



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

45th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

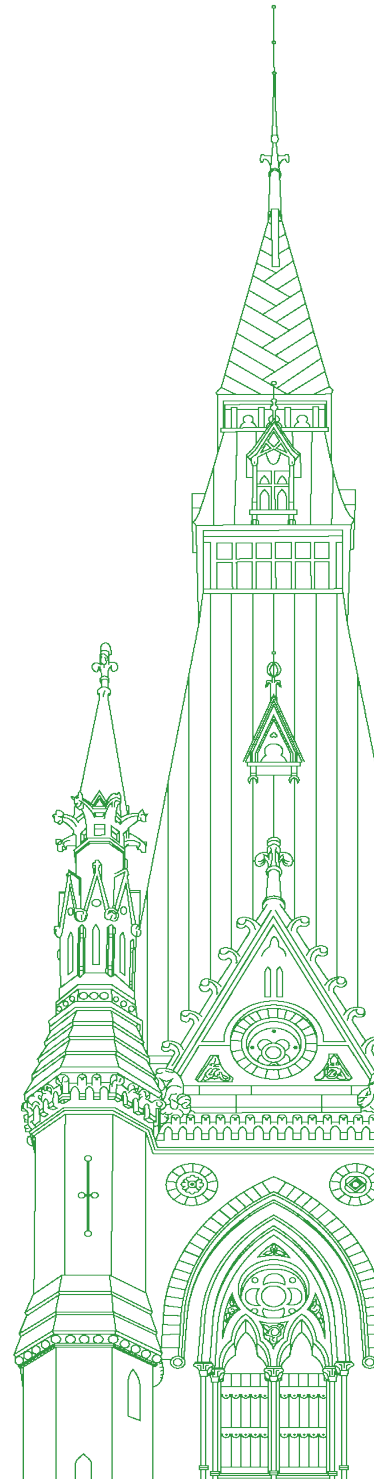
Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 052

Thursday, October 8, 2026

Chair: Kelly McCauley



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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC)): Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to meeting number 52 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates.

We are continuing with our study related to Motion No. 16.

We have Ms. Miller in person. Mr. Shimooka is back with us virtually. We have a third witness who had to leave to restart their computer because of sound issues. That person will be coming back on, so we'll finish with them during the opening statements. We'll start with Ms. Miller's opening statement, followed by Mr. Shimooka's and then that of our other witness.

Colleagues, when we get to the questions, please clarify whom you're asking the question of because we have half here and half virtually.

Ms. Miller, welcome to OGGO. The floor is yours for five minutes.

Jessica Miller (Sergeant (Retired), As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

OGGO is the best committee of them all. Am I right?

The Chair: You have the floor for 30 minutes. Please go ahead.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Jessica Miller: Thank you.

Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity today to speak before you.

My name is Jessica Miller. I grew up in Aurora and Newmarket. I began my military career journey training as a soldier out of the Aurora armoury, one of the oldest armouries in Canada, built in 1874.

I am a retired sergeant who served more than 22 years in the Canadian Armed Forces as a medical technician. I'm a woman veteran and a survivor of military sexual trauma. I live in rural Nova Scotia. I am here because I believe we need to broaden how we think about veteran housing and security and about how we reuse federal lands, buildings and public money to address this. Are we measuring success by the number of housing units that are being created or by whether the veterans living in those units are actually safe and housing-secure? There is a difference.

In 2024, I testified for the ACVA committee on "Invisible No More. The Experiences of Canadian Women Veterans". Recommendation 26 out of the 42 calls upon our Government of Canada to "contribute financially to the construction of women-only Veteran...housing."

Parliament has already heard that housing designated for veterans is not necessarily appropriate for women veterans, particularly women who have experienced military sexual trauma. As a survivor, I can tell you that the physical environment matters. Living in a building with unfamiliar men can create a very real safety concern. A ground-floor apartment may not be the appropriate space for a woman veteran. Shared entrances and laundry facilities, lighting, security, privacy and the ability to control who enters your personal space matter.

Federal lands can be part of the solution, but an empty federal building is not automatically an appropriate housing solution. I question whether renovating a deteriorated 110-year-old building constructed with red sandstone and lime mortar is the best choice for veteran housing. Red sandstone like the material used in the Amherst armoury is scarce and difficult to source now. Finding compatible materials and skilled restoration methods can be difficult and incredibly costly. Modern replacement materials must be assessed for compatibility with the original masonry, or you could have a calamity of the structure.

I have to ask this: If adding a second story to this building will change the entire facade of the building, how is that then serving the purpose of a heritage building? We're essentially changing the appearance on the outside.

Before committing significant public money, government should compare rehabilitation with redevelopment, including costs, remaining useful life of the building, accessibility, maintenance and whether the finished housing will meet veterans' needs. Before the Amherst armoury is presented as a veteran housing solution, I ask that the committee seek clear answers about the proposed housing model, its funding and its sustainability and suitability for the veterans who would be living there.

What kind of housing is being proposed? Is this temporary or transitional accommodations intended to get veterans off the streets? Is this permanent housing? Is it intended for single men, women, couples or families?

Will the veterans pay market-rate rent and utilities? If not, who would be funding the difference and for how long? Who will pay the upfront costs required for the environmental remediation and conversion? Who will cover the ongoing maintenance and heritage restoration needs and the proposed wraparound services? What funding commitments will sustain these costs over the long term?

Will this be considered a location of secure housing? Will veterans have a stable home with secure tenure, or could they be required to move out when a program ends or their circumstances change? Will the general public also use this building for a museum, café or community space? If so, how will the residential areas be separated, and how will access control protect veterans' safety and privacy?

• (1540)

Where will residents shop for groceries and other essentials in Amherst? My understanding, through Google Maps, is that the closest grocery store is an approximate 40-minute walk from the armoury. The town of Amherst has no public transportation and no ability to get into the cities of Halifax or Dartmouth. How will veterans with mobility limitations reliably access food and appointments in the community it serves?

These questions go directly to whether the proposal will provide safe, affordable and lasting housing security.

Our armouries are part of Canada's military history. Some should be preserved because of their historical and community significance, and where restoration is practical, they deserve to be considered. Where redevelopment is a better option, the site's history can be preserved through its name, through retained architectural elements or through historical displays. Honouring military service can also include providing safe homes for veterans today.

Living in rural Nova Scotia reminds me that veteran housing cannot be developed exclusively through an urban lens. Rural veterans face limited rental inventory, transportation barriers, distance from services and fewer housing choices. Rural communities also offer opportunities for smaller developments, individual housing units, women-only housing and community-based models. Not every veteran needs or wants to live in a large veteran-housing complex. Trauma-informed housing must include choice.

I ask this committee to consider three things.

First, consider the use of federal lands as part of implementing recommendation 26 and creating women-only veteran community housing.

Second, require transparent value-for-money assets when deciding whether aging federal buildings should be preserved, rehabilitated, repurposed or replaced.

Third, ensure that veteran housing created on public lands is designed around safety, privacy, accessibility, dignity and, of course, choice, while appropriately preserving the military history of those sites.

We honour veterans by ensuring that when their service is over, they have the opportunity to live in safe housing with dignity.

Thank you.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Miller.

We'll go over to Mr. Shimooka.

For those who haven't been with us before, Mr. Shimooka is returning for perhaps the third or fourth time to testify.

It's wonderful to have you back, sir. The floor is yours for five minutes.

Richard Shimooka (Senior Fellow, Macdonald-Laurier Institute, As an Individual): Thank you for that introduction, Chair, and thank you very much for having me at the committee again. I really appreciate the opportunity to speak to the committee on this topic.

I will keep my remarks short, as I'd like to maximize the amount of time members can ask questions on their specific interests.

As it is clear, the international system is becoming highly unstable, with threats towards Canada and its allies and partners growing daily. The current government has made national security a major priority, meeting its 2014 NATO summit commitment of defence spending reaching 2% of GDP last year. Now the government has signed onto the NATO Hague Summit Declaration, which pledges to raise core defence spending to 3.5% of GDP by 2035.

While this trajectory indicates real progress, there are a number of serious challenges ahead.

First, the spending may not be adequate to meet the country's defence needs. Nearly four decades of underinvestment have left the Canadian Armed Forces with a significant capability deficit, one that simply reaching 3.5% of GDP will fail to address. The current defence spending priorities over the next decade largely fund priorities that should have been addressed between 2000 and 2025. This includes infrastructure priorities like the armouries.

The Canadian Armed Forces faces a rapidly changing technological environment that has altered the nature and breadth of warfare. Examples include the widespread use of low-cost drones, the development of boutique biological agents and the emergence of space and cyber domains of warfare, just to name a few. This will further stretch the already insufficient spending over an even greater number of requirements.

Finally, the country's fiscal situation is not strong, which may limit the government's ability to meet its spending pledges. This is by no means a problem limited to Canada. In the last year, we have seen the United Kingdom, Italy and France, among others, have significant internal debate about their abilities to fund defence. It is more than likely that the Hague declaration's objectives will be moderated after 2028 when its automatic review process is triggered.

Thus, the future of Canadian defence spending will need to be cognizant of these new realities and make smart, nimble investments to ensure that the Canadian Armed Forces and other national security-related agencies obtain the capabilities they need to keep Canada safe, as well as meet the country's foreign policy objectives abroad. I hope we can discuss this further today.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

Just so everyone knows, we're still trying to get Dr. Charles from Sunnybrook logged on. We'll go ahead with questions, and then, if we can get her on, we'll allow her to do the five-minute introduction.

We'll start with Ms. Cobena, please, for six minutes.

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

Ms. Miller, thank you for being here. Thank you for your service. Also, it's very special to have another Newmarket—Aurora native here with us today.

I found your opening remarks quite compelling. Of course, we have also been reading in the news about the resignations from the women veterans council. You were one of the five who resigned. Could you please explain what happened that led to that resignation?

Jessica Miller: Thank you for the question.

When I was selected, I joined the council with great enthusiasm for the potential to create lasting change for women veterans. Throughout the year that I was on the council, we faced incredible roadblocks in communication, priorities and what the Minister of Veterans Affairs wanted out of the committee. Whenever we asked some of these questions, it was impossible to get an answer.

Although we weren't getting answers, we still did the work behind the scenes. I was the chair of the peer support and community outreach committee, which was trying to work towards having peer support acknowledged as a way of supporting women through their transition out of service. Through that work, I put together proposals that were not sent forward. I felt like I was just hitting a brick wall every time I tried to bring a suggestion up. It was clear and quite well known that the agenda for the minister was not something that fit with the expectation or the experience that I thought being on this council would entail.

Once it reached one year, which was the mark where you could continue on or step down, there were five of us, all military veterans, who decided to step down at that one-year mark, out of frustra-

tion with the inability to dedicate anything to the accomplishment of the goals.

• (1550)

Sandra Cobena: We had representatives from Veteran Affairs Canada here. I asked if anything had been done since your resignations or with regard to your concerns. Unfortunately, the answer was.... In fact, there was no answer, but the answer was that there are still a few members left in the council, which I obviously found frustrating.

What would you have to say on that?

Jessica Miller: The members who are still on the council I think are doing great work. I'm proud of them for staying, but most of them are RCMP veterans. It does not matter that they're RCMP veterans. They deserve to do the work and to support women RCMP veterans. However, VAC does not recognize RCMP as true veterans, as the RCMP only buy into the disability package for RCMP officers who served.

They don't have all the other services that we have access to, and we found it really frustrating trying to get any work accomplished, because the things that the military women wanted to implement, change, address or do research on weren't applicable to the RCMP. It really made it difficult for us to work together in a meaningful way.

Sandra Cobena: In some of your remarks that I was reading in other interviews, you mentioned that there was an email that was created for you to be able to hear from the women you were there to represent, but you never had access to this email and even the minister said that "when we need you, we will call you."

How are you supposed to represent these women when you can't connect with them, and when you come up with some solutions, the minister is not necessarily listening?

Jessica Miller: That's true.

Are you asking me...?

Sandra Cobena: I'm asking for your thoughts on that.

Frankly, I find it so difficult to even believe this could happen: "I want you to represent them, but don't say anything until I tell you to, and I'm not going to share the stories of the people you're supposed to be representing."

Jessica Miller: Yes. That was part of the communication frustration we faced.

The Veterans Affairs' women veterans council page said that if you wanted to contact the council, you could send an email through the portal. It said that the email would be sent to the council for consultation. The council would answer the questions in these emails coming from women who wanted to have their concerns addressed. We never received those emails. They were just not forwarded on to us.

I have been running the Veteran Farm Project for nine years now. It's a peer-support farm for women. I know a lot of women veterans. When they heard that I was on the council, they were quite excited because they hoped I would then be able to bring forward their questions and concerns, but I wasn't able to talk to them. I wasn't able to say anything outside the working groups we had. I wasn't allowed to express myself to the public so they could understand what was happening behind the scenes. If any emails were sent, all the tombstone data was redacted, so we had no idea who even sent it. How do you reply or even acknowledge the person who sent the email when you have no ability to reach out to that individual?

Again, as a peer supporter and therapeutic horticulturist dealing with women on a daily basis, I felt I was being incredibly stifled. I felt my work was hindered by my being on that council because I was quiet, as opposed to promoting and advocating for the women I work with in Nova Scotia.

• (1555)

The Chair: Thanks.

We're going to Mr. Danko.

Go ahead, please, sir.

John-Paul Danko (Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Have you had any luck with Ms. Charles yet?

The Chair: We're still trying.

John-Paul Danko: I'll start with you, Ms. Miller. Thank you so much for being here today and for sharing your story.

I think there are some really important perspectives to consider when it comes to supporting veterans, especially focusing on women veterans. When we are developing government policy—in this case, we're talking about veterans' housing—it's critical that we have that specific perspective. Some of the things you mentioned are really important to consider.

If we're talking about the adaptive reuse of surplus federal lands, this armoury in Amherst, Nova Scotia, reminds me of a project in my riding. It's called the Century Manor project. It's the adaptive reuse of a Victorian-era heritage property that was built in the late 1800s. It had been the Hamilton asylum for mental health care. It's a very beautiful building with a very difficult and troubling past. It's being rebuilt as a heritage building. It's being used for supportive housing as part of a broader project.

I think that broader project is about \$150 million. As part of that development, Schlegel Villages, Mohawk College and private developers are turning property over to Indwell, an adaptive housing provider. It's a similar situation. The property or land is being provided to the housing services provider doing the adaptive reuse.

My question to you is this: What parts of adaptive reuse do you think are really critical to make sure it is a safe space for women veterans? Is that a separate floor? Is it separate entrances? Is it a separate space altogether? What kinds of supports do you think need to be there on site to support women veterans in that space?

Jessica Miller: Thank you for the question. Before I can even answer that, I think what needs to be established is what this housing will look like. Will it be transitional housing from the street to a roof over their head? Will it be people who are potentially on the brink of becoming homeless? If we don't know what the end purpose is, how do we work backwards to then figure out the steps to achieve that?

From all the reading I've done, armouries are important to the town. I completely understand. I began my career in the oldest armoury in Canada, which has now been repurposed for use by the community. I don't think you could talk to any woman who has paraded out of an armoury in Canada who'd tell you that they'd feel safe being in that building. For myself, the idea is preposterous. Having women in this building, having a community space in this building, having a café or museum in the same situation—they're all just opportunities for potential problems.

I think we need to respect that women veterans, and men, are people. We don't necessarily need to be housed in a complex building that is just for veterans. We are civilians now. We need to be able to work and adapt to the community we're in so that we become part of that community. If you're isolating veterans in one space where they eat, sleep, live and receive wraparound services, I don't see where the difference is between that and housing for inpatient alcohol problems, drug dependency or anything like that. I don't know where the defining line is. With all the services that are being presented as wraparound services for this building, I don't know what the expectation is.

What are we creating? Is it a place that you can call home, or are we getting somebody off the street, in transition, and then helping them to find permanent housing? If that's the case, there are lots of organizations out there that are already doing that piece of work. I work with Landing Strong in Nova Scotia, and that's what they do. They support homelessness. They get rehabilitation services for those members who need to learn how to then live on their own again.

This building, as special and as incredibly important to Amherst as it is, unfortunately is very dilapidated, for lack of a better word. The red sandstone armoury that was built in Amherst has actually the same floor plan as the Halifax armoury that's in downtown Halifax. It's made with the red sandstone, so we already have in Nova Scotia a large armoury that reflects the design and the era of the Amherst armoury. Back in 1896 to the early 20th century, Sir Robert Borden was in charge of militia and defence building. When he did that, he commissioned an architect to design five standardized plans for armouries. That's why if you go to armouries in Vernon, B.C., Halifax or Fort York in Toronto, they're all the same floor plan. Just slightly different materials are used on the outside.

I appreciate the significance and the heritage of the Amherst building, but I think spending millions and millions of dollars to rehabilitate a building that's in the state it's in, without a clear purpose, would be sending money in the wrong direction, in my opinion.

Thank you.

● (1600)

John-Paul Danko: Thank you.

The Chair: We had Dr. Charles up for a moment, but it looks like we've lost her again.

We'll go to Madame Gaudreau, and after that, hopefully, we'll suspend for a couple of seconds and try to do a voice check and bring her in.

Madame Gaudreau, go ahead.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Miller, I want to begin by thanking you for your courage in coming forward to express what you experienced during your service.

Still on the same topic, I'd like to take a little detour to try to understand the purpose of our study. Earlier, my colleague talked about the fact that you were part of the women veterans council. I didn't know you were part of that. I'm just wondering, because we didn't get a proper answer, do you have any idea why you were left out of the information flow and what your role was?

Jessica Miller: Thank you for the question.

[English]

I apologize. My French is not up to snuff. From what I understand, I think you're asking me why I feel like I was set aside and not able to do the job I thought I was going to do.

The thing that was emphasized to us greatly while we were on the council was that the Prime Minister has seven pillars he wants to ensure that the government follows. Within those pillars, the minister told us she had three priorities that she wanted to focus on, and those were the only priorities she would be addressing.

In our last in-person meeting, I asked her directly. I said that before I made a final decision to leave, I wanted to ensure that all of my concerns or questions were answered. I told the minister our interpretation of being a part of this council was that we were going to be reviewing and sending up our thoughts and our lived experience on projects and/or packages they were putting together for the rest of the country. One of those was the study on women veterans. That was written completely by the government and the veterans affairs committee without any input from us whatsoever. We were really taken aback, because when I asked the minister about this, she said they were going with a top-down approach, not one going up with us giving her direction. That completely contradicted what I thought we were doing on the committee.

If the minister was just going to be sending down information for us to read, such as recommendations or papers that were already going to be utilized, and we were just in a "nice to know" situation.... On the priorities that a lot of the members on the committee had, from research to acquiring equipment and resources and, for myself, trying to have peer support recognized as a true way to help

women and survivors through their transition out of the forces, none of those were the priority.

We worked almost daily as a group, and because of that, we felt like our effort, our passion and our contributions were for naught. Unfortunately, we were not going to continue to put our efforts into creating information for the government that it didn't even want to hear.

● (1605)

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: In fact, for the study we're doing right now, you made recommendations in your opening remarks. They contain a lot of elements that the department could have used to much better define what can be done with vacant buildings, had it consulted you. One of the questions you asked was whether they are still in good condition and whether people need to be in a tight-knit community. In short, you've given us a lot of information.

It makes me sad, because you know as well as I do that there have been a total of nine veterans affairs ministers since 2015. When they are appointed, they have to learn and get up to speed, but it seems that once they know their files, they are switched. I think you were also a victim of that.

Just this morning, the Minister of Veterans Affairs attended the meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, on which I sat for quite some time. I don't know if you've heard, but my colleague Claude DeBellefeuille asked her whether sexual trauma had a direct link to potential suicides among women veterans. I hate to talk about it, but we have no other choice.

I'd like to hear your thoughts on that, because the minister wasn't able to make the correlation and say that, yes, it can be a problem. Do you think anyone is listening when it comes to this issue?

[English]

Jessica Miller: I think you're asking about suicide prevention in the women veteran population and how we can ensure that we take the appropriate measures to ensure that women feel safe in their housing or security. Is it something like that?

● (1610)

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: My question was more about how people should have listened to the council to find out things like how buildings are used or how suicide is prevented. Alas, this morning, the minister was unable to answer a very simple question.

I would like to know if you do, in fact, believe that there is a correlation between sexual trauma and suicide attempts.

[English]

The Chair: Can you answer in about a minute?

Jessica Miller: Yes.

There absolutely is.

[Translation]

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

[English]

The Chair: We were past our time, but I thought it was very important that we hear that.

Unfortunately, we are still fighting with our IT system with regard to Dr. Charles, so we'll go to Mr. Mazier. Then, as soon as we can get Dr. Charles in, we will do a voice check.

Go ahead, Mr. Mazier, for five minutes.

Actually, I'll just say something very quickly. As you know, I've allowed everyone to go quite a bit over time because I thought what we were hearing was very important, but could you keep an eye on your own time, please?

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

Thank you for coming here today, Ms. Miller. I have a question for you.

With regard to veterans living in former armouries, do you have any concern from a PTSD or mental health perspective?

Jessica Miller: Yes.

Would you like me to elaborate?

Dan Mazier: Yes.

Jessica Miller: Those armouries hold a lot of history, a lot of traditions and a lot of inappropriate behaviour. For many decades, armouries had messes that were allowed to run independently. Consumption of alcohol was through the roof in these places. It was an old boys' club, essentially. In 1989, when women were allowed to serve in combat roles, that ingrained sense of "this is our space; this is a man's space" was already there, from the beginning, in armouries.

I can tell you, through lived experience and the experiences of others, that armouries have not been safe spaces for women for a very long time. There are a lot of dark spaces in basements and whatnot. Because those buildings were never designed to have women in them, anytime a new washroom, women's changing room or anything to that effect that had to do with women was put in, the buildings had to be retrofitted. Typically, they ended up in the basement.

If I said "Christmas dinners" right now, any women veterans who are watching would understand what I'm saying. They hold a lot of dark memories for a lot of women. There are good memories, but there are dark ones too.

Dan Mazier: Thank you very much for answering that.

Mr. Shimooka, DND's own departmental results report shows that the share of defence infrastructure in fair or better condition fell from 64.5% to 54.7% over two years, while maintenance spending also fell further below its 2% target, from 1.5% to 1.4% in relation to the portfolio value.

What does that tell you about how this government is maintaining Canada's defence infrastructure?

Richard Shimooka: It reflects multiple trends. As my original remarks stated, the Government of Canada—various governments, stretching back even to the 1970s—didn't really maintain the infras-

tructure base it had. Especially as you got into the 1990s and 2000s, when defence spending saw decreases of 30% to 40% from the heights of the end of the Cold War, critical pieces of infrastructure were not really invested in. As a result, the cost that is accrued to the defence budget has increased.

Now there has been increased spending, especially in order to meet the 2% in the Wales Summit Declaration. If you look at the announcement that was made when the government announced that it hit 2% earlier this year, you'll see that locations like the Halifax steam plant and whatnot would see major upgrades.

I think the government—

● (1615)

Dan Mazier: I—

Richard Shimooka: Go ahead.

Dan Mazier: I have another question here for you. You can follow up with this.

Richard Shimooka: Sure.

Dan Mazier: Mr. Shimooka, Coast Guard officials confirmed to this committee on Tuesday that offshore fishery science vessels used for fish stock surveys and marine research are now being counted toward Canada's defence spending.

Does counting ships used for fish stock surveys as defence spending mislead Canadians about how much the government is actually investing in the Canadian Armed Forces?

Richard Shimooka: It certainly has problematic aspects to it. I'm not going to say "outright", but if we think about grey-zone activities that the Chinese government is undertaking and illegal fishing in that area, there are aspects to that. It's ancillary, but it's pretty far from the mark overall. If you look at some of these vessels and their ability to provide direct security elements, which is part of the justification for bringing the Coast Guard into DND's fold, they just don't have that. They are not set up at this time—and probably won't be for quite some time—to integrate and provide any sort of security element.

Dan Mazier: Do you have any other concerns about mislabelling defence spending?

Richard Shimooka: I think there's concern. If you think about the two parts of defence spending that the Hague declaration looks at, which are the 3.5% of core defence spending and the 1.5% of infrastructure spending, the latter is certainly an area that so widely covers.... You can discuss bridges to some degree in areas and say that this is part of our national security. There are concerns for that part.

I think that some of the buy Canada provisions that we're seeing may increase defence spending on the core aspects of it, but it will actually have very limited effects in providing new meaningful defence capabilities to the Canadian Armed Forces, ones that they require to defend against threats they face.

Dan Mazier: That's it. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thanks.

Fortunately, we have Dr. Charles, but unfortunately we don't have an approved headset, so we'll contact her separately and ask for a written statement perhaps. We can include that in our study. Thank you.

We'll go to Ms. Fancy, please, for five minutes.

Jessica Fancy (South Shore—St. Margarets, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Through you, Chair, thank you very much, Ms. Miller, for being here today. Anytime we can talk, as two people coming from Nova Scotia, predominantly from a rural area.... Talking shop is always welcome here at OGGO, I think anyway, Chair.

I also want to say, thank you very much for telling your story today, and the courageousness that it takes to come here in front of a bunch of strangers to do that. Thank you very much for sharing your story.

Also, thank you for the peer support and being an active and willing participant in working with fellow women veterans. I know your veteran farm support program in West Hants is a really strong example of rural-based community models that are helping support veterans. In this case, it's our women veterans. Earlier in your opening statements, you mentioned a trauma-informed housing model, and I wrote that down right away. I was wondering today if you could elaborate on that, where you had talked about value for money, assets and safety, privacy and dignity.

Thank you.

Jessica Miller: When we speak about trauma-informed housing, we can go back to recommendation 26 of the "Invisible No More" report, and we can recognize and acknowledge that women have different needs and different requirements for housing. Typically, women are the ones who are left with the children in a relationship that splits up. Women are typically held to a different standard when they're released from the forces. We take our uniforms off and then all of a sudden we become mom, soccer mom, groceries, laundry. There's very little space for women to find that space where they can be themselves with other women, whether civilians or veterans—because we share a lot of the same stories within our lives.

I think it's very important for women to have independence and not be dependent on living somewhere they're dictated to live. I don't want women to feel like they have no other choice but to stay in a veteran complex with men, because I know for myself and my lived experience, that's the last place I would want to be. Women need to have their space and know that they're safe. I don't feel like redeveloping armoureds will fit that need that is desperately needed in our women veteran community. Ground-floor apartments, anything where there are mainly men in the building or where there are

community activities happening that you have no control over, all of those can be quite detrimental to a woman's overall being and their access to a positive transition.

Yes, it all matters for women.

● (1620)

Jessica Fancy: To follow up on that question, now let's talk, broad range, about all veterans and the inclusivity pieces, but with a rural lens. There are very different challenges that come with accessing things like health care services, housing and transition support.

From your experience, if you want to be able to live rurally, but still get those supports, what do you think some of the biggest gaps are? I'd love to know what you think are some of the things that can get done to help fill those gaps. Thank you.

Jessica Miller: Yes, one of the biggest challenges for anyone—men, women, civilians, veterans—is access to stable transport. Not everyone drives. Not everyone drives as they age. We have no public transit across the province that's accessible to people unless you're in Dartmouth or the HRM. Because of that, putting spaces for veterans in rural locations with limited work possibilities and limited access to services, which are mainly in Dartmouth and Halifax, puts in a cycle of not accessing appointments and falling down the rabbit hole of missing services that VAC could pay for. They just have no way of getting there.

The valley in Nova Scotia where I am, West Hants, is the beginning of what people think is the breadbasket of Nova Scotia. However, in that area, we are considered the largest food desert in Canada because there is no transportation in rural Nova Scotia. Access to food and to daily needs is just not there.

Jessica Fancy: I know I'm out of time. We didn't get time to fill the gaps, but we're good.

The Chair: You can go ahead if you have a quick one.

Jessica Fancy: The second part of the question is that we know those are some of the things we're experiencing. Are there any ways that we can help to mitigate or fill those gaps? That was the —

Jessica Miller: It's transportation. We need someone to invest in reliable transportation for the rural areas of Nova Scotia. Everything is concentrated in the HRM. If you live outside of that, you're out of luck.

The Chair: Thanks, everyone, for your patience.

Madame Gaudreau is next.

[Translation]

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

Ms. Miller, I see that there are many recommendations that could be forwarded to the department, but also get departments like Public Services and Procurement Canada to ensure a dialogue between needs and accessibility.

We talked about transportation and building quality. Are there three recommendations that you think are critical?

[English]

Jessica Miller: Thank you.

Would the three recommendations be specifically for the Amherst armoury or in general?

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Let's go with the buildings we're talking about, which are vacant.

[English]

Jessica Miller: Okay.

My recommendation would be to ensure we're not preserving buildings out of a community's interest in preserving history. We have many ways to preserve history and remember those who have helped to shape this country and served before us. I don't think we need a dilapidated building that no one has access to being that representation, that symbol of remembrance. Right now, it just looks like we don't care and we don't remember. We need to re-evaluate our perspective on what a heritage building is and if it should be repurposed or reused in a different way.

I also think that investing in rural environments that don't have all of the services for veterans is not an appropriate way of spending money. There are a lot of better options out there that should be explored. I fully believe in honouring those who served and in acknowledging that we have a long storied history in Nova Scotia of those who have served and helped shape the country, but saving a building for the sake of a building that is already represented somewhere else in the province is not, in my opinion, appropriate.

Also, the footprint the building holds would be what would be divested to create something new, but there's no thought process on the land and how the land around those buildings will be used. Is it then going to become public land? Is it going to still be held by the federal government?

I think everyone should have access to nature and outdoor spaces because I think it's incredibly important. If we're only divesting the buildings and not thinking about the land itself, how do we secure safety for those who are living in these spaces? We have no idea of what could then be developed around them, and it may not be something that's appropriate for veterans.

• (1625)

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Mr. Chair, I'm pleased that Ms. Miller was able to speak when, unfortunately, she wasn't able to do so and be heard when she was on the women veterans council.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Gaudreau.

We'll go to Mr. Bragdon for five minutes, and then Ms. Sudds.

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

Thank you to the witnesses today. I really appreciate hearing from each of you.

I'd like to address my questions to Ms. Miller.

Thank you, first and foremost, for your service to our country and the sacrifices you've made in more ways than could ever adequately be expressed in words.

I want to circle back to what we've heard. I'm truly shocked and saddened to hear that you felt silenced and felt you could not adequately express what needed to be expressed on the council that was created to give women veterans a voice. Is there anything you would like the committee to hear today that should be heard, or you feel should be heard and you were unable to get heard while you were on that council, that you would like to express here now?

Jessica Miller: Sure. Thank you.

I first joined the council after the "Invisible No More" report was tabled and accepted, and those 42 recommendations became the goal for what we thought on the council. I'm very saddened that those goals are not necessarily a priority for the VAC minister. For me, and I know others felt the same way, but I will speak only for me, with the amount of trauma that was incurred to give testimony to create that document, to then let it go and not be the guiding direction for how to support women.... I think it was a complete waste if we don't look at it and intentionally action the recommendations.

With recommendation 26 accepted by Parliament, veteran female housing should be a priority in understanding why women are different and have different requirements for that housing, but we weren't able to touch any of those recommendations in the way that we wanted to work towards actioning them.

Richard Bragdon: Thank you.

You say you felt so limited. Can you help us understand who exactly set those limits and how they were communicated to you?

Jessica Miller: We had little communication, so we didn't know what we were doing. I'm not here to discredit anyone or to say that it was a bad idea. I'm just speaking from my own lived experience and just telling the truth. The truth is that with those who were working within VAC, the staff, it felt like everyone was not comfortable in the roles they were in. There were a lot of emails directed at us, as opposed to collaborative work. I feel it was a very big missed opportunity to actually hear from women veterans who had served their country, survived war, survived military sexual trauma and survived the horrific incidents that they'd seen, felt and heard.

We have those experiences to then guide policy and guide how the 42 recommendations could be enacted, but we were.... I was not being heard. I will speak for myself. I was not being heard in those moments when I had questions about implementing peer support and community outreach, and the significance of women spending time with other women in a safe environment. Unfortunately, I feel the other women who left with me—resigned—were feeling the same way as well.

● (1630)

Richard Bragdon: You felt, if not directly, implicitly, from higher-ups, very much intimidated to be able to share fully what you had experienced. You felt very constrained. I don't want to express that for you. I just think it's important for this committee to understand the constraints, or how you and other women victims were feeling as a result of this.

Jessica Miller: I won't speak for the other women, but I do share the same thoughts as others. I wouldn't say we were constrained by being told directly that we cannot speak or cannot engage with women. We were silenced because they did not create a space where we could communicate with other women. The continued answer we got when we asked for a communication tool was that we could potentially do harm to other women with our responses to their emails.

My response to the minister directly was that we are strong, capable women leaders. Some of us went to war. Some were officers who directed an entire company of infantry soldiers. We saved the lives of those who were at their lowest point or at their most injured. To say to us that we don't have the skills or ability to then speak with other women, that it's a safety concern and that we would do harm was, I felt, very demeaning to me and to the others who wanted to be able to speak with women, because that is why we're doing what we do.

Unfortunately, the only way women could reach out to me was through my non-profit because they either knew me or worked with me. Many questions were coming to me through personal email. I would redirect the questions to the committee and to the VAC staff, but nothing would be responded to because there was no interest in it, in my opinion.

Richard Bragdon: Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks.

Ms. Sudds, go ahead.

Hon. Jenna Sudds (Kanata, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I give my sincere thanks to the witnesses. Thank you for being here today.

I'm going to direct my first question to Mr. Shimooka.

I'm a member of Parliament representing Ottawa. Here in the national capital region, we certainly have our fair share of both federal lands and buildings. As part of this study and as part of the motion, we are tasked with thinking hard about those buildings, that land and the possibility of future uses to better support veterans.

Given the extensive work that you've done in defence policy, I'm wondering if you have some feedback for us on how as a government we should be distinguishing between land that is genuinely surplus and land that might appear to be under-used today but could be important in the future for Canadian Armed Forces requirements.

● (1635)

Richard Shimooka: Thank you for the question, Member. I think that's an excellent question.

One of the interesting things about defence that's very much different from any other government area is that the time scale that is required in defence policy is not just five or 10 years down the way. You're thinking about 20 to 30-some years.

Going to Ms. Miller's comments earlier about Robert Borden and building these facilities back at the turn of this last century, many of these facilities still provide a role. If you think about the increase in natural disasters or emergency preparedness, many of these facilities can play a key part in semi-rural communities for the coordination of those activities. It is difficult, to some degree, to identify what could be utilized for these areas.

I think the use for housing, especially in some of the higher-cost areas, such as within metro Vancouver, Esquimalt-Victoria, Calgary to some degree and obviously Toronto and Montreal, is a useful purpose, given that how the housing benefit is provided to serving members especially is not so much adequate. It can provide some level of relief for those individuals. That's a case, and I don't see that being a short-term trend that's going to be alleviated quickly.

Having the ability to identify what can be effective, especially for the personnel side, is important and critical. Keeping some of these facilities for these longer-term purposes, such as coordination of activities.... As we are actually going through a significant change in the structure of the armed forces, especially in the army and its locations, how that can be aligned with that task is pretty critical. I think that's an area where the Government of Canada has not been great in the past, and it still may be overlooking the need to marry up the right type of infrastructure in these areas overall.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Thank you for that. I think this study gives us an opportunity to dive into that and to provide some guidance and advice on it.

Are there any safeguards that you recommend we could put in place to ensure that as we are disposing of land or buildings, they are considered for the CAF's purposes first, as opposed to thinking about transferring them to other public purposes?

Richard Shimooka: That is going to come to a very in-depth answer. I'll try to keep it brief.

I will give you this example: Near me are the Jericho lands. We are seeing a significant redevelopment and sale. The reality is that I don't think the future trend of land prices will go down. We have to be extremely careful about the divestment of these properties, because it's not going to be easy to bring them back into the fold. The divestment of significant portions of the Chilliwack facilities is a significant one. You won't have that ability.

Right now, defence spending is high. We're seeing this increase. Infrastructure, as I said before, is being targeted for increase along with that. I don't necessarily see much problem with the divestment aspect right now, but if there's a turn on the spending side, that's where the real challenges are going to emerge. Whatever government is in at the time will look at what it is spending: "Can we subsidize other parts of defence spending and move that?"

A process that has worked in the past—you see this in the United States and other countries—is having a commission that goes through what the requirements are in order to have a really good look at the marrying of long-term objectives. What is surplus and what's not? Try to have a much broader view of that. Often, these decisions are made with more short-term objectives in mind. I would look to a commission of some sort that looks beyond pure military assets and has that longer-term view on these areas.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Thank you very much for that. I think I'll end there.

I want to confirm this, Chair: I believe there was a fourth witness, Bill Casey.

The Chair: Yes. Unfortunately, Mr. Casey had to cancel at the last moment for something more important.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: Have we requested a written submission from him? Are we able to do that?

• (1640)

The Chair: I know we sent him a note wishing him well and that he's okay. Yes, we'll make sure that's part of it.

Hon. Jenna Sudds: That's amazing.

If possible, that would be great. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, all, for being with us today. If you have any documents or anything else you wish to share, I invite all three of you to send that in to our clerk. We'll make sure it's read and part of our report.

Dr. Charles, I'm sorry we couldn't get our IT sorted. Perhaps we'll see you another time. I suspect Madame Gaudreau will see you at the veterans affairs committee for something else.

Mr. Shimooka, thank you for being with us again. I appreciate it.

Ms. Miller, thank you very much. I commend you for your courage and for everything you shared with us today. It's been very important. It's sincerely appreciated.

Very quickly, before we leave, we need to have this tabled in the House by the 23rd. On the 20th, we're going to spend the full meeting doing line-by-line so that you will have the report out. On Tuesday, October 3, at noon, eastern, you need—

A voice: It's the 13th, not the third.

The Chair: I'm sorry. Yes, please go back in time. Get in your DeLoreans and go back to the future.

Please have your recommendations in to the analysts by October 13 at noon. I realize we're getting ahead of ourselves because we haven't done the report, but if you're going to have a supplementary, complementary or dissenting report, start thinking of that. We will need to have it by October 21. I'm not saying that we will, but start thinking about it because we're on such a short timeline.

That's the 20th. On the 22nd, we'll have the PBO in because she'll have three reports coming out between now and then. We have to finish off the comprehensive expenditure review. We've gone line by line. We have all of our recommendations in. I'm hoping we can finish that on the 27th. If we can, on the 29th, we'll resume buy Canada. It shouldn't take us that much. Hopefully, we can get it through on the 27th. The 29th is a backup for the CER, but otherwise it'll be for buy Canada. I see that continuing on through December.

If there is nothing else, witnesses, thank you again for being with us.

Thank you, colleagues. Have a fantastic Thanksgiving. We're adjourned.

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