Métis to really outline the impacts, as you noted.

Some benefits of this increased investment, beyond the military capability, are that we're going to look at what the power and infrastructure needs are for defence, which can also benefit communities. What are the waste-water system upgrades that can support communities and the military? What can we do around broadband and connectivity?

It's going to be very important for us not only to have plans but also to sit down and talk it through, with leadership in the north, to help inform the decisions we're going to make. We've done a lot of engagement. We're going to continue to do more, especially as we get closer to some of the planning and some of the contracting, and then, within government, work together with the Major Projects Office, which will also be making some investments.

One challenge is that building infrastructure is complex. In the north, it's even harder—the skills and workforce availability—to achieve what we're trying to achieve. It is a real opportunity for the country, but in order for us to have success, we really need to be guided by those who live in the north.

• (1215)

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Thank you very much for that. Indeed, it's such a massive opportunity for the north as we move forward.

They were mentioned briefly, but maybe we can expand upon some of the innovative new ways in which we are looking at rapidly building housing at scale. Is there a plan specifically for the north, perhaps entailing some modular...some other ways of ensuring that we meet these targets as quickly as we can?

Christiane Fox: Definitely, the answer is yes. Things are on the table in terms of... We had a conversation with a team from the Nunavut government about some of the modular housing they're exploring for their communities and whether this would be an option for DND. We'll have to determine the specific housing allocations required. We'll have to look at what's happening with the other initiatives, such as Nunavut 3000, which is a commitment to building more homes in Nunavut. We'll have to sit down, but yes, we are open to different ways to build faster, and modular is one of those. Prefab is another.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I know its representatives are not here today, but is the Defence Construction Canada organization involved in these discussions?

Peter Hammerschmidt (Assistant Deputy Minister, Infrastructure and Environment, Department of National Defence): Yes, absolutely. Defence Construction Canada is a core partner for us. It's effectively our procurement arm. It issues construction contracts and manages those contracts to ensure that they're delivered on time and on schedule and that they meet standards. We are intimately integrated with DCC on all of our construction activity.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: I don't recall who mentioned it—I apologize—but I'll switch gears slightly to the pilot program with Trenton. I believe I heard that mentioned. It makes incredible sense for the CAF to have the first right of refusal.

Can you speak to how this came to be and any progress to date leveraging it?

Paola Zurro: This was an idea the agency started to explore when we heard that the air force uses this for runways. It gets the first right of refusal to use runways. We thought it could be applicable to housing as well.

Given that our members sometimes have just one week to house-hunt, it is very hard. The houses are not necessarily available the week they come with their families to look for a house.

The concept evolved into having a first right of refusal, which means that we're working with landlords to make sure those houses are still available for Canadian Armed Forces members. In this sense, the agency is committing to keeping the houses for certain times of the year if the previous family has left and the next family is coming in a month or two from that time. We are committing to working with landlords. We will be responsible for vacant units to make sure those units stay available for Canadian Armed Forces members and their families.

We started small because it's a pilot. We initially had access to 10 units. In the contract, we have up to 75 that we can access. As units become vacant, landlords contact the agency and we confirm whether we would like more, depending on our wait-list.

The Chair: Thank you. That is time.

[*Translation*]

We now go to Mr. Lemire, who is on Zoom, for two and a half minutes.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Hammerschmidt, I'm going to re-ask my earlier question about the situation at the Valcartier base and the municipality of Shannon. I went over the interpretation from earlier, and I think a few things were off. The interpreter referred to a “real estate assessment”, but I was talking about property tax.

Sarah Perrault, the mayor, said last month that the base's property value assessment was 7% below what the city was expecting. Obviously, I'm talking about property tax.

How do you explain the difference, and how are you going to fix the problem? Municipalities rely heavily on that money to expand services around the municipality. How are you going to bridge the gap between their assessment and yours?

• (1220)

Peter Hammerschmidt: Thank you. That's an excellent question.

Of course, it's very important to determine the tax rate accurately. We work with Public Services and Procurement Canada on that process. Right now, we're planning how many housing units we're going to build. Once the process is under way, once we know exactly how many we're going to build and where they're going to go, we will work with Public Services and Procurement Canada and the city to determine the exact rate for the payment in lieu of taxes.

Sébastien Lemire: Does this situation affect other municipalities? Do you know whether other municipalities, in Quebec or elsewhere, are experiencing a disparity between the amount provided and the actual amount? Are these frictions common? Is this a way to save a few pennies on the backs of municipalities, which are already suffocating with all the new demands, particularly when it comes to housing construction?

We know that Build Canada Homes is supposed to be fantastic, but it doesn't bring sewers and infrastructure to municipalities. So it's a failure to begin with. Do you agree?

Peter Hammerschmidt: Yes, it's rare, but there are such cases in our municipality. However, our policy is to be a good neighbour. So we're not trying to reduce the payment in lieu of taxes, because we want to support municipalities and all the infrastructure that's needed to support us.

Sébastien Lemire: Perfect, thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to the next member.

[*English*]

Mr. Bezan, you have the floor for five minutes.

James Bezan: Thank you.

Auditor General Hogan, in paragraph 62 of your report, you recommend that National Defence evaluate its policies on living accommodations and how they impact retention, especially for longer-serving members. In the response from National Defence on this recommendation, it said it is taking until December 2027 to come up with policies that will inform the development of housing stock.

Is this fast enough, considering the shortage and the urgency of retention that we have?

Karen Hogan: If I were a member waiting, I would tell you it is not fast enough.

James Bezan: I appreciate that.

In the department's own report on the evaluation of Canadian Armed Forces retention, which talks about everything from doctors to day care and housing, it said that 9.4% of junior ranks are prepared to leave the forces. If the department is going to take two years to evaluate the policy, are we risking losing up to 20% of our members in the Canadian Armed Forces?

I'll ask the Auditor General if she wants to reflect on that, and then I'll ask the department and CAF to respond.

Karen Hogan: It's a difficult question for me to reflect on. I know that if updating a policy will take two years, then action won't happen until after then. I would hope it would happen simultaneously or much faster.

James Bezan: Would you like to respond, Lieutenant-General?

LGen Erick Simoneau: If I may, thank you.

James Bezan: You are the chief of military personnel.

LGen Erick Simoneau: I would say that policy development is seldom done in isolation. It's always in parallel with concrete action, and that's why we do pilots. We refine policies and try them on the go, so this is what we're undertaking as we speak about the living accommodation policy—

• (1225)

James Bezan: If I may interject, I've had a lot of conversations across this country with base commanders and those serving in the armed forces, and the common theme is that they've it's fallen on deaf ears. We've known for a decade about this housing crisis, but the Liberal government hasn't been listening.

When we did the study on National Defence that we reported on in 2024, there had been fewer than 40 residential housing units built over the prior two years. We knew we had a crisis then; at that time, it was estimated that they were around 6,200 or 6,300 housing units short.

If it's not happening in isolation and we're doing it in parallel... Forty houses won't cut the mustard.

Christiane Fox: We've looked at all the recommendations, and we have time frames set for action; a lot of them are linked to each other. We need to speak to people and get stakeholders telling us some of the things they would like us to change.

However, there are things we can do much faster on the facilities conditions, such as the inspections. We have a time frame in order to execute, and we have investments to make, and I think that is the difference this time compared to previously.

James Bezan: I'll say this: We had at committee Serge Tremblay, who is the general manager of infrastructure and technical services with the Canadian Forces Housing Agency. He's the one who confirmed that there were only 40 houses built.

If I'm not mistaken, in your testimony today from CFHA, there are only 200 homes scheduled to be built this year. Is that correct? Is this what you said in your comments so far?

Paola Zurro: No, I mentioned that we finished the fiscal year by adding almost 200 homes—

James Bezan: That is almost 200 in one year. Is that correct?

Paola Zurro:—through alternative solutions, so not necessarily through construction but through acquisition and leasing space.

James Bezan: This creates another difficulty. Then the big question comes down to this: If we're only going to build or acquire somewhere around 200 homes for the Canadian Forces, and we have a shortage of 7,200, we're talking 36 years before we address the need, never mind the aging housing stock that we'll have to retire. Square the circle for me: How do we get there?

Paola Zurro: I will clarify.

In phase one of the national construction program for housing—I'm not mandated to speak of quarters; I'm speaking just about housing—we committed to build it over the next five years. By 2029-30, we will have those 800 houses available for the Canadian Armed Forces members and their families.

Phase two—

James Bezan: You haven't built that volume of housing since, what, World War II?

Paola Zurro: Yes, you are right. It is the largest military housing campaign ever since the portfolio was built in the 1950s. We are adapting the organization—as is our partner, DCC—in order to deliver on these big construction programs.

I'll add that phase two, which was just announced, is going to be concurrent with phase one. As we deliver those 800 houses, we're also going to be delivering thousands and thousands of houses across the country.

James Bezan: “Thousands and thousands” are how many?

Paola Zurro: It will be up to 7,500. That's the plan.

However, I will also mention that the housing requirement exercise we finished in October is going to be an annual exercise. We will be looking at real estate markets, as well as the CAF's composition and growth, and we will be going back to the department to approve a housing requirement update every year. We will evolve to meet the current and the future housing needs of the Canadian Armed Forces.

James Bezan: We don't have a whole lot of faith in the Liberals to deliver on housing. They have missed their mark every year over the last decade on everything they've promised on housing.

It's an ambitious plan. How are you going to deliver it?

Paola Zurro: We are delivering through industry.

As I mentioned, DCC is our contract partner and delivery arm, but everything we will be doing is with industry. That's why DCC has set up an engagement day today to engage with industry. We have more than 800 private sector firms engaging today to understand more of what we want to deliver and where.

We are going to be working through modified design-build contracts to plan, design and construct, leaning on their capacity to deliver fast. We're also going to be leaning on modern methods of construction.

We're working with Build Canada Homes to align our requirements on modern methods of construction. This will help us deliver faster. We know that throughout the country there may not be capacity for modular everywhere we build, and we are still open to using all types of construction in our contracts.

• (1230)

The Chair: Thank you.

That is your time, Mr. Bezan.

Up next is Mr. Osborne. You have the floor for about five minutes, please.

Tom Osborne: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm always hesitant to get political at these committee meetings because they're not meant for that, but I have to point out that the previous Conservative government dropped below 1% of spending on our national defence. The new government has committed to going to 5%—

James Bezan: It was 10 years ago—

The Chair: Order, Mr. Bezan.

Mr. Osborne, you have the floor, please.

Tom Osborne: Yes, and I didn't interrupt the previous speaker, so I respect you, Mr. Chair, for containing that.

The new government has committed to going to 5% of GDP in addition to putting in place Build Canada Homes and other strategies to allow National Defence to meet your mark in providing the housing necessary for our Canadian Armed Forces, for the women and men who serve.

I have a couple of questions.

In terms of Canadian Armed Forces establishments—garrisons, bases, etc.—and in looking at the garrison located in St. John's, for example, there are no quarters there. There is no housing attached to it, so for new members going to this location... I'm not drawing attention to this particular garrison, because there are others that need it, but are there plans for this garrison and others to put in place not only quarters for training purposes but also housing units, for the short term at least, when a family comes to a garrison or a base and can settle in with a bit of flexibility while looking for longer-term housing in the market?

Paola Zurro: Thank you for the question.

In October, when the agency updated the housing requirement, we realized that there are some locations where we do not operate right now and where there would be members needing housing support. St. John's is one of them, and the living accommodation board endorsed the housing requirement for us to look at St. John's. In the next months, we're going to be exploring and defining what will happen in St. John's, but housing is going to be part of the solution.

Tom Osborne: Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

Some of my neighbours and friends who are members of the Canadian Armed Forces talk about the challenge for spouses and children when they are asked to move. Some members choose to move for advancement purposes. Some are told they have to move. With the increase in spending for National Defence and the increase in the number of members, we're looking at recruitment and retention. Recruitment is one side of it, attracting people to our Canadian Armed Forces, but is there—or will there be—an opportunity for longer placements for spouses who have careers and for children who have friends, activities and so on? This is connected to housing. These families may invest more in a house in the private market if they know they'll have some stability. We may retain some of them longer if they have a sense of stability.

Let me also say that I understand that there are strategic reasons for moving and National Defence reasons for moving. There are training reasons for asking members to move. However, with more recruitment and larger spending, will there be some opportunity for balance in the length of time our recruits stay in one location?

Christiane Fox: I'll turn to my colleague in a minute, but I want to add that in terms of the stress on military families who move domestically or abroad, in the domestic context, one thing our minister undertook was to write to all premiers across the country, through a seamless Canada initiative, to try to make it easier for a family who has moved from one province or territory to another to have services accelerated. Things like driver's licences can be quite burdensome. We're looking at ways to relieve that burden.

On the duration of the post, I'll turn to Lieutenant-General Simoneau.

LGen Erick Simoneau: Thank you very much.

Up front, I will tell you that we don't move people if we don't have to, by rule or by policy. When we move people across the world, it's because they're needed at a post somewhere in a country. This is on a voluntary basis. If they need to go on career courses with a view to advancing in rank, again, it is on a voluntary basis. If you are being offered a promotion, very rarely can you stay in the same location when you're promoted, but you also don't have to accept your promotion.

There are ways to be very stable. Some members take advantage of stability, but I wouldn't coin it as being the norm. People want to improve their quality of life. They want to improve their family situation. They go to courses and have promotions, as they should, I think. This is when all those support mechanisms are warranted and fall in place. It's in order to enable them to do so and to have success as individuals but also as a family unit.

• (1235)

Tom Osborne: Okay. I appreciate that.

I have one final question. It's about looking to build out the availability of housing for members of our Canadian Armed Forces. You spoke about partnering with Build Canada Homes. Can you talk in greater detail about how the Canadian Forces Housing Agency will be working with Build Canada Homes? We touched on communities and the need there, when we're looking at pressures on infrastructure and so on. To connect all the dots, the Canadian Forces Housing Agency is working with Build Canada Homes and is looking at other agencies of government and municipalities and provinces. Can you elaborate on how National Defence intends to connect those dots as we move forward?

Paola Zurro: The Canadian Forces Housing Agency is in weekly discussions with Build Canada Homes. We want to align our modern methods for construction requirements. We would like to work with industry and be consistent from a government perspective on what we are asking industry to deliver for us. We would also like to coordinate so that we don't compete on the same markets.

I would say we are definitely collaborating in the area of modern methods of construction. We are starting early explorations to see whether there are other areas in which we could have synergies between our two programs. This is as much as I can mention today, but I think there is hope that we will find other opportunities.

The Chair: Thank you. That is your time.

To begin our final round, with five members for various times, Mr. Bezan will lead us off for five minutes. We'll finish a few minutes after one o'clock.

You have the floor for five, Mr. Bezan.

James Bezan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

When you're talking about going into different markets and buying off the market... We were in Gander last week, and there were only 30 houses for sale. I met with the municipality, and there's very limited housing stock currently available. Have you been evaluating the marketplace to ensure you're not exacerbating the problem for the public while still trying to address the needs we have in the Canadian Armed Forces? There's an immediate problem that you have to address, not just the long-term solutions.

Paola Zurro: Yes, you're right that not all housing solutions will be effective or appropriate for all markets. This is why we launched a flexible, layered housing response plan, which is composed of very different tools. Some housing markets will be appropriate for leasing and some others for acquisition. In other markets that don't have availability, we will need to rely mostly on building, which is the case for the north.

James Bezan: We have the home equity assistance program for those who buy in the marketplace, who often get caught in upward and downward markets and have to sell out. Until 2018, 100% of the losses they may have incurred were covered by the Government of Canada. In April 2018, that changed to only 80%, or \$30,000, whichever is less. Knowing that the market is unstable, are we going to restore the 100% for those who have to go and are forced to buy in the marketplace because there's an inadequate supply of proper housing for our proud members of the Canadian Armed Forces?

LGen Erick Simoneau: I share the concern, especially in today's market. We're working with the Treasury Board Secretariat to find a way forward on this one. I would tell you that, of my concerns right now in the compensation and benefits sphere, this is probably number one because of the market we're seeing. I share the same concern.

• (1240)

James Bezan: We know that this affects those who got the much-deserved raises, but then the post living differential changes as well undermined our senior members, both non-commissioned and commissioned—especially those in middle management. Are we also looking at changing the post living differential to make sure it's fair for all ranks? I'm hearing from guys who are master corporals that their take-home pay is less now than what it was before. Even though they got a pay raise, the post living differential took more out of their pockets.

LGen Erick Simoneau: The answer is yes: We need to look at it on an annual basis. We interact weekly with the Treasury Board Secretariat. The pay increase we received last year, coupled with the military service pay and the CFHD, solved a portion of the problem. I'm still concerned about today's market and how it's shaping up. We're gathering data, and we're going through wings and bases in order to understand the problem. As I mentioned, this is something we need to keep a close eye on, but we also need to find a solution. We don't own those policies, which makes it harder.

James Bezan: Right, it's up to the government to make those changes.

Now, the military service pay you mentioned also involves a retroactive payment up to April 2025. Is this correct? I understand that the money hasn't been flowing, and it would help offset some of the living costs our troops are facing. When are we going to have the problem rectified?

LGen Erick Simoneau: The military service pay is the eighth initiative of a suite of eight initiatives. It's the last one. It's also the most complex one, because it's a bonus that is pensionable, and our system, which is COBOL-based, is a very archaic system and is not equipped to do this, nor is our pension plan legislation.

James Bezan: You guys aren't looking at Phoenix, I hope.

LGen Erick Simoneau: No, it's more stable.

We're looking into this. We're looking at December. The bulk of the pay increase was not through the military service pay—we're talking about the low thousands, at best, on this one. It was really the pay increase, the 13% and the 9% for the executives, that is solving most of the gap that you've identified.

James Bezan: The other one, of course, is the rent hike that we saw as well. For those who are in military housing, they saw rents go up commensurate to the pay increases. Can we freeze those rent hikes? I asked Minister McGuinly that, and he said no, but I'm wondering how it's impacting the morale of our serving members.

LGen Erick Simoneau: Do you mean the rent from the CFHA's...? There's a limit of a 25% maximum shelter charge—

James Bezan: You're stealing from Peter to pay Paul. You're going to take away the benefits of getting a salary increase. You're going to pull it away from them with the rent hike.

LGen Erick Simoneau: I don't think the price of the shelter charge went up to the same extent as the pay increase. Therefore, our members are in a better situation today than they were a year and a half ago, for example.

James Bezan: If you have a pay increase that moved you into a new tax bracket, plus you have an increase in rent if you're living in CFHA housing, all of a sudden, you're behind the eight ball compared to where you were before all these changes came into place.

You've probably heard those stories. I know we have.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bezan. That's your time.

Lieutenant-General, would you like to provide a last answer to that while time remains?

LGen Erick Simoneau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

All I would say is I'm no tax expert, so I do not understand exactly the new tax bracket associated with the pay increase. However, my understanding is that members are much happier today than they were a year and a half ago with the salary they have. They can afford more in the market. They're also protected in the RHU by the 25% maximum.

The concern is really about people who will enter the market and have to sell at a lower price. This is what I'm putting efforts into right now.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Yip, it's back to you for five minutes.

Jean Yip: Thank you.

This question is directed to Mr. Hammerschmidt. Could you update us on the modernization efforts in terms of, first, communal showers, as individual showers need to be built; second, properly functioning sanitary waste systems; and third, access to Wi-Fi? I think these are pretty basic needs.

• (1245)

Peter Hammerschmidt: I agree. They are important needs that should be met. We have a housing stock that is fairly old. I think the Auditor General mentioned 60 years. Across this entire system, 54 years is the average age of our quarters. They were built at a time that had different training requirements and different living standards. We know there are pretty significant investments that need to be made.

One fortunate thing is that last year, we completed a survey of all of our quarters' facilities across the entire country. We have a very good picture now of the condition of all of our quarters—where the needs are met, where they're unmet and whether the quarters that exist at those locations are suitable for operational needs. We have a good picture of the living standards at all of those locations. We're in a much better position now to prioritize the dollars that are coming in. Fortunately, more dollars are coming in, which will allow us to address those issues.

Just on maintenance and repairs, this year, my budget will increase by 60%. Next year, it will double. The year after, it will double again. We'll be in a position to get after a lot of maintenance and repairs. Equally, in the minor capital, it's more than upkeep but less than a major new building. This range of investment is going to increase again quite significantly. There were 24 projects last year. This year, there are 35.

We are ramping up our ability to make those investments. Living standards is a key area we'll be focused on, as well as health and safety, of course. Those kinds of issues will be addressed.

On Wi-Fi, I can flag that in terms of barracks, our actual training accommodations, about 75% of all buildings that require Wi-Fi have it, and there are plans in place right now to advance and accelerate it in the remaining 25%.

Jean Yip: Thank you for the update. That's interesting to know.

Ms. Zurro, housing doesn't exist on its own. Living in a community requires support. With the increase in housing, will there be enough child care supports, medical services and access to other municipal services?

Paola Zurro: As I mentioned, the agency's mandate is within housing only. However, we find an opportunity with our phase two national housing construction program to incorporate and build thriving communities, not just housing. We are collaborating with the internal stakeholders responsible for child care and for commercial space to incorporate all of those needs as well, where there are opportunities in our phase two.

So far, there are early discussions. We are trying to define the needs by the base at which we're going to be building. Again, you will see more thriving communities in the future now that there is funding and we're going to be building more available housing.

Jean Yip: Thank you.

Ms. Fox, I know that you've been in the position for only a short time, but has the 2015 Auditor General's report on roughly the same topic been addressed? Have the recommendations been met?

Christiane Fox: We have looked at previous reports. Things have changed so significantly that, yes, maybe they were addressed at the time, but at this point, there's a lot more work to be done based on what the Auditor General found and the recommendations. The focus is very much on ensuring that we respond as quickly as possible.

Jean Yip: Okay.

Ms. Zurro or Mr. Hammerschmidt, what are the timelines for housing availability for the three underutilized federal lands—for example, the Halifax and Toronto lands?

Peter Hammerschmidt: I can start. Yes, as Ms. Zurro mentioned, we've launched these dual-use pathfinder initiatives. The goal is to work with the private sector to redevelop underutilized parcels of department land. We've launched broker processes in Esquimalt, Halifax and Toronto. So far, we've had the most uptake on this in Halifax, given the market conditions there. We are in the process now of moving toward a development of about 200 units. We hope that sometime in the near term, we'll be able to advance this with a developer.

The Chair: Your time is up, Ms. Yip, unless you have a short question.

Jean Yip: No. Thank you.

The Chair: Very good. We'll move on.

• (1250)

[*Translation*]

Once again, Mr. Lemire, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Fox, first, I'd like to mention something. I've been trying to have a discussion with someone from the Canadian Armed Forces for several months, if not years. We had a good discussion at this committee with Ms. Beck about the situation in Abitibi-Témiscamingue and how the region could contribute to the development of the military presence, search and rescue, the repair of military equipment, training, recruitment and many other things.

However, for a number of years, I haven't been able to get an email response in order to have a direct meeting with someone from the forces. Would it be possible to contact you so that you can follow up with me and my team, and we can have this meeting about the potential the region could offer the Canadian Armed Forces?

Christiane Fox: Thank you for the question. Certainly, I would be pleased to work with you to organize that meeting.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you very much.

I have a point of clarification on something that was mentioned in the Auditor General's report. The report states that National Defence lacks detailed knowledge of its housing portfolio, and that some bases use spreadsheets, hotel management software or in-house applications. Among the measures you've put in place since then, has data collection and the software being used been standardized?

Christiane Fox: Indeed, as my colleague mentioned, we conducted an inventory of the current situation across the country. Beyond that, it's about ensuring a standardized approach to data collection and monitoring, as well as national-level reporting, so we have a clear picture of what's happening, what needs to be done and what needs attention. We also need to make sure that measures are in place so that, if we say inspections will be carried out every three years or annually, that happens systematically. There needs to be an

alert mechanism in place so that we can carry out checks and act immediately when gaps are identified.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you.

I have one last question. Your 19-year plan allocates \$2.2 billion to renovate 2,500 units and build 1,400 new ones. That works out to \$115 million per year. If we calculate the average cost of construction and renovation per unit, we arrive at \$575,000. Last month, you announced a major investment of \$3.7 billion for 7,500 one- and two-bedroom units. So we're talking about a cost of \$495,000 per unit. If, compared to 2024, there's already a difference of \$75,000, and today we're in an even more uncertain market where costs have clearly exploded, how are you going to manage to do more?

Paola Zurro: That's a good question.

Housing market costs are very uncertain right now. As you know, there is a great deal of uncertainty due to many factors. However, we are currently building or planning to build higher-density apartment buildings with many more units. So, this means that the price per unit will be much more affordable than what we've seen in previous years, when we were building single-family homes or six-unit apartment buildings. With phase 1, we're starting to build apartment buildings with six units, twelve units, and up to forty units. In phase 2, we plan to build up to 100 units per building.

Sébastien Lemire: I'm out of time. Thank you very much for being here.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Deltell, you have the floor for five minutes. I think you're going to split your time. It's up to you.

Gérard Deltell: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

We also have to go back to the Ethics Commissioner's report, which was very critical of Ms. Fox. According to this report, giving preferential treatment to someone is in itself inappropriate, and the evidence shows that she abused her influence as a deputy minister to favour a friend and exerted undue influence on senior management to have a friend hired in a position for which he was not qualified.

Ms. Fox, do you regret doing that, yes or no?

Christiane Fox: As I mentioned at the outset, I take note of the report's findings.

Gérard Deltell: Do you have any regrets?

Christiane Fox: I take responsibility for what was stated, and I take it seriously. In addition, I'm reflecting on my actions and on how those actions affect the system. I was motivated by a significant organizational change. I was motivated by the desire and need to have a public service that reflects Canadians. I will give serious thought to how I make decisions going forward. So I take the report extremely seriously.

• (1255)

Gérard Deltell: This isn't a report that was tabled three minutes ago. I believe you've had time to reflect. You have no regrets, no apologies.

I'll just leave you with a thought, Ms. Fox. You know, you don't tell a friend what they want to hear, but what they need to hear. It's much the same when you offer someone a job that doesn't match their skills. You end up doing them far more harm.

Christiane Fox: I'd like to note that he's not a friend.

Gérard Deltell: It was the Ethics Commissioner who talked about that.

Christiane Fox: No, the Ethics Commissioner noted in his report that he was not a friend.

Gérard Deltell: He's an acquaintance.

You know, madam, it doesn't hurt to say, "I shouldn't have done that."

The Chair: There you go.

[English]

Mr. Stevenson, you have the floor for just under three minutes.

William Stevenson: Thank you.

I have a two-pronged question. In a previous report of the Auditor General, we looked at RCMP training. They were short 3,200 members whom they needed to train. Their capability at Depot was only 1,500 a year, and they could only afford to train 1,200 and change. I fear that we're going down a similar path in housing in regard to this goal of 10,000 houses.

You stated that you do not have numbers as to a cost per unit for the housing. Can you tell me how we're going to get to 10,000 and, number one, if you think there is going to be enough funding allocated so that you will be able to purchase or build to get those 10,000 units? I believe you said that 2029 is when you're going to be needing those housing units. Can you tell me that there is a plan to...that there are enough funds to get to those numbers? I'll start with that part of it.

Paola Zurro: I'll clarify that I did not intend to say that we don't have the cost per unit. I mentioned that it was early to tell how much the cost per unit will be, given that for phase two, we are just starting to launch our planning phase.

What we have seen in the contracts awarded in recent months is that the cost per unit is quite a bit lower than what we anticipated, because the construction we're doing is more dense.

William Stevenson: Do you have the numbers? You talked about the different bases. Do you have it broken down?

You may not have all those numbers now, but maybe you can provide the committee with those numbers, if you have them later, to say that it's going to cost x amount in New Brunswick and x amount in B.C. versus Yukon or Edmonton or wherever it might be.

Paola Zurro: We have estimations of how much it would cost. They're based on a rough order of magnitude of \$500,000 per unit for phase two.

For phase one, we've already awarded the contracts. We have the exact amount for the contracts that have been awarded. We can provide them. It would be my pleasure to provide them to the committee.

William Stevenson: That would be good.

I'm not sure if you're the one who would be good to answer this. In the numbers for rent that you collect, can you tell us how much goes back to maintenance from those funds versus providing new facilities or the replacement of facilities? Do you even have numbers you could work backwards from to say what the percentages are for that?

Paola Zurro: Yes, we have those numbers, and as I mentioned, we publish annual numbers in our annual report. Our operating budget is based on the rents that we collect, so the agency is self-funded through the rents of the occupants.

William Stevenson: I'm sorry. Maybe I wasn't clear.

I want to know if there's a strategy to say, "We collect x dollars for rent, and we're allocating those in the future...." Are those funds allocated just for maintenance, or are they allocated potentially for replacement in the future, on that part of it? I suspect this is not the case.

• (1300)

Paola Zurro: That's a good question. We use our rents for the operations, for maintenance and for renovations, and we are funded by the government with regard to our capital funding for new construction and recapitalization. We reported in our last report that 84% of the operations budget was going back to the repairs and the renovations of the portfolio, including 11% for the housing operations—so, for cutting the grass and for snow removal. The majority of our funds goes back to the portfolio.

The Chair: Finally, Mr. McKinnon, you have the last five minutes.

Ron McKinnon: I'm going to carry on. I talked earlier about accountability and who's responsible. I think the answer was that DND is responsible, but that's a little too blurry for my taste.

I think, for the housing, that the Canadian Forces Housing Agency is the one responsible for that. As you are the chief executive officer, I think we need to be able to hold you accountable. Would you say that's correct?

Paola Zurro: That is correct. I'm accountable for the residential housing portfolio, not for the training quarters or the quarters.

Ron McKinnon: I understand.

Do you need any further clarification of the mandate? Is the mandate sufficiently clear for the Canadian Forces Housing Agency?

Paola Zurro: The mandate is clear. We revised it last year to include that we are moving from managing Crown housing to providing and meeting the needs of Canadian Armed Forces members.

Ron McKinnon: Is there anything more you need from the government, from us, to help you meet this mandate?

Paola Zurro: That's a great question. I ask myself the same question every day. So far I can tell you that in the past two years, everything we've asked for has been given, so we will continue to reflect on that and work with the department to request further authorities or funding if necessary.

Ron McKinnon: One thing we heard earlier was that, of 35 housing units, 32 needed major repairs that weren't done. Is this a problem of a lack of resources, a lack of people to do it? There's also a consideration of many inspections that weren't done. Do you need more resources? Do you need more money to do this?

Peter Hammerschmidt: Maybe I'll jump in, simply because that was a reference to quarters. With regard to quarters, as with all infrastructure, we manage the portfolio with a risk-based, data-driven approach that allows us to make decisions around how to focus and how to target what are, at the end of the day, limited dollars. As for the repairs in question that were not done, this was probably just the result of repairs being done on other priority issues instead, given limited resources. As I mentioned, going forward, this is going to change quite dramatically with significantly more money in maintenance repair, minor capital and major capital funding.

Ron McKinnon: In the last two minutes, I'll see if anyone needs to give any summarizing remarks.

Ms. Fox, would you like to wrap anything up?

Christiane Fox: Thank you.

I would say that, with the department reaching its 2% of NATO spending, we can now invest in our operational readiness, in our capabilities and in the defence industry at large. However, what's most important for that is investment in rebuilding the defence

team, and part of that is housing. Now we have funding over a long term to allow us to plan, to build, to repair and to use innovative ways to provide housing to military members. We'll be working very hard over the next weeks and months to advance this agenda, as I said, and I think housing will be a big part of our priorities.

Thank you.

Ron McKinnon: Are there any other remarks? No. I guess that's it for me, then.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want to thank our witnesses for their testimony today and for their participation in relation to the "Housing Canadian Armed Forces Members" report of the 2025 fall reports of the Auditor General of Canada.

I will excuse the witnesses. I have a couple of points for members, just to wrap up.

You're all excused. Thank you very much. I know we'll see some of you again very shortly.

Just so you know, members, we're having a meeting tomorrow. It's an informal meeting. The public accounts committee from the United Kingdom is coming in to discuss the renovations at Centre Block. I hope members will attend. We had an audit report on it, of course, in the previous year.

In the regular Wednesday meeting, we're going to be looking at the main estimates and then the public accounts with respect to the Bank of Canada.

That's it for now, everyone. Have a great day. We will see many of you tomorrow, I hope, and again on Wednesday.

Thank you. This meeting is adjourned.

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