



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

45th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 032

PUBLIC PART ONLY - PARTIE PUBLIQUE SEULEMENT

Monday, April 20, 2026

Chair: John Williamson



Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Monday, April 20, 2026

• (1100)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (John Williamson (Saint John—St. Croix, CPC)): Good morning, everyone.

I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 32 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, although I believe everyone is in the room.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(g), the committee commenced consideration of the Recruiting for Canada's Military report, of the 2025 fall reports of the Auditor General of Canada. The report was referred to the committee on Tuesday, October 21, 2025.

[*English*]

I'd like to welcome all our—

[*Translation*]

Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent—Akiawenhrahk, CPC): I'd like to have a clarification, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: You have the floor, Mr. Deltell.

Gérard Deltell: Mr. Chair, I'd like to know whether we have any news from the Minister of Finance and National Revenue, who is expected to appear before the committee, pursuant to the order we adopted two weeks ago.

The Chair: Thank you for your question, Mr. Deltell.

We've not yet received a response. However, today, we're going to once again ask the Minister of Finance and National Revenue to respond to our invitation to appear before summer.

Gérard Deltell: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Pardon me, everyone. That was some committee business we were trying to get sorted out.

Now we'll go over to our witnesses.

From the Office of the Auditor General, we have Andrew Hayes, deputy auditor general, and Mohamed Ayachi, director. It's good to see you both.

From the Department of National Defence, we have Christiane Fox, deputy minister; Lieutenant-General Erick Simoneau, chief of military personnel; and Lieutenant-General Stephen Kelsey, vice-chief of the defence staff, Canadian Armed Forces. It's nice to have all of you in today.

I understand there are two opening statements.

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

Andrew Hayes (Deputy Auditor General, Office of the Auditor General): Good morning, Mr. Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee today to discuss a report on recruiting for Canada's military, which was tabled last October.

I'd like to begin by recognizing that we are meeting on the traditional, unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

With me today is Mohamed Ayachi, the director who led the audit team.

In this audit, we looked at whether the Canadian Armed Forces recruited and trained enough members to meet its operational requirements. The Canadian Armed Forces set a goal of recruiting just over 19,700 new members between 2022 and 2025 but fell short by about 25%.

While tens of thousands applied, only one in 13 were successfully recruited and made it to basic training. Some applicants were rejected by the forces, but we found that a high number of candidates withdrew or abandoned their applications. The forces did not analyze why this happened during the recruitment process. Without understanding why applicants are dropping out, the forces does not know what changes are needed to increase the number of successful candidates.

Furthermore, the IT systems used to support recruitment and training activities contributed to inefficiencies and delays. As these systems were not interconnected, applicants had to provide information more than once and staff had to manually enter large amounts of data.

[Translation]

The forces made changes to increase the number of recruits, but these changes were implemented towards the end of our audit period. It was therefore too early to assess their impact on recruitment rates.

In the audit, we also examined demographic data on people recruited by the Canadian Armed Forces. We found that the forces had strategies and programs to attract a diverse group of Canadian men and women. The forces had exceeded their employment equity objectives for the recruitment of indigenous people and members of visible minorities, but the representation of women fell short of the target.

We also found that owing to a lack of equipment, instructors and facilities, the forces did not have sufficient training capacity to meet recruitment targets.

In 2025, temporary instructors were hired to train additional cohorts, but, according to the forces, this approach is not sustainable. In the absence of a sufficient number of highly skilled recruits, including pilots and munitions technicians, the army, the navy and the air force will have difficulty responding efficiently to threats, emergency situations and conflicts.

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

• (1105)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hayes.

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

[English]

Christiane Fox (Deputy Minister, Department of National Defence): Mr. Chair, committee members, Deputy Auditor General and Director Ayachi, good morning. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Auditor General's report on recruitment in the Canadian Armed Forces.

Today I'm joined by my colleagues, the vice-chief of the defence staff, Lieutenant-General Stephen Kelsey, and

[Translation]

Lieutenant-General Erick Simoneau, vice chief of the defence staff.

[English]

As this report indicates, the Canadian Armed Forces set a goal of recruiting over 19,700 new recruits and achieved about 15,000 at the time of the report. We appreciate the time and research the Office of the Auditor General undertook to examine this matter, and we are working diligently to respond.

The report makes six recommendations, all of which National Defence has agreed to and responded to with a detailed action plan.

[Translation]

I'd like to highlight a few of the report's findings.

The report identified that the Department of National Defence has more than eight different information technology systems for managing recruitment and training data, with minimal integration.

Auditors also found that those managing recruitment lacked authority and accountability. There was not enough clear ownership over the recruiting process.

Another issue was delay: The Canadian Armed Forces aims for a timeline of between 100 and 150 days, but it often took twice as long to recruit. Over the three years that were measured, the median number that was reported in the report was between 245 and 271 days. The delay was more problematic when it came to recruiting for roles that are in high demand, such as combat engineer, pilot, and aerospace telecommunications and information systems technician.

Many of the applicants who specified that they were applying for a role in high demand either failed to stay in touch with recruiters or dropped out of the process. As Mr. Hayes has just noted, their reasons for voluntary withdrawal from the process were not documented.

[English]

Without tracking, we don't have data on why people are dropping out and, therefore, it is very difficult to have the required information to address this.

These findings have refocused the defence team. We have committed to applying the lessons and recommendations outlined in this report. Some changes were made during the period covered by the Auditor General's report and some have been made since.

For example, our department made changes to the screening process for permanent residents, significantly increasing recruitment among this population. This was reflected in the report, which showed that, over a six-month period, 763 permanent residents were recruited, compared with the previous 30-month period, in which only 177 recruitments were achieved.

We're also creating one cohesive IT system for recruitment instead of having various disconnected platforms. This means we can better track applications through the recruitment process. We will also be updating the electronic forms so applicants complete them only once and so the information they submit can be transferred automatically to other parts of the recruitment system. We will track our results to refine our approach over time.

• (1110)

[Translation]

We're working hard not only to attract but also to guide, and retain contact with, new applicants. That way, if they withdraw, we can better understand their reasons and make appropriate adjustments.

As you know, budget 2025 contains historic increases to defence spending. Going forward, the department will spend \$81.8 billion over the next five years—to rebuild, rearm, and reinvest in the Canadian Armed Forces. Canadians deserve to be assured that this generational investment is delivering the best capabilities and value for money.

A big part of these investments is going to our people. The department has taken significant steps to increase recruitment in the Canadian Armed forces, by investing in military housing, improving access to child care, and increasing the salaries and benefits of all serving members. We're seeing positive results. Indeed, applications were up nearly 13% in the past fiscal year, compared to the year previous.

[English]

Canadians are developing an increased awareness of what's required to defend Canada's security and sovereignty. This is why these changes are more important than ever.

Mr. Chair and committee members, at National Defence, we are entrusted with a sacred responsibility to defend Canadians and to preserve and assert our sovereignty.

[Translation]

We will continue taking steps and making improvements to attract the skilled people we need in uniform.

[English]

I would like to thank the Auditor General and her office for the detailed insights in this report. They have sharpened our focus as we create a faster and more effective recruitment process to strengthen and grow our Canadian Armed Forces.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Fox.

I will now begin our first round of questions, which will consist of three members for six minutes each.

Mr. Bezan, you'll kick things off for us, I understand. It's over to you, please.

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

I want to thank our witnesses for joining us today.

Thank you to the Auditor General's office for the work you've done on this.

We know that Minister McGuinty came out and did some damage control this morning because this report is quite condemning on the announced numbers for this last fiscal year. Still, at the end of the day, 44,000 people recently successfully applied, but only 7,300

made it into basic training. There is a lot of ambiguity in the numbers. We don't know the details of this, but over 83% are still not making it into the forces, although they've gone through the application process.

We know that the economy is faltering. There have been huge job losses under this Liberal government. Of course, maybe that's one of the reasons people are signing up to join the forces—to actually have employment. We know that a lot of this has been filled by permanent residents, who previously had not.... As Deputy Minister Fox mentioned, there were changes to security clearances for PRs.

Despite what the minister tried to do this morning, we're still not getting enough people through. We still are unsure of what the retention number is. Out of the 7,300 new recruits versus the goal—you surpassed it by just over 300—I'm wondering what the real numbers are for the force strength today. Are we holding our own, or are things still struggling?

Christiane Fox: As was announced this morning by the minister, yes, as of March 31, we are now at 67,800 regular forces. I think we have seen a year-over-year increase, as was noted this morning. Even if you look back in terms of the enrolment from recruits from April 2024, it's about a 9% increase in recruits.

In terms of your specific question around the numbers that get through, we look at it more in the context of a percentage, so maybe I can use percentages. From zero to one year, we're seeing that 16% decide not to pursue or to leave at some point. We have to get the data as to why this is happening and improve the system to get a better result.

• (1115)

James Bezan: Are we still not doing exit surveys on why people are leaving the forces?

Christiane Fox: We are doing more data than we have. The launch of our online application system is allowing us more than we did in the past. There still needs to be improvement in that. We'll continue to modernize over time.

I do want to note that after—

James Bezan: Are we bleeding out forces in middle management, the ones who are doing the training and making sure new recruits are getting through in their occupations? I know that this is where we've bottlenecked in the past. We don't have enough corporals, master corporals or master seamen out there actually doing the training of those new recruits.

Christiane Fox: Yes. To that question, first I would say that the drop-off rate after one year is about 8%. That's actually consistent with what we see in other industries. We have that data. We're taking a look at that in more detail.

You raise a very good point. We need to have instructors in order for us to train more people. That's why some of the incentives that have been announced around allowances for instructors are proving to be successful in the context of recruiting them to play those roles.

James Bezan: I'm hearing that at Saint-Jean right now, where we do all our basic training, a large number have either voluntarily withdrawn or have failed to meet the standards. Some of them are even on language. Some of the PRs are not functional in either French or English.

Based on that, we're hearing that there are temporary shelters being built to house them. I thought that all those who went through basic training or were in basic training, whether they voluntarily withdrew or not, were paid to go home, not to be stored in temporary housing like tents. I'm hearing that up to 13 units are being built to house those who have not gotten through basic training.

Lieutenant-General Erick Simoneau (Chief of Military Personnel, Commander Military Personnel Command, Department of National Defence): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the question.

For the recruits who are being terminated—the 16% that the deputy minister talked about—it is twofold. It's a voluntary release. We do exit surveys now, and we understand why. The bottom line for half of the 16% is that it's not for them. They wanted to try it. They gave it their best shot. They're either being voluntarily released or being exfilled through a period of probation that we put in place. As we work diligently to reduce barriers to entry, we don't want to lower our standards, so the standards remain.

James Bezan: Then 16% are failing. You said half of that is voluntary release. How much is based on medical and how much is based on mental health, because all of that is happening after they show up at basic training?

LGen Erick Simoneau: Half of the releases are medical. Half of those medical releases are for mental health, and the other half are musculoskeletal. Therefore, you have voluntary releases, and you have medical releases. It's half-and-half. Then, the medical release is half-and-half as well. That's what we observe.

The people on the platoons awaiting training are not waiting to be exfilled. We believe that they can be rehabilitated. They are injured or hurt, and we're working with them to “re-course” them in the next serial or two serials in a row. We're trying to gainfully employ them in the meantime. The limiting factor of our recruiting ambitions is the—

James Bezan: Not every one of them is employable, though.

The Chair: Mr. Bezan, that is your time. I'm sure that we'll come back to you.

Next is Ms. Yip.

You have the floor for six minutes, please.

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

Welcome back.

Why does it matter for Canada to have the right number of Canadian Armed Forces members to be able to carry out our operations at home and around the world? How does this impact our ability to recruit and retain people in order to carry out different types of operations?

Christiane Fox: I will start and then maybe turn to the experts.

We absolutely need to have the skills and expertise to assert Canadian sovereignty and to conduct important operations missions here and internationally. Having a group of people with the right skill sets, especially in some of the critical operations, to be able to deliver that is a focus of the department and, of course, of the CAF.

This \$2-billion investment in a lot of the incentives to attract and retain the qualified personnel we need to conduct these operations is essential. It is quite significant in the context of pay adjustments, instructor allowances and environmental allowances. There's a list of incentives that I think are important in recruiting.

I'll turn to the Vice-Chief and the Lieutenant-General for a perspective from the forces as well.

• (1120)

Lieutenant-General Stephen Kelsey (Vice Chief of the Defence Staff, Canadian Armed Forces, Department of National Defence): The shortage of trained personnel, as is fairly evident, is what constrains our ability to operate in and around the world. To a point that Erick made, it's also constraining our ability to grow and expand. The master sailors, corporals, master corporals, who are the engine of generating growth, are the same folks we need to employ elsewhere, so it's a strategic choice.

We could, based on the number of folks who have demonstrated interest in joining the force, take them all at once, but it would pull people out of the ready force. It would stop our ability to be present around the world, and particularly here in Canada. It is an interdependent system, but it's all the more reason that growth is important, and it's the reason General Simoneau is accelerating. We grew by 2,000 folks last year, the previous year and almost the same this year.

Jean Yip: There are eight steps from recruitment to being a trained officer. It's noted that there's been a need to modernize the recruitment process. That was one of the recommendations. What is being done?

The options now are preapply, apply, process, offer, enrol, basic training and occupational training to become a trained Canadian Armed Forces member. It seems to be a long time from when they first demonstrate their interest.

Christiane Fox: On what is being done, I would first point to how, in the recruitment process, we've launched a new portal called "This Is For You". It allows an applicant to virtually experience what it is to be in the army, the navy and the air force. In my view, that is an important part of exposing someone to what those careers could offer.

Following on that, we are absolutely modernizing our online system, because we have to have user-friendly processes for people to submit their applications. It has to be modern, in the context of their ability to do it from their smart phone and go through those steps. That digital experience is important as they navigate.

Then, at the back end of that, we need to have a case management system that takes a "tell me once" approach. You come in through the portal, and there has been some work on the basic training lists across all organizations, among army, navy and air force, to make determinations about where people are at and to make sure that those in the system are talking to one another. We moved from a system that was quite separated and unique to a more integrated intake, so that we can track and know where people are at in their training and what their next steps are. There's more work to be done, but this digital approach will help us in addressing some of the challenges that were raised through the AG report.

Because of the question of digital, I would also say that an important component is looking at how digital can help us in training. We have really important in-person training that has to take place, but if we can do some of that online, then we can maximize some of the in-person efforts while dealing with some of the other pieces remotely. That can then have a greater throughput for our applicants, and our recruitment system can move more people through the process and give them that really valuable experience they need.

Jean Yip: Is AI being used to streamline the applicant process to shorten the time?

Christiane Fox: It is. There's an automation. I think we'll have to evolve the AI further as we roll out this system. We've rolled out version one. However, as we indicated in our management action plan, we will continuously update, with the goal of completion in March 2028 of an integrated data management that will benefit from AI tools built into it.

• (1125)

Jean Yip: What are some of the strategies used to attract a more diverse and inclusive group of Canadians to the Canadian Armed Forces?

LGen Erick Simoneau: Thank you for the question.

In terms of diversity, I'm very proud to report that we did really well—great, actually—last year. We onboarded, in terms of racialized people, 33.7% of our strategic intake last year, of a target of 12%. This is in large part thanks to the permanent resident line of effort that we're bringing inside the forces. There were 1,400 of them over the last year, which is the greatest number we've ever

had. This is very helpful for us to face the volatility and complexity of the world that we already have today but that certainly we will have tomorrow. We need diversity of thought. We need people to not groupthink on issues. Therefore, onboarding diversity is really important to us, and we are delivering on it.

In terms of indigenous, which also speaks to diversity and is so important to us, we are expanding our recruiting centres footprint. For example, as we speak now, we don't have a recruiting centre in Yellowknife. That doesn't make sense, so we will have one. We're moving ahead with this. In Saskatoon, it's the same thing. We're getting closer to where we could have rangers as well, so at Prince...and the like. We have an expansion. We have only 21 recruiting centres across Canada. We want to add 18, and they all have in common that we're going to bring ourselves closer to communities.

The Chair: Thank you.

That is your time, Ms. Yip.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor for six minutes, Mr. Lemire.

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

Thank you once again, Ms. Fox, for joining us this week.

This is not the first audit to show that the Canadian Armed Forces has recruitment challenges. I'm thinking of the CF-35 aircraft audit, in which the Auditor General's office once again highlighted the potential shortage of pilots and technicians. That followed another report from 2018, which also raised the possibility of gaps on this front.

What lessons have been drawn from the action plan to address the 2018 recommendations? The plan has ultimately not yielded any results in seven years.

What lessons have you drawn from that?

Christiane Fox: Thank you for that question.

We have learned from the 2018 report and have implemented action plans. However, we're proposing new elements today thanks to the funding we've received. We couldn't propose them in response to the first report of the Auditor General or the 2018 report you mentioned.

We have drawn some lessons and course corrected, especially with regard to pilots and aircraft maintenance personnel. We have certainly made some changes, but I think the compensation and benefit measures announced over the past year will address some of the gaps that pose the biggest obstacles to recruiting and retaining talent.

Sébastien Lemire: An interesting thing happened this morning. I don't know if it was a coincidence or not, but just before the committee meeting, Radio-Canada announced that recruitment was at its highest level in 30 years. I think that was a clever piece of communication.

The bottom line is that we're also in a global context where there's significant pressure on the military.

Does that have an impact on applicants who wish to join the Canadian Armed Forces? There's more and more pressure, and more countries are spending money to arm themselves. Since no government is going to acknowledge that it has spent money for nothing, a conflict will have to erupt at one time or another.

Is that drawing people to enrol? Does it motivate them to come and work for the forces?

LGen Erick Simoneau: Regardless of why people want to join the Canadian Armed Forces, we welcome them with open arms, as long as it's for a noble reason. There are many reasons for enrolling, including the economic context, the relationship with our partner to the south, and the new funding for salaries and benefits announced on August 8 last year, which we're implementing throughout the year.

Indeed, our ambition was to recruit 6,957 new members, but we recruited 7,310. That doesn't include folks from the reserve force who have joined the regular force. It represent civilians from outside the forces who came to see us. That is 105% of the goal we set out to achieve.

It's important to understand that we have a pool of 44,000 applicants, and we have screened them for age, citizenship and education. As the vice chief of the defence staff said earlier, we could pick everyone in that pool in one go if we had the necessary training capacity. That is what is holding us back right now. It's like a dimmer switch. Each year, we come up with a strategic recruitment plan based on our training capacity. We need more investments, because we have set a very ambitious goal this year to recruit 8,200 new members in the Canadian Armed Forces. That number is for the regular forces alone. To make that happen, we'll have no choice but to work on our basic training system.

To get a sense of what that goal means, members who've been to Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu can picture the megaplex there, which has around 3,000 beds. Half that number has to be established at the Borden base to meet the target to recruit 8,000 recruits.

To hit the 8,000 mark, we'll change the onboarding process and use what we call virtual onboarding. We'll no longer spend a week completing paperwork with our new recruits and asking them the same thing over and over. We're going to use a digital tool, and this will shorten every basic training period by one week. We're going to have access to more capacity. However, we have to build a sys-

tem and purchase equipment to exceed our target to recruit 8,000 recruits.

• (1130)

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you for that answer.

Over 100,000 applicants voluntarily withdrew their applications between April 1, 2022 and March 31, 2025. This is more than half of all the people who applied during the period.

What are the main reasons for these withdrawals? Is there a connection with the fact that more processes are now online and ultimately lack human involvement, follow up or elements that motivate applicants to move through the various steps?

LGen Erick Simoneau: That's why we really appreciate the Auditor General's report.

As a matter of fact, the recruitment system was underfunded, and as a result, we didn't have enough resources for recruitment. In addition, many of our software systems were not interconnected. In other words, we had a hodgepodge system.

That is what happens without sustainable and predictable funding, but we believe we have that now. By this, I mean the funding we received this year. We're now in a position to implement digital tools that can tell us exactly where we are now.

We didn't even have a digital portal. All we had was a web page with an "apply now" icon where people would seek information.

The Auditor General's office considered the number of clicks in its analysis. Most of the time, people would click a link, show an interest in joining, but they were not necessarily applicants. They were simply seeking information.

Our portal is doing that job now, and we're tracking things closely to find out exactly how far people have gone in the process.

Even so, it's not perfect. Based on the report, the number of days it takes to process applications has dropped from 271 days to 134. My plan is to bring that down to 30 days. There's nothing worse than starting a process, waiting and not knowing how far your application has gone. We don't have a small, automated flag to alert a recruiter that an application has been submitted, but the new system will have that. We're investing heavily in digital, infrastructure and equipment.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you very much, Mr. Simoneau. We get the feeling that this matter has been taken seriously.

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

We'll now begin our second round.

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

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

I'd like to mention right away that I'll be sharing my time with my colleague Mr. Kuruc.

Good morning, colleagues.

Witnesses, welcome.

Generals, welcome.

Lieutenant-General Simoneau, we met with you last week.

I'd like to commend Lieutenant-General Kelsey for serving his country with distinction for the past 41 years.

Lieutenant-General Kelsey, thank you very much for your service to our country.

Lieutenant-General Simoneau, the report shows that 103,684 applicants, or 54%, withdrew from the selection process. Earlier, you stated that you had faced significant technical challenges to identify people.

Beyond that, how come so many people, more than 50%, don't make the right choice?

• (1135)

LGen Erick Simoneau: I would say that the 103,000 or 104,000 individuals were definitely interested because they clicked our web page, even though they were not necessarily prospective candidates or people who were going to submit an application. Through the portal, we're now using the ACE tool, which allows us to review applications by age, citizenship and education. That means that people have sent us the required documents, that they are really serious and that they have initiated the application process.

The number of people in this database went from 11,000 two years ago to 21,000 last year and 44,000 this year. This shows that some people are keenly interested. In other words, these are real applicants.

Gérard Deltell: The report talks about recruitment targets, where the ratio was 1 in 8. In the end, the ratio was 1 in 13. The aim was to process applications within 100 to 150 days, but the actual number was 271 days.

How is it that after 10 years, our armed forces have not been able to overcome the challenges they continue to face?

Christiane Fox: An important part of the answer is the funding allocated to attract people and retain them in the Canadian Armed Forces.

Indeed, the process used to be lengthy. As Lieutenant-General Simoneau has just said, we're now at 134 days, compared with 271 days when the report was prepared. This is an improvement, and we will continue to improve by integrating digital approaches to streamline the recruitment process.

Gérard Deltell: I'm now going to cede my time to Mr. Kuruc.

The Chair: Mr. Kuruc, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Ned Kuruc (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, CPC): Thank you, everybody, for joining us today. We really appreciate it.

In February, the Minister of Immigration announced the new express entry category for foreign military applicants to be invited to apply for permanent residence. There were 800 cases of study per-

mits flagged for fraudulent documents, but IRCC didn't follow up on any of those cases.

Are you concerned about this military express entry program since the Auditor General found that they aren't acting on integrity concerns, even though they're aware they exist?

Christiane Fox: Thank you for the question.

The express entry allows us to identify talent and draw from permanent residency, and there's a two-step process in the security clearance. There is what the immigration department would manage, and then there's a secondary step that we would manage at the Department of National Defence. We do not rely exclusively on the immigration process.

Ned Kuruc: Thank you for that answer.

A reduction of up to \$1,500 for some out-of-country deployments was announced last week, I think. These are the men and women who are deployed. They're in active duty, peacekeeping or whatever they're involved with, outside of Canadian borders. I have a hard time with that.

How will this affect recruitment? What message does that send?

Christiane Fox: Thank you for the question.

The post index, which is the foreign post index that you referred to, is set by the Treasury Board, and it's delivered by StatsCan, which does reviews of the economic context. It compares the cost against Ottawa in the context of a foreign place. The post living allowance is based on the cost of living in a particular location. We did note that, over the last year, there was almost a backlog of review processes in terms of determining what that cost was.

Now it will be done on an annual basis and therefore we will have more predictability. However, we will have to constantly look at cost of living pressures and the economic context, because we do want to maintain our attraction and recruitment strategies, and we have to do that on an ongoing basis.

I think the incentives help address some of that, but it is important to note that this is not just for the military. It is for all foreign postings for the Government of Canada.

The Chair: Thank you.

That is your time, but I know we're coming back to you very soon, Mr. Kuruc.

Mr. McKinnon, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

• (1140)

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

Thank you all for being here. I appreciate it.

What I think I'm hearing is that the lack of instruction resources is a major limitation. Is that correct?

LGen Erick Simoneau: Yes, that is correct. The factor limiting faster growth of the CAF is the training system.

Ron McKinnon: If we had more instruction resources, would that alone help us to increase our rates of growth?

LGen Erick Simoneau: We can always use more resources, but I would not say that alone would do it. We also need to digitalize so that we don't drop applicants. We're still not perfect in terms of the time it takes to process applications. Although we're well within the range the Auditor General told us we should aim for, which is 120 to 150 days per application—we're at 134—our goal is 30 days.

There is that at the front end, which we need to keep improving on, but then, yes, there is the capacity, which speaks to infrastructure, digitalization and equipment.

Ron McKinnon: Let's focus a little bit more on instruction resources.

What can we do to improve and increase those? Is this a problem with retention? Are we having trouble retaining the personnel who conduct these instruction exercises?

Christiane Fox: Thank you for that question.

Absolutely, the instructor focus is key in order to have more people go through the training and then be able to serve. The instructor allowance looks at members who are posted or attached posted to designated instructor units. We have an allowance for that.

We have instructor allowances for the Canadian Forces Leadership and Recruit School, as well as instructors at all of our establishments. Therefore, focusing on ensuring we have enough instructors allows us to proceed with more training.

We also have to look at what the military has done even in increasing training lines. For instance, at Borden, at one point we had two training lines. Now we have three, and by the fall, we hope to have four.

It's a modernization of the training efforts, and then it's also about making sure we have the instructors required to deliver that training.

Ron McKinnon: You're saying that there are incentives in place now to encourage instructors to be instructors and to remain in the forces. Is that correct?

Christiane Fox: Yes, that's correct.

Ron McKinnon: What do you mean by "training line?" I don't understand that.

LGen Erick Simoneau: A training line is a team that will provide basic training. Basic training takes eight weeks to deliver, so we do it back to back to back, and that's a training line across one year.

What we intend to do in Borden, for example, is to increase this to an overall training capacity of four lines, which would translate into 1,000 trainees over that same year. That's 250 per line across the year, so 1,000 in the upcoming year is our goal, but we want to go beyond this. That, again, speaks to building infrastructure and bringing in personnel and equipment.

Ron McKinnon: With more training lines, we're training more people on a concurrent basis. Is that right?

LGen Erick Simoneau: That's correct, and we're solving our capacity issues.

Ron McKinnon: I want to go back to retention.

Are we having problems with qualified instructors dropping out of the forces?

LGen Erick Simoneau: We're not losing instructors from the forces. However, we had problems attracting instructors to the basic training schools, because they needed to surrender their field or sea allowances to come and instruct. That was a major dissatisfier and a disincentive to working at our schools.

Now, we include the allowance and what they earn is pretty much on par with what they would earn in the field or at sea, so there are no disincentives to coming to instruct. We therefore have access to a bigger pool of instructors.

Ron McKinnon: Are there any particular gaps in our ability to instruct, or any particular professions or roles that need to be better staffed in order to do that?

LGen Erick Simoneau: We have 97 occupations, so that's aside from basic. Everybody goes through the same basic training, officers or non-commissioned members, and afterwards it fans out to the 97 occupations. They're all different and have their own paths.

However, in general, you may have heard of our "missing middle," which are the middle ranks among the non-commissioned members and officers. They're the ones who instruct but also, as the VCDS said earlier, they're the ones we deploy and ask to be the advisers to other partnering nations. They're in high demand.

They are who we focus the benefits and our attention on. It is based on their capacity and infrastructure that we derive our strategic intake plan every year. We have access to 44,000 people right now, so we need to bring them in at a rate that we can actually train them right up to the operationally functional point.

• (1145)

Ron McKinnon: That's great. Thank you.

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

[*Translation*]

I'm now going to cede the floor to Mr. Lemire for two and a half minutes.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

According to figures from the Royal Canadian Navy, only 9% of the regular force identify as francophone. Vice-Admiral Angus Topshée noted that the Royal Canadian Navy was struggling to attract francophone recruits and called for the creation of a navy base in a francophone area. He argued that, unlike the air force, which has a base in Bagotville, or the army, which has a base in Valcartier, there is no navy base in Quebec. He felt the time has come to consider having a navy base in a francophone region.

In your opinion, Ms. Fox, is this an option?

Christiane Fox: Thank you for the question.

First, I'd like to give you an overview of the recruitment of francophones during the last fiscal year. We're now at 22.3% francophones across all forces.

When it comes to the navy, it's important for us to look at where military bases are located across the country and at the results on bilingualism in the Canadian Armed Forces as a whole.

We consistently look at ways to optimize returns and attract francophones. We don't have to wait for departmental approval, but we do consider their input.

Sébastien Lemire: In 2021, Mr. Raymond Thériault, who was then the Commissioner of Official Languages, pointed out that it was difficult for members of the Canadian Armed Forces to work in French. Speaking before the Standing Committee on National Defence last Wednesday, Lieutenant-General Simoneau noted that French-speaking soldiers don't spend their life in Quebec only, and for good reason. It's clear that it's difficult for francophones to access services in French in other parts of Canada.

In your opinion, is it easier for an anglophone member to access services in Quebec than for a francophone member outside the province?

Is there some inequality in this area in the armed forces?

LGen Erick Simoneau: We'd all love to get services in our mother tongue, and that's why the new legislation, or the modernized Official Languages Act, will be enforced rigorously.

I'd say that the situation is different for an anglophone and for a francophone. Because some trades are often quite technical or generally require interaction with English-speaking partners from the United States, England or the other Five Eyes countries, a francophone member has no choice but to learn the language early in their career. We give them the tools to do that. We have schools. I enrolled in a language school and took courses on technical terminology in Moose Jaw before taking to the skies at 300 kilometres an hour above the runways in Moose Jaw. I had the tools that I needed. That was in the early days of my career.

Things are easier for an anglophone in the early stages of their career because they are immersed in a setting where people speak their mother tongue. Much of the work within the Five Eyes takes place in English. The challenge comes a bit later in their career because they have to demonstrate proficiency in the second language to be promoted and to advance. They will be required to take classes, but if you ask me, by then, it may be too late. Language classes should be taken early. People should be exposed to the second language at the beginning of their career.

Earlier, we spoke about people who are awaiting training. What are we doing about that? Well, most of the time, we send them to units to learn the ropes. Perhaps we should be sending them to language school to learn their second language earlier, while their capacity to learn is still at its peak and they're still in a learning and training mindset. We're taking a close look at this issue. Based on that, I would say that that anglophones and francophones have different experiences.

I'd like to give you some reassurance about the francophone issue. Francophones represent 35% of the general officer population and 35% of chief warrant officers. Francophones are at the top of the pyramid of non-commissioned members. The deputy minister said that the Canadian Armed Forces recruited 22.3% francophones this year, whereas francophones account for 21% of the Canadian population, so we're actually well represented. We're doing what is needed. The experience is just different.

• (1150)

Sébastien Lemire: Once again, thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

We're now back to Mr. Kuruc for five minutes, please.

Ned Kuruc: I find it extremely concerning that the Auditor General said, "This could affect the army, navy and air force's ability to respond to threats, emergencies or conflicts and accomplish their missions."

Over the last 10 years, the Liberals have neglected our national defence. It's clear from the Auditor General's report that they let it get out of control. How is it that after nearly a decade of this Liberal government, the recruitment system has become so inefficient that it turns away the overwhelming majority of willing Canadians?

Christiane Fox: We have to focus our efforts on recruitment and retention. There is no doubt that it is essential. We have to make that process appropriate and responsive to people who apply.

These investments, in terms of the digital portal and the investments into infrastructure to have the right infrastructure in place, are key to our ability to do that successfully. I think we saw from the report the impact that this had and we're working toward it.

To your point around the geopolitical context and our ability to respond, we have to be able to respond. We have to take part in operations, both domestically and abroad, in order to contribute to our sovereignty and to global security. I think the more people we have to do that the better equipped we are as a country.

Ned Kuruc: Yes, I agree. I agree with your answer, but then we see things like today. Obviously, there was going to be this committee today and we see a report come out that only states how many people have signed up, yet we fail.... We don't have the data on why they're leaving, how many are dropping off or how many are dropping off with the PR stuff. I look at this report that came out today as a bit of a way to negate what we're doing here and to escape some of these tough questions.

Where are we on this? Where are we on that data capturing? I think that's the essence of it. We need to know why Canadians are falling off.

Christiane Fox: Thank you very much for the question.

We launched the online portal that will give us better data. That needs to improve, and it's going to be consistent improvement. I think in June is the next 2.0 version of that portal. It will give us that data to allow us to better understand why people are dropping off. We have been doing some work to do both. Are there compensation drivers to this decision? Is it non-compensation? If it's non-compensation, then what is that? This is something where we're going to have to, first, have the ability to collect that data, and then assess it using that kind of evidence base to inform the decisions we will make.

The answer is that we are seized with this because it is a gap if we don't know why people are leaving. We have reinstated exit interviews. We need to do that formally in a system, and then we need to drive our communications and we need to drive our recruitment based on what we hear.

Ned Kuruc: Thank you.

I'll cede the rest of my time to my colleague, Mr. Deltell.

[*Translation*]

G rard Deltell: Thank you.

I'd like to talk about first nations.

The Wendake reserve is in my riding, and I'm very proud to say that Lieutenant-General Paul is Wendat. I'd also like to remind you that during the Second World War, the Cree Nation rendered service to the whole world by communicating in their language, which the enemy could not understand. We have sidelined first nations legacy much too often. I believe the Canadian army would benefit greatly from showcasing these impressive accomplishments more often.

That said, today, when it comes to recruitment targets, can you tell us where we are now and what needs to be done?

LGen Erick Simoneau: Thank you for the question.

We have some very good news. It's not excellent, but it's definitely very good news. Last year, we recruited 3.4% of people from first nations. We had a target of 3.5% and we almost met it. That's a big part of why we want to move closer to first nations communities across Canada, including Quebec.

We'd like to open recruitment centres in Yellowknife and Saskatoon. Our list includes 18 other centres, and the common strand between them is to move us closer to first nations.

• (1155)

G rard Deltell: You told us that there is no recruitment centre in Yellowknife.

That may be the case, but there are many members of first nations in Yellowknife. How come you're lagging behind?

LGen Erick Simoneau: We're moving as fast as we can.

We expect to open the recruitment centre this year.

G rard Deltell: None has been opened in the past 10 years.

Is that not be correct?

LGen Erick Simoneau: No, none over the past few years.

I can't say we've never had one, but we haven't had one in the recent past. I'd have to cross-check that because I don't have a precise answer.

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

[*English*]

Ms. Tesser Derksen, you have the floor for five minutes.

Kristina Tesser Derksen (Milton East—Halton Hills South, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to our officials for attending today.

I want to thank the Auditor General, as always, for the report, which exposes some gaps and some definite room for improvement. I would confidently say that we seem to be moving in the right direction now, and that's definitely good news.

I want to speak specifically to exhibit 3 in the Auditor General's report, which highlights different targets over the past few years and is something that just jumped out at me. This covers the years of 2022, 2023 and 2024, and the target for recruitment was one in eight for several of those years. Those targets were not met. In 2022, we had recruiting at one in 11. For 2023, it was one in 16.

For 2024-25, the target was met. We had one in 12, but it looked like the target had actually changed. I'm just wondering why that 2024-25 target was moved.

LGen Erick Simoneau: This is the 77,000, which the Auditor General could speak more about, but the number of clicks on the "apply now" were not necessarily all serious applicants. They were people interested in joining the Canadian Armed Forces. Because they were seeking information, they hit the "apply now" button, which counted for one.

In terms of more information, if you click twice that would have recorded as two clicks, as two applicants. It was very problematic. This is why we generated the online applicant portal through which we then go back and forth with a preliminary check on age, citizenship and education. The age check is telling us that this is a real applicant. Now we have 44,000 of them and we just onboarded in the Canadian Armed Forces 7,310. That's a 7:1 ratio.

As for the 77,000, that was at the time that we were only intaking 3,000. That's a 13:1 ratio. I'm just struggling with the 77,000 because I right now would not consider them serious applicants, but in those days when the Auditor General's team was doing the analysis, they had no choice. They had nothing else to base their study on because we didn't have the online applicant portal. I truly value the Auditor General's report because they pointed us towards digitalization, towards reduction in applications, which we are implementing and now we are seeing the better ratio, which is 7:1.

I would compare it to our Five Eyes partners. Except for the United States, all the other ones are in the 8:1 ratio, so we are actually doing really well. The U.S. simply has a different system in place.

Kristina Tesser Derksen: That's good news. Thank you for that.

I also want to ask about the removal of the aptitude test. I noted in the Auditor General's report that one of the changes that was made was the removal of this Canadian Forces aptitude test. From what I understand, it evaluated verbal, spatial and problem-solving skills. Did something replace that test?

LGen Erick Simoneau: The answer is yes. We have what we call the Raven test, which is not the final solution. We want to do a cognitive test, which we're implementing. We're working with service providers right now to define exactly what it's going to look like—ideally, off the shelf, easy to acquire and fast.

The downside of the Canadian Forces aptitude test was that it honestly was scaring people away. People saw it as a huge barrier, and probably as more than it was really about. Still, it was negatively perceived so we just removed it. We kept it downstream in only certain occupations for which we needed to select and we had no difficulties recruiting into. I would go with pilots, for example. We kept it there for them, but downstream, not at the recruiting stage.

• (1200)

Kristina Tesser Derksen: Would it be a fair comment to say that Canadians can remain confident that the applicants or the recruits who are making it through to the final stages are, in fact, meeting aptitude requirements?

Christiane Fox: Yes, absolutely. What I would add too is that as part of our recruitment efforts and modernizing, we made some changes as well to the medical evaluations to allow people to take part in basic training in the context of a further evaluation, whether that would be asthma or other types of conditions, and then look at potential flexibilities around what occupations those people could take on following basic training if in fact the condition was deemed to be less appropriate for one workforce. This is whereas in the past we probably would have made just a blanket decision. We're trying to introduce flexibilities in the system and not delay people's participation in the basic training as we do that.

Kristina Tesser Derksen: Thank you very much.

I have a question for anyone on the panel. I want to point out how I understand audits to be. Particularly this one is focused on policy implementation, performance indicators and program management, which are all important, but I regularly make a habit of asking about workplace culture as well and the way things are done in a particular department or an agency due to the localized values and different conventions that develop in those spaces, which can sometimes be a little bit isolated or siloed. I'll direct this to Mr. Hayes.

Did your audit detect any workplace or management culture that either positively or negatively impacted recruitment performance?

Andrew Hayes: The answer to that question is that we looked at it from the perspective of why people might be reluctant to stay in the process or, for example, in the case of some individuals, leave after a couple of years of being in the forces. That did emerge as one of the reasons why, after four years and reaching the occupationally functional point, which is when they are fully trained, members left. It was because of training delays, difficulty adapting to military culture or dissatisfaction with their occupation. If you're looking for that in the report it's at paragraph 22.

To answer your question, it will happen that some people are not satisfied in a particular workplace for a number of reasons. What's important is identifying those reasons and addressing them where they can be addressed for retention purposes.

The Chair: Thank you. That is the time.

I noticed the lights flashing. I've sent a note to find out what's going on. We're going to continue for now, until we hear otherwise from the whips or the lobby. We're beginning our third round now, which will consist of five members with various times.

Mr. Stevenson, kick us off for five minutes, please.

William Stevenson (Yellowhead, CPC): Thank you.

You piqued a bit of my interest. General Simoneau said something, and I just want to clarify.

Are the rangers now included under the umbrella of the military on both their numbers and their spending?

LGen Stephen Kelsey: We have always included them as part of our numbers. They're funded through the army. The junior rangers are funded through our organization. The recruiting is a distinct process that is community-led and not part of our recruiting—

William Stevenson: Okay. I'm curious because I have a small segment of rangers in the north end of my riding, in Grande Cache.

Earlier in this process, we were talking about how there were eight different systems that were electronically there, and now they're looking at improving their systems. Was this due to 10 years of lack of funding? You didn't know where your funding was. Was this because of priorities? They chose not to upgrade the electronic systems previously.

Was it because the Auditor General said that you must work together to get these things going that now it has become a priority?

Christiane Fox: Thank you for the question.

I would say that it is a priority for us. There was a gap where the systems didn't talk to each other, and therefore the recruiting experience of an individual—

• (1205)

William Stevenson: Can you tell me why?

Christiane Fox: I think choices were made around where you spend your money. This helped.

William Stevenson: Okay.

This is for either one of the generals.

General Simoneau talked about the 33% of recruits now and how they are looking at, basically, DEI requirements.

Can you tell me if those requirements were internally created, or were they forced by the Liberal government saying, "All government should be looking at this to have all staff have different recruits"?

LGen Erick Simoneau: As I mentioned earlier, we value diversity. I firmly believe that the volatility, uncertainty and complexity of the world we're in right now will just worsen as we move forward.

Our chief of the defence staff is very serious when she looks at the future. That's why she gave us an ambitious target: Meet the 71,500 number sooner than "Strong, Secure, Engaged" told us, which was by 2032. She told us to do it by 2029. She wants us to meet those numbers, and we will.

Part of this—

William Stevenson: I guess where I'm going with this is that, for me.... I don't really care about gender, race or anything as long as the soldier who is protecting their country is capable of doing those things. I'm curious as to who's making the decisions and if they're being pressed upon the military when they make their hiring checks.

Specifically, are you being restricted? If—I'm just throwing a number out there—95% of the recruits came through as white males, and you're pushed to meet those DEI requirements, is it going to restrict us from having the best of the best versus filling these other requirements first?

LGen Erick Simoneau: There's only one answer to that: There's one standard, and we're upholding the standard. We exceeded almost 34% on a target of 12%. The reason we went above target is that they were the right individuals to onboard into the Canadian Armed Forces.

It is a selection process. We have a pool of 44,000 to draw from as we speak, and that pool keeps evolving by the day. It fluctuates. We have a 7:1 ratio to pick from, and we're picking the best talent we can from that pool.

William Stevenson: In your process, in the audit, there was some discussion earlier about temporary instructors who were taken on to increase capacity, but this approach doesn't sound like it's sustainable. My concern is that we're using short-term fixes to manage long-term structural problems.

From your perspective, what structural changes will be needed to ensure the forces are actually sustaining those training personnel?

LGen Stephen Kelsey: The use of temporary instructors is to accelerate change. Concurrent with that, the structural changes, so the growth of the recruiting system, is happening. Additional positions are added to Borden and Saint-Jean. The challenge we face, as was alluded to in the question, is that as we create new structure and draw talent in—these master sailors, young women and men—to teach, and we incentivize them through instructor pay, those are the same folks who are needed in other schoolhouses to grow the back end of this training system.

Once General Simoneau's done, they go to the 97 trade schools to get qualified and become employable. It really is a strategic choice, but we are absolutely looking at it systemically. They are interdependent conditions, but it's infrastructure, digital enablement, materiel, uniforms, rifles, and it's dollars to conduct training. We're looking at the whole, and the OAG report reminded us of the right approach.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Stevenson.

We'll turn now to Mr. Osborne for five minutes, please.

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

I have a couple of questions. In terms of the median number of days being between 245 and 271, it was said earlier that this has dropped to about 150. What measures were put in place? Can you expand on the measures that were put in place to bring about that improvement?

• (1210)

Christiane Fox: I can start, and maybe my colleague will jump in.

Based on our Q4 data, right now the median number is about 134. We aim to be between 100 and 150, but as was said, we're trying to accelerate that even more.

I think part of the reason why we saw such improvement is the online capabilities and the digitization of the experience, which allowed us to intake more application forms, have systems in place to receive and then work all across the organization to identify where people were at in their journey. I think the more data you have on that, you accelerate your process, you get people into basic training faster and then you get people into that specialized training even faster after that. As we improve our systems and as we streamline, which we'll still need to do—we're not where we want to be—we hope to see that continually improve and that number go down. In that waiting period, as people are expecting an answer or waiting for their next information, it is important that we don't lose people in that moment and that we don't rely just on humans, but flagged systems that generate action and responsiveness.

We are seeing improvement in that. We will continue to make those investments into modernizing the system to see even more.

Tom Osborne: Thank you for that answer.

The AG report determined that 54% of applicants either withdrew voluntarily or did not respond to outreach after 60 days. Can you expand on what you're doing to improve those numbers and to ensure that people who apply get more attention, I guess, from the Canadian Armed Forces to ensure that they're engaged and remain in the process?

Christiane Fox: I would say that part of our challenge at the front end was determining what the right numbers were. Were people applying? Were people visiting the website? What was the intention? I think now that we can improve the systems, we will know how many people are actually applying versus general interest visits to make their decision. If they're visiting twice, we have to make sure that we're not counting them twice. I think we need to clean up the numbers, clean up the data through a modernized system in order to be in a position to look at what that data is telling us and then pivot if we need to.

The improvements that we've made to the system mean that we have more granular data. We need to do even better to have a very good understanding and a system in place. We've dedicated resources to this, not just in digital but in people, to track these things and make sure that people don't get lost in the process. However, I do believe that this is a first step to getting to better results, and we will need to continuously improve that. A case management system that is client-focused and responsive to client needs, I think, is exactly what will help us retain those people who show a genuine interest.

I noted some of the approaches that the military has taken in terms of showcasing what joining the army, navy or air force can look like in a very digital way, in a very user-friendly way. It allows you to navigate your way through what an experience on the battlefield looks like, and you can navigate your way through various experiences. It's just a way to reach people to gain that interest, and I think it shows a connectedness to try to reach Canadians.

Tom Osborne: The AG report also determined that only about 16% of applicants were successfully recruited. There were issues

with communication by recruiters, the documents that were submitted by applicants and applicant inactivity.

We've touched on that a little bit, the improvements in the computer systems, the ability to intercommunicate and the streamlining of applications through the system as opposed to having to enter them manually later. Can you expand on the differences, the improvements that have taken place and the impacts they are having on applicants?

Also, could you just touch on the exit surveys and having a better understanding of, for those who do drop out, why they drop out and how we can make improvements to prevent that?

• (1215)

Christiane Fox: I think you've outlined exactly some of the considerations that we need to take on and we are reflecting on at CAF and DND.

In the context of data, the modernization of the system gets us better access to data and, if we can do exit interviews, we'll get evidence-based datasets to tell us why people are leaving. What is the driver to stay? What is the driver to not join? If we understand that better, then we can think about how we tailor the recruitment efforts and how we tailor the training to make sure that we retain those individuals.

I think it is about looking at the data. It is about getting information from the individuals we are recruiting, better understanding that information and then putting in place systems to address the issues, whether they're cultural or related to training. It's part of a broader approach we are taking in terms of recruitment and retention.

Tom Osborne: I know that there were three or four AG reports over the previous years regarding recruitment and so on.

Can you expand on the impact that the increased investment by the new government is having? We know about the new computer systems and the increased pay, but what's the difference that it's making to the Canadian Armed Forces in terms of being able to recruit and retain?

Christiane Fox: I would say that we have to look at, as you noted, the systems of recruitment and retention, but it's taking a step back and looking at the broader investments. It's compensation. It's child care. It's housing. It's having the military equipment that people want to train on. It's having the capabilities to retain our skilled individuals as part of the armed forces.

It's the totality of the investments that allows us to prioritize and be very strategic about where we invest, but there is more money to address some of these problems that may have been present in previous AG reports, which we can then take a look at in the context of our action plan and the current funding that we have.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Osborne.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lemire, I'll give you four minutes because we're going to end the meeting after this round of questions.

The same goes for you, Mr. Bezan. I'll give you a few more minutes.

Once we're done with the panel, we'll get back to your motion, Mr. Lemire.

You have the floor for four minutes.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to come back to the very relevant intervention by my colleague from Louis-Saint-Laurent—Akiawenhrahk regarding indigenous recruitment.

It gave me pause, because in my region of Abitibi-Témiscamingue, we once had a recruitment centre that was responsible for increasing indigenous recruitment in Abitibi-Témiscamingue and northern Quebec, in Anishinabe and Cree territory. I'd like to mention that my brother was in charge of that centre.

In 2008, well over 100 people were members of the Rouyn-Noranda detachment at the 34 combat engineer regiment. It was, and continues to be, a source of local pride and joy. The legacy of the 9th field engineer squadron is important. We're celebrating our 100th anniversary at the Aiguebelle national park and other parts of Rouyn-Noranda, and military presence is a key point of pride.

The Canadian Armed Forces closed the Rouyn-Noranda recruitment centre in the mid-2010s, and we lost our status as an independent unit due to cuts to troop levels in the regular forces. That put a huge dent in mobilization and the size of the workforce in recruitment positions. It's clear that activities in my area, such as Remembrance Day commemorations and other events, are no longer vibrant. The activities that remain are still running for a good reason, but for obvious reasons, the military presence has diminished.

In this context, you have said that you have identified 18 locations across Canada where you could establish recruitment centres. I believe Abitibi-Témiscamingue has already proven its worth. We also have a large gap in central Canada, and we can help to bridge it, and this would address several challenges, including recruitment.

At this time, is the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region on the list of the 18 locations that you want to add?

• (1220)

LGen Erick Simoneau: Yes, it is.

Sébastien Lemire: That's great news. I'm happy to hear that, and would welcome another discussion with you, as we had last week. This will certainly have a big impact.

Obviously, I would urge you to take remote areas into account in your assessment. I'd truly appreciate it.

One thing that also stands out from the Auditor General's report is that during the audit period, the backlog of security checks rose from 20,000 to 23,000.

What factors contributed to this backlog?

Christiane Fox: I'd like to thank the hon. member for his question.

I'd say that it was partially due to the resources allocated for this work. We have now increased resources to support the process.

I'd also say that the computer system has been upgraded to allow for regular review. Security screening is important and it has to be undertaken within a reasonable time frame. We have now added more resources to address this process.

Sébastien Lemire: Has the security screening process been streamlined?

You touched on a form of computer modernization. Would you say it has been streamlined?

Are there any risks associated with that?

Christiane Fox: We continue to be diligent. We have added more people and the necessary resources to deal with the paper-based process and review files. We're not reducing the time. We're adding more people.

Sébastien Lemire: It's nice to hear that from an official from the federal department.

In its report on the Royal Canadian Armed Forces, the Auditor General's office noted that the cost to train an officer was roughly \$247,000.

What's the average cost to train a member of the forces?

LGen Erick Simoneau: I'd like to thank the hon. member for his question.

I could give 97 different answers because we have 97 trades, and they all have their own learning paths. The cost of training a pilot can run into millions of dollars, but can be considerably lower for other trades that require less extensive training.

However, I can assure you that we have top-notch training. We're securing the necessary resources to ensure we have the best equipment possible. This is really a good time to join the Canadian Armed Forces. We have 97 trades and one can have a career in any of the 97 professions, all of which are well resourced and offer good training opportunities. In addition, missions make a big difference for Canadians every day.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you very much.

I studied political science. I do understand that my studies did not place a huge cost on the system, but that doesn't mean I'm not good at something.

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

[English]

We will go back to Mr. Bezan, please, for five minutes.

James Bezan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for the Office of the Auditor General.

In your report, you talked about 6,100 spaces for basic training. Is that correct?

Andrew Hayes: Yes, that's correct.

James Bezan: You said that we were operating at only 80% capacity during the time of your review, and it was largely due to the lack of instructors. Is that also correct? It's from page 13 of the report.

Andrew Hayes: That's right, yes. There were 534 positions, but only 429 people were staffing those positions. There was a gap in terms of the resources and the positions to be filled.

James Bezan: On top of having that personnel shortage and having the middle management who can go in there and do basic training, there is also a shortage of equipment. What type of equipment are you referring to in your report in paragraph 30?

Andrew Hayes: That type of equipment will be the needs of the basic training program. In terms of specifics, I will turn to the representatives from the forces to maybe address that.

I will say that equipment and procurement become an issue in a number of our audits. We've talked about it in other audit reports, and we will be talking about it in future audit reports coming forward.

James Bezan: Thank you.

I'll turn to our National Defence team. What are we currently sitting at? Is 6,100 still the capacity of our basic training facilities on an annual basis or at a one-time level? If not, where are we going with it?

LGen Erick Simoneau: Do you mean in terms of equipment?

James Bezan: The Auditor General said that the total capacity is 6,100 recruits. You're now saying that we trained, this year, 7,300. If we're training above and beyond what the facilities are providing and the equipment that we have, how are you doing it? Are we just signing people up and throwing them through, or are they actually getting the proper training that's needed?

• (1225)

LGen Erick Simoneau: We're in a difficult situation in that we need to acquire more equipment and we need to put national contracting mechanisms in place. To use a couple of examples, for uniforms and rucksacks, we came up with a creative solution. Once recruits terminate their basic training, they have to return their kits to supply in order to be reissued to the next set of recruits. This is less than ideal, especially with sized equipment. You want to size the recruits once. They keep their equipment throughout their careers, especially if they are in the army and they rely on that equipment in the future.

This is why I always say that we need to digitalize infrastructure resources with staffing and equipment. The equipment line of effort is really important to address those issues.

James Bezan: During the time of the AG report, the total shortage in the regular force and reserve force was 12,785 people. I know that when General Eyre was still chief of defence staff, he made the comment that at that point in time we were around 16,000 personnel short, but more than 10,000 members of the Canadian Armed Forces were also undertrained and undeployable.

What is that number at today? How many have gone through basic training but haven't received the training they need in their occupations to then become effective members of the Canadian Armed Forces?

LGen Erick Simoneau: The answer to this is called the basic training list. It's everybody who's in the training pipe, short of the operationally functional point, who can then be deployed. The number, as we speak, is around 12,000. This number will increase in the years to come, simply because we're growing the CAF. As we want to grow the CAF, we'll need to manage this.

This is where we address the front end of recruiting and basic training. We need to go basic to operational training, because it fans out to army, navy, air force, special forces and joint forces. We need to, number one, digitalize to understand where people are on that continuum and what they need so that we can optimize and maximize their training—

James Bezan: What are we doing with the 12,000 members of the Canadian Armed Forces who are undertrained and undeployable?

LGen Erick Simoneau: No, they are being trained. They are on the basic training list. That's what they are doing there—

James Bezan: They've gone through basic. I want to know how many have gone through basic and are sitting there in furlough waiting to enter their occupation to get the training they need to pursue a career in their trade.

LGen Erick Simoneau: It depends on every occupation.

James Bezan: Let's talk about occupations, because in the AG's report—and I think this was the most damning part of the report—at the bottom of page 10, where you start talking about the different trades, you guys talk about 97 different trades. At the time this study was done, only 19% of the occupations were going to be completely filled under four years. For 30%, it would take 10 years to fill all the different positions, and 38% were going to take 25 years to fill. There were 13 different occupations, or 13%, on that list that may never reach the authorized level.

Conflict and war are not waiting for the Canadian Armed Forces to get their people trained up and ready to fight, so 25 years is ridiculous. Again, 13% are never getting it.

What types of career paths are we talking about? What trades and occupations are not being filled?

I'll hear from the Auditor General's Office first.

Christiane Fox: I can start. Thank you for the question—

James Bezan: I want the AG's office to talk first about which careers are at risk.

Christiane Fox: Okay. I'm sorry.

Andrew Hayes: We gave some examples, and I'll highlight a few that are particularly noteworthy for us.

There are pilots and ammunition technicians. We've been talking about the challenges in hiring pilots for many years now. I think back to our 2018 report on future fighter jets. Effectively, if you're buying a fighter jet and you don't have the people to fly it or maintain it, that fighter jet is not going to be useful.

These kinds of occupations need particular attention. For sure, it takes a long time to train these people, but I think with the needs and the analysis that has been done, the Canadian Armed Forces can take the information and improve.

James Bezan: This morning, the minister was out doing damage control. He talked about how, out of the 97 trades, 70 of them have been addressed. Is that as of today, or is this still saying, “No, we got the number down and we're going to fill those in the next five, 10 or 25 years?”

• (1230)

LGen Erick Simoneau: The minister's comment on the 70% of our trades was that we met our strategic intake goals for this year. For example—

James Bezan: Those are intake goals. They're not actually trades that are currently trained up and deployable.

LGen Erick Simoneau: That's correct, but those goals are set with a view to recovering the trades and making sure that they become healthy again.

James Bezan: It's semantics, then, in how he's addressing that.

Out of the 97, there are still 27 that aren't being addressed. What trades are we at a critical point with, and when are we going to get people to fill those roles?

LGen Erick Simoneau: Some are on page 11, as the AG mentioned.

James Bezan: Has that changed?

LGen Erick Simoneau: I recognize the signal operator. I don't see the maritime technician on there, but that's certainly one that we're tracking closely. There are some weapons techs in the army, navy and air force.

The training capacity is what's limiting us, because we have pools of applicants. The difference between 70% of our objective met in all of the occupations and 100% is less than 250 applicants being sent to the right occupations, so we're on a clear recovery path.

We will be at 71,500 on the regular force—because that's what you're alluding to—by 2029. It will probably take some more time to finish, depending on the occupations they're in, training them, training effective strength and training status, but we're getting there.

James Bezan: What about the reserve force side?

LGen Erick Simoneau: For the reserve, it's the same thing. We grew the reserve this year by 1,500. We are, as we speak, at an average base strength of 25,054, with an objective of 30,000 by 2029.

James Bezan: Okay. Recruitment there is happening at the unit level more than the general intake we use for the regular force.

LGen Erick Simoneau: It's actually both. We do reserve recruiting at our recruiting centres, as well as the army, navy and air force recruiting. It's mostly the navy and the army that do it at the unit level.

James Bezan: With your recruiting centres, are we getting more of our members out into the community, rather than just sitting behind a desk in an office?

Christiane Fox: Our objective is to have our forces in operations domestically and abroad, of course, and then there are some really essential positions in an office as well.

James Bezan: Yes, but I'm saying that with the recruiting office, often they're at the office and not in the community. Are we getting them out to trade fairs? Are we getting them out to job fairs at high schools and universities? Are we doing more in the communities we're trying to attract, like our first nations and others?

The saying we always use out in the Interlake is, “Go and hunt where the ducks are,” so let's get our troops out into the field where we can talk to them directly, one on one, rather than just those who want to come through the front door.

The Chair: I'll allow an answer, Ms. Fox. Go ahead, please.

Christiane Fox: I'll be very quick and just completely agree in terms of community presence. I would say that it's especially important in the Arctic. As we expand our investments, as we do more, we need to make sure that we recruit and that we have community engagement in our plans.

Thank you.

James Bezan: Could I have just one final question?

The Chair: Yes.

James Bezan: One of the critical shortages is in pilots and aircraft technicians. Right now, for fighter pilots, we've outsourced that to other countries to do our training. When are we going to repatriate that and have that sovereign capability at home?

Christiane Fox: That is absolutely something that is being considered. Hopefully, we'll have more to say on that, but I think that is one of the very important elements of sovereignty and the repatriation of the training here.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'll go to Ms. Yip in one second.

For a point of clarification and contrast, General, would it be possible to get the list of trades in which there's still a deficiency? Could we look to get that in the next couple of weeks?

LGen Erick Simoneau: I can certainly be on notice to provide the list of the 21 trades that we call the "critical occupations".

The Chair: Thank you. I didn't think that would be controversial. If you could do that, please, we'll look for it in the next couple of weeks. Thank you very much.

Ms. Yip, you have the floor. I will certainly give you extra time if you need it. I gave Mr. Bezan time as well. It's there if you want it. You certainly have five minutes, but if you run long, that's no problem.

Jean Yip: Thank you very much.

This is in regard to some of the changes made to the recruitment process. We've talked about the Canadian Forces aptitude test. Was the scored employment application form to replace the aptitude test to show perhaps different skills?

• (1235)

LGen Erick Simoneau: The scored application is a different survey base to replace the Canadian Forces aptitude test, which was perceived to be a barrier to entry. Instead, we gauged the applicants using a survey base. It's not perfect. It's doing the job. This is why we want to evolve towards a Raven test and potentially another type of cognitive test.

It was a pilot. It still is. We find that we need better tools, and we're going to allow ourselves to have those tools shortly.

Jean Yip: What exactly are you trying to capture in this application form? Would it be just as intimidating as the aptitude test, or is it looking at different skill sets from applicants?

LGen Erick Simoneau: Having done the CFAT myself, I remember that it's pretty intense. It's time-based, and you need to do a whole bunch of actions, and you rush through it, whereas the SEAF, the scored application, is more of a survey base that you do on your own time. You provide the information that allows us to derive the necessary conclusions on who you are.

For example, there are questions on your diplomas, on what you own. We can build the persona that you are, built on the information you're surrendering to us, at a much slower pace. It's not per-

ceived.... We've seen really good comments about it, but we still need to run a selection process. We need to grant ourselves and enable ourselves with more of a screening tool that wouldn't be perceived as a barrier to entry.

This is a sweet balance that we need to have. That's why I don't have the solution. As we speak, we're studying the way forward.

Jean Yip: Why was a probationary period introduced? Why wasn't that there before?

LGen Erick Simoneau: It's all part of reducing barriers but upholding standards. On the one hand, we want to ease access to the armed forces, but that comes with potential risks. When the risk materializes—it's not if; it's always when—we needed to have the tools to exfil them when they are not meeting the three conditions: medical, security or conduct.

Jean Yip: Are you able to see the impact of these changes in the recruitment process yet?

LGen Erick Simoneau: I think the numbers speak for themselves. We've grown over the last two years by implementing all those new initiatives. We've grown the regular forces by close to 5,000. We're at close to 68,000 of 71,500. We're just 3,600 short of the target, and we're in 2026, so I think we're making great progress. I'm cautiously optimistic about reaching the target. There's no other choice, I would tell you. It's by all means necessary.

We made it the number one priority for the department. This is why it's fully resourced and fully staffed. We have what we call the L0, the strategic level attention, on this. This is why we have a DM so versed on the CAF recruiting business. Five years ago, I'm not sure that would have been the case, because it was not the priority of the department.

Jean Yip: Despite the prioritization of qualified women during the recruitment process, why does the representation of women remain below the goals? You can see that in exhibit 8 of the Auditor General's report.

LGen Erick Simoneau: We onboarded 17.2% this past year. It's not enough to reach our target of 25%. We should be recruiting in the 30% zone. We're having great difficulties because the bulk of the occupations and positions that we have to offer to the Canadian population is in the army, more specifically in the combat arms. Until we can convince women to join the army and the combat arms, I'm very pessimistic about meeting the 25% target.

Therefore, we are applying a lot of energy to send our combat arms women.... Our chief of the defence staff is one of them. She's a great champion and a showcase of what women in the combat arms can be. I'm sending them, especially bilingual ones, to recruiting centres as a matter of priority so that they can tell their stories and attract other women like them to join.

• (1240)

Jean Yip: What about the cost of living concerns that some of these recruits may have? I know that compensation has increased. However, sometimes it's not just about compensation. It's about where they live and the families they bring. How are you addressing this at the recruitment stage?

Christiane Fox: As we recruit more members, it is important for us to think about what makes the experience positive and about the totality of the effort that is required to attract and retain. A part of that is salary and incentives. That could be some of the critical occupations that we spoke about and incentivizing people into where we have needs, but it's also the broader supports that are put in place. It's setting up the right culture so that people feel like they want to join and want to stay. It's investing in things like child care to make it realistic for people. The \$100 million complements systems across the country in order to deliver that child care. It's about housing and allowances if people are serving internationally.

What we try to do is look at the totality of the system and make the investments appropriately to make sure that we can retain that talent.

Jean Yip: Are there any further comments that you would like to include before we finish?

Christiane Fox: I would just thank my colleagues here at the table. They've done such great work to improve the process. They are dedicated to getting the skilled workforce we need, and they've gone through a lot of personal effort to drive this. I think that's why we're here today.

Jean Yip: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Of course, we also appreciate the work from the Office of the Auditor General—Mr. Hayes and your entire team. Thank you for always being ready to come in and for being here today as well.

I want to thank our witnesses for coming in and for their testimony and participation in relation to “Recruiting for Canada's Military”, one of the 2025 fall reports of the Auditor General of Canada.

I'm going to dismiss the witnesses and suspend the meeting for two or three minutes. We still have other items on the docket, so don't go far. I will endeavour to get things back on track as quickly as possible.

This meeting is suspended.

• (1240)

(Pause)

• (1245)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order. We are still in public, so we're good with people lingering.

I'd like to deal with a motion that I understand has broad consensus. If that's the case, we will move on it. If I discover that's not the case, I will move to close this part of the meeting.

[Translation]

Mr. Lemire, please table your motion.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

On April 15, we had a very interesting meeting on main estimates 2026-27 of the Auditor General.

The Auditor General shared a recommendation to ensure her right to unrestricted access to information based on section 14.1 of the law passed in Nova Scotia, namely, An Act Respecting the Office of the Auditor General, which is attached as an annex to the request that was forwarded to you.

The section gives the Auditor General the right of access and is worded as follows:

... the Auditor General has the right of unrestricted access, at all times, to all records of any auditable entity, including the right to copy such records and to any things or property belonging to or used by any auditable entity, and every officer, employee and agent of any auditable entity shall forthwith provide the Auditor General any such information or explanations, or information concerning its duties, activities, organization and methods of operation....

I believe that it's absolutely necessary to modernize these aspects of the act.

There might be an option to do that next week, at the same time as the budget update, which we are awaiting. My motion is as follows:

That, in light of the testimony of the Office of the Auditor General on the 2026-27 Main Estimates on April 15, 2026, the Standing Committee on Public Accounts report to Parliament on the need to modernize section 13 of the Auditor General Act to ensure unrestricted access to information.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

I have two friendly changes.

• (1250)

[Translation]

We're going to report to the House of Commons, and not to Parliament.

[English]

That's an easy one.

[Translation]

That's what I think.

[English]

Finally, I'm going to suggest this.

[Translation]

We would remove “*est joint en annexe*” in French. It would be replaced with “*l'exemple représente un libellé*”.

[English]

We don't need an annex. We don't really attach annexes to motions. This is just housekeeping wording, which I don't think will be a problem.

[Translation]

Does that work?

Sébastien Lemire: Yes, thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Tesser Derksen, go ahead, please.

Kristina Tesser Derksen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to my colleague for presenting this motion.

I have a comment I'd like to get on the record regarding concerns about the potential chilling effect for officials who might be seeking candid legal advice. Whenever we talk about giving different officials expanded powers to access information, particularly information that might be protected by solicitor-client privilege, there might be a concern that folks who need to access such advice from lawyers may have that advice exposed to scrutiny.

I don't know whether my colleague wants to comment on that, or if he's been able to ask about it or gotten any reassurances about it.

[Translation]

Sébastien Lemire: I believe the issue is simple and clear. The Auditor General has asked for powers to fulfill her functions more effectively. We heard her speak to the obstacles she faces dealing with some Crown corporations. I think we need to take action at this point.

That can be done if we make legislative changes. Opportunities to do that are quite limited. We don't necessarily have to review the entire legislation, but rather, amend and improve this provision. Next week's budget statement could be an opportunity to do that.

I believe that you want this work to be done continuously and diligently. I believe that on this issue, the government must have this information. It has the responsibility to take action. I also think that our committee has the responsibility to grant the Auditor General's office these powers, for the best interest of the Government of Canada's budgetary spending.

I believe the government has this information already, but if not, that may be cause for concern. It would make it especially important to modernize this act.

The Chair: You have the floor, Mr. Deltell.

Gérard Deltell: To go back to Ms. Tesser Derksen's point, which is quite relevant, two things need to be taken into consideration.

First, the motion was tabled in proper form in accordance with the 48-hour notice rule. We're not giving a motion for show. We're doing so to give people enough time to do their due diligence. I do understand that when one is in government, they have to check and cross-check everything to make sure they don't set a precedent that could have far-reaching consequences. At least that's what I think. In short, the 48-hour notice rule has been met, and this is not new. It hasn't dropped down from the sky. Government lawyers will have enough time to scrutinize this matter.

Second, as my colleague so eloquently put it, the Auditor General made this request. She's not exactly a newcomer to the parliamentary community. She understands how things work. The fact that she's making this request means that she's thoroughly verified

its legality. Furthermore, one government in Canada has already done what she's asking for, and that is the government of Nova Scotia.

I'm looking at this issue from three angles that make me feel we can put it to the vote today. I hope we can do that.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Are there any comments?

Mr. Osborne.

Tom Osborne: We're not going to rock the boat on this. We're amenable to the motion that Mr. Lemire put forward. We have what we believe is a friendly amendment. If it's acceptable, we'll move forward. If parties don't want to accept it, then we'll move forward without it. We believe that this is a friendly amendment, but we don't intend to hold this up. We had some discussion prior to this discussion.

I'll just read in the amendment, and if all parties feel that this is acceptable, fine. If not, we'll go without it. It would be "That, in light of the testimony of the Office of the Auditor General on the 2026-27 main estimates on April 15, 2026, the Standing Committee on Public Accounts"—and this is the change—"write to the Treasury Board Secretariat on the need to modernize section 13 of the Auditor General Act to ensure unrestricted access to information". It would also add that the Treasury Board Secretariat would respond back to this committee in 90 days.

• (1255)

The Chair: Is that instead of reporting to the House?

Tom Osborne: Yes.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Lemire, it's about writing a letter to the Treasury Board Secretariat and asking them to respond within 90 days, instead of reporting it to the House.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think that in this case, the Auditor General is asking for a concrete measure to ensure timely response. We have an opportunity next week. I'm afraid that incorporating this aspect means we lose this opportunity, and we'll end up not addressing the request.

That said, I think that the information is quite relevant and that the government can take the initiative to provide us with this information without incorporating this in the motion, which could make us lose the opportunity to respond to this request as early as next week.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Osborne, the ball is in your court. I'll make a suggestion if it's friendly. Why don't we do both? Then I'll table it.

I think Mr. Lemire's concern is to get this in front of the government before the fiscal update is done. I kind of see his point there, whereas you're actually looking for an answer from the government, which I think this committee would welcome. Why don't we do both? Why don't I table it—friendly—in the House from the public accounts committee and reference the letter in writing to the Treasury Board seeking an answer in 90 days.

That kind of covers it all. Would that work?

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: Yes.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Osborne, it was really a question for you.

Tom Osborne: I think we would be good with that.

The Chair: To move things along, I'm going to look for unanimous consent—just to wrap all of that up—that we agree to add Mr. Osborne's amendment, as an addition to reporting to the House, seeking a response from the government in 90 days, from the Treasury Board.

(Amendment agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

(Motion as amended agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: I'm now going to suspend again for five minutes. We're going to come back here in camera. My goal is to keep you here as briefly as possible. This meeting is suspended. I'll see you back in five minutes.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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