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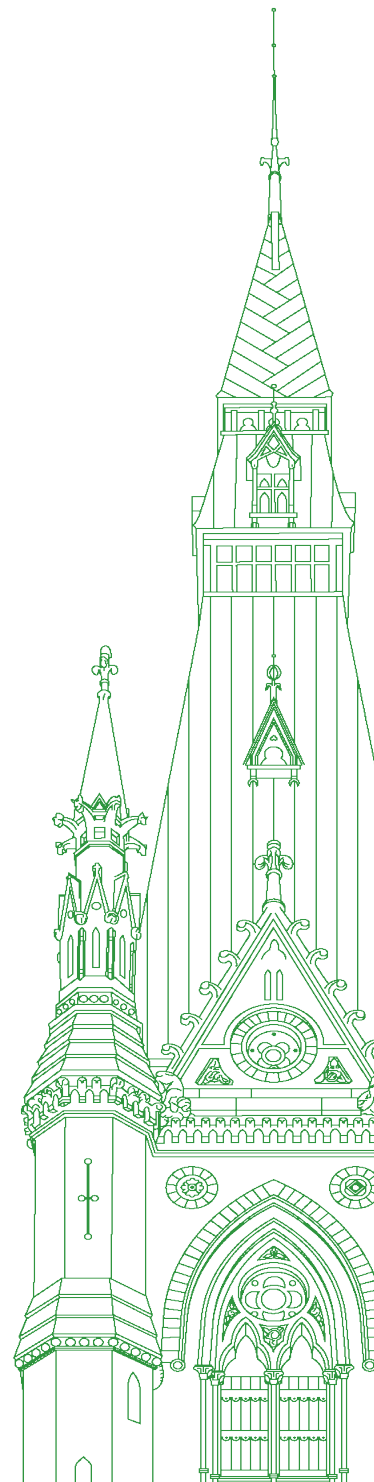
Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 043

Thursday, October 8, 2026

Chair: Marie-France Lalonde



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● (0820)

[Translation]

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

Welcome to meeting number 43 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[English]

Before we begin, colleagues and Minister, I would like to take a minute to recognize the departure of three former members.

Due to recent changes to committee membership, our former vice-chairs, Mr. Blake Richards and Madame Marie-Hélène Gaudreau, are no longer members of the veterans affairs committee. Through his contribution and commitment to the committee, Mr. Richards helped ensure that the interests of Canada's veterans were consistently reflected in our work.

[Translation]

I also want to acknowledge the contribution of Marie-Hélène Gaudreau. Through her ongoing engagement and constructive collaboration, she has helped advance the work of this committee and advocate for veterans and their families across Canada.

[English]

I will also note the departure from this committee of Mr. Sean Casey, the former parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs. Mr. Casey served on the committee for seven and a half years while representing Charlottetown, which he continues to do very proudly, a community that holds particular significance for Veterans Affairs Canada as the location of the department's national headquarters.

Mr. Casey, we want to thank you for your contributions all these years.

Our thanks also go to Mr. Richards and Madame Gaudreau.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

[Translation]

The Chair: Pursuant to the motion adopted on June 8, 2026, the committee is meeting to study the supplementary estimates (A), 2026-27.

To keep things orderly, I would like to go over a few rules for witnesses and members.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name.

For interpretation, use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

All comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. The committee clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can. We appreciate your patience and understanding in this regard.

[English]

I have the immense pleasure of welcoming the Honourable Jill McKnight, Minister of Veterans Affairs, who is joining us for the first hour. The minister is joined by Deputy Minister Nancy Gardiner, who will also be here for the first hour.

[Translation]

We also welcome the following representatives from the Department of Veterans Affairs, who will remain with us for the second hour of the meeting: Jonathan Adams, acting assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and corporate services; Mitch Freeman, acting assistant deputy minister, strategic policy, planning and performance; and Doug Wentzell, senior assistant deputy minister, service delivery.

As usual, we will begin with the minister's remarks. We will then proceed to a round of questions from committee members.

[English]

Minister McKnight, the floor is yours for five minutes.

[Translation]

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

[English]

Colleagues, thank you for inviting me to share an update on the supplementary estimates (A) for Veterans Affairs Canada. It is a pleasure to welcome colleagues who have joined this committee. I look forward to working with you on behalf of Canada's veterans.

At Veterans Affairs Canada, every investment ultimately comes down to one purpose: ensuring that veterans and their families receive the support they need when they need it. For 2026-27, Veterans Affairs Canada accounts for \$8.17 billion of the government's \$502.8 billion planned budgetary spending. As the government's second-largest contribution towards NATO's 2% defence spending guideline, this investment underscores Canada's continued commitment to those who have served our country, while maintaining our NATO obligations. Behind every dollar is a veteran, a family member or a caregiver counting on support. For a veteran living with a service-related injury, it can mean access to treatment and rehabilitation without the added burden of financial stress.

[Translation]

For family caregivers, it can provide financial assistance to help a veteran.

[English]

For a veteran facing mental health challenges, it can mean access to professional care, treatment and support. For a veteran transitioning to a civilian career, it can mean translating their military skills and experiences into a meaningful career.

[Translation]

On a practical level, this funding is a game-changer. The services they need will be there when the need arises.

[English]

As you can see, the department's budget will increase by \$2 million, to \$8.173 billion.

The first item in the supplementary estimates (A) supports a national outreach campaign to help more veterans and their families learn about the programs, services and benefits available to them, including financial assistance, career support, education and mental health services.

[Translation]

The campaign highlights veterans' stories. These are real-life experiences of service and transition. It's a simple, personal and easy-to-understand message.

● (0825)

[English]

Our goal is simple: help more veterans recognize themselves as part of the broader veteran community and ensure that they know where to turn for support. For some veterans, knowing where to turn for help can be an important first step in reaching out. That's what we want the campaign to do: make the first step a little easier.

[Translation]

That's what this campaign is all about: making that first step a little bit easier.

[English]

The second item in the estimates will support veterans facing immediate crisis. The \$800,000 transfer will ensure that the veterans emergency fund remains available to veterans across Canada facing situations that threaten their safety, health or well-being. Since

launching in 2018, the fund has provided timely financial assistance to veterans and their families during moments of urgent need. On average, more than two veterans receive essential support every day through the veterans emergency fund. Our government remains committed to ensuring that no veteran is left without access to urgent support when they need it most.

These estimates represent a modest increase to the Veterans Affairs Canada budget, but an increase nonetheless. It is important to be clear about what these estimates demonstrate. Funding for Veterans Affairs Canada continues to increase, ensuring that veterans and their families can count on the programs and services they rely upon when they need them most. This investment in veterans is a reflection of our commitment to ensuring that Canada's veterans never have to face life's challenges alone.

This fall, we will continue strengthening service delivery, expanding employment opportunities for veterans and increasing awareness of the programs and services available to them, but our responsibility does not end there.

[Translation]

Our work doesn't stop there.

[English]

We must also ensure that the contributions of veterans are recognized, not just on Remembrance Day but also every day of the year. We have a responsibility to ensure that future generations of Canadians understand their service, their sacrifice and the lasting impact that veterans have had on our country. As we approach Veterans' Week and Remembrance Day, I encourage all Canadians to wear a poppy, attend a ceremony and thank a veteran.

Remembrance is more than a moment. It is a shared responsibility we must pair with action. It is a responsibility to honour those who've served, support those who continue to carry the effects of that service and ensure that future generations understand the sacrifices that helped shape our country. Together, by supporting veterans, sharing their stories and expressing our gratitude throughout the year, we can ensure that every veteran knows their service mattered and their sacrifices are remembered.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister McKnight.

Now we will open our first round with six minutes for Mr. Barrett.

Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands—Rideau Lakes, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Through you to the minister and her officials, thank you for being here.

Minister, my questions relate to the departmental plan for 2026-27, which you referenced in your opening. As of March 31, Veterans Affairs had 36,491 disability benefit applications pending. Of those, more than 9,359 were already beyond your department's service standard. Is that your understanding?

Hon. Jill McKnight: That aligns with the numbers that I'm familiar with.

Michael Barrett: Your own departmental plan says that you are reducing or cutting staffing in the disability benefits program by approximately 20% between this fiscal year and next fiscal year. Is that also correct?

Hon. Jill McKnight: I disagree with your assessment that we are cutting staffing. There is a reduction in staffing related to the completion of temporary funding, which was coming to its end as part of its sunseting. I disagree with the assumption that we are cutting staffing. In fact, through the budget we have made an investment in service delivery, stabilization and modernization, with the \$184.9 million that was part of budget 2025.

Michael Barrett: Minister, is it correct, then, that you've had a net increase or that your staffing numbers have stayed the same?

• (0830)

Hon. Jill McKnight: The sunseting funding that came to an end was completed as of March 31. The service delivery and modernization are allowing us to ensure that we maintain additional staff, who were on term contracts, to deliver services and benefits for veterans.

Michael Barrett: You have thousands of veterans waiting too long for benefits—I would say that “we” have thousands of veterans who are waiting too long for benefits that they've earned. The disability benefit staffing has seen a reduction. You've called it “sunseting”, and it's by 20%. The concern that I have and that I'm looking to drill down to is, how does that help to clear the backlog?

Will you guarantee today that the changes being made—“sunseting” or however you'd like to characterize it, even if differently from how I've read it in the departmental plan—won't increase the number of veterans waiting beyond your established service standard?

Hon. Jill McKnight: We continue to work towards improvements on delivering for the service standard, acknowledging that there is still more work to do. Since 2021, we have seen a reduction in the number of weeks that a veteran is waiting for first applications, from an average of 39.7 weeks down to below 20 weeks in Q1 of this year. Part of why we have the investment in service stabilization and modernization is to work with the team members we have in order to deliver more timely decisions for veterans so that we can continue to improve on the service delivery standard.

Michael Barrett: Thank you, Minister.

How many disability benefit applications are beyond your service standards today? Just give the number, if you have it, please.

Hon. Jill McKnight: As that's a very specific number, I'm going to turn to my department officials, as they will have that available.

Michael Barrett: If you have it, I'd like the number only, please.

Doug Wentzell (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery, Department of Veterans Affairs): As of June 30, we have 9,675 over the service standard.

Michael Barrett: You have 9,675.

Minister, by what date will your department meet its 16-week service standard for 80% of disability benefit decisions?

Hon. Jill McKnight: I would again turn to the department officials.

Michael Barrett: Minister, is that something you've directed them on, a date or goal that they need to meet?

Hon. Jill McKnight: As I mentioned, that's part of service delivery, modernization and stabilization—the work that is being undertaken right now.

Again, I would turn to the officials to address that more specifically.

Michael Barrett: If I can, I think that's a question I can get into with officials during the second hour.

With my last minute, I just want to get some clarity from the minister with respect to ceremonies and services organized for Remembrance Day by the Royal Canadian Legion that traditionally include prayer or benediction. The government's new policy restricts religious language and spiritual reflections at certain military and commemorative events. What I'm looking to find out is, if the Royal Canadian Legion organizes Remembrance Day ceremonies, including the national Remembrance Day ceremony, will there be any impact, consequence or discipline for military chaplains who offer a prayer at these events?

Hon. Jill McKnight: I appreciate the question about commemoration. It's an incredibly important part of the work we do. Veterans Affairs Canada has a long-standing working relationship with the Royal Canadian Legion, in addition to a number of organizations that participate in the commemorative experience.

As it relates specifically to a specific ceremony, I would turn to the department officials.

Michael Barrett: The question is, are they allowed to pray?

The Chair: The time has expired.

I'll just say, on a personal note as the chair, that I attend my own Legion, and we pray every single year, so it has not changed.

Thank you very much, Mr. Barrett.

Michael Barrett: Madam Chair, on a point of order, since the chair is answering questions on behalf of the minister, the question was with respect to military chaplains, not if the Legion invites a local spiritual leader to offer a prayer.

● (0835)

The Chair: Mr. Barrett, I wanted to make sure that it's understood that I'm very proud of my own Legion. I just wanted to share publicly that at my Legion, we do have spirituality and a pastor and priest. Thank you very much.

Michael Barrett: I'm proud of my Legion too.

The Chair: I'm glad for that. Thank you, Mr. Barrett.

For the next round, Madame Auguste will be talking for three minutes, and then it's Mr. Fanjoy.

I will advise the minister that, just for interpretation purposes, Madame Auguste may ask her questions in French.

[Translation]

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

I want to thank all the witnesses for being here today. We are very grateful to them.

Minister, like you, we know that the process and steps involved in applying for veterans' benefits can seem daunting and that all Canadians who submit forms to the federal government are concerned about processing times. This is a major concern for veterans. Therefore, I think it's important now and in the future to better understand the work that your department will be doing for them.

Can you tell us about the work your department does when processing a veteran's application for benefits or supports?

Hon. Jill McKnight: Thank you.

[English]

Every application that a veteran submits for benefits and services is because they are reaching out for support. As previously discussed, while we've made significant progress in advancing responses and delivering in a timely way, there is a continued opportunity for us to enhance this, to improve and to make the process more streamlined for veterans.

This is very much at the core of the work that the stabilization and service modernization process is about. It is about being able to support veterans, to refine the process and to make it easier for them to access the benefits for which they are eligible. It is about using the public service resources that we have—the individuals, the people—to have interactions with veterans and to support them through technology with some of the administrative elements. This is very much about ensuring that we are able to deliver timely results to veterans to fulfill their needs and to expedite our service delivery, but in a way that is still comprehensive for the veteran and that keeps the veteran at the centre of it. We know those relationships and engagements are incredibly important.

Our department officials are certainly happy to speak to the specific elements of that, so I would turn to them to highlight some of those elements.

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Auguste, you have 20 seconds left.

Tatiana Auguste: I'll give that time to the witnesses.

Doug Wentzell: Thank you for the question.

The department works closely with the Canadian Armed Forces because a key part of the process is our transition centre. We want to work with veterans early in the process so we can support them with our services before they leave the forces.

We are working with veterans and using our tools to promote the My VAC Account portal.

We have a presence in 28 transition centres across Canada. That's a key part of our process.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

Mr. Fanjoy, you'll have about two minutes for your line of questioning.

Bruce Fanjoy (Carleton, Lib.): Thank you, Minister and officials, for joining us.

I want to talk about the Royal Canadian Legion. This year, 2026, is their 100th anniversary. Less than two weeks ago in Carleton, we had an incredible celebration of that 100th anniversary. I'm an associate member of the Legion through Legion 314 in Manotick.

A veteran and historian identified 22 members of the Canadian Armed Forces from our community who were lost in the First and Second World Wars. They will be remembered forever on our cenotaph as a result of those events.

I wanted to ask, Minister, about how you and your department have been celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Royal Canadian Legion.

● (0840)

Hon. Jill McKnight: The opportunity to acknowledge the contributions of the Royal Canadian Legion over the past 100 years has been a significant milestone this year. We have been engaging through the department and through my interactions particularly over this summer, but as we lead into November 11, I've had the opportunity to participate with a number of Legions across Canada, from the Atlantic to central Canada to the west, in a number of different ceremonies that have acknowledged the work the Royal Canadian Legion has done.

Through the commemoration side of Veterans Affairs Canada, we have also supported Royal Canadian Legions with some of the legacy projects they are doing as part of this 100th anniversary. I have an example here in front of me. As part of the commemorative partnership program this year, Royal Canadian Legion Branch 112 in British Columbia has added a plaque to their cenotaph, honouring the contributions that were made in Afghanistan.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

I'll just inform our minister and her officials that Madame DeBellefeuille will be addressing you in French, so please make sure that the interpretation is correct.

[Translation]

Thank you very much.

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor for six minutes.

Claude DeBellefeuille (Vallée-du-Haut-Saint-Laurent, BQ): Minister, thank you very much for being here this morning.

You know, I'm brand new to the veterans file, but I did take the time to read the latest report on suicide prevention, entitled "Suicide Prevention Among Canadian Veterans". I also read your response to the report, and, quite frankly, I was shocked.

I was shocked because I understand that, despite the 2024 report entitled "Invisible No More. The Experiences of Canadian Women Veterans" and the latest report on suicide prevention, you chose to state in your response that you do not recognize military sexual trauma as a significant risk factor for suicidal ideation, suicide attempts or even death by suicide. I was shocked to read that, although you acknowledge it as a significant concern, it is not considered sufficiently traumatic to be recognized by your government.

Your response is based on your assertion that there is insufficient evidence to do so. To be honest, I was kind of in shock when you said that because I know that the U.S. military and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs recognize it based on a large body of evidence-based research. Australia has as well.

My question for you is this: When a military member experiences military sexual trauma, how does a Canadian veteran's experience differ from that of an American or Australian veteran?

Can you explain why you refuse to acknowledge the significance of this trauma?

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

[English]

I would like to start by acknowledging the work of this committee on the suicide study and the incredible importance of it. I thank the committee for the time that was spent on that. In particular, I thank the veteran community, the family members and those who shared their personal experiences when testifying in that study. Again, it's an incredibly important topic that we are discussing.

[Translation]

Claude DeBellefeuille: Minister, I don't want to interrupt you, but I don't have much time and I really want to know your answer.

Please explain your rationale. Why don't you recognize military sexual trauma as a significant factor that could lead a veteran to die by suicide or attempt to take their own life? As you know, I have a clinical background. I told you about that, and I have experience in social services. I want to hear what you have to say because you can't refuse to acknowledge it if you can't explain why.

I have three minutes left. Explain to me why you refuse to acknowledge it.

• (0845)

[English]

Hon. Jill McKnight: I certainly acknowledge the impact that military sexual trauma has on veterans who have served, both women and men. It is an incredibly important part of our consideration in this conversation.

Our colleague has referenced the study that was done in Australia. That is something our department has been looking thoroughly at and will be continuing to follow and have conversations about as we look at work that is being done around the world.

As it relates to this specific recognition, I would turn to department officials to share more on that.

[Translation]

Claude DeBellefeuille: Minister, I don't mean any disrespect, but before you turn to your officials, I'd like to speak directly to you. I will ask the officials these questions later, but right now I'm asking you, as a woman and as the minister responsible for veterans, to answer.

You heard from the witnesses during the previous study. There are also evidence-based studies from the United States. As a member of the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security, I attended the debate on Bill C-22, which concerns access and information sharing. We were repeatedly told that we had to align with the Five Eyes, with Australia and the United States, and that we were the only ones not sharing this information.

Your government wants to expedite things and be efficient. Why not look to U.S. and Australian evidence to support recognition of military sexual trauma as an aggravating factor for suicide? What is preventing you from doing so? I don't understand your reasoning as a minister or as a female minister. I really don't get it. I'd like to hear your own opinion, not that of your officials.

[English]

Hon. Jill McKnight: I appreciate the member's question.

Again, recognizing that this can be one factor in a continuum of factors that have an impact, it is incredibly important that we continue to have engagement on this. As I said, we will be looking to the Australian study. We will be looking to studies around the world as we move forward with the work that is done here in Canada and looking to continue to support veterans in their experiences, as we are with military sexual trauma and the work we are doing with the Canadian Armed Forces.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

We're now going to start our second round.

Mr. Tolmie, go ahead for five minutes.

Fraser Tolmie (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for joining us today.

Minister, in previous roles, I would evaluate some of my staff, and I'd ask them to give their own evaluation of their performance out of 10. Would you do that for me today? What would you say on a scale from one to 10? You've been in this role for about a year. What number would you give yourself?

Hon. Jill McKnight: That's a very interesting question. To my colleague, it's very difficult to put a context on that because there's a variety of different factors.

Fraser Tolmie: That's fine. I'll just ask some other questions.

Minister, the department awarded an independent review contract of PCVRS in August of this year for \$253,000 to Ference & Company. The contract is up in December. That seems like a tight timeline to do an evaluation on such a large, multi-million-dollar contract. What kind of response do you think we're going to get?

Hon. Jill McKnight: Earlier this year when I appeared at ACVA in the spring, I announced that a third party independent review of the RSVP, as delivered by PCVRS, would be undertaken. That work is ongoing right now, and I look forward to receiving the results of it and being able to come back and report on it.

Fraser Tolmie: Thank you, Minister, for that answer. Personally, I don't think you're going to get an answer by December. I think we're going to be in a bit of a muddle.

Minister, you said in your opening testimony that veterans should be recognized, not just on November 11, but every day. Your department couldn't tell me how many families of the 158 fallen were invited to the groundbreaking of the Afghan monument. You've said they'll be an integral part of the 2028 unveiling.

What will be different in the planning and when does that work start? We've had 12 years to plan that event.

● (0850)

Hon. Jill McKnight: The groundbreaking or sod-turning for the monument to the mission in Afghanistan was an important milestone in the progress of the completion of that monument earlier this year, but it is one of many steps relating specifically to the families of the 158 fallen individuals. Communication was shared with all of the families in advance of that event to let them know it was happening and to invite them to participate.

Fraser Tolmie: Thank you, but we didn't see any veterans on the podium, and no veterans made speeches or were recognized. We heard that loud and clear right after that monument....

We'll move on to some other questions.

Minister, you mentioned in your testimony that you like the fact that we do a lot of hard work in this committee on studies, but a lot of the recommendations we bring forward don't get acted on. My colleague from the Bloc just mentioned how sexual trauma is not being recognized in Canada.

What recommendations have you put in or followed up on from this committee since you've been minister?

Hon. Jill McKnight: I very much appreciate the work and recommendations that come forward from this committee. Those recommendations are taken. They are reviewed and worked on by the department as we move forward in our continuing journey to support veterans.

I would like to clarify a statement just made by our colleague. It was characterized that I disagreed with our other colleagues with regard to military sexual trauma. I did not disagree. I said we are taking up the work of the other studies that had been conducted externally in Canada. We are reviewing that information, and we continue to work to support individuals who have experienced military sexual trauma.

Fraser Tolmie: Will military chaplains be allowed to pray at Remembrance Day services?

Hon. Jill McKnight: As I've said already, this is engagement with third party organizations.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. I appreciate it.

Now we will invite Madame Chatel for her five minutes.

Sophie Chatel (Pontiac—Kitigan Zibi, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Welcome, Minister and officials. Thank you for being here.

I started on this committee with a very interesting study. I know the government launched in 2024 the national veterans employment strategy. I also know, Minister, that you've been working really hard. During the summer, you had several round tables, so this study could not come at a better time.

The military defence budget is increasing and enrolment has increased, and Minister, you said yourself that the faces of veterans are changing. They're coming into the workforce, having worked on dual-use technology, drones and aircraft. The military is working even more today with civilian businesses.

What is your vision, Minister, in this context of veterans changing and acquiring different skills? What's your vision for them once they leave the forces?

Hon. Jill McKnight: I appreciate the conversation with regard to veteran employment, as this is something I have been keenly focused on since starting in this role.

In 2024, Veterans Affairs Canada undertook the national veterans employment strategy. In the past 16 months, I've been focused on operationalizing that and delivering it with employers for veterans, with veterans at the core of it.

We know that today's veterans have a wide range of skills and talents. They bring leadership, adaptability and problem solving, but they also bring highly specialized technical skills. You mentioned the aviation industry, specifically the criteria for airplane mechanic engineers. These incredible skills are in demand in the civilian marketplace.

This summer, I conducted seven round tables with employers, veterans, educational institutions and non-profits as we look at how we can help veterans with their skills and translate those from the military context, in some cases, into the civilian-language context of a job description. We look for opportunities where upskilling could be done to align things with the civilian marketplace. We are supporting veterans in making that connection quicker, sooner and in a way that fulfills them.

One of the key opportunities I saw with the national veterans employment strategy—I may refer to it as the NVES, just to simplify it—was ensuring that we had the veteran at the core of it. Our focus is on the right employment opportunity for them where they are today. That may be the same as it will be five years from now, or it might be different, but our goal is to support them where they are in that which will be fulfilling for them. As we move forward, we will be coming out with some skills translation, starting with roles in the CAF that we can translate into the civilian area.

As we launch this, I will look at it as an evergreen launch. The NVES is an evergreen document, and the rollout will be too, because it needs to be responsive to veterans and their needs, and as things change, we need to ensure that we are meeting them in the way that works best for them. I anticipate that you will see steps come out—what I'm thinking of as version 1.0—because we will then take feedback and continue to modify and enhance so that we can continue to roll out the next steps.

We will also be working with employers for veteran employer recognition as a way of connecting veterans with employers that are embracing veteran culture in order to support the veteran in their success as they move through their civilian career journey.

● (0855)

Sophie Chatel: I'm out of time. Thank you for your passion. It's much needed.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Minister, this is the first time we've had a conversation at this committee, and I will tell you frankly that I'm deeply disappointed by your response regarding the recognition of military sexual trauma as an aggravating factor leading to suicide or attempted suicide. Veterans Affairs Canada recognizes mental health problems, addiction and relationship problems. You know that if someone is a victim of sexual trauma, it can lead to addiction. It can lead to mental health problems or it can exacerbate them. The evidence is there.

You don't need to waste any more time studying this issue. The evidence already exists. Look to the Americans; look to the Australians. What is preventing you, as Minister of Veterans Affairs,

from standing up for veterans who are victims of sexual trauma? This is a serious issue, and it's clinically documented.

I don't get it. I expect a female minister who advocates for veterans to do everything in her power during her mandate to secure that recognition. How much time are you planning to take to conduct the studies, define it and decide to recognize this trauma? How many years are you going to take? Will it be done soon? I would like you to speak to that.

You have one minute left to give me cause for hope.

● (0900)

[English]

Hon. Jill McKnight: I agree that military sexual trauma is very traumatic and very impactful for the veteran community. I appreciate our colleague's advocacy for the women who have experienced it, but we also need to remember that military sexual trauma is not applicable to just women. It is something that—

[Translation]

Claude DeBellefeuille: Excuse me, Minister. I never said that. I said that it applied to veterans. Maybe that didn't come across in the interpretation.

You have 30 seconds left to answer my question. I'm asking you to make a commitment. There are veterans in the room. How much time are you planning to take to conduct the studies to determine whether or not the trauma will be recognized?

[English]

Hon. Jill McKnight: We are continuing to work on responding to the recommendations and the studies that are out there, and we will continue to remain focused on this.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Now we will share our time for the next five minutes. We have Mr. Gill for two and a half minutes.

Sukhman Gill (Abbotsford—South Langley, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you very much, Minister, for being here today.

First of all, I want to echo my colleague's message. I feel it's a very important study, and we definitely need to look more into it and pay it more attention. These are details that should have been studied. We've had time to study them. We need to implement them now for the benefit of our veterans. As my colleague said, we have veterans in the room today, and I see their faces. I see the witnesses and I see the emotion. Because of that, I want to echo my colleague's message.

Getting to the questions, Minister, VAC is requesting \$39.6 million for the caregiver recognition benefit, representing a 6.5% decrease from the previous year. The benefit provides \$1,264 per month directly to the caregiver for severely disabled veterans who require continuous care.

Can you explain why the funding for the caregiver recognition benefit is decreasing by 6.5% this year?

Hon. Jill McKnight: All of the benefits and services at Veterans Affairs Canada are demand-driven in response to the needs of veterans. As such, different programs, different services and different benefits will follow a natural ebb and peak in response to the needs of veterans. As it relates to the caregiver recognition benefit, that too will respond differently to the needs of the veteran community.

For more specifics on the actual dollar figure, I would turn to the officials to speak to that.

Sukhman Gill: Through you, Chair, I want to ask the minister directly—I can get the details later—if that reduction is because fewer caregivers are qualifying for the benefit or because VAC anticipates fewer applications.

Hon. Jill McKnight: As I mentioned, the different benefits and programs are in response to the needs of veterans as they move through their life cycle and their continuum—

Sukhman Gill: I apologize for cutting you off, but this is my last question. I have only 20 seconds. It's not even that much.

How many caregivers have applied for this and been denied? Give me just the figure.

Hon. Jill McKnight: That's a very specific number. I would turn to the department officials for that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I wanted to be respectful of both of your two and a half minutes, so I apologize, Mr. Gill.

We have Mr. Diotte for two and a half minutes.

Kerry Diotte (Edmonton Griesbach, CPC): Thanks, Madam Chair.

Minister, in previous years, members of Parliament could select veterans as a local priority for the Canada summer jobs grant program. This year, we cannot. It doesn't exist. Now your department says that helping veterans transition into civilian employment is a priority. If that's the case, why can we no longer select veterans as a priority for the Canada summer jobs grant program?

Hon. Jill McKnight: The Canada summer jobs grant program is run out of ESDC as a department. That is where the criteria and the parameters of that program live. I would turn to our department officials, who may perhaps be able to inform you of why a change has occurred.

• (0905)

Kerry Diotte: I could ask that in the second hour, perhaps.

Was Veterans Affairs consulted before veterans were removed as a priority category?

Hon. Jill McKnight: As I said, that lives under a different minister in a different department, but I would turn to our department

officials to see if there is information they can share to answer that question.

Kerry Diotte: Minister, Veterans Affairs operating spending is falling by more than \$225 million, while your department is projecting nearly 530 fewer employees than in 2024-25. How many of these positions are frontline jobs serving veterans? Why should veterans believe that these cuts won't mean longer wait times or poorer service?

Hon. Jill McKnight: I think there are a number of things coming together here, and it's perhaps overlapping two different items. I would turn to our officials on the finance side to speak to that.

There remain no cuts to services and benefits for veterans. We are investing in delivering services and benefits in a timely fashion.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds. Do you want the response in hour two, with the officials?

Kerry Diotte: Yes.

You're saying no cuts.

Hon. Jill McKnight: There have been no cuts to the services and benefits available to veterans.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Now to complete our second round, we'll have Mr. Clark for five minutes.

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

Minister and officials, thank you so much for being here this morning.

Last week, when we were all back in our constituencies, I had a chance to visit one of the local Legions in my riding, branch 95 in Bedford, Nova Scotia. When I was talking to the veterans there, one of the things they raised with me, which I'm sure is common across the board, is that they're looking to attract and retain more young people at the Legion. It's a challenge for them, and I'm sure it's a challenge in many places.

It got me thinking about my own experience of veterans in service. My grandfather served. His brother was injured during the war. My dad, in the fifties and sixties, would have grown up when all of his neighbours, his teacher and the local police officer were veterans who had served. That was kind of central to the community. In the following generation, I was growing up in the early nineties. In school at Remembrance Day ceremonies, lots of mostly elderly gentlemen would come. They were still living in the neighbourhood. It might have been the retired guy down the street. There was a tangible connection.

Now I have kids of my own. They're nine and six, and for them, it's more distant. That's just a function of time, but it's something that I think we should be concerned about. Legions are seeing this on the front line. It's an important year for the Legion, obviously. It's their 100th anniversary.

Minister, perhaps you could give us your thoughts on how we as a committee and as a country can make sure that younger people in particular are aware, are involved and respect the service of veterans? How can we make sure they see it as tangibly as possible?

Hon. Jill McKnight: First off, to our colleague, thank you very much for sharing the story of your visit to your local Legion branch. Again, those conversations are incredibly important.

As we discussed earlier, for 100 years, the Royal Canadian Legion has played an important part in the support of veterans by bringing them together and offering shared camaraderie and the acknowledgement of service and of storytelling through Remembrance Day ceremonies in many communities.

I had the opportunity to attend their Dominion Convention earlier in August, where I found that much of what you just mentioned is the focus of the Royal Canadian Legion right now as they look to what the next century looks like, how they connect with modern-day veterans and how they transition their services on the commemoration side to tell the story for the next generation.

This past week, I had the opportunity to visit three different schools across Canada—speaking to your point about how we tell the story for the next generation and make those connections—where we were able to talk with children in grades 3 to 5 about who a veteran is, about how we might recognize a veteran and about veterans very much being individuals among us in our communities, to speak to the other point you mentioned. We were engaging with youth, with tangible interactions, to say what they can do and to give them calls to action that they can undertake at a young level.

At the end of our visits, we talked about three things that they could do. They could wear a poppy on Remembrance Day and could attend a ceremony, but the third thing I said to them, as a way of starting this conversation and of moving it forward with the next generation, is that they could go home and tell one person about the conversation we had that day. It can start that simply, because that is how we tell the stories.

One of the things that I found really interesting with the school visits is how many of the children—and I can think of three in one particular classroom—when they heard what the topic was going to be, used that as an opportunity to bring in mementoes from their family's history to share with their friends. That is how the organic storytelling and commemoration can continue.

Two of those individuals were sharing about their great-grandfathers, because that's how many generations it was. For one of the individuals, it was about their father, who had served and is now a veteran. It opened up the conversation that we could have about the idea that when they're on the playground and they see this child's father, they're seeing a veteran and they're engaging with a veteran.

It's about telling the story in a way that lands for them. That is one of the focuses that we have with our commemoration side of things right now: It's how we move this conversation forward so that it can be accessible for the next generation.

• (0910)

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

Minister McKnight, thank you for your visit with us.

We will suspend briefly to say goodbye, and then we will welcome more officially our officials for hour number two.

• (0910)

(Pause)

• (0915)

[Translation]

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Good morning once again. We're continuing our study on the subject of the supplementary estimates (A) 2026-27.

[English]

We will now start our second round of questions with our witnesses from the Department of Veterans Affairs. We have Mr. Jonathan Adams, Mr. Mitch Freeman and Mr. Doug Wentzell attending.

Our first round will start with six minutes for Mr. Barrett.

• (0920)

[Translation]

Michael Barrett: Thank you, Madam Chair.

[English]

To our officials here today, how long should veterans have to wait to receive their disability benefits, from the time of application to receipt of benefits?

Doug Wentzell: The department obviously works to make sure that we process benefits and make decisions in the most timely way we possibly can. As of the end of the first quarter of 2026-27, I can report that on average we're able to process benefits for first applications within a little less than 17 weeks.

Michael Barrett: Is 17 weeks the ceiling or the floor?

Doug Wentzell: That is simply the current processing time on average. As I noted earlier, my team works to ensure that we process benefits as quickly as we possibly can for veterans.

Michael Barrett: Currently, how many applications are there that have exceeded the service standard? How many are in the queue right now?

Doug Wentzell: As of the end of June, we have 9,675.

Michael Barrett: Is that acceptable?

Doug Wentzell: To my earlier point, that's the current number exceeding the service standard. The department and my team from coast to coast to coast work to minimize that to the extent possible. We will always do that.

Michael Barrett: That answer isn't good enough, with all due respect. I don't discount the fact that the public servants charged with this responsibility are working hard. That's not an accusation that's been levelled. The fact that's been certified is that nearly 10,000 veterans are languishing, waiting to receive the entitlements—and I'm very specifically using the word “entitlements”—they have applied to receive.

When the men and women of the Canadian Armed Forces sign up, they receive world-class training, they learn a wide array of things depending on their specific trade and then they serve with unlimited liability. The least we can do for them is provide them in a timely way with the benefits they are entitled to. This isn't something they should be making a case to receive; this is their entitlement. The government has said that these are benefits that are available to them.

In my words—you didn't say it—this is an unacceptable number and an unacceptable amount of time. I appreciate that there are edge cases all the time, but we're talking 10,000 people.

By what date will that number be zero, the number of veterans who are waiting past the service standard? What's the department's objective? By what date will that number be zero?

Doug Wentzell: The department is taking significant steps to make sure our processing times are as low as they possibly can be. Budget 2025 invests, as the minister noted earlier, \$184.9 million, in addition to \$40 million ongoing. That's an investment in our capacity to help stabilize our ability to process as quickly as possible.

In addition to that, we're working to modernize our systems and employ technology such as the claim summary tool to help give our decision-makers as much information as they can to make decisions on behalf of veterans in the most timely way possible.

Michael Barrett: The term you've used a few times, Mr. Wentzell, is that the times should be “as low as they possibly can be”. Well, the lowest they can be is zero weeks. That's the lowest they possibly can be.

You've talked about the funding that's included in the budget this year. We've talked about the departmental plan. Is this a question of not having enough money to do the job, or not having enough people to do the job, in what is an acceptable amount of time?

• (0925)

Doug Wentzell: As our officials work to process claims for disability benefits, there is a process that our officials, up to and including our claims adjudicators, go through. There are a couple of steps in that process.

I want to be really clear with the committee that I've met a number of individuals over the past week in my team who come to work every single day to minimize those timelines to the extent possible.

Michael Barrett: With all due respect, sir, that's not an answer to my question. The question is, what's the limiting factor here? I appreciate that you have a standard—your department has a standard—and you're not meeting your own standard. You have 10,000 cases of that.

You're saying that everyone is doing a great job. That's great. Do you just need more people to do a great job? Do you need more money to get those people to do an even greater job? What's the limiting factor here? If it's exceeding your standard—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barrett. I apologize sincerely. Your time has run out.

Michael Barrett: Thank you.

The Chair: We will now invite Ms. Hirtle to go ahead.

You have three minutes.

Alana Hirtle (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Good morning, gentlemen.

Veterans Affairs Canada provides significant financial benefits to veterans who have service-related injuries or illnesses. For many veterans, those benefits can be critical at different points in their lives. At the same time, we have heard concerns about individuals or organizations that may seek to take advantage of veterans while they're navigating the claims process.

Could you speak to what VAC is doing to protect veterans from what are sometimes being referred to as benefit claim “predators”, and how the department and other third party organizations are available to support veterans in their application process? What steps are being taken to ensure that they receive the full benefits they are entitled to?

Doug Wentzell: I want to be really clear that veterans do not need to pay private companies or consultants to complete disability benefit applications. Our department offers free assistance services and has also worked to simplify our application process. We have staff across our offices—at transition centres, on bases and wings across Canada, and at Service Canada—who can assist veterans. We also work really closely with our partners at the Royal Canadian Legion and the War Amps of Canada, to name two examples, where we have service officers who can also assist with the application.

The other thing I would add is that we have online guided applications to provide the tools to support veterans in making it easier to complete their own application. While we certainly don't prohibit veterans from working through private consultants and firms to support their application process, we want to make sure that veterans understand that there are equivalent supports available for free through our department and through our partners.

Alana Hirtle: I have less than a minute now and I want to check in on PCVRS, which is providing important rehabilitation and vocational services to many veterans. Could you quickly walk the committee through what the department has learned from veterans' experiences with the rehabilitation program? What steps are taken to address where opportunities for improvement are identified?

Doug Wentzell: I will try to be as quick as I can on this.

It's very clear that the department is working to listen to what we're hearing from veterans on the rehabilitation program. I will highlight, as an example, a couple of things that we've heard.

Continuity of care is extraordinarily important. It's about working with veterans to ensure that they can continue to access the existing therapeutic relationships they have and that those can perhaps be built upon through the processes that exist through PCVRS. It's also about ensuring that we're working with PCVRS to support recruitment across the country so that there's equity in terms of access in the official language of choice, and about making sure that through the network, which I believe is now up to over 17,000 providers, veterans have access to providers in their community.

Those are some key examples that we've heard very clearly from veterans and that we're working to respond to.

• (0930)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I have here that you're sharing your time, Ms. Hirtle, so I apologize.

Now for the balance of the six minutes, you have about two minutes and 20 seconds, Ms. Chatel.

Sophie Chatel: Thank you.

You mentioned modernization. I think it's key to improving services. Could you please explain what efforts the department is making to improve services through modernization and technology?

Doug Wentzell: The department, in addition to making sure that we have a network of officials across the country, is investing in supporting more modernized processes and tools to support our processing capabilities.

One example I would share is the claim summary tool, which was launched recently. It basically supports disability application documents to organize what is quite often a very robust package of information brought forward to support our assessment. It highlights key information. It pinpoints items that are relevant to our decision-makers to help them make the important decisions that veterans are relying on us for.

These upgrades, along with a number of IT infrastructure improvements to make sure our systems are robust and easy to navigate, will all work to enhance efficiency and consistency in how we work with veterans from coast to coast to coast.

Sophie Chatel: We are undertaking a study on employment. Could you please give us your take on the important study we're doing, especially in the new context, as we said, of dual-use technology and the new skill set that our veterans are acquiring in the CAF?

Doug Wentzell: As the minister said earlier, the employment file is a very key priority for us, both to support veterans and to continue to support Canada in terms of the investments being made across the country from an economic perspective.

There are a number of ways we are working to support employment, including, as I mentioned earlier, the career transition services. We work with individuals before they conclude their service to make sure they understand the benefits, the programs and the employment supports that are available. We have a number of different items, including the job bank, that—

The Chair: Mr. Wentzell, I'm so sorry. I mentioned to all of you that I have the responsibility for very few things except the clock. I have to apologize in advance. I want to be fair to all members, so I will have to interrupt you, Mr. Wentzell. We will, I'm sure, have more questions throughout this hour number two.

[Translation]

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor for six minutes.

[English]

Again, make sure you have your interpretation on. Madame DeBellefeuille will be addressing you in French.

[Translation]

Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Good morning, gentlemen. All three of you are assistant deputy ministers in different branches of the department. Which of the three of you is responsible for conducting the studies to determine whether sexual trauma is a significant risk factor associated with suicide? Which team is studying this issue?

Is it your team, Mr. Adams? Is it your team, Mr. Freeman?

Mitch Freeman (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy, Planning and Performance Branch, Department of Veterans Affairs): I can answer the question.

Claude DeBellefeuille: Is it your team?

Mitch Freeman: Yes.

Claude DeBellefeuille: It's your team. Now that I know who's in charge, can you tell me how long you've been studying this issue and when you will be able to make a final recommendation to the minister on recognizing sexual trauma as a significant risk factor associated with suicide?

Mitch Freeman: Thank you for the question. I will answer it in English to provide an accurate update.

[English]

I want to start by highlighting the minister's comments earlier this morning around MST being a recognized condition at Veterans Affairs Canada. Any veteran who comes forward with an MST—

● (0935)

[Translation]

Claude DeBellefeuille: I'm sorry to interrupt you, Mr. Freeman. The government's response—which I imagine you were involved in drafting—identified trauma as a significant concern but did not recognize it as a significant factor leading to suicide or attempted suicide. You may find me a little insistent when it comes to answers, but I asked you a specific question because I want a specific answer.

I assume that you are currently studying the issue. As the minister told us, you're conducting studies around the world to gather evidence. As I said, the evidence exists. You heard me. You don't have to come up with new evidence. It exists in the United States, Australia and elsewhere.

Now, you're the guy in charge, so I'm guessing you're very good. You plan your work. What is your plan for reaching the point where you can tell the minister that the evidence is sufficient and that sexual trauma must be recognized as a significant risk factor for suicide? That is all I'm asking. I would really appreciate it if you could give me a very specific answer.

Mitch Freeman: Thank you for that clarification.

[English]

There are two things currently being done in this particular regard.

The first is that whenever a death notification arrives at Veterans Affairs Canada and the cause is suicide, a comprehensive review of that veteran's file is completed in order to determine risk factors: military sexual trauma, health, mental health, wellness, etc. That's the first thing undertaken every single time a notification of death arrives at Veterans Affairs Canada.

The second, as the minister highlighted, is a review of the material that the member is speaking about from a Five Eyes point of view—Australia, the United States and the other members of the Five Eyes community—to determine the applicability. I know the assertion is that it's applicable across the board. What we find in analysis is that there are a lot of similarities, particularly between Australia's research and the Canadian context. We are actively looking at that in this particular context, among others. For example, with women's health research, there's a lot of applicability there that we can ensure is taken into account as policies and processes are delivered.

[Translation]

Claude DeBellefeuille: I am 100% convinced that you are taking this seriously. I used to work in a minister's office, and one way to delay things is to hold committee meetings or conduct studies. Eventually, though, that has to come to an end. Someone has to say it's done, the evidence has been reviewed, the issue has been studied and a decision must be made.

When will your branch make a decision and give the minister a recommendation? The recommendation here is for more study. The study will end eventually. As you plan your deliverables, when will this study end so you can make a decision? There's a schedule, a time frame. You can't keep studying this indefinitely. When will your study end?

Mitch Freeman: Thank you for the question.

[English]

On the time frame wrapped around this process, I look to our research colleagues and teams to provide the amount of time necessary to derive the right answer. Is it five years out? Is it 10 years out? Of course not. However, I look to my research team to come back with what they believe is a reasonable time frame to make a conclusion and then influence policy—perhaps legislation or regulations—in that time frame.

[Translation]

Claude DeBellefeuille: You're telling me that you want your team to wrap this up within a reasonable time frame. I have been both a manager and a chief of staff. What does “reasonable time frame” mean? Parliamentarians have been studying the issue of suicide or sexual trauma among veterans since 2024. I think a lot of time has been spent on it. You're an experienced manager. When does your reasonable time frame end? What direction have you given your team? It's really quite a simple question.

[English]

Mitch Freeman: That is exactly why the work is under way, particularly as I started. MST is a recognizable condition at Veterans Affairs Canada, and any member who comes forward does not have to retell their story. There's no retraumatization, as the minister highlighted earlier. That comes into our disability program. There's a team dedicated to it. It moves through, is processed and is paid for.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll start our second round.

Go ahead for five minutes, Mr. Tolmie.

● (0940)

Fraser Tolmie: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I appreciate the officials showing up today.

I have a couple of questions.

One of the comments the minister made in her opening testimony was about steps to make life easier for veterans. I want to work through that. This is maybe a working question.

Veterans have come into my office and have called me concerning the fact that when they are assessed with PTSD by Veterans Affairs, that is one and done. However, every two years, when it comes to tax for the Canada Revenue Agency, they have to resubmit. They get traumatized again by the Canadian government.

I know these veterans know the difference, because they know different departments. When they look at the government, they're looking at the government as.... They're being mistreated by the government, and they're being retraumatized.

Is there any way you can work to break down the silos between your departments so that veterans do not have to go through this every two years with the Canada Revenue Agency and continually prove to another department within the government that they are suffering from PTSD?

Mitch Freeman: I want to highlight that from a federal point of view, many of the benefits for veterans are delivered by many departments, as you're highlighting. We have some pretty tight integration between our colleagues at ESDC, CRA, Indigenous Services Canada, CAF, DND and the RCMP to ensure we can minimize that to the best of our ability.

It's an ongoing evolution of the delivery of all our processes—whether that is from a veteran-centric, front-end client point of view or is about data sharing, technology, information, etc.—to ensure that our services, from a Veterans Affairs, ESDC, ISC or CRA point of view, are delivered in an efficient and effective manner to limit that traumatization to a veteran.

Fraser Tolmie: I want it on the record that I want to see this situation solved for veterans.

I'm asking this department for that. I can't direct you; the minister can. I'm highlighting this on behalf of veterans who are continually being traumatized when they're going through taxation services and other departments. Somehow, the bureaucracy and red tape they have experienced must get minimized in order to expedite services for veterans.

As for my next question, nine times out of 10, the appeal board rules for veterans. If I'm watching a sports game and the referee gets overruled many times by the VAR, I start looking at the referee and the quality. What are you changing in your department so that it gets things right for veterans the first time?

Here, we're seeing that there will be a cut of services. Everybody is saying it's not a cut of services, but it is a cut of services. It's a reduction. Veterans are now going to get backlogged. They're going to get rejections. That's what we're seeing. We have a backlog of 10,000 veterans who are not getting assessed properly.

What are we going to do on the front end to get things better and right the first time?

Mitch Freeman: Thank you for the question.

Fraser Tolmie: You seem to be getting all the questions, Mr. Freeman.

Mitch Freeman: That's quite okay. I'm happy to provide good-quality answers.

This is, in fact, the goal of the service modernization project that was funded through budget 2025. It's to look at the veteran journey from application through to decision, to appeal and to pay and benefits for the veteran. That service modernization effort looks at the life journey of the veteran, including the process, the steps involved, the appeal, and the appeals that are in a particular categorization of favourability, and it brings that back to the front end of it. It's looking at the technology and at all of the systems from end to end.

Fraser Tolmie: I don't mean to cut you off, Mr. Freeman. I really do appreciate that.

Is there anything we could do that's like the Australian model, with presumptive liability? We keep talking within this department about getting that included so that veterans aren't going through an insurance program; they're being accepted right off the front end and being looked after.

● (0945)

The Chair: Thank you very much. I apologize.

We have five minutes, and my understanding is that we will be sharing the time.

Mr. Fanjoy, you have two and a half minutes.

Bruce Fanjoy: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Witnesses, the nature of military service is such that our service members start their careers relatively young. It's the beginning of a career. That usually means they retire from military service still relatively young in the context of a lifetime, which means they have a lot of good years left to contribute to this country.

Helping the veterans move on to a productive career post-military service has to be one of the most important things we can for them, not only because it's important for them to support their families—we all understand that—but also because it's important for veterans to feel that they are continuing to contribute to the country and their communities.

Can you tell us what we are doing, and what we could do better, to help veterans make that transition to a post-military career?

Doug Wentzell: This touches very precisely on the work we're doing around employment. The average age of release from military service is in the mid-thirties, so we really want to make sure we're working with veterans before they conclude their service and then as they transition into civilian life.

We're doing that through a number of key pieces of work. We're doing extensive work on skills translation to make sure that military members can take the time with the expertise required to translate their skills into a civilian environment. We're also working to ensure that we improve the recognition of military training so that it translates, in a very easy and efficient way, into the employment landscape.

I would also pinpoint the work we're doing on entrepreneurship. We are expanding a number of partnerships through groups like the Business Development Bank of Canada and Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada to make sure we build networks to connect veterans with resources and expertise if they want to build their own businesses following their service.

It's all really important work.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now, for the remainder of the time, we have Madame Auguste.

[Translation]

You have just under two and a half minutes. Please keep that in mind.

Tatiana Auguste: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Veterans really come from diverse backgrounds, and their needs are diverse. Now, members of the armed forces and veterans come from all kinds of backgrounds in Canada, and they increasingly represent the Canadian population. Resources dedicated to service delivery must reach eligible individuals and make it easier for them to access programs.

With respect to service delivery resources, how is the department working to improve access to programs for veterans from different communities, including indigenous and Black communities in Canada?

[English]

Mitch Freeman: I can respond to that.

I'd like to take a moment to highlight that the diversity of the veteran community is rich. One of the things we saw with the census 2021 dataset.... I'll just bring to the committee's attention that it's the first time in a large number of years that we asked a question about military service, and it allowed us to gain really concrete information about the 461,000 veterans living in Canada.

We know the percentage between male and female. We know the percentage of indigenous people serving. In fact, there are more indigenous people, from a population point of view, in the military than in Canada—by 1.5%. It's really rich.

It has allowed us to formulate our engagement plans for these communities appropriately. We have a group that looks for and interacts with indigenous veterans organizations, women veterans organizations, and Black and racialized veterans across the board to

ensure that all of the inbound engagement with the Department of Veterans Affairs is inclusive of that lived experience. Then they look at that from an evolutionary point of view around policy development and around service delivery development to make sure that.... As we've said at this committee time and time again, historically all of that research has been male-focused, and that is changing and continuing to change.

• (0950)

[Translation]

Tatiana Auguste: In the 20 seconds I have left, could you please tell us about the awareness campaign the minister talked about earlier?

[English]

Mitch Freeman: I might need a refresher on that. I apologize.

The Chair: You're out of time.

Thank you very much.

Tatiana Auguste: Thanks.

Mitch Freeman: I do apologize to the member.

The Chair: That's okay.

[Translation]

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

We know that there are currently many vacant buildings owned by the Department of National Defence. There is one in my colleague's riding in Amherst. Everyone around the table is wondering what is preventing the Department of Veterans Affairs, if it is convinced that this building could be used to provide services to veterans, from making an offer to transfer it from the Department of National Defence to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

I know there's a motion being debated but, as far as I'm concerned, it's as if we're wasting our time. If the Department of Veterans Affairs has assessed the needs of veterans and determined that the building in Amherst is suitable, it seems to me that the minister should take the lead and ask the Department of National Defence to transfer the building to her so that we can better help veterans.

What is preventing Veterans Affairs Canada from taking action?

Mitch Freeman: Thank you very much for your question.

[English]

I would highlight that this is one of the areas of interest that another committee is studying in some detail. It's about how best to utilize these available—

[Translation]

Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Freeman, I told you that I only had two and a half minutes of speaking time.

I know that the debate is taking place in another committee, but personally, I think it has nothing to do with that committee. I think that, if Veterans Affairs Canada is convinced that it can provide services in the building in Amherst, it's not up to the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates to prepare a report. It's up to the minister to make an offer to National Defence, convincing it that this building can meet the needs.

I think we're making things much more complicated than they need to be. Personally, I tend to agree that transferring buildings should be much easier, whether in Amherst or elsewhere, because there's a needs assessment at the core of the process. Have you assessed the needs of veterans, and are the available Department of National Defence buildings suitable for meeting those needs? That's a decision that falls to Veterans Affairs Canada.

[English]

Mitch Freeman: I can certainly highlight that the service delivery model for Veterans Affairs Canada has over 700 points of service across the country. The most recent client satisfaction survey highlights that nearly 49% of the cohort interacts with the department via the contact centre and another 24% or so interacts with the department via the online secure portal. That distribution of offices across the country coast to coast, as my colleague mentioned earlier, is available for that purpose.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much. We will now move on to Mr. Diotte.

[English]

Mr. Diotte, you have two and a half minutes. I understand that you are sharing the five minutes.

Kerry Diotte: That's right, Madam Chair.

I want to get back to the Veterans Affairs documents that show operating spending is falling by more than \$225 million, while your department is projected to have 530 fewer employees than in 2024-25. How many of those positions are frontline jobs serving veterans, and why should veterans believe that these cuts won't mean longer wait times and poorer service?

Jonathan Adams (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Chief Financial Officer and Corporate Services, Department of Veterans Affairs): Good morning.

In response to the question, there are a couple of key context points.

First and foremost, this year's budget of \$8.2 billion actually represents a \$340-million increase from last year's opening budget overall. When we talk about operating changes in terms of where things were last year to this year, the majority of those budget changes are related to two different things. They're not linked to the number of staff and capacity. They're linked to the decisions made around cannabis reimbursement and changing the administrative rate for the disbursement of that, and they're related to a one-time

special project related to a litigation file that is now complete. That was the decrease of the \$225 million.

In terms of the staffing that you touched on and the resources, the snapshot is actually a point in time of approved resources. As we all know, there was the identified \$184.9 million of funding over four years, plus \$40 million ongoing for disability adjudication resources. Those have been approved, but at the time of the report you're referencing, they were not yet secured and with the department. That's why they're demonstrating right now a temporary decrease in the report in what was available at the time. As that funding has now been approved by a Treasury Board submission, it will be reflected in the next update in terms of FTEs for the department.

• (0955)

Kerry Diotte: Moving on to another issue, the spending on pain and suffering compensation and related benefits is increasing by about \$340 million, yet the number of recipients has fallen by roughly 20% since 2022-23. Why is the government spending substantially more while fewer veterans are receiving the benefit, and where's the extra money going?

The Chair: Mr. Adams, I have about six seconds left for Mr. Diotte.

I need a clarification from Mr. Diotte. If I allow Mr. Adams to answer, it will remove some time from Mr. Gill.

Kerry Diotte: Go ahead.

The Chair: That's perfect.

Jonathan Adams: Thank you.

This reflects the options that veterans have available to them with the pain and suffering compensation. They have a choice, when a decision is made, to receive either a monthly payment for a lifetime or a lump sum payment. The increase in spending, as you highlight, reflects the fact that with more disability application decisions being processed by the department, more individuals have the opportunity to choose a one-time lump sum payment for their disability compensation. That is a big aspect of the increase in the annual spending.

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

Now, for two minutes, we'll go to Mr. Gill.

Sukhman Gill: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Wentzell, I'll be questioning you.

I want to basically go off of what Mr. Barrett was asking you earlier. I know you didn't get a chance to answer his question because the time ran out. My colleague asked a very important question, because there are nearly 10,000 people waiting to receive entitlements that they're entitled to receive.

We left off at the point that we know you have a great team. You guys are trying to do what you can. Where are the barriers? Where do we see the delays here? Do you need more team members? Do we need more funding? Can you give me more detail?

Doug Wentzell: When it comes to disability benefit processing, there are a number of factors that drive the volumes. Over the last 10 years, we've seen more than a 90% increase in volumes. For sure, we want to make sure that we're as efficient as we can be in terms of our capacity and the tools we use, and we've been working to reduce our processing times. I think they've decreased by about 57%, but we also have almost a doubling of volume, so we're—

Sukhman Gill: Thank you, sir, but the question here is this. If you see that you have more on your plate, to put it in simple form, do you need more funds? Do you need more team members? Where is the barrier? Where is the wall that we're hitting? We understand that there are more veterans. We get that, but from your perspective of your job, where is the barrier?

Doug Wentzell: There are two key things that drive our service standards and our wait times. One is our overall capacity. As my colleague mentioned earlier, we're investing in staff capacity and making that investment over the coming years. We're also making sure we have the most efficient tools we can have. Those are the two key factors that we continue to focus on.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we will invite Mr. Clark. The five minutes, I understand, are being shared. That's up to you to determine, but we'll start the clock for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Clark, go ahead.

Braedon Clark: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our officials for being here for two hours this morning.

Mr. Freeman, I'm not sure if this is for you or Mr. Wentzell, but we've touched a lot on service delivery and modernization today. I know the minister talked about that a bit. All sides have talked about it, and I think we all have a common agreement that it's obviously critically important. How does the department take that \$185 million or so that was invested in the budget and translate it into efficiencies on the service delivery side?

I'm sure you would agree with me that the best designed program is not that useful if it's not delivered efficiently and in a timely way. How do you go from service creation and identifying the service or program that works to getting it out in an efficient manner by using some of the funds that you touched on earlier? How do we translate those two things?

• (1000)

Doug Wentzell: I highlighted some of the key inputs previously, so I won't repeat myself on that, but I will say that trying to make sure we have the most efficient tools and processes to connect with veterans as early as possible, prior to release, really helps us in meeting our service standards. The investments we make in our transition centres on bases and wings across the country are critically important, as are the investments we make in other service channels, like the My VAC account.

We talked earlier about making sure that the department has timely access to the most current earnings information from veterans in order to calculate our benefit payments. We recently introduced, earlier this year, the part of the My VAC account that allows

veterans to see the information we currently hold in real time so they can make changes and notify the department when there's action needed. For all of those interfaces—whether they're online, in person or via our call centre network—we have to be in constant improvement mode to identify opportunities to improve the interfaces.

Braedon Clark: Mr. Wentzell, could I ask you to follow up a bit more on that point about My VAC in real time? That's something I've heard about in my riding. For some veterans—maybe they've had changes in their income or something has happened in their life—that information, that data, doesn't get shared as quickly as it could be with them, and then with the CRA. They run into problems because of that. Just touch on that piece a bit more, the real-time aspect, and how that can nip problems in the bud, if I can put it that way.

Doug Wentzell: I think it was in April this year that we implemented changes to the My VAC account for all veterans who are registered to use that system. They can verify all of their income information that we currently have on file and can, in fact, submit an online income verification form to make sure that we're doing the necessary updates and recalculations in real time.

Braedon Clark: How do you assess the success of any one of those programs? Again, the design is incredibly important, but the measurement is really important too. Do you have any sense of how regularly that's being used, or do you have any results on how that has worked so far?

Doug Wentzell: It's still very early, but we will be assessing that through all of our quality indicators in terms of processing and service standards and through the qualitative feedback we get from veterans. We'll be paying very close attention to that.

Braedon Clark: Do you know, Mr. Wentzell, when you might expect meaningful data on that to work from?

Doug Wentzell: I suspect that we will be getting data on that initiative over the course of this fiscal year.

Braedon Clark: Thank you very much.

The Chair: We have about three to four minutes left within the round, so we will go to Mr. Barrett for a minute and a half.

[Translation]

Mrs. DeBellefeuille will then have the floor for one minute and Mrs. Chatel will have one and a half minutes.

[English]

Mr. Barrett, go ahead for a minute and a half.

Michael Barrett: Madam Chair, thank you very much.

Mr. Wentzell, I want to give you the opportunity to offer us precision in response to a question I asked you previously. We have approximately 10,000 veterans waiting beyond the department's own service delivery standard. In one of your previous answers, you said there's an approval process that has to take place. I assume that's baked into the 16 weeks.

You talked about projections, onboarding new staff and the additional funding, so what is the date by which the department will be meeting its service delivery standard?

• (1005)

Doug Wentzell: As I mentioned earlier, a number of factors drive the performance standard—including our intakes and the complexity of claims—and are very difficult to predict. What I can commit to is that we are making the necessary investments in both people and technology, and we're obviously monitoring the service standard very closely.

Michael Barrett: With all due respect, you set the standard. The department set the standard with all those complexities in mind knowing the resources that it has available. You're blowing past it, and people are calling your office, my office and everyone's office every week. We need to do better for veterans. It would be super helpful if you shared with this committee, if there's not even a year by which you plan to reduce the number to zero, how many more dollars or how many more staff you need to get it to zero, because that's what our veterans deserve.

Doug Wentzell: I would say that our process is very much geared to monitoring in real time to ensure that we make those necessary investments.

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

[Translation]

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor for one minute.

Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Mr. Freeman, you told us that your team would conduct the study on recognizing sexual trauma in a military context within a reasonable time frame. Now, "reasonable time frame" is the language of public servants. Let's speak in the language of veterans. When you say "reasonable time frame", are you talking about weeks, months or years?

[English]

Mitch Freeman: When I talk to veterans about MST, what I highlight is that Veterans Affairs Canada has services and supports available. We have a dedicated unit to process MST to ensure that veterans are not retelling their story or being retraumatized from their story.

[Translation]

Claude DeBellefeuille: I have a few seconds left. We're talking about recognition. We're not talking about studies. We're talking about the recognition of sexual trauma in a military context as a significant factor associated with suicide. You're not answering my questions, and I'm deeply disappointed.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

[English]

Now, for the one and a half minutes we have left, I have Madame Chatel.

Sophie Chatel: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Dave Morrow came to our committee this week, and he said something very important. Veterans, more than anything else, need a rewarding career for their mental health and because they want to continue to serve their country. They are very proud to have served their country, and they want to continue to have a meaningful career in their civilian life.

I want you to have an opportunity to give us your take on what you are doing to help them find a rewarding career.

Doug Wentzell: Veterans have contributed in the most meaningful way to this country during their service. That contribution, as the member noted, continues post-service. The department is very focused on employment supports for veterans. We currently have around 1,000 active participants in a number of workshops that we deliver through our career transition services that are specifically focused on making the transition into the civilian workplace, entrepreneurship or other opportunities.

We also take opportunities to recognize the contributions of veterans to the labour market. We've been highlighting veteran entrepreneurs and trying to emphasize the work we can do to support them in all phases of their lives, including post-service. We're looking forward to doing more.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I would like to thank the three of you and the entire team behind you for the extraordinary service that you are providing to our veteran community.

I would also like to wish all my colleagues a happy Thanksgiving weekend.

I will dismiss our witnesses, but I need you a little longer for some housekeeping.

[Translation]

Our next meeting will be on Monday, October 19, 2026. We will resume the study on the civilian recognition of military skills.

• (1010)

[English]

Before seeking a motion to adjourn, I would like to seek agreement to adopt two study budgets that were distributed yesterday. The budgets are for the funds for this meeting's study on the supplementary estimates and for our ongoing study on the civilian recognition of military skills.

Does the committee agree to adopt these budgets?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Again, I wish you all a happy Thanksgiving.

[*English*]

[*Translation*]

Does the committee agree to adjourn?

Thank you very much.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

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