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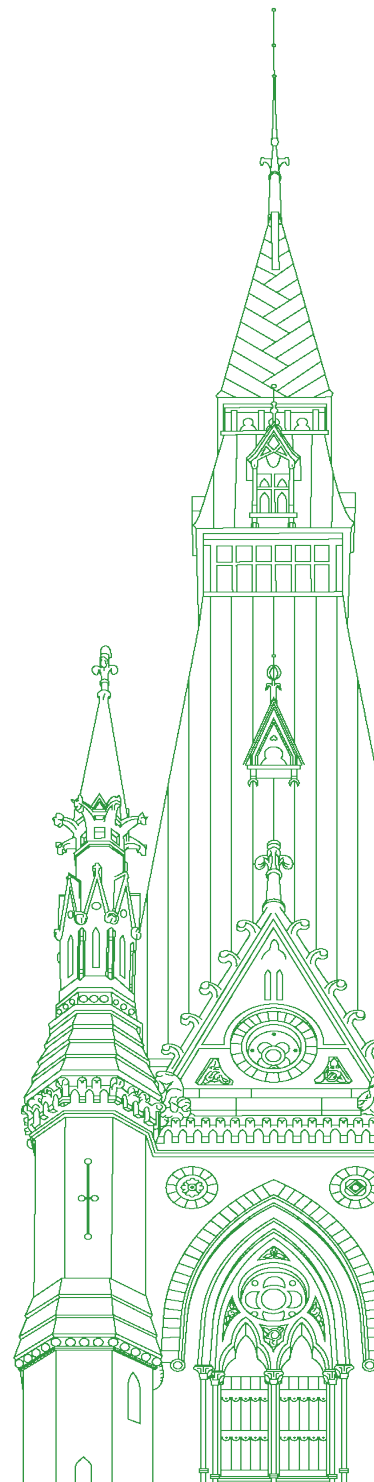
Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC)): Good morning, everyone. Welcome back. I hope everyone had a wonderful summer.

We are now at meeting number 49 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates, the mighty OGGO, the only committee that truly matters.

We welcome four new members to our committee.

Ms. Fancy, Mrs. Cobena, Mr. Bragdon and Mr. Mazier, welcome to OGGO.

Before we start, I'll give a very quick reminder since we've been away for a bit. Keep your hands and the earpieces away from your microphones so that we can protect the hearing of our very valued interpreters.

Pursuant to the order of reference from the House of Commons and the motion adopted by the committee on June 16, we're undertaking a study of the use of underused and surplus federal lands and buildings for services for veterans.

We have two witnesses to start. We'll do one hour. We'll then suspend briefly and bring in the next batch of witnesses.

We have Mr. Freeman and Ms. Pham.

Who's doing the opening statement?

Mr. Freeman, the floor is yours for five minutes. Go ahead, please.

Mitch Freeman (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Members of the committee, thank you for the invitation to appear before you today. My name is Mitch Freeman. I'm the assistant deputy minister of commemoration and public affairs and strategic policy and planning at Veterans Affairs Canada. I'm pleased to be here today with my colleague Nathalie Pham as part of your study of motion M-16. The study provides the occasion to explore the opportunities, challenges and best practices associated with providing services, supports and resources for veterans. It is also an opportunity to identify successful models and consider, alongside other federal departments, how assets might better serve veterans and the communities in which they live.

Veterans Affairs Canada's mandate is to support the well-being of veterans and their families and promote recognition and remembrance of the achievements and sacrifices of those who have served Canada in times of war, military conflict and peace. Our mission is to provide exemplary client-centred services and benefits that respond to the needs of veterans and their families while ensuring that the memory of their service and sacrifice remains alive.

Today, Veterans Affairs Canada administers a broad range of benefits, programs and services designed to support veterans throughout the postservice life. These include disability benefits, rehabilitation services, income supports, health care benefits, transition supports, case management, and education and training benefits, among others. We provide those services through an extensive national network. Currently, veterans can access support through 38 Veterans Affairs Canada locations across the country, Service Canada locations, 28 transition centres located on or near Canadian Forces bases, operational stress injury clinics, our national contact centre and our secure online platform, My VAC Account. Combined, these service channels form more than 700 points of service available to veterans and their families from coast to coast to coast.

Each year, approximately 7,800 members of the Canadian Armed Forces transition out of military service, including roughly 2,000 medical releases. While most veterans transition successfully, we know that some experience challenges adjusting to civilian life. Research indicates that nearly one in five veterans reports experiencing difficulties during that transition. Therefore, supporting a successful transition is a critical aspect of the department's work and requires collaboration among federal departments, provinces and territories, municipalities, employers, health care providers, community organizations and, of course, the veteran's family.

It is within this broader context that Veterans Affairs Canada welcomes the committee's study of motion M-16. However, we know the transition extends beyond access to programs and benefits alone. Veterans often tell us that access to housing, meaningful employment, social connection, health services and peer support are all important determinants of well-being. These are often areas in which municipalities, communities and organizations, provincial and territorial governments, and local service providers play an essential role.

Housing is a particularly important consideration, and this is why we have collaborated with Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada to support the veteran homelessness program to ensure eligible veterans receive the supports they need. We support organizations that identify and assist veterans who are experiencing or are at risk of experiencing homelessness, helping them access housing, income supports, health and mental health services, and other benefits for which they may be eligible. The department also provides emergency assistance services directly to vulnerable veterans to address their immediate financial challenges.

Experience has shown that homelessness is rarely solely a housing issue, though. Long-term success often depends on access to integrated supports that address health, wellness, employment, financial security, social connection and community belonging. These are areas in which community organizations, municipalities, provinces and territories, and other partners frequently play an essential role.

From our perspective, one of the strengths of this study is, in fact, the focus on evidence and collaboration. For that reason, hearing directly from veterans, veteran-serving organizations, municipal leaders, property experts and federal partners will be critical to understanding both the opportunities and the practical considerations associated with repurposing federal assets. As the committee undertakes this work, it will be important to consider factors such as long-term stability, accessibility, operating costs, local demand, governance arrangements and partnerships. Although Public Services and Procurement Canada is the department responsible for federal real property, Veterans Affairs Canada has extensive experience working with veterans, their families and organizations that support them, and we are committed to contributing expertise to the committee's study.

• (1105)

Further, this study comes at an important time. The government is making significant investments in the Canadian Armed Forces. Motion M-16 recognizes that an increase in military personnel today will ultimately result in a growing population of veterans in the years and decades ahead. The motion, therefore, invites us to think proactively about how we can continue to support those who have served Canada.

Canadians who serve in uniform—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Freeman. You're past your time. Can I get you to wrap up, please?

Mitch Freeman: Yes.

Canadians who serve in uniform make extraordinary contributions on behalf of our country. They deserve the systems to help them remain healthy, connected and engaged.

Mr. Chair, we appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the study and look forward to supporting the committee in its work.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. Freeman.

We'll start with Mr. Mazier for six minutes.

Welcome to OGGO, sir.

Dan Mazier (Riding Mountain, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Hello to everyone across the way. It's my first time here at OGGO. Here we go.

Mr. Freeman, how many veterans does the government estimate are currently experiencing homelessness in Canada?

Mitch Freeman: Thank you so much for the question.

The current information we have from Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada indicates that approximately 1,700 to 1,800 veterans are experiencing homelessness throughout the year. I would qualify—

Dan Mazier: Thank you, Mr. Freeman. That's good.

According to the government, the veteran homelessness program was introduced to prevent and reduce veteran homelessness in Canada. What is the total number of veterans who have attained stable housing through this program to date?

Mitch Freeman: In terms of the veteran homelessness program as administered by Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada, the last count I have indicates that through the program, 233 veterans have received supports to receive stable housing.

Dan Mazier: Mr. Freeman, we have obtained a departmental briefing note showing that last year, the government had over \$3 million in veteran homelessness program funding sitting unused. According to the department, "All opportunities to allocate this funding within the [veteran homelessness program] have been exhausted."

Does the government really believe there wasn't a single veteran who could have benefited from this money?

Mitch Freeman: I suspect that the reference is to HICC's program and is probably best suited to commentary from them, as they administer the veteran homelessness program.

Dan Mazier: What are your thoughts on that? You didn't think there would be any veterans who...? You're in charge of the department. You have lots to do with Veterans Affairs. Would you think any veterans could have benefited from that money?

Mitch Freeman: As noted, I don't administer the veteran homelessness program. That is administered through Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada. Any budgetary situation in that program would be best suited for them.

Dan Mazier: Are you aware of any organizations across Canada that could have used the \$3 million to benefit veterans?

Mitch Freeman: As I said, the delivery model for the veteran homelessness program is to utilize external expertise across the country. The question of how that is delivered would be best suited to Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada.

Dan Mazier: The question was this: Are you aware of any organizations across Canada that could have used this \$3 million to benefit veterans? Are you aware of any? It's simply yes or no.

• (1110)

Mitch Freeman: I appreciate the question, but I would still come back to my response that this is best suited for Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada as the administrator of the veteran homelessness program.

Dan Mazier: Are you the administrator of the veteran homelessness program?

Mitch Freeman: I am not.

Dan Mazier: What are you responsible for? Do you ever talk to that program at all?

Mitch Freeman: The relationship between Veterans Affairs and Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada is very collaborative in nature. The program's delivery model is to utilize two streams of work. The first is around services and supports; our colleagues at HICC have implemented programming across the country, with expertise—

Dan Mazier: I guess you are aware, then.

Why was the unallocated funding for the veteran homelessness program not transferred to the veterans emergency fund instead, given that this fund specifically supports veterans with food, clothing and shelter?

Mitch Freeman: The veterans emergency fund is a fund administered by Veterans Affairs Canada. It provides funding to veterans who find themselves in financial crises. That fund is funded through Veterans Affairs and has sufficient funds for the demand that is required.

Dan Mazier: Did anybody from Veterans Affairs ever pick up the phone and say, “Hey, we could use that \$3 million”?

Mitch Freeman: As I mentioned, that program has sufficient funds for the demand of veterans using that program, the veterans emergency fund.

Dan Mazier: It has sufficient funds.

Mitch Freeman: The current veterans emergency fund is capable of meeting the demand.

Dan Mazier: Mr. Freeman, in budget 2024, the government named multiple National Defence properties as candidates for housing. Some of these properties are working or former armouries, including the armouries in Amherst, Nova Scotia; Windsor, Ontario; and Vernon, British Columbia.

Has Veterans Affairs conducted any analysis on whether a former military drill facility is a psychologically appropriate environment for veterans living with operational stress injuries or PTSD?

Mitch Freeman: That's a very important question. I would offer two thoughts on this.

The first is a conversation with our colleagues at the Canadian Armed Forces on what those properties were or have been used for.

The second is a conversation with experts in the field around veteran homelessness and communities. I believe the committee has

several experts on the invitee list. I would suggest that this question be put forward to them.

Dan Mazier: Are you aware of any analysis done on that?

Mitch Freeman: Certainly we are in contact with organizations, particularly with Public Services and Procurement Canada, with regard to assets. From a Veterans Affairs Canada point of view, we do not have assets in that regard.

Dan Mazier: Have you ever asked for an analysis on that? As a department lead, have you ever had a conversation around that?

Mitch Freeman: I look forward to the outcome of this committee study after conversations with all the witnesses on what recommendations may come forward.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mazier.

Ms. Rochefort, welcome back.

Pauline Rochefort (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to start by saying that I found this particular report on the use and underuse of surplus lands to be excellent. The analysts have done a very good job with this report. Thank you for that.

Thank you for the opportunity this morning to talk about this important issue. I'm interested in understanding where the opportunities are. The report that was prepared highlights the Canada public land bank. It highlights the Canada Lands portfolio and the opportunities that exist with properties that have been identified as suitable for housing.

I am wondering if there are any that you have assessed at this point that are suitable for veterans housing or services. I'm also interested in understanding the stage of the property decision process at which veterans organizations and housing providers can propose such a use.

Mitch Freeman: I wish I were in a position to answer on the detailed process around unused land and how that works, but those questions would be best suited to our colleagues at Public Services and Procurement Canada, who look after the evolution and devolution of federal assets and how different organizations are involved in that.

What I can say, though, is that any organization that comes forward to Veterans Affairs Canada looking to inquire about.... We certainly put them in contact with those types of organizations to determine how that land can best be used from a veterans point of view.

Pauline Rochefort: Is there interaction between the two departments on some of these issues as they come forward? Would you recommend and propose anything on behalf of veterans?

• (1115)

Mitch Freeman: As I noted in my opening remarks, we are very happy to contribute the expertise we have on behalf of veterans. We understand the transition process. My colleague Nathalie can speak to that as we progress.

The transition process and the needs of veterans are unique compared to those of the typical Canadian living in Canada. We're happy to share our research and our work with regard to those needs with our colleagues at Public Services and Procurement Canada, the CAF, the DND, etc.

Pauline Rochefort: Do they ever ask for your expertise on these matters?

Mitch Freeman: The last interaction we had with PSPC was some months ago, and it was an inquiry—I suspect in support of this conversation—about the type of lands Veterans Affairs Canada had in this regard. Our response was that we don't have any land from a federal point of view. We are not the owner of federal assets. PSPC is the owner; PSPC is the custodian of land.

Pauline Rochefort: Would you ever provide advice on the requirements for veterans in terms of housing?

Mitch Freeman: We certainly would be happy to provide our expertise and best practices with regard to what we know about the veteran community.

Census 2021 highlights 461,000 veterans living in Canada. We have information around the split between male and female. We have an indication of the indigenous component of veterans, who would have a conversation of their own for unique needs.

We'd be happy to share and consult, as required, to support the committee's study.

Pauline Rochefort: Have you looked at the Amherst property, which has been proposed for a project for veterans housing and veterans services by my colleague MP Hirtle? Has this come across your desk?

Mitch Freeman: Thank you so much.

We are quite aware of the property in Amherst, and we are working with some of the community organizations to understand their needs. We have helped them and directed them as appropriate to Build Canada Homes, Canada Lands, etc.

Pauline Rochefort: You do collect input from communities and from veterans. You do ensure that this information is passed on to the appropriate bodies within government. Is that correct?

Mitch Freeman: Absolutely.

On that question, one role that Veterans Affairs Canada has is as a convener, if you will, on veterans issues. Of course, we have a case management process in which we talk to and deal with complex and high-risk veterans—the “high touch” folks—in that regard. We also have research on the census and the Canadian veteran health survey. We're happy to share, and we do share, that information with our colleagues at PSPC; CAF; DND; Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada; and others to support the veteran conversation.

Pauline Rochefort: Once information has been passed on, how do you follow up with other government departments on these issues?

Mitch Freeman: That's a great question.

The integration among the departments at the federal level is very collaborative in nature. We certainly participate in all kinds of conversations, steering committees, etc. For example, between the Canadian Armed Forces and us, we have a very formal structure that allows us to come together on a regular basis, establish priorities for the two departments with respect to veterans and then follow through with oversight on those.

Pauline Rochefort: As a final question, in terms of Amherst, what would be your role in following up with the various government departments with whom you've passed on the information? How would you ensure...?

As well, when we seek feedback from the public and from veterans, do we return to them? In other words, who closes the loop or—in whichever way we view communication—the triangle?

The Chair: Could you give a brief answer, please?

Mitch Freeman: As I mentioned, Mr. Chair, as the convenor, we would certainly establish a 360° feedback loop to ensure that those organizations coming forward and inquiring get in contact, and then that the contact is fruitful.

Pauline Rochefort: Thanks.

The Chair: Thanks.

Madame Gaudreau, welcome back.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. It's good to see you again. I hope you had a good summer.

We have a lot of work to do, even though we're in a minority position. The role of democracy is to ensure that we get the answers to our questions and also to ensure that services are provided properly. That leads me to mention that I was a member of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs for a year. Greetings to my colleagues who are here today.

It is clear that there are many neglected veterans, and we know very well that the money provided is insufficient. Today, we are looking at a new structure. The questions are precise and clear, but we don't have any answers. Questions have been asked. We know that Veterans Affairs Canada, or VAC, and the Canadian Armed Forces work together.

However, Deputy Minister, for a project like this one, is it normal to work with Public Services and Procurement Canada, or PSPC, to ensure that the services and terms and conditions are appropriate?

• (1120)

Mitch Freeman: Mr. Chair, I thank the member for her question.

It is normal for departments to work together to resolve the problems veterans are facing. The two departments, PSPC and VAC, have opportunities for those conversations. That said, I'm happy to receive recommendations from this committee to strengthen and improve that relationship.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Constituents are telling me to ask the question.

We know that the department is lacking money and that services are not fully available. Let's face it: Quality is a work in progress. Why isn't Veterans Affairs Canada being proactive in ensuring proper collaboration with PSPC on a program that can have concrete and significant benefits? Why are we asking the question and being told that the responsibility for this lies elsewhere and that the question should be put to someone else?

I must say that I want to have the answers to all the questions that have been asked by my colleagues. This is important, as it's part of our role.

Can you make a commitment to the people watching us, the veterans who are watching us? Can you say that you will be proactive to ensure that you don't miss a single penny or a single structure? What do you think?

Mitch Freeman: If I may, I will answer in English for clarity's sake.

[English]

First, I'd like to highlight that the benefit structure from a financial point of view for Veterans Affairs Canada is quasi-statutory in nature, which means that the demand from a veteran point of view is met in Parliament. This means that if 10,000 veterans come forward, the programming is there for 10,000 veterans. From a short-fall conversation of funding to veterans through the benefits and services offered by the department, there is none. That demand is met 100%.

With regard to the second aspect, I think the collaboration between PSPC and Veterans Affairs and all departments is high. The relationships are good. I look forward to the study here. This is a bit of a new conversation for the Department of Veterans Affairs, because we're not real property experts. We have expertise around veterans and the issues they're facing. We're happy to share those with our colleague departments and community organizations, etc., to ensure that veterans have the best services available and that these properties, where they exist in the country, can benefit veterans.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I still have a few minutes left. We'll get a little more into the concrete side of things.

First, it is said that there are 10,000 veterans with needs. For the people listening to us, yes, it's good to have a response, but is it acceptable to get a response 18 months later when people are suffering? That's the other question. We can play with words when it comes to time frames. If you tell me the time frame is less than two

weeks, I can show you that thousands of people are still waiting. They are calling my office.

I understand that collaboration will take place. That's a good thing. However, if PSPC is in charge of the land and the building, what exactly are we talking about? Are we talking about a service centre, housing for veterans or both?

[English]

Mitch Freeman: Thank you for the question.

[Translation]

I will answer in English for clarity's sake.

[English]

PSPC has the responsibility of managing federal assets. From our point of view, we are happy to collaborate here with the committee, as I said in my opening remarks, and with PSPC to share that knowledge and expertise of veterans in order to ensure that these properties can be used appropriately.

As I also said in my opening remarks, the infrastructure of Veterans Affairs Canada is 38 offices across the country and 28 co-locations with Canadian Forces bases to ensure that veterans receive the services and supports that they are so entitled to. Likewise, from an in-person point of view, our most recent client satisfaction survey indicates that 5% of veterans look for in-person services. That infrastructure is there. When it is more convenient, we will have case managers meet veterans in their homes or other convenient locations in that regard to ensure that those needs are met.

• (1125)

[Translation]

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

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame.

Mrs. Cobena, welcome to OGGO. You have five minutes, please.

Sandra Cobena (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Freeman, for being with us today. This topic of discussion that we've had so far, particularly around homelessness, is of particular interest to me and to my riding of Newmarket—Aurora. There is a homelessness problem. We see it. It's evident. We see that the need is there.

On that note, could you let us know what official estimate you have of the number of homeless veterans in Canada?

Mitch Freeman: Certainly. The most recent data I have from Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada is a compilation of point-in-time counts of shelter surveys across the country. It indicates that approximately 1,700 to 1,800 veterans experience homelessness over the course of the year.

I wanted to qualify earlier, Mr. Chair, that this doesn't mean that 1,700 veterans are homeless every day. Throughout the course of the year, 1,700 veterans would experience, or would be at risk of experiencing, homelessness throughout that period of time.

Sandra Cobena: What date do you have for that number? What year is it based on?

Mitch Freeman: The data I have is from March 2026.

Sandra Cobena: Okay.

I have a report from the Government of Canada as of December, and they are estimating around 2,600. Of course, those are the ones we know of. Some of our veterans, people who have served our country, are experiencing homelessness. You would understand why it was shocking to hear that the housing minister decided to transfer approximately \$3 million out of a program to help the homeless veterans, claiming that he couldn't find any ex-military in need.

In that vein, when did Veterans Affairs Canada first learn that the \$3 million would not be used through the veteran homelessness program?

Mitch Freeman: Thank you for the question.

I'd like to highlight two points. The data you're quoting—around 2,600—was a data point from years previous, so we look at veteran homelessness from the point of view of how the 2,600 has come down to 1,700. Many factors in that regard may be contributing to that. Certainly, the veteran homelessness program was implemented during that time frame, so we're quite happy to see those numbers migrate from 2,600 down to 1,700.

As I said to a colleague earlier, any question around funding of the veteran homelessness program really is best suited.... I'm not privy to the internal funding conversations with respect to the veteran homelessness program. What I can say is that the program is delivered in two streams. One is around services supports, and there are about 28 organizations that HICC has entered into contracts with. They have another stream, called "capacity", which are six organizations that are performing research in this space to have a better understanding of the root cause of veteran homelessness. I look forward, from a Veterans Affairs point of view, to receiving that research data in the coming years to better understand and to then make policy decisions around benefits and services for veterans.

Sandra Cobena: You mentioned all the support and the need that veterans do, in fact, have, which is why we see an issue with funding being removed—the \$3 million being removed here and transferred elsewhere. This is money that was specifically allocated to help veterans, and Housing took it away. Was your department consulted before this decision was made?

Mitch Freeman: As mentioned earlier, the administrator of that program is HICC, and decisions made would be internal to that organization.

Sandra Cobena: You were just advised, "We're taking money away", and that's it. Do you have no input into that?

Mitch Freeman: From the veteran homelessness program point of view, our role is collaborating with HICC to establish the wraparound services that veterans obtain as they enter into the pro-

gram, as well as to identify veterans and bring them into the Veterans Affairs portfolio. Many times, veterans who arrive at the veteran homelessness program may not necessarily be using all the services available from Veterans Affairs.

As I mentioned earlier, from a disability benefit point of view, we have an entire program in that regard. However, more importantly for this particular cohort, it's about rehabilitation and income replacement. That rehabilitation program—

• (1130)

Sandra Cobena: May I ask, in that vein, would you have recommended that, instead of the \$3 million being taken away, it be reallocated to these services? I ask this because in my riding there's a mental health support organization for veterans, and it's at capacity. Wouldn't those funds have been better allocated to these sorts of services rather than being taken away from the veterans?

The Chair: Give a brief answer, please.

Mitch Freeman: I would say that the veteran homelessness program has assisted more than 1,400 veterans across the country with wraparound services. As mentioned earlier, over 200 have received and found stable housing.

The Chair: Ms. Fancy, welcome to OGGO. You have five minutes, please.

Jessica Fancy (South Shore—St. Margarets, Lib.): Thank you very much. Through you, Chair, I'd like to redirect the conversation to housing, which is what we're here to talk about.

Also, it's wonderful being a new member at OGGO. I remember substituting here a couple of times during one of our previous sessions.

I'd like to start with you, Mr. Freeman, very quickly, in regard to planning and strategy. I'd also like to highlight that I'm a member from Nova Scotia, similar to my colleague—it's her motion—who's from Nova Scotia. I'd like to highlight the fact that, in Nova Scotia, we punch above our weight in terms of the number of veterans we have: 7.2% of our total population in Nova Scotia are veterans, versus a national population of 2.7%, making it extremely important to have wraparound services, as my colleague across the way was talking about, that are close to housing.

My first question for you, Mr. Freeman, is this: How is Veterans Affairs identifying opportunities to use some of these underutilized, or surplus, federal properties to address veterans housing? What do you feel some of the biggest barriers are to making these properties available?

Mitch Freeman: Thank you so much for the question.

I'd like to start by highlighting your first point around some of the data and information we have as a result of census 2021. This was the first time since 1971 that a census question was asked about military service. That, of course, has been repeated in 2026. We look forward to receiving that data in the coming months and years, as well as the analysis that occurs.

As for your point, Nova Scotia has the highest veteran population per capita, and it's very important that the services are offered in a way that.... We have heard from veterans about telling their story once and not making them repeat the trauma or the issues they have. Certainly, to the committee, it would offer the opportunity to reflect on how best to make recommendations on those types of properties.

We also hear from veterans that the majority of interactions with the Department of Veterans Affairs come in two steps. One is case management. By far the most important is case management, in which a veteran will sit down and speak to a Veterans Affairs employee around their needs analysis. They'll walk through a transition process. They'll identify the needs.

That case manager, as the convenor of services, will then work with the veteran to put the right services in place. Some of those services may come from us. Some of those services may come from community providers. It will be important for the committee to reflect on how these properties can then be used in and where veterans live, in order to resolve their needs.

Jessica Fancy: What do you feel is one of the barriers to that right now?

Mitch Freeman: Nathalie, do you have any thoughts on that?

Jessica Fancy: I'm coming to you next, Ms. Pham. Yes, let's roll into that.

Nathalie Pham (Director General, Field Operations, Department of Veterans Affairs): Do you mean specifically to Nova Scotia or as a barrier to...?

Jessica Fancy: I mean in general. We're representing all Canadians with the committee.

Nathalie Pham: As I think Mr. Freeman said, the role of our frontline staff is to support our veterans and to link them with the community resources, with the province and with service providers to help them. That is one of our greatest missions, and we're proud of doing that.

Of course, it's not always an easy piece. First of all, veterans come forward, but are they ready to access all the resources available to them? It takes time and engagement to help the veteran move forward to that.

When you ask me what the obstacles are, I would say that trust and the building of relationships with veterans are not as easy as we think. It's not as though we have a veteran who comes forward and we put the service in place. We need to build that trusting relationship. This may take months or, sometimes, years.

I would say that with our homeless veterans, that is a bigger challenge. They don't engage with you right away. It may take time. Also, as you know, homeless veterans have a different shape. We don't always see the classic homeless veterans. A lot of our home-

less veterans do what we may call "couch surfing", and they may not be completely homeless when we first meet with them. We realize when we start working with our veterans that some of them are potentially in a situation of becoming homeless. Trying to be proactive is really critical, then, for the people who are in the steps to become homeless. That's when we want to react, act and support them.

● (1135)

The Chair: We are out of time for you.

Madame Gaudreau, please go ahead.

Before you start, though, it will be Madame Gaudreau and then Mr. Bragdon. Then we'll finish with Mr. Gasparro. We have a couple of extra minutes to spare, and we'll do three and a half or four, six and six. I'm just adding a minute to each.

Please go ahead.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: You're right, Ms. Pham. The study we did at the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs showed that a veteran commits suicide every week. My colleagues don't know this, but it's important. Some people don't know me yet, but I speak French. I was saying that 50% of veterans are more likely to commit suicide. So, yes, being proactive is essential.

This morning, we had the opportunity to get an overview of Veterans Affairs Canada. We understand that Public Services and Procurement Canada is in charge of the land, but we want to know specifically what's available for veterans through this program. What are the services provided? What's the plan? That's all I want to know today.

Nathalie Pham: You're asking what the plan is for homeless veterans. Is that correct?

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Yes. I'm talking about vulnerable veterans and home ownership.

Nathalie Pham: In terms of service delivery, we're more focused on the risk factors we can address with our veterans so they have access to the services that are in place. If they need mental health services, regardless of where the veterans are, we need to give them access to those services. As you know, veterans reside everywhere across the country. Our number one mission is to put them in contact with service providers, provinces and territories. That's important for us.

Of course, we look at every angle, including how the person functions.

Housing is one of the concerns: We have to look at what works for them. We collaborate a lot with community resources. They're really our eyes on the ground; they can be there day and night. They work a lot with other resources in the community. So our role is to contact community resources and work with them. Moreover, very often, it is the community resources that send veterans our way. Again, it's about building trust; a homeless veteran won't come knocking on our door. That's what we want, but we need to work with community resources to create that trust so they send the veterans our way for us to help them.

We believe it's about providing them with the services they are entitled to and helping them meet their needs, no matter what they are.

I know we're talking about housing, but we have to find the type of housing or the way of doing things that suits them. There isn't a one-size-fits-all for veterans; it's specific to each one.

• (1140)

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I would like to have more details about the plan, how it will take shape and what the implementation process will look like. Will it be implemented everywhere at once, or are there priority areas? I would like for the committee to receive that information. People are asking us questions, so we want to be able to give them answers.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Is there anything that you're looking for in writing from them in a response?

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I didn't hear that.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry. Is there anything that you're looking for from them in writing to respond to your last commentary about a plan?

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: My question is really about the implementation of the plan across the country.

Ms. Pham, since you represent the regions, I would like to know how the plan is divided up and carried out in the regions.

Nathalie Pham: We can share our plan and how we work with the various resources to support vulnerable veterans.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That's great. Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: That's fantastic. Thanks very much.

As a reminder, this committee has passed a motion that any requested documents have to come to us within 21 days.

We will now go to Mr. Bragdon, and then we'll finish with Mr. Gasparro and Ms. Fancy.

Richard Bragdon (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

Motion 16 recognizes that Canada's growing armed forces could lead to an increasing number of veterans over the coming decades and, of course, over the coming years. Has Veterans Affairs undertaken any planning to determine how the demand on veterans services and facilities could change as a result? Are there particular communities and regions where you anticipate significant increases in demand?

Mitch Freeman: It's a question that is relevant to the time in which we live. There's certainly work being done by the two organizations, ours and the Canadian Armed Forces, to try to forecast and understand that growth in recruitment and retention in the military and then what the future forecast is for that departure to Veterans Affairs. Undoubtedly, there will be an increase in the number of veterans in the country over the course of the next years and decades.

I want us to come back to some of the analysis in that regard. First and foremost, I want the committee to have confidence that the Veterans Affairs benefits—that is, our disability benefit program, our rehabilitation income replacement benefits, etc., as I mentioned earlier—are quasi-statutory in nature, which means that they grow with the demand. From a purely financial point of view, the number of veterans who apply for benefits is the number of veterans who receive those benefits.

The second component is processing and capacity. We are thankful that budget 2025 included \$184.9 million to stabilize the disability processing workforce in order to ensure that processing keeps pace. It also invested in a program called service modernization, which will see technology around efficiency and effectiveness of that program moving forward. The delivery of that particular benefit is virtual in nature, so infrastructure and physical location are not consequential inputs to that conversation, because the workforce is virtual across the country today, and the service modernization to enhance the veterans' journey will be the first step in meeting the increasing demand in the years and decades to come.

Richard Bragdon: I think what many veterans would want to know and, of course, what Canadians as a whole want to know, is that the response from the department and from the government is matching the urgency of the moment and the need.

All of us in this room can reflect and perhaps know of or have encountered or met with veterans who are transitioning across very difficult terrain and are navigating, along with their families, the consequences of their service and the after-effects of that. Then we have those who are severely impacted and find themselves in conditions we can't even begin to imagine.

It behooves the government, as well as the department, to answer with compassion, sensitivity and urgency to make sure priority is being put on ensuring the proper use of the facilities that are there, and if there are surplus federal buildings that match a need, they are being identified now and are repurposed to align with those emerging needs.

There is one area that I was made aware of this morning, in fact, when I received a note. There is a chapel that's part of the Canadian Armed Forces base in Gagetown called St. Luke's Chapel. It has long served the military families and the veterans of our region. Was Veterans Affairs consulted on the decision to repurpose and basically deconsecrate the chapel and convert it to a multi-purpose facility?

I know many veterans and their families rely on chaplaincy services. That aspect of their lives is so important, especially in times of crisis and need. Is Veterans Affairs aware of this decision, and were you consulted?

• (1145)

Mitch Freeman: I have a couple of comments.

I'd like to draw us back to the beginning of the statement to make sure that all the committee members know that, if you know of a veteran who is struggling and needs assistance, you can talk to the veteran and make sure we are aware so that we and our teams can reach out and make sure the veteran has access to any services and supports that they may need.

I would also like to highlight to the committee members and any veteran who is watching today that the number one priority of the department is to ensure that services are in place for veterans and that the transition process goes as well as it can. This is why the department, over the last decade, has evolved the transition process in collaboration with our colleagues at the Canadian Armed Forces to ensure that there can be sit-down interviews with veterans and their families, should the veteran be so inclined.

Richard Bragdon: Thank you, Mr. Freeman. I have a short time, and I want to allow a colleague to ask a question as well.

Were you consulted? Was Veterans Affairs Canada consulted on this decision, which impacts veterans and military families? It is a building that was dedicated for years to serving those families. Were you consulted about this decision, yes or no?

Mitch Freeman: I can say that to the best of my knowledge, I am not personally aware of a conversation. The question should be redirected to our CAF colleagues, who are responsible for their real property.

Richard Bragdon: I'll turn it over to Ms. Cobena for the remainder of my time.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Cobena.

Sandra Cobena: Thank you.

Veterans Affairs Canada created the women veterans council to ensure that women veterans had a meaningful voice in shaping policy. We have since learned that five of its 12 members have resigned, citing a lack of conditions necessary to achieve meaningful outcomes. This is nearly half the council. Could you tell us what went wrong?

Mitch Freeman: Thank you so much.

With respect to the women veterans council, that council was put in place.... I believe you're making reference to the change in membership earlier this year. A number of members decided they would not resubmit or volunteer for continued participation in the committee.

As such, the current committee is functioning quite well at this time. There are six members—

Sandra Cobena: There was an article in which they explained why they were walking away. They walked away from the council. Are you aware of what the issues were that caused them to walk away?

Mitch Freeman: As mentioned earlier, the committee has a foundational aspect to provide advice and guidance to the Minister of Veterans Affairs. My understanding is that a number of members did not feel they would continue forward with the committee and therefore made decisions to move on. The committee continues today. There are six active members providing advice to the Minister of Veterans Affairs.

Sandra Cobena: I'm sorry. Just to be clear, you are not aware of the issues and there were no changes subsequent to these five members walking away.

Mitch Freeman: As I mentioned, the women veterans council remains in place today. There are six members. They provide advice and guidance to the Minister of Veterans Affairs.

The Chair: I'm going to interrupt you, Mr. Freeman. I don't do this often, but it was a very direct question: Are you aware of the issues or the reasons for this? I think the committee would appreciate a direct answer instead of just hearing that the committee still exists.

Mitch Freeman: Absolutely, Mr. Chair.

In this time frame, I am not aware. I was not involved in the process. I was not the ADM responsible at that point in time.

• (1150)

Richard Bragdon: Mr. Chair, just quickly, I would simply request—

The Chair: We're past our time.

Richard Bragdon: Okay.

The Chair: We're quite a bit past our time.

I'll now go to Mr. Gasparro and then Ms. Fancy.

I'm sure we'll have a bit of extra time for you two as well.

Vince Gasparro (Eglinton—Lawrence, Lib.): Great. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll yield the first portion of my time to Ms. Fancy.

Jessica Fancy: Nice. Thank you very much.

Once again, I am bringing the topic back to housing, which is the purpose of the motion today.

I'd like to do a follow-up question from my last round, Ms. Pham. This is in regard to how you measure the success of a housing initiative. Previously, you had talked about some of these wraparound services, couch surfing, what is homelessness and different indicators. Let's look at how we measure the success of a program. Is it simply whether someone is housed, or do you also look at long-term outcomes, such as employment, education and independent living?

Thank you.

Nathalie Pham: The outcomes really depend on the veteran. Each veteran may have different outcomes, depending on what they desire. As you talked about, some will seek housing and some will seek vocational aspects. We start with where the veteran is, at point A, and then we work with the veteran to achieve their highest level of independence. Their highest level of independence is very different. We have people with a lot of outcomes they want to achieve. We will support them throughout the journey.

Again, when you think about it, when you engage with Veterans Affairs, it's not that you start and when you reach an outcome we say goodbye. It's a very long journey. The level of commitment from the veteran can fluctuate over time. You may have outcomes you've reached so that you don't need to engage with Veterans Affairs as much. Maybe a couple of months later you have new needs. We're there throughout the rest of your life and to support you on whatever the outcome is.

We measure the outcomes based on the seven domains of well-being. Each veteran goes through a different journey. We look at their physical health, their mental health, their environment and their social environment. All of those domains may have different outcomes for each veteran.

Jessica Fancy: Thank you very much.

Mr. Gasparro.

Vince Gasparro: That's great. Thank you.

I'd like to pivot from that line of questioning on wraparound services.

You previously mentioned, Mr. Freeman, that there are currently about 461,000 veterans in our country. If I recall correctly, a significant percentage of those are members of the RCMP as well. Is that correct?

Mitch Freeman: The 2021 census question asked for military service.

Vince Gasparro: That's great. Thank you.

There are 461,000 veterans in our country, and there are about 1,700 who have experienced homelessness over the past 12 months, according to your stats. I think we can all agree that one homeless veteran is one too many.

I'd like to talk about the wraparound services, because homelessness and the causes of homelessness are complex issues. I'd like to refer back to a May 2019 Veterans Affairs report, entitled "Moving Towards Ending Homelessness Among Veterans". Can you talk about some of the findings from that report and some of the pro-

grammatic support being provided to our veterans to try to mitigate their experiences with regard to homelessness?

Mitch Freeman: I can speak to a number of programs that are in place post the 2019 conversation.

First, the veteran homelessness program is the most significant aspect, which came online a number of years ago in order to address veteran homelessness, as I mentioned earlier, through our colleagues at HICC.

Second, we have the veterans emergency fund. We spoke about that a bit earlier as well. This is a fund available to veterans who are facing immediate financial crisis. They may be fully capable. They may just be dealing with a time when the furnace needs a significant repair or replacement and they don't have the funds to do that, and without solving that particular problem, it would lead into some other situation around the risk of homelessness or homelessness itself. The veterans emergency fund is there to assist veterans in this immediate financial crisis situation.

Finally, subsequent to that, there's also the veteran and family well-being fund. This is another fund that we have, and it supports organizations across the country to do innovative things. A significant portion of the fund, over the last number of years, has been allocated to organizations that are assisting with veteran homelessness.

Those coming together have provided actions, since the 2019 report, to enhance support and reduce and diminish veteran homelessness. From the data we're seeing from Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada, the number is getting smaller.

• (1155)

Vince Gasparro: That's great.

I'm good. Thanks, Chair.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Do you mind if I ask a couple of quick questions?

Mr. Freeman, you had numbers from March 2026. The departmental plan refers back to the 2021 census for the number of those identified as homeless. Are those the most recent numbers? Where are the March 2026 numbers coming from?

Mitch Freeman: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The homelessness numbers come from our colleagues at HICC, who do point-in-time counts and shelter surveys to identify the number of homeless veterans who are utilizing those services.

The Chair: They're updated, I guess, when the actual census is done.

Do you have a breakdown of—I hate the term “root causes”—the root causes for the homelessness? How much is drug-related? How much is mental health-related? How much is financial stress?

Mitch Freeman: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I think—

The Chair: You can get back to the committee with that, if you have—

Mitch Freeman: Yes. It would probably be best to provide that information back to the committee.

Certainly, a veteran experiences the same indicators as a Canadian, plus—

The Chair: I figured as much, but I'm curious. If you could provide that, it would be wonderful. I would appreciate that.

Mitch Freeman: Okay.

The Chair: Mr. Bragdon, you wanted to ask something really quickly.

Richard Bragdon: Yes. Thanks, Mr. Chair.

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*] any documentation that was brought forth as it pertains to the decision that was made around the repurposing of St. Luke's Chapel at base Gagetown. If you could provide that to the chair of the committee, that would be great.

The Chair: Is that something you can get to us, Mr. Freeman?

Mitch Freeman: Certainly. I can provide what we have in Veterans Affairs Canada, which I suspect is minimal. Directing the question to our CAF colleagues may be more appropriate.

The Chair: Minimal is better than nothing.

That's wonderful.

We're going to suspend for about five minutes, and then we'll bring in our new witnesses. The new witnesses are in the room already, so let's keep it to five minutes, please. Thanks very much.

Mr. Freeman and Ms. Pham, thanks for being with us.

We are suspended.

• (1155) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1200)

The Chair: Thank you, everyone, for your patience. We are back in session.

Mr. Field and Ms. Lowther, welcome to OGGO. I understand that each of you has an opening statement.

Ms. Lowther, the floor is yours for five minutes, and then we'll hear from Mr. Field.

Please go ahead.

Debbie Lowther (Chief Executive Officer and Co-Founder, Veterans Emergency Transition Services): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of Veterans Emergency Transition Services, or VETS Canada.

In April 2024, it was reported that the federal government planned to divest 14 surplus properties for housing. Among those properties was the Amherst armoury in Nova Scotia. When the announcement was made, we contacted former member of Parliament Bill Casey, who had been working with a group of people for many years to save that armoury. Amherst is my husband's hometown, and Mr. Casey is a family friend. We immediately arranged a meeting with Mr. Casey, the then mayor of Amherst and the CAO of the Town of Amherst to discuss what might be possible. We shared our vision for the armoury, and there was strong support.

Our vision includes approximately 18 one-bedroom units for homeless and disadvantaged veterans, along with a VETS Canada office staffed by trained social services workers, who could provide the wraparound supports. The armoury previously housed the Nova Scotia Highlanders Regimental Museum, and we envision the museum remaining there and being enhanced. Most importantly, we want to preserve this recognized federal heritage building as a landmark and a living monument to the thousands of soldiers who trained there for three wars, including the 486 who trained there but never made it home.

We believe that VETS Canada is well suited to operate such a facility. Since our founding in 2010, we have worked directly with veterans in communities across Canada, providing immediate practical support to Canadian Armed Forces and RCMP veterans who are homeless, at risk of homelessness or experiencing crisis.

This frontline experience has taught us an important lesson: Veteran homelessness is rarely just a housing issue. A veteran may need a roof over their head, but they may also be dealing with food insecurity, financial instability, difficulty navigating government programs, challenges transitioning from military to civilian life, or the loss of the community and sense of belonging that came with military service.

This is why we strongly support exploring the use of surplus and underused federal lands and buildings for veterans housing and services, but we would encourage the government to think beyond simply converting surplus properties into housing units. The real opportunity is to create veteran-focused community hubs in which housing and support services exist together.

Imagine a facility in which a veteran experiencing homelessness can access safe, affordable housing while also receiving assistance with food security, financial support, employment, benefits navigation, mental health referrals and other practical needs. Imagine that same facility providing a place for veterans to gather for peer support, programming, financial literacy, cooking programs or simply a cup of coffee with someone who understands their experiences. That connection matters.

Military service creates a powerful sense of community. When someone leaves the Canadian Armed Forces—particularly when the transition is difficult—losing that sense of community can have a profound impact. Veteran-focused facilities can help rebuild the connection while providing the practical assistance that veterans need.

We also believe the federal government has an opportunity to work with established and vetted veteran-serving organizations. Organizations across Canada already have the relationships, knowledge and experience necessary to support veterans. What many lack is affordable, appropriate physical space. Making suitable federal properties available through long-term leases, nominal cost arrangements, transfers or partnerships could allow these assets to support veterans and communities for decades.

There is also a practical economic argument. When a federal building is vacant or significantly underused, Canadians continue to carry the cost of that asset while receiving limited public benefit. Repurposing appropriate properties for veterans housing and services can turn an underused government asset into a lasting community asset. We encourage the government to consult with veterans and veteran-serving organizations and, when appropriate properties are identified, to move forward without unnecessary delay.

Canada already owns these assets, while veteran-serving organizations already possess much of the expertise needed to deliver service and communities across the country have veterans who need affordable housing, practical support and connection. Bringing those three things together could create something far more valuable than simply disposing of surplus property. It could create places in which veterans could stabilize their lives, reconnect with communities and move forward with dignity.

We strongly support the committee's exploring a model that prioritizes veterans housing, integrated support services, partnerships with established veteran-serving organizations and long-term community benefit.

I will close with one of our VETS Canada tag lines, which summarizes our core belief: "Those who protected our home should never be without one."

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and for undertaking this important study.

• (1205)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Field, go ahead, please.

Brad Field (President, Homes For Heroes Foundation): Members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear here today. I'm the president and CEO of Homes For Heroes Foundation. Our mission is simple: to help end veteran homelessness in Canada.

However, I'm here today to speak about something larger, which is the opportunity created by motion number 16 and what Canada can do with federal assets it already owns. Motion 16 asks this committee to examine how underused and surplus federal lands and buildings could be put to work serving veterans and strengthening communities. I would suggest that this is not simply a question about surplus real estate. It is a question about what Canada chooses to do with assets it already owns.

Across Canada there are federal properties that are vacant, underused or approaching the end of their current purpose. At the same time, veterans are struggling with affordable housing, access to ser-

vices, employment and successful transitions to civilian life. These two realities should not exist independently of one another.

At Homes For Heroes, we have seen what happens when housing is combined with community and meaningful support. Our approach is not simply to provide a roof. We provide veterans with a home, a community and wraparound supports that help them address the challenges contributing to housing instability and help them rebuild their lives. We have learned something very important: Housing is the platform, while community is the catalyst and support makes the transition sustainable.

We believe that federal land and buildings can provide the platform on a much larger scale. We're not suggesting that every surplus federal property become a veterans village. We are suggesting that the federal government establish a deliberate, repeatable framework for identifying suitable properties and matching them with qualified organizations capable of serving veterans. Imagine a formal federal facility becoming a place where veterans can live, access services, pursue employment and training, connect with other veterans and become a part of the surrounding community. This is the opportunity before this committee. It is an opportunity that can bring together the federal government, provinces, municipalities, indigenous communities, veteran organizations, housing providers and private sector partners.

There is also a strong economic argument. We should not view this solely as a government expenditure. We should view it as an investment in people and communities by using assets it already owns. The land has value and the building has value, but when we combine those assets with housing, services, employment pathways and community partnerships, we create something far more valuable: the opportunity for a veteran to regain stability, independence and purpose.

This is also an opportunity to be proactive. Canada is investing significantly in our armed forces, and the veteran population will continue to evolve. We should not wait until a veteran is homeless before asking where the veteran can go. We should build infrastructure, partnerships and pathways before this crisis occurs.

My recommendation to this committee is straightforward. I encourage you to examine the creation of a federal veteran community asset strategy, a framework through which surplus and underused federal properties can be identified, evaluated and made available for veteran-serving purposes when there are demonstrated need and a qualified operating partner. The framework should consider the location and suitability of federal properties, the housing and service needs of veterans in the surrounding community, partnerships with organizations with demonstrated veteran-serving experience, sustainable operating and funding models, and measurable outcomes and accountability for Canadians. Homes For Heroes would welcome the opportunity to contribute our experience to that work.

Ending veteran homelessness will not be accomplished by one organization, one government or one program. It requires partnership, innovation and the willingness to see an old problem through a new lens.

Members of the committee, Canada asked these men and women to serve. Our responsibility does not end when their military service ends. If Canada owns the land, if Canada owns these buildings and if Canadians need housing and services, then we have an obligation to ask, "How can these assets serve Canadians who served us?"

Motion 16 gives us the opportunity to begin answering this question, so I encourage this community to be ambitious. Do not simply study the surplus federal property; study what those properties could become. They could become homes. They could become communities. They could become centres of service, transition and opportunity. Ultimately, they could become places where veterans rebuild their lives and where they once again become an integral part of communities they served to protect.

Thank you, members of the committee. I look forward to your questions.

• (1210)

The Chair: That's perfect. You had two seconds to spare. Thanks very much.

We'll start our six-minute round with Mrs. Cobena.

Please go ahead.

Sandra Cobena: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being with us this morning.

I have some questions for Ms. Lowther, to begin with.

You and your volunteers go out and find veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. How many veterans in a housing crisis does VETS Canada encounter in a typical year?

• (1215)

Debbie Lowther: We support anywhere between 400 and 600 veterans a year. Many of them are at risk of homelessness. I would say probably about 80% are at risk and 20% are actually homeless.

Sandra Cobena: Would you say that you have difficulty finding veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness?

Debbie Lowther: No. Out of the 400 to 600 whom we support in a year, about 80% are referred to us by Veterans Affairs Canada. There's no shortage.

Sandra Cobena: We have learned that approximately \$3 million was transferred out of the program, which would have helped veterans who are facing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness. It was stated that they couldn't find ex-military who were in need. Does this explanation make sense to you?

Debbie Lowther: No, not even a little. We would have gladly taken that \$3 million. Brad and I probably would have fought each other for it.

Brad Field: We'd arm-wrestle.

Sandra Cobena: That was my next question.

Could VETS have used the funding? What could you have done with the funding?

Debbie Lowther: We probably could have helped even more veterans. In cases in which a veteran comes to us and their need is going to cost a lot more than what one organization can afford, we will often collaborate with other community organizations. It's wonderful to collaborate, but it comes with...I shouldn't say a negative side, but it can become confusing for a veteran when they're dealing with a bunch of different organizations.

If we had the extra money, instead of reaching out to another organization and asking if it can split the cost of whatever, then we would probably do a lot more in-house.

Sandra Cobena: When you think about \$3 million, could you tell us how many veterans you could have helped?

Debbie Lowther: We have figured out that on average we spend about \$3,500 per veteran. Do the math. I'm not good at math.

Sandra Cobena: This is a big deal, because it is cheaper to prevent homelessness and invest in prevention rather than investing after the fact.

Could you talk about what preventive measures you could have invested this \$3 million in?

Debbie Lowther: On the prevention side, we help out with things like arrears rent payments, utilities payments, food, clothing and household items. We could certainly have used the \$3 million for all of those things to help a veteran stay in their home.

Sandra Cobena: Is it fair to say, then, that there are scenarios in which veterans become homeless because the help did not arrive fast enough?

You're talking about veterans in need and how it's difficult to navigate all the different programs. That's where you come in and assist them. Have you seen the complexity of accessing all these programs lead to a veteran, in fact, becoming homeless?

Debbie Lowther: It is complex, confusing and overwhelming for veterans to try to make sense of all the programs that are available. Programs like the veteran homelessness program are wonderful benefits, but they need to be less complicated and more seamless for veterans.

Sandra Cobena: Is it fair to say that sometimes bureaucracy turns a housing problem into a homelessness problem?

Debbie Lowther: You could say that, yes.

Sandra Cobena: Thank you for that.

Is there a problem with lack of money? Is there a need for additional funding to support veterans?

Debbie Lowther: Absolutely, yes.

Sandra Cobena: Could you expand on that?

Debbie Lowther: What I say to people generally is this: The public thinks that when members of the Canadian Armed Forces take off the uniform, they are well cared for. The general public does not realize that somebody has to serve 10 years to get even a tiny pension and they have to serve 25 years to get 50% of their pre-release income, so leaving service is not lucrative. Many veterans are not in a great headspace when they leave, but they are still forced to entertain a second career in order to make ends meet. We could do a much better job of looking after them.

• (1220)

Sandra Cobena: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Hirtle, welcome to OGGO. The floor is yours for six minutes.

Alana Hirtle (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm very pleased to be here this morning. Thanks to you folks for being here as well.

Mr. Field, I was very pleased to hear you mention the idea of a framework for the community hub concept, because that's exactly what I'm hoping this study will lead to: the creation of a framework so that we can take the case study of the Amherst armoury and roll it out across the country to provide more buildings, housing and services for veterans. Thank you for highlighting that.

I have a feeling I'm going to address most of my questions to Ms. Lowther this morning.

You've talked about your experiences relating to veterans who are unhoused and require services. How does being unhoused impact a veteran? Is it different from the general public?

Debbie Lowther: It is. Veterans deal with a lot of the same issues that homeless civilians deal with, but then they're also dealing with the effects of their service.

There's also the aspect of their pride. A lot of veterans are very proud and don't want to come forward and ask for help, so the homelessness experience for veterans is different.

Alana Hirtle: Thank you.

Can you expand on your plans for the armoury? If you get that lovely property handed over to VETS Canada for housing, what will you do there?

Debbie Lowther: What we envision, as I said, is 18 to 20 units, but again, it's important that it not be only housing. The wraparound supports and programming have to be available there. I mentioned financial literacy seminars.

We've also talked a little about maybe having a satellite recruitment office, because in Nova Scotia right now, there is only one recruitment office for the regular force, and it's in Halifax. Folks in rural areas have a difficult time getting there, and that could be a barrier to joining the Canadian Armed Forces for people, so we thought that this could be an opportunity.

On the site of the Amherst armoury there is also a three-bay or four-bay garage where we envision doing a social enterprise in which veterans can do car work as mechanics and that sort of thing. It could generate income for them and give them a sense of purpose. We would intend to keep the museum there as well.

Alana Hirtle: The museum, the Nova Scotia Highlanders Regimental Museum, has found a temporary location since the armoury's closure, but we are hoping to have it back and relocate it with the housing units and the other services at the armoury.

Thank you for all of that.

What would be the benefit of offering a community hub—as you've noted and as Mr. Field referenced—and having not just housing but all the wraparound services there in one facility? What would be the benefit to veterans and then to the greater community, would you say?

Debbie Lowther: The benefit is that it's a one-stop-shop situation. Veterans wouldn't have to try to figure out how to navigate benefits. They could do it all right there in the space where they live. It helps them by not having to travel to the city or that sort of thing. The convenience is there.

We know that veterans struggle with isolation at times. Having all the supports and services right there would probably promote a bit less isolation.

Alana Hirtle: Absolutely. Yes. Thank you.

Cumberland—Colchester is a very rural riding in Nova Scotia. I don't have a handle on how many veterans there are who may be unhoused. Have you ever done that kind of digging?

• (1225)

Debbie Lowther: I can tell you that, since it started in 2010, VETS Canada has supported just over 6,000 veterans, with 806 in Nova Scotia and 107 in Cumberland county.

Alana Hirtle: That does not surprise me. Thank you for those numbers. They're really helpful.

Mr. Field, I have one minute left. I'm wondering, from a rural perspective, how important it is.... There's been talk about difficulty getting to an urban centre for appointments and services. You talked about something similar to a community hub in your presentation.

How important would it be to have these services available in a more rural environment?

Brad Field: At Homes For Heroes, we tend to lean toward more of an urban setting, where we have access to public transportation. Most of the veterans whom we serve are without vehicles in a lot of cases, so access to public transportation, doctors, banking, groceries and so forth, is important. With our model, we lean into a more urban setting, but we have explored and will continue to explore a rural type of set-up. At this point, though, we lean into more of an urban setting.

Alana Hirtle: Thank you. I'd love to have further conversations about that, but I am now down to eight seconds.

Thank you so much, folks.

The Chair: Thanks.

Madame Gaudreau, please, go ahead.

[Translation]

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

Hello again, Mr. Field. We meet a lot of witnesses, but I remember you from the meeting on entrepreneurship. So, I'll get right to the point, not only because you are very familiar with veterans' issues, but also because you were here a few moments ago when the deputy minister explicitly said we were waiting on the report to have a discussion and make decisions.

However, we didn't get an answer, and that's really disappointing. Be that as it may, let's not waste this opportunity. You said that ideas have been expressed to perhaps regroup the facilities that help veterans into a support network. Tell me something. Let's imagine you have all the options in front of you. If you're at the negotiation table, what will you say to PSPC and VAC about the needs of veterans on the ground?

[English]

Brad Field: Thank you for the question.

We struggle on a daily basis—and I'm sure Debbie and her team do too—with the continuity in conversations between departments within the federal, provincial and municipal governments. I'll give you an example. I'm going to start to trail back to the \$3 million. We applied for funding for our operations in Kingston, Calgary and Edmonton. We had Winnipeg under construction. We got funding for Kingston. We received funding for a village that hadn't been built yet, and then we were denied funding for our two locations that had been up and running for in excess of five years.

Again, when the \$3 million.... I thought, "Why didn't you call us back, because we applied for funding?" Now we're struggling, you know, day to day, and we have to take away resources for serving our veterans and go to fundraising to keep operations going. Continuity in discussions is sometimes a challenge.

If I could, I'd like to lean into something around building our villages, and I speak only for us. Currently, we have villages under construction in Winnipeg and in London, Ontario. We seek funding through the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, funding which in turn moved to Build Canada Homes. We are now a year and a half into a funding application. We've been pre-approved. They formed Build Canada Homes and said that CMHC was no longer going to handle the file; it was shifting over to Build Canada Homes. This cost us six months in funding. Also, once we get approval, if we get approval, the file will be sent back to CMHC to handle. Why did we form Build Canada Homes? It's a slower process.

That being said, our London village will be built and fully operational before we even see a dime from our federal partners, but they'll be there on ribbon-cutting day.

Those are the kinds of challenges that we face on a daily basis around funding. When it comes to federal lands, surplus lands, we would love to have access. We've applied for in excess of 52 pieces of land across Canada to build villages on, to build our model. We haven't won one of those bids. Most of the time, closer to urban centres, land use is the issue, and we're not dense enough. We look for an acre and a half of land, and of course, you can build a high-rise there that will house 1,000 people as opposed to a village for 25 veterans that creates community and an environment where they can heal and reintegrate into civilian life.

The whole process is a little skewed, I would say, but it's not about politics. It should be non-partisan. However, we need to come together from all departments to talk about how we can streamline the process so that we can get these surplus lands into the hands of organizations like ours and VETS Canada and do some good for our veterans in an immediate fashion, not years down the road.

● (1230)

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I can just tell you that it's as easy as pie. People need to sit down and talk to each other. However, it's so easy that it doesn't happen that way. I've been fighting for seven years to ensure that you and others are at the table. The same goes for the Canada Post matters.

By the way, Mr. Chair, I would like to digress for a moment. What will happen with Canada Post? We've heard that the president and CEO is retiring. Yesterday, union members were on the Hill. Cuts and attrition have already taken place. We haven't heard anything. Honestly, 17 million households and 55,000 workers are wondering what will happen. September 25 is just around the corner. It has been a year and we haven't heard anything. I'm bringing this to your attention because it makes no sense.

My question is for you, Ms. Lowther. Here's what I understand. If we want a positive outcome, we definitely need to consult with you. Unfortunately, the government officials don't just wake up one fine morning and decide to consult with people.

Do you agree or disagree that we absolutely must consult with you in order to provide appropriate housing for veterans, in keeping with the areas of jurisdiction? Please give me your answer in 10 seconds.

[English]

Debbie Lowther: Yes.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: There you have it. Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: That was simple.

Mr. Bragdon, you have five minutes, please.

Richard Bragdon: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

First and foremost, thank you for your service and for the tremendous care that you provide for each of those veterans you serve and their families. Oftentimes, the folks who work closest to and are nearest to those who are walking through the shadows, as it were, of life and circumstances never get the recognition they certainly deserve. Thank you for what you do. We appreciate it.

Veterans Affairs Canada, VAC, mentioned that there are, in its estimation, between 1,700 and 1,800 homeless veterans in Canada. Do you believe this number is accurate? Why or why not?

I'll ask both of you that question.

Debbie Lowther: The number is probably higher. If they're relying on the point-in-time counts that were referred to, those counts are done within shelters and of folks entrenched in the streets. Veterans don't tend to access shelters. They are more likely to live in their car, stay with a buddy or live rough in the woods. There's a component of the hidden homeless, which is not factored into that number.

Richard Bragdon: Obviously, it is an urgent situation across the country. I think that Canadians from coast to coast would want to make sure that our veterans get the best care possible and get all the support they need in trying times or in their time of difficulty. Do you feel that the urgency of the response has met the urgency of—for lack of a better expression—the situation? Do you feel as though the response so far and the resources made available by the government are adequate to the urgent need that there is?

● (1235)

Brad Field: I would say no. This has been going on for years, so it's not necessarily this government but past governments as well. We've struggled with not only funding issues, but.... As for the boots on the ground at VAC, the caseworkers and so forth, I have to say that more often than not they do a fantastic job. Where we get stuck is in the bureaucracy above the boots on the ground.

Resources aren't there. We're struggling every day. At Homes For Heroes, our mandate every day is to ask, for whatever decision

we're going to make, "Is it in the best interest of the veterans we serve today?" Every time I have to leave to do fundraising or one of my caseworkers has to go down to the local food bank to get food for veterans, that takes time away from serving our veterans' needs. I agree that the sense of urgency just isn't there.

It's growing. Again, as in our statements, our CAF enrolment is increasing, which, in turn, means we will have more veterans. We believe 1,700 is a low number. A recent study in 2023, I think from McGill University, pegged it at 10,000. I would say that may be high. I don't know, but it's certainly not 1,700, I can tell you that much, just from the numbers we deal with on a regular basis.

We're currently under construction in Winnipeg. They're talking, in the local shelters, in the interaction with public agencies, social agencies...in excess of 500 homeless veterans just in the city of Winnipeg. Do the extrapolated math: 1,700 is not the number, and I think we should stop using that number as a point of reference.

Richard Bragdon: Thank you.

Would you like to add anything to that, Debbie? This could be to both of you, as you talked about that bureaucratic maze above the frontline workers at VAC. What would you both identify as the biggest impediments to getting the resources that you need to where they're needed? Can you speak to that? What have you encountered and experienced to be the greatest impediments?

Debbie Lowther: There's a lot of unnecessary bureaucracy. Just in dealing with the veteran homelessness program, we're dealing with Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada. The reporting alone on that funding is quite an impediment itself. It takes time away from being able to raise funds. The bureaucracy is definitely a barrier.

There needs to be a greater sense of urgency. We need to stop and consider that these are people who wore the uniform and put their lives on the line for our country. If we're going to send them into harm's way, then the least we could do is look after them when they come back.

Brad Field: Could I add to that?

The Chair: We're out of time, but if it's brief, yes, please.

Brad Field: I'll make it very brief. Thank you.

Stop with the new shiny programs. Stop with the research programs. We spend millions of dollars. I see the money distributed to research on veteran homelessness, "Let's do a new shiny-penny research program." We need basic needs funded. We need homeless programs put in place, the basics. Stop with the new shiny programs and research projects. Let's dole out some funding to organizations that have a proven track record of getting work done on behalf of our veterans.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Rochefort, go ahead.

Pauline Rochefort: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a quick question for Ms. Lowther.

To come back to the Amherst proposal, you spoke about what could be developed in Amherst. From your point of view, what would it take to deliver and to move forward with the Amherst proposal at this point?

Debbie Lowther: First things first, there is the building itself. We would need to have the building—

Pauline Rochefort: Could you expand on what this would involve?

Debbie Lowther: We would hope that DND would ensure the building is structurally sound. We would hope that building could then be transferred to us. We would then start fundraising for renovations to make it suitable for our needs.

Pauline Rochefort: Have you personally had discussions with DND?

Debbie Lowther: We had one meeting a few weeks ago with the Minister of National Defence. He went into some detail about the structural issues with the building, but we didn't get too deep in the weeds.

• (1240)

Pauline Rochefort: What was discussed in terms of next steps?

Debbie Lowther: The next steps basically were to follow this process to allow you folks to do this study. That would be step one.

Pauline Rochefort: The outcomes of this committee's discussions and the recommendations brought forward will be of interest as you move forward in examining the Amherst property. Would that be correct?

Debbie Lowther: Yes.

Pauline Rochefort: In our documentation, the analyst brought forward a point that I found interesting. I want to try to understand. I always like to see, from a historical perspective, what has worked for Canada. I'll read what they wrote, and I'd be interested in both your points of view:

For centuries, the Canadian government helped settle ex-soldiers on the land by encouraging veterans to settle farms or small commercial holdings and build their own housing. The World War II-era Veterans' Land Act allowed for provision of loans and direct sales of land, including "granted or ungranted federal land."

To the extent you are aware, why is this no longer the government's preferred approach to a veteran's transition into civilian life?

Brad Field: I'm not sure why we wouldn't go down that path. I think we need to lean on proven models. Both VETS Canada and Homes For Heroes have proven models. There are other models out there, but maybe bureaucracy gets in the way. We had less bureaucracy 50, 60 or 100 years ago, and now we have too many middle managers in the way of getting work done.

Pauline Rochefort: Ms. Lowther, do you have any points to add?

Debbie Lowther: No.

I 100% agree that it seems bureaucracy has become more cumbersome over time. To be honest, I feel as though veterans are not prioritized.

Pauline Rochefort: Amongst ourselves, we nodded when you said those who protect our homes should never be without one. I thought that was a good point.

To your point, Mr. Field, it would be interesting to examine the lessons. There must be studies that have looked at the various models, what has worked and what hasn't worked, and what the government learned about the sale of federal land directly to veterans. This might be interesting to consider as well.

As we examine different models and different approaches, I think that overall perspective might be interesting in our study as well.

Brad Field: I appreciate all insight and so forth, but I'll only speak for myself. If I have to do another study on behalf of the government to prove that our model works—

Pauline Rochefort: As part of this report, as we examine it, it would be interesting to have that perspective.

Brad Field: Oh, it would not be for me to do research.

Pauline Rochefort: No.

Brad Field: Oh, thank God.

I'd have to do some reading on it and understand it better. I know what works in this day and age, but I can't speak to any details around that.

Pauline Rochefort: As for your point, how could surplus federal properties then be used to make home ownership more accessible to veterans?

Brad Field: It's not a model that we're considering at this point, but if surplus land were available for sale or for a nominal amount of money to a veteran to provide housing or to build their own property, I would be in full support of that.

Obviously, ours is a program that happens to have a home attached to it, so we believe that providing just a roof and four walls is not a solution. Until you have wraparound support services, you're not solving the inherent issue at hand of why they were homeless to begin with. We believe the shelter has to be in conjunction with full wraparound services; otherwise, you're not solving the base issue.

Pauline Rochefort: Do you believe in purpose-built rental housing as well?

The Chair: I'm sorry. We're past our time, unless it's a really quick question.

Pauline Rochefort: Yes, it's on the opportunity for purpose-built rental housing as a solution.

Brad Field: It's a potential solution, sure.

Pauline Rochefort: Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks.

Go ahead, Madame Gaudreau.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Lowther, your message was clear. Throughout my career, I've worked with community organizations. The hardest thing to accept is the heavy reporting requirements when you're struggling to provide services to people who need them. I can tell you the hardest part. When you look at the scale, the more zeros you see in the contract amounts, the fewer the reporting requirements.

Your message today is crucial. At some point, can we channel the funds and trust the people who are actually providing the services? Everyone is navel-gazing. People talk about cutting back and then making decisions.

As we saw earlier, Veterans Affairs Canada and Public Services and Procurement Canada don't have any officially mandated meetings. They're waiting for our report before taking action. Yet one person is dying every week right now.

I'm no longer a member of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. However, I truly hope that you will pursue your efforts. My heart goes out to the veterans who, unfortunately, don't have the services or must wait for months.

Since I still have one minute left, I would like to give you the floor. What's your number one wish when it comes to choosing a building in this situation? What information do you need to provide to the government officials when they're making choices?

• (1245)

[English]

Debbie Lowther: I would hope that they make the choice quickly in the interest of time. We have veterans living without a roof over their heads. Decisions that could be made quickly would be appreciated.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: If you have any additional information, it will help us prepare a report. Clearly, the government officials need your input. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Mazier, please, for five minutes.

Dan Mazier: Thank you, Chair.

Welcome.

This question will be for both of you. You were both here in the previous hour and listening to Veterans Affairs as they testified. Is that right?

I think many of us were frustrated and sort of surprised by the lack of responses that came out of Veterans Affairs. Can we get agreement on that?

Do you have any thoughts or concerns on what Veterans Affairs stated in the last hour?

Brad Field: It's just frustration.

It's not about partisan politics. It's not about people not wanting to do the right thing. It's about getting something done.

I think we share that frustration. We get to the table, and we have these conversations; the committee goes away, and we never hear back. We never hear of any results. Again, our frustration lies above the boots on the ground. We need to take the veteran crisis seriously, start acting on it and not just talk about it.

Dan Mazier: I agree. The lack of urgency is what really struck me. It was almost flippant, like, oh yes, we're working on it, and we're not really gaining much of anything.... Also, now we've learned at committee that this study came about because of a motion, and it's intended to go towards a framework. All the words are still there, and there are more delays.

I understand your concern. I too am concerned about this. We need to get things done. Really, it is quite frustrating when you think about these veterans. These people have served our country. It's absolutely reprehensible.

In the 2024 federal budget, the government announced that National Defence is working with the Canada Lands Company to divest 14 surplus properties with potential for housing. Has either of your organizations ever been consulted by the government on any of these 14 properties? No...?

Brad Field: No.

Dan Mazier: Is either of you aware of a single one of these 14 identified properties that actually became veterans' housing since the announcement?

Brad Field: There are none that I know of.

Dan Mazier: We wonder why we were worried about pushing it down, though.

This is since 2024. The announcement was there. I can see why you're frustrated. Well, everybody is. Just the lack of....

How many studies do you think you have done in your lifetime to try to make the projects work right, when the government lets you down in this way?

VETS Canada and the Homes For Heroes Foundation both receive funding through the veteran homelessness program, according to the government. However, according to the departmental briefing note, the government had over \$3 million in veteran homelessness program funding sitting unused, as we were commenting on earlier.

In fact, the government's briefing note stated—and it's worth repeating—that “All opportunities to allocate funding within [the veteran homelessness program] have been exhausted.” That's absolutely pathetic.

Do you believe that this \$3 million in unallocated funding could have been used to do more work in reducing homelessness for veterans?

I would like to hear from both of you. You didn't have a chance to explain. It's really important for the committee to hear.

Every dollar going to veterans is needed and has been allocated as such, so why was it removed, and how much good could this \$3 million do?

Debbie Lowther: No.

• (1250)

Debbie Lowther: From our perspective, when we applied for our funding, we were told that we could apply for up to \$6.3 million over five years. Housing and infrastructure called it a negotiation process. Almost a year of back-and-forth went on between us and somebody at housing and infrastructure, and it got to the point that the funding ended up being \$5.2 million over four years because so much time was spent negotiating. I'm still not sure what we were negotiating.

The \$3 million that was sent back to treasury could have made up for the lost year. This is just one example. Nobody reached out to us before they sent that money back to say, "Hey, could you use a few extra bucks?" It did not happen. To my understanding, other organizations were not contacted either. This was very frustrating to hear.

Brad Field: To add to Debbie's comments, the funding we did not get approved for in our two operations in Alberta was allocated to a very good social agency firm. They had no veteran experience, but they had an idea. They got full funding on an idea of how they could serve veterans; we had a proven model that was in active operation, but we didn't get funding.

They had our application for the \$3 million, so why didn't they come back to us and say, "Hey, we have some excess cash. You applied, and we declined on the first go-round, but we think we can find some cash for it?" I would have welcomed that. I'm sure Debbie would have welcomed it.

Yes, it's super frustrating. Situations like these sometimes take away from the volume of veterans we can serve, but more importantly, from the quality of care. As I stated earlier, we're now scrounging around trying to find food supplements or doing fundraising because we didn't get the funding in place, and that takes away from the time we could have been spending with our veterans on re-establishing a connection and a trust relationship with them, getting them employment and finding them secure housing.

Sometimes it's not necessarily about the number of veterans we could have served with extra money; it's about the quality of care we could have provided but weren't able to provide because we were doing other things unrelated to veteran care.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll finish with Ms. Fancy, and then I need about five seconds' time to approve our budget.

Please go ahead.

Jessica Fancy: Thank you very much.

Through you, Mr. Chair, very quickly, we're here today talking about housing, supports and services for our veterans in Canada.

I'm an Atlantic Canadian member of Parliament. Before I start, I'd like to remind everybody here and other people that in previous Parliaments, when the Conservatives were in power, they closed—in Atlantic Canada alone—nine different VAC centres and over 800 positions.

As we're looking at the way we support people, I'd like to talk today about templates for support.

My first question is for Ms. Lowther. In your introduction, you talked a lot about interventions to supports. From your experience working directly with veterans, how important is early intervention? Are there signs a veteran is at risk of homelessness that governments could identify earlier?

• (1255)

Debbie Lowther: Thank you for that.

Before somebody is released from the Canadian Armed Forces, their situation should be looked at.

One thing I don't think is taken into consideration is the lack of social support when somebody takes the uniform off. I had a veteran say to me one time that when he was still serving, he had a family, and when he was released, he became an orphan.

If we're talking about a single person leaving the Canadian Armed Forces who may not have a large group of natural supports, such as family members, then they're not going to be successful once they get out of the military if they don't have a support system in place. This is something I've always felt strongly about. They shouldn't be released if red flags are there.

Jessica Fancy: Exactly.

Our template for this motion in Amherst is trying to create that community hub, reduce social isolation and have more social opportunities within that particular structure.

I'm also an MP from a rural riding. I'm wondering what some of the challenges are that veterans face in rural and coastal communities like South Shore—St. Margarets, which is my riding, where there may be fewer housing options and fewer support services. It's similar, I believe, to Amherst.

Debbie Lowther: We are a national organization, so we deal with veterans right across the country, including in rural areas. It's definitely challenging.

At our headquarters in Nova Scotia, we have a veterans food bank. We deliver, but we only deliver, at this point, within two hours of the food bank. We have veterans who live beyond that point, and they'll schedule their visits to our food bank when they're coming into the city for medical appointments, visits to the VAC office or that sort of thing.

They have to travel to access those resources, and it's difficult. We have veterans who reach out to us all the time and ask us if we can help with a gas card to get to appointments, because they have to travel a couple of hours to get to those appointments. Rural veterans definitely struggle a bit more.

Jessica Fancy: That was the exact follow-up question I had in regard to delivery and transportation with services.

How significant, then, do you think that transportation is to accessing housing and support services for veterans outside major urban areas?

Debbie Lowther: It's not good. Veterans in rural areas are struggling as much as their counterparts who live in more urban areas.

It is a big issue, and I don't know what the solution is. We do the best we can to support those veterans in rural areas, but geography is what it is.

Jessica Fancy: That's why it's so important when we have a surplus federal building such as the armoury in a rural area; it really is a good indicator of how to build a template model that we could use and replicate throughout Nova Scotia.

I have a couple of seconds left. Beyond the physical space or a place to live, what do you feel that a veteran needs to be successful in transitioning into stable civilian life?

Thank you very much for being here today.

Debbie Lowther: Thank you.

A lot of veterans are looking for a sense of purpose. If we were talking about a community hub in which we'd offer any of the kinds of programming I mentioned, such as financial literacy, cooking classes, yoga classes and those sorts of things, we could also have staff on hand who could let veterans know about volunteer opportunities in the area so that if the veterans were not able to work, maybe volunteerism would give them a sense of purpose. I think we could help with that.

The Chair: Great. Thank you for being with us today. We appreciate your answers. Perhaps we'll see you again in the future.

Colleagues, before we adjourn, I have a budget to approve for this set of meetings. It's \$3,750.

Alana Hirtle: Mr. Chair, before you move on, I'd like to add another individual to the witness list.

The Chair: I was talking to your staff. I asked them to send me an email with the dates, and then we'll look after it.

• (1300)

Alana Hirtle: Lovely. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Can I get approval for the budget for the working meals and everything?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Wonderful.

We are adjourned.

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