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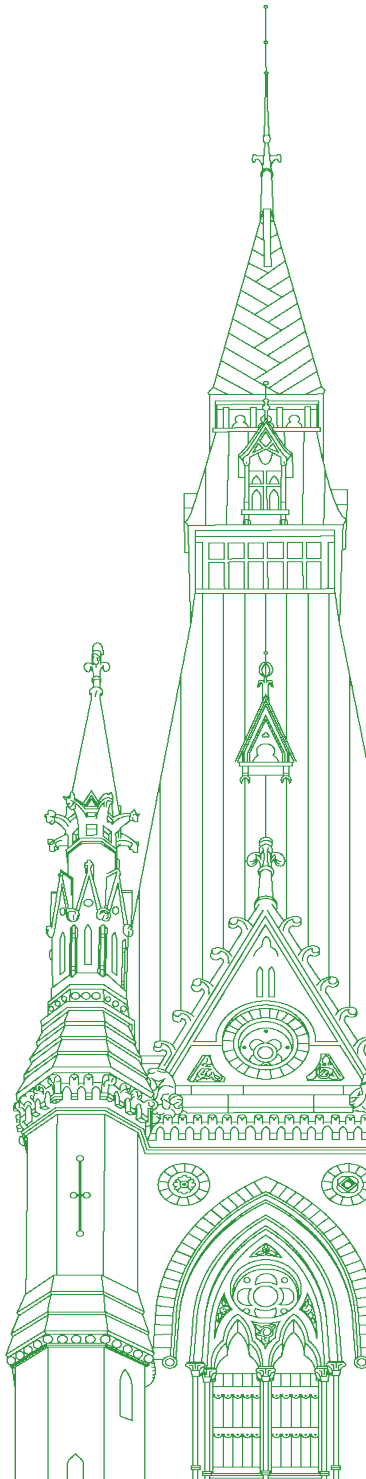
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Chair: Marie-France Lalonde

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Thursday, October 29, 2026

● (0820)

[*Translation*]

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

Good morning. Welcome to meeting number 45 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on May 25, the committee is meeting as part of its study on the civilian recognition of military skills.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members and witnesses may attend in person and via the Zoom application.

[*English*]

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses and members.

For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking.

For those who are on Zoom, you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French.

I would like to welcome our witnesses on this Thursday morning.

From eCampus Ontario, we have Dr. Robert Luke, chief executive officer. From True Patriot Love Foundation, we have Mr. Nick Booth, chief executive officer. From the Veterans Emergency Transition Services, we have Mrs. Debbie Lowther, chief executive officer and co-founder.

We will start by giving each of you five minutes to deliver your opening remarks. After that, the rest of the hour will be for a series of questions with the members of our committee.

I would like to start by giving Dr. Luke the floor for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Dr. Robert Luke (Chief Executive Officer, eCampus Ontario): Good morning, Madam Chair and members of the committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the committee with information and insight on the important topic of civilian recognition of military skills.

[*English*]

The women and men who serve in the Canadian Armed Forces gain valuable skills that contribute to Canada's professional military capabilities. The successful transition of veterans into civilian occupations is not a “nice to have”; it is an absolute necessity for the well-being of our veterans and the productivity of our economy.

To date, there has been a lot of work done on transitioning highly skilled veterans into the civilian economy. Veterans Affairs offers career transition services and the education and training benefit, to name two. There are supports for job takers—those who are seeking employment—and job makers—entrepreneurs who are pathfinding to self-employment.

For those who might not know what eCampus Ontario is, we are a not-for-profit that is funded primarily by the Ontario government. We support Ontario's public post-secondary institutions to use digital technologies and connect education to employment. We help get people into programs and into jobs.

For the past three years we've had a productive partnership with Employment and Social Development Canada's job bank. Our flagship platform, skills for jobs Canada, is the country's national upskilling platform. It provides Canadians with over 5,000 courses, all indexed with labour market information from institutions in nine provinces, and in both official languages. Skills for jobs Canada is linked to the job bank's training finder. This means that, when Canadians go to the job bank to look for education and training, they have ready access to thousands of short, affordable and flexible upskilling and re-skilling opportunities that help them develop job-relevant skills.

Skills for jobs Canada uses large language models to ensure courses are indexed with relevant labour market information and AI tools to help people using the site. Over the past year we have been working with our partners from across Canada to orient skills for jobs Canada to the needs of veterans transitioning into civilian employment. We have built AI agents that help veterans understand how the skills they have learned in the military apply to civilian occupations. When additional education or training is needed, we help find this quickly.

We offer free courses that act as an on-ramp to advancing career-relevant learning. This includes free learning on artificial intelligence, a course designed for the layperson to gain fast insights into AI. For those wanting to learn more, there are over 280 courses on artificial intelligence in the skills for jobs Canada database. Our road map includes a digital credential wallet that enables all learners to store and showcase their skills and competencies. Together, these supports help ensure that all Canadians can participate in the economy.

We are proud of the work we have done to support people in this volatile economic time. We are proud to help the Government of Canada convene education providers from across the country to meet the education to employment needs for all Canadians. We are proud to now make these tools and resources available to veterans.

If I had just one recommendation to make, it would be this: Make it easy for veterans to access supports, with best-in-class digital and artificial intelligence tools, while linking to Canada's higher education institutions. Together, we can ensure that all Canadians, including our highly skilled veterans, can contribute to a productive economy.

I recognize that introductions are short, so I welcome your questions.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Booth, go ahead for five minutes, please.

Nick Booth (Chief Executive Officer, True Patriot Love Foundation): Madam Chair, vice-chairs and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here to discuss veteran transition through skill recognition and employment, and I hope, its contribution to well-being.

During this period of remembrance, I first want to acknowledge the Canadian Armed Forces members and families impacted by the recent incidents at CFB Wainwright. True Patriot Love is proud to be partnering with Support Our Troops and the Edmonton military family resource centre in establishing a dedicated support fund to assist those affected and their families. Our thoughts are with them.

Thank you, also, to the serving members and veterans in the room and across the country. Thank you to the committee members for your cross-partisan dedication to our military community in these challenging times, both in Canada and geopolitically.

True Patriot Love is Canada's national foundation for the military community. Since 2009, we've invested over $62 million in high-impact programming, research and advocacy in close partnership with the Canadian Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Canada. Our focus is on ensuring that those who have served have the support required to thrive at every stage of their transition to postmilitary life.

Each year, approximately 8,000 armed forces members are released from service. About half move directly into the civilian workplace, with nearly one-third still in their prime working years. They leave the armed forces with advanced technical training and skills. They have team-building and leadership experience, and they have a powerful desire to continue to serve their community.

However, significant barriers remain. Civilian employers often struggle to understand military experiences or map military qualifications into corporate roles. Veterans, in turn, may not know what roles they are best suited for, and if they do secure employment, a civilian workplace can be culturally jarring. When a veteran's operational rank and level of responsibility are not mirrored in civilian roles, it can lead to underemployment, loss of purpose and identity fracture.

To fix this, we must first change the narrative. There can be a tension, often driven by fundraising or the media, between supporting those in need and promoting the talent in our serving members. Whilst not ignoring the struggles that some veterans face, we must replace this with an understanding of capability. Veterans are skilled, resilient assets whose service-related injuries, should they be present, can be readily accommodated in modern workplaces.

To accelerate this, we can build on the strengths of programs already under way here, such as last year's True Patriot Love employer declaration, which was signed by a dozen major companies in Canada, and the ecosystem connect events we've now been running across four provinces.

As well, we can look at our closest allies, which have proven blueprints for corporate mobilization. At the CIMVHR Forum last week, a joint session was held with eight of our allied nations to look at different approaches to retention, developing a strong reserve force and postmilitary transition. In the United Kingdom, the Armed Forces Covenant has mobilized over 13,000 businesses to make public pledges to recruit and support the military community. In Australia, the national veteran employment program drives structured engagement through the veteran employment commitment, which is an evidence-based accreditation system in which more than 600 employers are benchmarked. Crucially, the Australian Defence Force itself manages formal civilian accreditation directly, offering transitioning personnel recognition of prior learning up to two years post release.

Drawing from these international lessons and previous studies, such as the foundation's 2017 veteran transition report; our current building a veteran-ready Canada initiative, on which we're partnering with Veterans Affairs; and the 2023 ACVA recommendations, we point to four practical priorities.

First, establish a national military skills transition framework. True Patriot Love has developed recommendations for a military skills translator that accounts for the role of rank and soft skills, as well as leveraging AI to support communicating military experience in a civilian context. This framework could be piloted immediately, for example, within the federal public service or national defence procurement contracts.

Second, create targeted pathways into high-need sectors. Recognizing a veteran's orientation toward having purpose, we've worked with Accenture to develop an employment pipeline into the health care sector, adapting the U.K.'s proven step into health program model. This could also be adapted to other sectors or provinces where key skills are needed.

Third, unify transition practices across government and industry. We urge industry and federal and provincial governments to standardize skill portability, encourage veteran employee resource groups, undertake military cultural competence training and protect reservist leave through alignment with National Defence's with glowing hearts program.

● (0825)

Finally, scale employer recognition. Successful programs in the United States, such as Hiring Our Heroes and veterans on Wall Street, demonstrate the power of corporate mobilization. Last month, True Patriot Love hosted our celebration of service on Parliament Hill—many of you were there—where military employers come together. This could be so much bigger. We should match the ambition of Australia, where the veteran employment awards are a national event, hosted annually by the prime minister.

To conclude, when we build a transition ecosystem that honours the full capability of veterans, it sends a clear message that skills forged in uniform are invaluable, and that our communities and economy are made stronger by those who served our nation.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

● (0830)

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

Mrs. Lowther, you have the floor.

Debbie Lowther (Chief Executive Officer and Co-Founder, Veterans Emergency Transition Services): Good morning, Chair and honourable committee members.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today as part of your study on the civilian recognition of military skills.

I must admit that I had mixed feelings about accepting this invitation. On the one hand, I always appreciate the opportunity to share our frontline experience in supporting veterans. On the other hand, I was frustrated.

In February 2023, I appeared before this committee to discuss a national strategy for veterans employment. While I appreciate the committee's continued interest in improving outcomes for veterans, I must respectfully question the need for what appears to be a largely duplicative study.

Many of these challenges have already been examined, and recommendations have already been put forward. Before we undertake another study on substantially the same issues, shouldn't we first be examining which recommendations from the previous study have been implemented and why others have not? At some point, we must ask whether the issue is a lack of understanding or a lack of action. Veterans do not need us to continually study the barriers they face; they need us to remove them.

Since 2010, VETS Canada has provided emergency assistance to Canadian Armed Forces and RCMP veterans experiencing homelessness, at risk of homelessness or otherwise in crisis. Through our frontline work, we have witnessed the challenges veterans face in transitioning to civilian life, including the failure to adequately recognize the skills, training and experience acquired during military service.

Members of the Canadian Armed Forces develop extraordinary skills in leadership, logistics, technical operations, problem-solving and crisis management, yet upon release, many discover that years—sometimes decades—of experience are not readily recognized by civilian employers, educational institutions or regulatory bodies. A veteran who has managed personnel, budgets and complex operations may be told they lack civilian management credentials. A military technician with extensive experience may be required to repeat training to obtain civilian certification. These individuals are not lacking skills. They are encountering a system that does not adequately recognize the skills they already possess.

At VETS Canada, we see how barriers to meaningful employment can contribute to financial instability, housing insecurity and, in some cases, homelessness. Stable employment provides more than financial security. It offers purpose, structure and belonging, things many veterans struggle to replace after leaving the military.

We believe several practical steps are necessary.

First, Canada needs a standardized system for translating military qualifications and experience into civilian credentials, developed collaboratively with governments, educational institutions, regulatory bodies and industry.

Second, recognition of military experience must begin before release. Transition planning should include assessment of transferable skills, identification of certification requirements and access to bridging programs that recognize prior learning.

Third, civilian employers need better education about the value of military experience. Highly qualified veterans should not be overlooked because their experience does not fit a conventional civilian résumé.

Finally, veterans facing additional challenges, including disability, mental health concerns or housing instability, must have access to coordinated, individualized support.

At VETS Canada, we understand that employment cannot be considered in isolation. A veteran worried about where they will sleep tonight or how they will feed their family is not necessarily in a position to pursue civilian credentials or a new career. Housing, employment, health care and transition services must work together, not operate in separate silos.

The men and women who served our country have already demonstrated their ability to learn, lead, adapt and overcome challenges. They should not have to start from zero simply because they have exchanged their military uniform for civilian clothing. Recognizing military skills is not about giving veterans an unfair advantage. It is about ensuring they are not placed at an unfair disadvantage because they chose to serve their country.

At VETS Canada, we believe those who protected our home should never be without one. We also believe they deserve a fair opportunity to build meaningful and successful lives after service.

In closing, I will reiterate what I said at the beginning: Veterans don't need another study confirming what we already know. They need meaningful action on what we've already learned.

Thank you for your time. I welcome your questions.

● (0835)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much to the witnesses for being with us this morning.

We will now move on to the next stage, which is questions from members.

I'll go to Mr. Barrett for six minutes.

[*English*]

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

Thank you to the witnesses for your presence here today and for the insight that you're going to provide in your advocacy for veterans.

Ms. Lowther, I'm in violent agreement with you. I think that the frustration that you've shared, if I can characterize it as that, is something veterans continue to face systemically, and it's nothing new. This isn't something that's happened in the last 12 months, 24 months, 10 years or 20 years. This is an ongoing challenge that the men and women who serve our country continue to face.

They have demonstrated and continue to demonstrate the ability to overcome all manner of adversity. However, for challenges that seem pretty straightforward—whether it's about access or the administration of benefits—it seems as though we're looking to discover fire or reinvent the wheel on an annual or semi-annual basis. Your frustration was well expressed and done very respectfully.

Having addressed your comments, did you have a follow-up that you'd like to make in response to that before I move on with my first question?

Debbie Lowther: No. I think my statement basically said where we stand.

Michael Barrett: Okay. Thank you very much.

I'm going to start with you, Mr. Booth. It's very nice to see you.

You talked about the Hiring Our Heroes program in the United States. I understand that employers who are covered by regulation—anyone who has a single federal contract or subcontract valued at $200,000 or more in the U.S.—also has to report annually to the U.S. Department of Labor a headcount snapshot of how many veterans and new hires they have in that reporting period.

Do you think that this would be helpful for us in Canada when it comes to the areas that the federal government regulates, specifically, what's within their remit for federal government contractors?

Nick Booth The short version is yes.

I'm not an expert on how the procurement assessments are done, but it does seem to be a significant opportunity as we're rightly investing more heavily in Canadian defence capability for the first time in many years, as we would all accept. There are two elements to that, which I would hope will be considered.

First is the point on employment. For me, it would be a perfectly sensible requirement to ask people who are bidding for those contracts or, indeed, already have them, what their is approach to military cultural competence, training and hiring of veterans, as well as to make that a stipulation of winning those contracts. That would be very sensible.

Second, when there's an element of channelling funding from some of those contracts into veteran care—a conversation that the honourable member and I have had previously—I do have a concern that, as Canada faces increasing global instability, we're not necessarily doing the same amount of preparation for post-conflict readiness.

People will come back from the next conflict—I fear, when it happens, it may be sooner than any of us would wish—with a significantly higher level of challenges, skills and transition needs than in previous conflicts. We must get ready for that, and thinking about the system in its entirety would be a sensible way to do that.

The other point, if I may, is on Hiring Our Heroes—in terms of Deb's comment. It had a key responsibility allocated to it, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce ran that program. The system is quite well built. I would agree that it doesn't work perfectly, but I think it's better than it used to be. We'll come back to that perhaps.

It's not entirely clear how the joints fit together well. That's an area in which the committee could perhaps make some additional contributions in terms of how those seams between the educational section, the military section and the employer section fit together.

● (0840)

Michael Barrett: I think it's—

[*Translation*]

Claude DeBellefeuille (Vallée-du-Haut-Saint-Laurent, BQ): I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Mrs. DeBellefeuille, you have the floor.

Claude DeBellefeuille: Madam Chair, I've been fairly patient since the meeting started, but Zoom isn't working. As a result, for anyone listening remotely, including my assistant, the interpretation isn't working. We may have to suspend the meeting while the issue is being resolved.

The Chair: That's exactly why I spoke French. I wanted to see if things were working technically. Apparently they're not, so we apologize.

I apologize to the witnesses.

I will suspend the meeting for a few minutes while we resolve the technical issue with interpretation.

● (840)

_____(Pause)_____

● (845)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

[*English*]

MP Barrett, you have the floor for your questions. I'm sorry again.

Michael Barrett: From the top...?

The Chair: From almost the top...not quite. Thank you. You have a little buffer.

Michael Barrett: Thanks, Madam Chair.

With my remaining time, the question is, how do we incent employers to hire veterans?

Federal procurement seems to be low-hanging fruit. They should award points heavily based on not only the number of veterans who work for these organizations—this should be publicly reported—but also the number of veterans who will be available to work on those contracts. That seems, on its face, very simple. It's not something that has been done. It's definitely not something that's being done. How do we do that? Should we do that?

I can start with you, Ms. Lowther, or you, Mr. Booth.

Nick Booth: Thank you.

I think we should try to do that.

The other way I would suggest we might look at it is with sector-specific initiatives, because that will mobilize people towards their own business interests if they're bringing transitioning military members or veterans in who have targeted skills in their industry.

I will refer back to the step into health program that I made comments on in my notes. NHS England has piloted step into health for about nine years now, and over 100 NHS trusts in England now have veteran-hiring capability. In fact, centrally, NHS England has a dedicated veteran-hiring unit. It has been extremely successful in bringing transitioning members and veterans into the health system, not just with medically related trades but also with all the different skills that a big health system will require.

True Patriot Love received permission from the NHS to use the system, and we've worked pro bono with Accenture to build it into a Canadian framework. We're now ready to pilot that, so we're looking for either a health authority or a key province where we can move forward and test that in the Canadian context, particularly as we strengthen our health systems postpandemic and do all of those other things we need to do around health preparation. This would be a very good way of saying, “Here's an industry”, and if you align the relevant bits of the industry, then people can see their own advantage in following this route, not just because it's the right thing to do.

Michael Barrett: Right.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Again, you have my apologies.

We will now go to Madame Chatel.

[*Translation*]

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

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today for this important study.

I really like the idea of changing the narrative. We often hear that substantial accommodations are required for jobs available to veterans because they face mental health challenges. That's true, and we need to make sure that the most vulnerable people receive adequate support during this transition.

At the same time, we don't talk enough about the extraordinary skills that members of the Canadian Armed Forces acquire while in uniform. Their skill sets are relevant to occupations other than security guard positions. Those are super-important jobs for which they are highly qualified. However, the face of the armed forces is changing with the advent of new technology and the modernization of warfare, as we can clearly see in Ukraine, where it now involves drones, robots, technology and cybersecurity. The face of the forces is changing at breakneck speed.

Mr. Luke and Mr. Booth, you talked about the rise of artificial intelligence, which may be a threat, a tool, or both. For younger veterans—those in their early forties or late thirties—transitioning to civilian employment, how can we provide them with meaningful work commensurate with their skills?

These people also want to serve their country. How do we give them the opportunity to pursue that mission with a second career?

We need people in aerospace and cybersecurity. We talk a lot about procurement, but we also need to talk about the severe labour shortage in the aerospace industry. We have the capacity to train only 25% of the people needed to fill 65,000 vacancies over the next decade. How are we going to attract these people and prepare them to serve Canada in these sectors?

● (0850)

Dr. Robert Luke: Thank you for the question.

[*English*]

I'll answer in English if that's okay.

There's a very important concept that you have put on the table. With the new defence industrial strategy, for example, we have an increased focus on support for the military, on how people are both entering and exiting, and I would like to relate this to the dual-use economy as well.

You have rightly recognized that the kinds of skills serving members need today to prosecute the kinds of wars that we are seeing around the world have changed dramatically with the rise of artificial intelligence and the concomitant needs for cybersecurity. These are all very important. When our veterans are transitioning into civilian employment, they often carry with them advanced security clearances, and they can go into those dual-use sectors quite readily.

A few of the things that I've heard some of my colleagues say are quite important here. How do we ensure that people know what skills they have when they are leaving the military? The Canadian Armed Forces does an excellent job of articulating the skills and competencies that you need to progress through various ranks and trades, but I'm not certain that we do a good job of helping these people understand how to articulate those skills.

We have another issue with respect to some of the services and supports we have. These are really good services and supports, but they're created on multiple websites. Bringing them together is one of the things that we have addressed. For example, through conversational AI agents, we circumvent the information architecture that might have made sense when we designed it but has resulted in a lot of different supports on different websites.

The AI agents go and collect that information and say, in a conversational way, these are the skills that you have. These are the occupations that they are relevant to, and here's how you can transition to them with minimal required training. There's a very important series of things that we can do. As for the point that Ms. Lowther made, we can do this today because it's something that needs to be done right away.

[*Translation*]

Sophie Chatel: I have one minute left, so I'll go right to Mr. Booth.

[*English*]

Nick Booth: I'll be very brief. I have two points.

First, the honourable member mentioned Ukraine. I had the privilege of meeting the new Minister for Veterans Affairs of Ukraine during his recent visit to Canada. We went in thinking we would be sharing things with them, and I think we'll be learning from them very quickly. They have two million veterans whom they're trying to place into the workforce now, in real time, whilst also fighting a war.

The point the honourable member made about veterans not looking the same as they used to.... Their veterans are young and digitally enabled, but they're also carrying trauma. If you don't find those people employment, purpose and meaning, then downstream you'll have significant health and, indeed, civil society challenges from people who have those fractured identities, perhaps, post service.

The second point I would make is around purpose. There have been some very good studies done—mainly in the United States but also in the U.K. and then, last year, we did the first-ever Canadian study—on the importance of purpose in transition and well-being—so, on really understanding the individual's motivation and their opportunity to continue to serve in both their employment work and in volunteering roles in the community.

● (0855)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now go to Madame DeBellefeuille,

[*Translation*]

You have the floor for six minutes.

Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Madam Chair.

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

Ms. Lowther, I really appreciated what you said in your presentation. I'm new to the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, and I've found that witnesses seem a bit reluctant to criticize a situation that makes no sense to me.

I'm a hard-working newbie, so I've read the reports from 2015, 2017, 2023, 2024 and 2026. I've noticed that the same concern keeps coming up. As you said, a lot of proposals and recommendations have been put forward. In light of all those recommendations, it's time to take stock of the situation. This study might have been even more useful had we looked at the recommendations in all those reports to see what has worked, what has been implemented and where we should focus our efforts now. That was my first impression after hearing what you had to say. I share your frustration, because I'm a woman of action. This is all well and good because I like talking, but eventually we have to take action. There's no shortage of good ideas that haven't been implemented, and I think you've made that point very clearly this morning.

I appreciate your candour and your sincerity. It's not always easy to be authentic, so I commend you for that. That takes a certain kind of courage.

I have a question for you, Mr. Booth. I did a little research on your foundation, and I saw that it received $910,000 for two projects in 2026. That funding was intended to help you create a network of civilian employers. Can you tell us if this initiative is working and whether it is achieving the desired results?

[*English*]

Nick Booth: We are working with Veterans Affairs Canada on that grant, building a veteran-friendly Canada. The key initiatives we've undertaken so far, for example, have been mobilizing the private sector, helping them understand the talent leaving our armed forces, with those ecosystem connect events I referenced, which we've already done in four provinces. We're coming to Montreal next year, which we're looking forward to very much.

We've been moving that. We often find—and we may hear it from a witness in the next session—that the small and medium-sized enterprises don't necessarily have the big HR teams that some of the larger employers have. We've been focusing quite a lot on building portable skill recognition tools and translation tools for small and medium-sized enterprises. That has been one of our key learnings.

I agree with the point you made about getting those reports out, tracking what was recommended and whether that's been done, and then working out where the outstanding pieces are. So much has been done over the last.... I've been in Canada for seven and a half years, and it's changed even in that time.

For a veteran—this is the point Mr. Luke made—navigating that as an individual can be challenging, particularly if you're also dealing with finding somewhere to live. There are other elements of leaving the forces: worrying about the health and well-being of your family, moving away from your community, etc. That whole-system approach is very important.

[*Translation*]

Claude DeBellefeuille: As I work through the material and try to develop a better understanding of veterans' issues, I see what amounts to a patchwork of services. There are all kinds of initiatives, activities and organizations across Quebec and Canada. One witness told us that a single window might make things simpler.

When members of the armed forces start thinking about retiring from the military, they look into getting some education or training so they can leave the armed forces with knowledge or a specialized skill set. After retiring, they should have access to a single window in each province for support in all psychosocial spheres, including, as you said, housing, employment, family matters, health care and assistance with the transition to civilian employment.

That seems like a simple solution, but I think it's a very good one. Right now, several different organizations or activities serve essentially the same purpose. It seems to me that veterans might find that difficult to access and navigate.

What do you think of that recommendation?

● (0900)

[*English*]

Nick Booth: Your analysis is a very good one. There are many organizations out there doing good work, although it's not clear, sometimes, how they evaluate that work. We often hear from veterans who engage with True Patriot Love that, irrespective of which province they live in, they don't know where the services or jobs are. They don't know whether these are applicable to them and their families or if they're culturally appropriate and safe for them. We at True Patriot Love now have a portal that has over 400 community programs on it, but even we couldn't honestly say that we know all of them are operating at the same standard.

I recently returned from a six-month secondment in Australia, where they're building something similar to what you're saying. We need a national overarching approach to service quality and evaluation so that a veteran can walk in—in Montreal, Vancouver or somewhere in the middle—and say, “These are the services I think I need or that I've been diagnosed as needing. They'd meet my needs and I'd know how to access them in a language, culture and geography appropriate to me.”

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now start our second round, with Mr. Tolmie for five minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for coming. I appreciate that two of them are returning.

Mr. Booth, it's good to see you again. I didn't get to say hi earlier on.

Ms. Lowther and Mr. Luke, I appreciate your attendance and your testimonies.

I have a few questions. I'm going to try to run through these as quickly as I can.

This is going to be for Mr. Luke and Mr. Booth.

From where you sit, who in government is responsible for making sure a releasing member knows where to get their skills recognized?

Dr. Robert Luke: I can start.

It starts with Veterans Affairs Canada. They seem to be the most likely candidate for providing that.

As for the point made earlier by Madame DeBellefeuille, there's a mishmash of services available. It is very easy today to bring those together. I suggest that Veterans Affairs put two very simple links on their website. One should say, “Here's what you know, so use this service.” An AI agent could do it. “You were in this occupation so you have these skills; here's how they are relevant to the civilian economy.” The next one should be a connection either to further education or an employer. I think that's a very simple thing to do.

The one thing I would suggest, though.... You asked whether there should be one place to go. Absolutely. There should be a link on the Veterans Affairs' website. We should have an approach to helping people exit the military that is equal to our induction process. Our induction process is quite detailed. The exiting process should be too. It's simple to do, by convening....

However, in addition to one portal, we should have no wrong door. We should have multiple routes in to help all veterans.

Fraser Tolmie: I'm sorry, Mr. Booth. I will get to you.

When a veteran is injured, VAC assigns a case manager. When a veteran needs a job, they fill out an application and get referred to the career-transition service.

What are your thoughts on that process, Mr. Booth? Are veterans made aware? Some veterans, when they release, don't even know where to go and what to do.

Then, Ms. Lowther, I'll have a question for you.

Nick Booth: I would agree with the other witness that it is hard for people to navigate a complicated system, particularly if they may have health and well-being challenges. As I said, I think it's better than it was. Certainly the other key responsibility lies with the Canadian Armed Forces transition group and the transition centres.

I repeat the point I made earlier about the connections between CAF TG and Veterans Affairs employment unit. With those two, the private sector partners and the voluntary sector partners, exploring how those things work better would be a good area of focus.

I think there's always been a concern that, the more you prepare people for release, the more you speed up the osmosis of people leaving, and we're trying to strengthen our retention right now. I don't believe that's true. I think the more you say to a military member that they will get vital skills through their career that will help them post military service, the more you strengthen retention. In terms of the point that was made earlier, there are some narrative challenges around this that we can also work on.

● (0905)

Fraser Tolmie: Ms. Lowther, you've mentioned a bit of frustration about returning here and about our seeming to be changing the titles of our studies and doing the same thing, and I would agree with you.

We hear about veterans who are on the streets, veterans who are couch surfing and veterans who are living in their cars. We want our veterans to be recognized, cared for and integrated into society, giving them meaningful employment.

What are your thoughts? I know I've asked you questions in previous rounds when you were here before. What are your thoughts when you see veterans who need meaningful employment? What do you see as the solution?

Debbie Lowther: We need to start looking at it pre release. When veterans end up at the transition unit, that's a great opportunity to do an evaluation of their skills and competencies to give them an idea of the trades or the jobs that might be appropriate for them. We need to start before they leave the military.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Royer is online, and she will be addressing us for five minutes.

Zoe Royer (Port Moody—Coquitlam, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Dr. Luke, Ms. Lowther and Mr. Booth. I really appreciate the testimony that we're hearing today, and it really gives a very full picture. I'd like to begin my questions with Mr. Booth.

First of all, thank you for your incredible service. Of course, you've been appointed to the Royal Victorian Order. You're a recipient of the King Charles III's Coronation Medal. Thank you as well for your support of members of the CFB Wainwright community during this very difficult time.

I'm very interested in some of the things that you mentioned and, in particular, your work with Australia and with the U.K. You talked about 35,000 businesses in the U.K. that have made pledges to, I believe, hire veterans. There are hundreds that have made a veteran employment commitment in Australia. How did they get there?

Nick Booth: Thank you, Ms. Royer.

Thank you for the very kind personal comments. They're not necessary but are much appreciated.

One interesting thing the British have done is to initiate a piece of statutory legislation, which I think Canada could consider, in which you're not allowed to be disadvantaged through your service. It's now in regulation through the Valour initiative. It started off in employment, but it now covers across housing, health and education that someone cannot be disadvantaged by their service. It's a requirement on each of those statutory functions to consider the experience of veterans and how, when they're looking for a house when they leave, they don't go back down the queue, or if they're looking for an operation, they don't go back down the queue.

I think that's something that Canada could consider. It became a benchmark legislation, and they've now undertaken quite a significant initiative called “Operation Valour” to execute that at scale. They're taking it very seriously.

As some of the members may know, the Australians have just done probably the largest analysis of the causes and consequences of veteran suicide ever done by one of the allied nations—a royal commission—and again, I would hope that something the Canadian government would maintain a strong focus on is suicide prevention.

Too often, we hear from our members that we've lost someone else. When you get those very sad stories and we ask what may have happened, it's often—to my earlier point—that loss of identity. People lose who they were. They lose those connections. Equally, I don't wish to reinforce the stigma, as only one in four of our veterans medically releases and transitions out. Three-quarters of them are well. They've had great careers and they just need to make that connection into the civilian world better.

We need to fix those two things at the same time, and that's where the communication challenge and the stigma can pull against each other. We must help those who need targeted support, but we mustn't see veterans as a homogeneous group. They're not. That goes to the point Mr. Luke made about—I'm using jargon, forgive me—segments of one: How does one person navigate their way through that system? That's the challenge at the system level, but if we work out how the bits fit together, that'll be easier for people.

● (0910)

Zoe Royer: Thank you for that, Dr. Booth.

My next question is for Dr. Luke.

Dr. Luke, you've done a lot of work with veterans, and one of the things in education that strikes me is that we're always thinking about future-ready skills. The military is really built on being future-ready: being ready for the big event that is going to shake our nation or for going into a conflicted country and being ready and managing many things simultaneously.

How can we equip veterans to be future-ready early on? When should that start?

Dr. Robert Luke: Thank you very much for the question. It's a very important concept that you're putting on the table—

Zoe Royer: My apologies: It's not future-ready for the next big event. They are, but it's future-ready for that career transition. Pardon me.

Dr. Robert Luke: It's important. A career transition is just another mission in many respects, and Mr. Booth just made the point that retention in the military will likely be enhanced if we help veterans understand that there will be supports for them.

I made the point earlier that the military does a very good job of helping serving members understand what skills they have as they progress through the ranks. That needs to be translated into effective knowledge for the serving members of what skills they have and then how those can get translated into the civilian employment market.

Zoe Royer: That's amazing. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

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

Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Booth, you said the United Kingdom's policy is worth looking to for inspiration. Canada is often compared to Australia or the United Kingdom. However, the reality is that Canada is a federation. The Canadian Constitution assigns very specific areas of jurisdiction, including education, to the provinces and territories, so when you talk about a national framework, you're talking about a Canadian framework. Basically, discussions and consultations must take place. There must be political will for all the provinces and territories to agree on the issue and work collaboratively. To achieve that, consultations and a very clear action plan must be undertaken by a province or by the federal government.

Right now, I see an obstacle in the fact that each province is responsible for its own curriculum and its own decisions relating to education. National Defence and Veterans Affairs Canada are somewhat constrained by that reality. In my opinion, the way forward is always through teamwork, carried out with respect for everyone's jurisdiction and through consultation. That has to lead to specific decisions and actions.

You talked about a national framework. I imagine that, in your work, you also try to lobby the provinces, education ministers and ministers' offices. I imagine that your work must also involve the provinces because, ultimately, they are the ones who decide whether or not to get on board with efforts to facilitate the transition from military to civilian life.

Do you see your work that way as well?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

[*English*]

Nick Booth: I do, and thank you for drawing the jurisdictional differences between the countries. In the U.K., in some ways it's easier to implement national frameworks. The Australians have a multi-layered system very similar to ours, with states as provinces.

We certainly do work with many of the provinces. We have a very close relationship with the government in Ontario on veteran mental health support, for example, but there isn't a single dedicated veteran union in any provincial government in Canada, whereas in Australia, every single state has a dedicated veterans state officer, usually with a small team. They're not terribly well resourced, but they exist, and they're responsible for state-level implementation of veteran legislation. Canada has done better at making those joins, for example, through Seamless Canada.

I was talking with Mr. Luke before we started about one of the other issues we hear about: the electronic transfer of health records, which remains a huge frustration for veterans. We would be pleased to look at the comparability across provinces and territories to see how we can make those links better.

● (0915)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Please go ahead, Mr. Gill, for five minutes.

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

First of all, I want to say thank you to all of our witnesses here today.

Mr. Luke, Mr. Booth and Ms. Lowther, thank you so much for being here and bringing your testimony.

Mr. Booth, I want to start with you.

First of all, I want to say thank you to you and the True Patriot Love Foundation. I know that you guys organize many walks across the entire country, and I know that you have come to Abbotsford, which is my home riding. I've met many of our veterans there, connected with our community members and walked with them as well. I wanted to thank you. To your entire foundation and to you, thank you for what you do for our country.

Back in 2015, the committee heard that only 13% of surveyed HR departments had received training on how to read military résumés. Do you think employers are getting better at recognizing military experience?

Nick Booth: Thank you for the kind comments.

Yes, our Canadian Walk for Veterans, including in Abbotsford, was very successful. It is a very good way of showing local employers the military in their community. I did the one in Hamilton and walked with members from the naval base there, as well as businesses and political representatives. It was a very good way for people to understand those in uniform who, they may not know, live and work in their own communities. It is a good example. Thank you.

It's better but not finished. I was talking to the chair during the break about businesses that do it well, and there are certainly some businesses that hire veterans well and retain them well. They have dedicated veteran employee resource groups. They have buddy systems or mentoring to help people with that cultural difference that I mentioned in my comments, which can be jarring otherwise.

Getting some good-practice businesses to address the committee would perhaps be an easy contribution to this dialogue. Also, outside the work of the actual committee, having a group of best practice businesses to look at military cultural competence training, for example, is something we would certainly be pleased to partner on. Through the ecosystem connect events I mentioned to Madame DeBellefeuille, we have been building those local systems, including in British Columbia.

Sukhman Gill: Are there any other bigger barriers whatsoever that you would say our veterans are facing when they're applying for civilian jobs? Is there anything you would want to expand on there?

Nick Booth: Without wishing to repeat some of the previous ones, the other issue is geography. It goes back to the provincial dialogue point that Madame DeBellefeuille made. People often move away from their support systems. Particularly now, with the rate of deployment that's increasing for operational readiness, the tempo goes up. People are having to move for longer periods of time. I had the privilege of seeing Lieutenant-Colonel Mailloux from the Van Doos honoured on Monday night. His wife was there. He's in Latvia, so she's here with their daughter while he's away for quite long deployments.

We move our military members increasingly frequently now. Often because of housing, structural issues, the price of housing or getting into health queues for family GPs, many military members will say to us, “I spent the whole of my childhood with my fingers crossed, because we never got into the health care system.” I know that Ontario certainly has been looking at how it can improve those transitions in and out of province. That will make it easier for people to leave. This is in addition to the skills training and the purpose and well-being analysis we looked at.

Finally in the conversation, the other bit is about the hierarchy of needs. We also need to find housing and security for people so that they feel physically and psychologically safe to then get a job and find that continuing purpose. It's linking it all together.

Sukhman Gill: Thank you so much.

Ms. Lowther, first of all, I appreciated what you had to say in your opening remarks. There was one thing I wrote down here. You asked whether there was “a lack of understanding or a lack of action”. I would like to ask what you think: Is there a lack of understanding here, or is there a lack of action in that our veterans aren't receiving the releases they should?

● (0920)

Debbie Lowther: Thank you for that question. I think it comes down to a lack of action. As we've stated, we've studied this. There have been previous reports. It would be a good idea to pull those reports off the shelf, dust them off, look at previous recommendations on what has worked and what has not worked, and come up with a national veterans employment strategy that works for veterans.

Mr. Booth talked about organizations and legislatures in other countries that employ veterans quite well. We could also look at businesses, especially in the defence sector, that are receiving funding from the government. There should be a caveat there: In addition to this funding, you also have a responsibility to hire a certain percentage of veterans.

That would be a good place to start.

Sukhman Gill: Do I still have time?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Sukhman Gill: Okay.

The Chair: Actually, no; you're over time.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Mr. Gill, you're making me look terrible today. Usually I'm very—

Sukhman Gill: I was going to ask a good question.

The Chair: I was passionate about listening to it, too. I'm so sorry.

Mr. Fanjoy, go ahead. You have the last five minutes for this round.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Bruce Fanjoy (Carleton, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, witnesses.

I'd like to open up this question to everyone. There's a lot of dual-use technology in military procurement. All that equipment and technology requires someone to make it work. The fact that it's dual-use implies that there's a civilian use as well. It would seem to me that this creates a path that a veteran could follow as they transition into a postmilitary career. What barriers would they encounter on that path?

I'll start with you, Dr. Luke.

Dr. Robert Luke: Thank you, Mr. Fanjoy, for the question.

Some of the barriers are things we've already spoken about. There's the inability of serving members to effectively articulate their skills in a way that civilian employers can understand. There's the concomitant inability of employers to understand, as one member recently said, the ways in which a military résumé or CV is structured.

In some respects, this is a very simple translation issue. Just as we have translators here who are translating between English and French, we can effectively use available technologies today to help people understand what their skills are and how they can transition those into the civilian economy. There are great things we can do—for instance, on the industrial technology benefits side—to enable technology transfer as well as skills. I think the translation issue can be readily solved.

Bruce Fanjoy: Thank you.

Mr. Booth...?

Nick Booth: For brevity, I'll make one extra point, which is to look at how we make it easier for people to move into and out of full-time reserve service and veteran status.

If we see those skills they've learned, the technologies they've been taught to use, as contributions not only to our military capability but also to our industrial capability, they should be able to move more freely from full-time military into the reserve, maybe back into full-time military, go out as veterans and perhaps come back as reservists. Making those joins seamless would be better. We'd see the investment we make in our military training to use those tools and technologies as a contribution to the wealth of the country, not just to our warfighting capabilities.

Bruce Fanjoy: Thank you.

Ms. Lowther...?

Debbie Lowther: I will go back to what I said earlier. We need to start the skills assessments at transition, before somebody leaves the Canadian Armed Forces. That could even include translating a résumé. Some people join the Canadian Armed Forces as an 18-year-old, and they've never written a résumé. They're going to write it in the language they know, which is acronyms and terminology the rest of us do not understand. That's something so simple that could be done before a member leaves the Canadian Armed Forces—how to prepare a résumé, how to articulate their skills and training so that they are understood on the civilian side.

● (0925)

Bruce Fanjoy: The point was made earlier that a lot of thought goes into onboarding a new recruit, but preparing the veteran for their postmilitary career is perhaps done as a bit of an afterthought.

Is the beginning of their career too soon to start planning for the end of their career? A couple of you have mentioned how this would help retention rather than hurt retention.

I'd like to hear your thoughts on that, Mr. Booth.

Nick Booth: Thank you, Mr. Fanjoy.

I don't think you can do it too early. You should start right at the beginning to help people understand how their career will enhance not only their time in the military but also after the military, because that will strengthen retention.

As an aside, it's also interesting that the young people we'll be bringing in will be changing. The current generation, gen Z—not being one, I'm not entirely sure I understand them fully—won't necessarily sign up for the long lengths of careers that previous generations would have done. There are cultural and psychographic differences in young people who've come out of a very...digitally enabled upbringing. They'll bring great opportunities, but they'll bring challenges. They might be willing to make that long-term investment, or think, “I'll come and try it for three years, and if I don't like it, I'll do something else.” The military may well need to adjust some of its training and retention strategies.

There was a very interesting study done of the Czech armed forces about how to manage gen Zs as an officer who isn't gen Z. If they were to tell a 22-year-old to go square-bash...“What gives you the right to do that? You've hurt my feelings.”

I kid you not. It's a fascinating study, if you feel like reading it. As a parent, I would strongly encourage it.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Thank you very much for this very happy thought about our learning about gen Z. We certainly appreciate it.

I truly appreciate the comments and your coming in front of us today.

We will now suspend to welcome our next round of witnesses.

[*Translation*]

Again, thank you very much.

The meeting is suspended.

● (0925)

_____(Pause)_____

● (0935)

The Vice-Chair (Claude DeBellefeuille (Vallée-du-Haut-Saint-Laurent, BQ)): I call the meeting back to order.

Welcome to our second panel of witnesses.

I would like to make a few remarks for the benefit of the new witnesses. Those in the room who want interpretation can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

In the room, we have Manon Larochelle, adviser, Recognition of Acquired Competencies, from the Cégep Marie-Victorin.

Joining remotely, from VeCATS Inc., we have Joseph Blanchard, founder and chief executive officer of the Veterans Entrepreneurship Hub. From the Veterans Transition Network, we have Oliver Thorne, chief executive officer.

We'll begin the meeting by giving each witness five minutes for their remarks. We'll then proceed to a round of questions and answers with committee members.

Ms. Larochelle, you're first.

Manon Larochelle (Advisor, Recognition of Acquired Competencies (RAC), Cégep Marie-Victorin): Good morning, Madam Chair and members of the committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to your study on the civilian recognition of military skills.

I'm here on behalf of the Cégep Marie-Victorin, a public college-level institution serving a diverse population of young people and adults. Marie-Victorin's office for the recognition of prior learning and competencies—RAC in Quebec—is a leader in this field. We've been offering this service for over 40 years. Prior learning recognition leads to formal recognition of skills developed over time through professional and personal experiences outside the formal education system. Today, my office offers 22 prior learning recognition programs. We assess more than 1,500 candidates. We employ 15 professional staff, seven support officers, one coordinator and over 100 content specialists.

Since 2013, the Ministry of Higher Education has tasked our office with serving as a centre of expertise in the recognition of prior learning and competencies. This supports the development of RAC, improves service delivery and contributes to the consistency and quality of practices throughout Quebec's college network. RAC is based on the guidelines and principles set out in the ministry's official document, the “General and Technical Frameworks”, which I submitted to the committee. The ministry defines RAC as a recognized, accessible and rigorous pathway to qualification within the Quebec college system.

What exactly is RAC? It's an assessment process, not a training process. It's an individualized assessment that enables an adult with a broad and unique range of work and life experiences to obtain a diploma of college studies—a DEC in Quebec—or an attestation of college studies—an AEC in Quebec—without pursuing a traditional program of study. RAC recognizes the competencies developed through an individual's professional and personal experience and aligns them with the competencies of a program of study to award formal recognition in the form of a diploma or attestation that is—and this is important—identical to and of the same value as a traditionally earned diploma or certification. Assessing competencies acquired outside the formal education system is at the heart of the prior learning recognition process.

RAC is based on the principle that people shouldn't have to relearn what they already know. In the case of veterans, we don't assume that a military occupation or training program automatically corresponds to the competencies of a college program. Rather, we seek to understand what the individual has accomplished, the responsibilities they've fulfilled, the knowledge they've applied and what they're now able to demonstrate in connection with the curriculum. Through a range of assessment methods, including examples of work, written assignments, interviews with specialists and practical tasks performed in real time, each program competency is formally assessed, and the result is recorded on the transcript. Once all competencies have been successfully assessed and completed, the diploma or attestation is awarded.

Additional training is sometimes required to help individuals apply their knowledge in one or more competencies. This takes the form of one-on-one or small-group sessions focused exclusively on identified gaps. Where required, this additional training is much shorter than a classroom course and incurs no additional fees.

Veterans have to face the challenge of transferring what they know and can do to a different professional and civilian context. The RAC approach can certainly play a valuable role in facilitating that transition.

● (0940)

A diploma or attestation provides tangible proof to a future employer that an individual possesses the competencies required for a given job. The RAC process helps veterans connect their military experience to the realities of the civilian labour market, better understand the transferability of their competencies and present their experience in a way that is easily understood outside the military environment.

The Vice-Chair (Claude DeBellefeuille): I have to interrupt you, unfortunately. This is very interesting, but your time is up. I think you'll be able to finish up later when you answer members' questions. It was very interesting to hear from you.

Mr. Blanchard, you now have the floor for five minutes.

Joseph Blanchard (Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Veterans Entrepreneurship Hub (Vet-Hub), VeCATS Inc.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

Madam Chair and honourable members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to your study on civilian recognition of military skills.

My name is Dr. Joseph Blanchard.

[*Translation*]

I'm a veteran with almost 30 years of experience in the military. I have a doctorate in business administration with a concentration in

[*English*]

entrepreneurship. I've founded two companies: Veterans Entrepreneurship Hub, or Vet-Hub, and Veteran Training and Development, or Vet-TD. My military experience, combined with over 23 years of subsequent business experience in Canadian industry, technology, program management, consulting and education, has given me an opportunity to examine military-to-civilian transition from several perspectives: as a veteran, as an employer, as a business leader, as an educator and as someone who is developing practical programs to help military members succeed after service.

I also write about pre and post release constantly on LinkedIn and other social media outlets. My writing series runs from corporate finance to corporate Canada. These articles are designed to give people an understanding of what the business world is and how to understand this prior to release or after people have transitioned out of the military.

I would like to start with five observations.

First, we must distinguish between translating military experience and formally recognizing military competencies. Second, we need to move from an individual, bottom-up recognition process to a systematic, top-down model. Third, military education should increasingly lead to civilian recognition of qualifications while members are still serving. Fourth, military skills are transferable but not always directly interchangeable with civilian industry experience. Fifth, recognition must lead to tangible outcomes.

I had a very large introduction prepared, but I can keep to the primaries, then talk about some of the elements I've spoken to—specifically, translating military skills.

A lot of organizations in the civilian world have tried to complete this. I worked with Dr. Steve Pound of the United States. He is taking a top-down approach in something called the military skills recognition and pathway, which he developed for the U.S. military and some of the other organizations down there. Basically, the MSRP is a proposed tool that, for Canada, could help military members and veterans translate their training, occupational experience and demonstrated competencies into civilian opportunities, education pathways and potential credentials.

I'll leave it at that and pass it to the next witness.

Thank you.

● (0945)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Claude DeBellefeuille): Thank you very much, Mr. Blanchard.

Mr. Thorne, you now have the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

Oliver Thorne (Chief Executive Officer, Veterans Transition Network): Thank you for the opportunity to speak today as part of the study.

[*Translation*]

Good morning, francophone members of the committee. To express myself as accurately as possible, I will deliver my testimony in English today. That said, serving francophone veterans remains a priority for our organization, and all our programs are available in French.

[*English*]

My name is Oliver Thorne. I'm chief executive officer at the Veterans Transition Network. We're a national charity that provides counselling and transition programs for veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces and RCMP. Military-to-civilian transition is a profound life event in which employment, mental health and personal identity all intersect. My testimony today will focus on employment as a core part of that transition, barriers to the recognition of military skills and an opportunity for veteran employment that we see in Canada's growing defence sector.

Meaningful civilian employment is a foundational part of a successful transition, and Canadian research consistently shows that stable, purpose-driven work supports psychological well-being, promotes community integration and reduces postrelease stress. The life after service studies program shows that veterans who are unemployed report nearly double the rate of difficult adjustment to civilian life compared to those who find work after release. The majority of Canada's veterans transition successfully into the civilian workforce, and two-thirds of them have served in military occupations that have direct civilian equivalents. However, a third of releasing regular force members serve in occupations that are unique to the military, the majority of them in the combat arms. Veterans from these trades report significantly higher rates of career mismatch and unemployment, with junior non-commissioned members facing the greatest risk.

While civilian businesses have strong goodwill towards veterans generally, most of them lack basic military literacy in their human resources departments. A national survey of 850 Canadian corporate HR departments found that 73% had no veteran hiring initiative and only 13% had staff who were trained to read a military résumé. Without the ability to decode military service and without the cultural competency to integrate veterans into the workplace, civilian hiring processes are systematically filtering out highly qualified veteran candidates.

We see an opportunity to address these challenges in Canada's defence sector. The defence industrial strategy published in February outlines an investment of $80 billion over the coming decade and projects the creation of 125,000 new jobs across Canada's aerospace, defence and security industries. To address the anticipated workforce shortage, the strategy also introduces a dedicated Canada defence skills agenda.

However, across the entire strategy document, the word “veteran” does not appear once. We believe this is a major oversight, but it is also a major opportunity. Canadian veterans possess security clearances, operational expertise, leadership skills and a proven commitment to national security. Integrating them into Canada's defence industrial base allows them to continue their identity of service while solving a critical skilled labour shortage in the defence supply chain. This is exactly the kind of stable and purpose-driven work that supports a successful transition. It's work that recognizes their skills and empowers them to continue their service to Canada after taking off the uniform.

To close the gaps I've mentioned, I respectfully ask the committee to consider three recommendations.

First, train employers to understand military culture and résumés. Establish a national federally supported initiative in partnership with industry to train corporate HR departments on military culture, résumé translation and workplace integration for veterans.

Second, modernize how military skills are recognized. Expand and improve recognition frameworks such as the MNET and MySET tools to map military occupation codes directly to civilian skills and occupations, with a focus on combat arms trades.

Finally, make veteran hiring a part of Canada's defence industrial strategy. Work with the Defence Investment Agency to explicitly integrate veteran employment, apprenticeship and retention incentives into defence procurement scoring under the industrial and technological benefits policy and the Canada defence skills agenda.

Thank you for your time. I welcome your questions.

● (0950)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Claude DeBellefeuille): Thank you very much, Mr. Thorne.

We will now proceed to questions. I would ask the witnesses to check their earpieces, because members will be asking them questions in French and English.

Mr. Tolmie, we will start with you, and you have the floor for six minutes.

[*English*]

Fraser Tolmie: I have a quick point of order before we continue. Our chair had to leave; our vice-chair left, and you're deputy vice-chair. Are you going to get a round of questions yourself?

I'm unaware of the process. I've never experienced this before, and I just wanted to make sure that you, as a sitting member, get a round of questions in.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Claude DeBellefeuille): Thank you for that consideration, Mr. Tolmie.

I'm going to ask for the members' unanimous consent for me to have my six minutes during my round of questions. If members agree, I will ask my questions during my six minutes. Is that okay with everyone?

I believe I have unanimous consent.

Again, thank you very much, Mr. Tolmie. You have the floor for six minutes.

[*English*]

Fraser Tolmie: You can add on an extra minute for me.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Fraser Tolmie: Thank you to our witnesses for joining us today.

Sometimes we come in here prepped with questions, and then we hear your testimonies and things change; you hear something that provokes a thought.

Mr. Thorne, you came up with three recommendations at the end. You spoke very quickly. I know you have only five minutes. You spoke about trying to train employers and modernize codes, and then you talked about defence procurement. I know that there is a policy for first nations to get 2%, if I'm not mistaken—I could be wrong on that number—of procurement, but there's nothing for veterans. If we look south to the United States, they have a 3% target, and they've exceeded it by getting 5% in their defence procurement.

We can do it in Canada, because we've hit the first nations target. What kind of target should we be setting for veterans?

Oliver Thorne: Thank you very much for the question.

When you say 2%, are you referring to workforce engagement? Is that the statistic?

Fraser Tolmie: Yes, that's correct.

Oliver Thorne: You put me on the spot here with a number, but that's an excellent question.

I absolutely think we should make a commitment, because that's the only way that we have something to measure against in terms of success. To answer what that number could be, I don't want to say a number on the spot, because it may be ill-informed.

We have thousands of members who are releasing each year. Some are going into retirement, but many are going into the civilian workforce after service. The life after service studies, Stats Canada and the census would give us a good idea of how many folks are releasing and are available in the workforce. Using that data to frame what a percentage or a number could look like is a wise way to go, but I absolutely think there should be a target, because that gives us something to measure against in the defence sector, and it gives us a way to incentivize the defence sector.

● (0955)

Fraser Tolmie: Thank you.

Mr. Blanchard, I saw your hand up. Do you want to answer that question as well? Go ahead.

Joseph Blanchard: Yes. Over the past three years, I've been working with members of Parliament to bring forward exactly what you mentioned, which is the United States veterans procurement act. Within the veterans procurement act, there are two components.

One component is for veterans leaving the military. They can get up to 5% to 10% of all contracts coming out of their militaries and their veterans affairs. Three per cent is for injured veterans. It's a guaranteed contract item for injured veterans. They can receive up to 3% of contracts coming out of their militaries and veterans affairs.

Over the last three years, I've been working with members of Parliament to bring in a Canadian procurement act. I was told the word “act” is not really a nice thing to say. In the last year, I met with Deputy Minister Arianne Reza in regard to a component for Canadian veterans. This component would comprise anywhere from 5% to 10% of contracts coming out of our militaries. That was my intent.

The current element, which I'm still working towards getting released, is that, with the new procurement process, there is a structured exemption for Canadian veterans in any industry and more specifically in regard to the Department of Defence and Veterans Affairs in regard to acquiring either 5% to 10% of contracts coming out of there to be first tendered and/or encouraged to a veteran-owned business to participate.

We're still working on several affairs. The issue of security clearances was mentioned. I spoke with the deputy minister of procurement and looked at how we can retain our security clearance, because on day one of becoming a veteran—when you release from the military—you lose your security clearance completely, and then you have to reapply and go through the process to get it back.

Fraser Tolmie: I have one minute. I have so many more questions.

Mr. Blanchard, you just touched on something. I get a sense that sometimes it's not what you know; it's who you know. From what I hear down in the States, the military is a bit of social networking and it's career networking. We don't seem to do that as well in Canada. What are your thoughts about that statement? Could we be doing a better job within the military of looking after each other on the other side? Is this a role that Veterans Affairs can play?

Joseph Blanchard: As Mr. Thorne indicated, there are elements of pre and post release. For pre-release, I've always said to my veteran friends to start managing their careers when they join, before anything else happens. You could get an injury within the first year, five years or 10 years and then you're gone.

On the networking piece, the main point for the Canadian military is they need to have a soldier in the field and in the units and go from there. Their expenditure of energy and time prior to release is not prevalent, nor should it be, in my view as an ex-military officer. When people become injured, it's a different story. When people are starting to release, it's a different story. Then we should do that.

I always advocate starting your pre-release right at the beginning. I've written an article on it, about how you should be looking at different organizations, the field of study you want to be in, where you want to be engaged—

● (1000)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Claude DeBellefeuille): I'm sorry to interrupt you, Mr. Blanchard. I think I was quite generous in giving nearly 45 extra seconds to Mr. Tolmie, perhaps for his consideration earlier. I'm sorry. You may get the chance to finish what you were saying later, with another member.

Ms. Auguste now has the floor for six minutes.

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

Mr. Blanchard, I want to start by thanking you for your service to Canada—it's really greatly appreciated—and also for what you continue to do for veterans.

Ms. Larochelle, my questions will be for you.

A bit earlier, we talked about various ways to help veterans, including in terms of education, and about what falls under provincial jurisdiction or federal jurisdiction. How could Cégep Marie-Victorin and other post-secondary institutions, such as those in Quebec, help promote co-operation between employers, organizations, provincial regulations and the federal government to bring all these people together and create clear pathways that truly enable veterans to obtain school credits and professional recognition for their expertise?

Manon Larochelle: Two things come to mind.

The Canadian Military, Veteran and Family Connected Campus Consortium, or CMVF3C, has been around for a few years. This Canadian organization brings together all stakeholders: post-secondary institutions, as well as all services for the well-being of the military member, veteran, family and so on, financially, mentally and otherwise. I think that organization, which is in the process of spreading its wings, can certainly help with moving in the right direction.

In terms of federal and provincial jurisdictions, I can only speak to the college level, because things will be different at the university level. The government currently does not allow colleges in Quebec to say that a particular military training corresponds to a particular course. We cannot grant credits or equivalencies. That's impossible at the college level. We aren't allowed to do that, which is what makes the recognition of prior learning so useful. It means that military members will have to be assessed, yes, but they won't have to take courses.

Through our admissions process—I'm talking about recognition of prior learning for all CEGEPs—we will ensure that they have mastered most of the skills in the program. It's really important to draw a parallel between the lived experience and the program. If members are accepted, they just have to do the assessments. That still requires effort: It can't be done in five minutes, but it takes less time. It's cheaper; it can be done on a part-time basis; it's very flexible. Military members don't have to be in Quebec; they can do it while they're deployed elsewhere. In 99.9% of cases, it takes place online. I think it's really a great avenue, a great opportunity, to be able to recognize skills, given that it isn't currently possible to grant equivalencies as such at the college level.

Tatiana Auguste: Thank you very much. I really appreciate it.

Given that you work in the recognition of prior learning and skills, I would like to know what changes to the recognition process, to funding or to educational partnerships would help better support veterans seeking to obtain their civilian qualifications so that they can enter the labour market a bit more quickly, particularly when their military experience does not directly correspond to a specific diploma or an existing certification.

Manon Larochelle: There could certainly be support, perhaps with career counsellors on the military side. In fact, I think the military side and the civilian side should talk to each other more. There should be easier lines of communication, so that everyone can understand each other's reality. I think that would be an appropriate solution.

For the time being, we're promoting the recognition of prior learning at the college level. There is a general framework and a technical framework. It's very clearly defined by the department. That can't change for the time being, but it would be best to establish contacts and promote discussions. In the past, we were in contact with a civilian career counsellor who worked with military bases in Quebec and strongly believed in prior learning recognition. That enabled us to provide a specific service. We went to military bases to provide the full service that, at the time, was based on paper documents. That was pre-COVID. We would travel to provide the full service. That kind of partnership between the educational institutions and the bases would certainly be a good way to go.

● (1005)

Tatiana Auguste: Thank you very much.

Mr. Thorne, you made your three recommendations, and you said how important it is to include veterans in all matters of defence procurement and so on. Could you tell us a bit more about how, with the work that's currently happening on the Defence Investment Agency, the government could start including veterans from the outset?

[*English*]

Oliver Thorne: Thank you very much for the question.

How can we include veterans from the beginning? Canada is very much still at the beginning of this historic investment in defence, and the Defence Investment Agency and the procurement process, at least as I understand it, are still being built. The airplane is being built while it flies, essentially.

I believe the opportunity is now to build the incentives for veteran hiring and veteran engagement into the procurement processes. It needs to be in the procurement processes, because that is the direct incentive for the defence sector.

The rates at which defence companies who are bidding on procurement contracts—

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Claude DeBellefeuille): Mr. Thorne, I'm sorry. It's not easy to chair a meeting and cut off such an interesting witness. However, I'm also the guardian of fairness and justice around the table. Ms. Auguste asked a very good question. You had a very good answer. Perhaps you will have an opportunity to expand on your remarks in another round.

If it's okay with the members, I'll take my six minutes to ask my questions.

Ms. Larochelle, I'm glad you came. Witnesses from Quebec have been quite rare, so far, so thank you for being here. I'm curious. You didn't finish your opening remarks earlier. Your conclusion had to be cut off. Were there any comments you wanted to add that I could allow you to make during my speaking time?

Manon Larochelle: Yes. I have already mentioned a few points, but I would actually like to focus my answer on the benefits. I just touched on some of them.

The recognition of prior learning and skills is really a very flexible thing. It's possible to start a program at several points throughout the year, which isn't the case in universities, where programs start in September and January, for example. We sometimes welcome new people five, six or seven times a year, and we operate 365 days a year, which provides great flexibility to military members who may be available at certain times, but not at others. Military members can take a break for a few months and come back. That's also possible. Above all, they can keep their job and therefore their income. The person may still be serving on the military side and slowly begin their transition by starting the prior learning recognition program. Around 99% of programs are really only done through assessments, without the need to take courses, but there are a few mixed programs. These programs combine the skills that the individual has already mastered, which will be assessed, as I mentioned, with the skills that they haven't had the opportunity to develop in their career. They will have to take the corresponding classes for those skills.

In fact, I wanted to close by saying that we have awarded diplomas to dozens and dozens of veterans who were sometimes still active in the military. What came out of this was that it allowed them to have a different perspective on civilian life. They felt more valued, and they were proud of what they had accomplished. It really gave them confidence in themselves and confidence in the future so that they could make full use of their skills in a new job, a new career.

● (1010)

The Vice-Chair (Claude DeBellefeuille): Ms. Larochelle, I'm happy that you're telling us that there has been success, that you have successfully awarded diplomas to veterans who found your service, your CEGEP, and who, at their own pace, took some training or went through a process to assess their skills.

The Cégep Marie-Victorin is a member of the Canadian Military, Veteran and Family Connected Campus Consortium. What is Cégep Marie-Victorin's interest in that? I'm curious as to why you joined the consortium. Could you explain that to us?

Manon Larochelle: The goal was to continue exactly what we had accomplished, what I told you about awarding diplomas to dozens of military members. That was about 5 to 10 years ago, when there was that very dedicated career counsellor who explained the basics of what it was all about to military members on bases. That intermediary really acted as a bridge between the two. That person left, and, little by little, we had fewer military members. We joined the consortium with the aim of recovering this clientele, because we genuinely think they have important skills for the civilian labour market, when the time comes for these people to take that step. We think it's really relevant to them.

The Vice-Chair (Claude DeBellefeuille): Ms. Larochelle, a number of witnesses have told us that transition work has to be prepared while the military member is serving. We know that there's a lot of recruitment happening right now and that veterans are younger when they leave the military. As a result, there's a concern about preparing a second career for veterans.

Do you generally agree that we can recommend to National Defence—because it's up to National Defence—to set up a more systematic, more institutionalized process that takes into account a military member's curriculum from the outset? The military member serves in the military, but they also think about what comes after.

Do you think that recommendation would be one of the ones you could make to us? Do you agree with that?

Manon Larochelle: Absolutely. I think it's important for people to be able to develop and think about what comes next, absolutely.

The Vice-Chair (Claude DeBellefeuille): I don't know if I'm wrong, Ms. Larochelle, but I get the impression that any employer must be concerned with always ensuring that their staff develop and progress in their organization, or ensuring that they are equipped to pursue another career when they leave.

We are the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, but I get the impression that our report will include a recommendation addressed directly to National Defence so that, upstream, it can concern itself with what comes after for members who are going to join the Canadian Forces.

Thank you very much, Ms. Larochelle, and thank you to all the witnesses.

We will now go to five-minute rounds, and we will start with Mr. Diotte.

[*English*]

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

I'm a firm believer that we should not reinvent the wheel at times. I'm wondering if I could ask each witness one question: When we're looking to recognize veterans' skills and get them civilian employment, where can we look in the world for best practices?

I could start out with Dr. Blanchard on that.

Joseph Blanchard: Globally, there are disparate systems that provide recognition and translation of skills. Currently, even here in Canada, we've tried several different tools—Canada Company tried to implement such a tool, which was taken from the U.S.—including other countries that I've been researching and working with, such as the military skills recognition and pathway with Dr. Steve Pound. We're working toward a top-down approach, taking it from a business perspective and an education perspective, and then layering it for them.

Is there a global system and/or regional systems that would work? No, but there are opportunities to work toward building one specific to Canadian military skills and competencies through their course training plans and course training standards, understanding those elements, and incorporating that education and training with actual competencies to build our own model. No, there is no centre of excellence on that.

● (1015)

Kerry Diotte: Mr. Thorne, would you like to weigh in on that? The question is whether we can learn from other jurisdictions in this regard and where we might find best practices elsewhere.

Oliver Thorne: I am not aware of, internationally, any recognition frameworks that we might use as a comparison, although I would certainly encourage looking towards the States, the U.K. or any of our other Five Eyes partners to see if they have a similar program.

In Canada, we have two that currently exist as federal initiatives. The first is the MNET, the military occupational structure ID to national occupational classification equivalency tool. The website is currently down for that tool. There is another tool, MySET, which is the “my skills and education translator” tool. I have tinkered with it a bit. I encounter a lot of errors within the tool, in terms of functional errors.

These are there, but they have not been built in a robust way. They have certainly not been promoted in a robust way. Many people I speak to are not aware of them. I think the government can serve as the primary source for these tools, but they need to be built well, accessible and promoted. It's not enough to build them. You have to advertise them and tell people about them.

Kerry Diotte: Madame Larochelle, would you weigh in on this as well?

Manon Larochelle: Yes, I would certainly recommend that you contact the CMVF3C, because there are many subcommittees and there's a PLAR group with regard to prior learning. Many institutions across Canada do great things about recognizing...and they have established pathways. I think there are sections for best practices on their websites, but contact them directly. Some institutions are really advanced in their recognition pathways.

Kerry Diotte: Thank you.

I have one quick question for each one of you, starting with Dr. Blanchard.

Could you give me the number one thing that you would like to see us do? What's the best recommendation, right off the top?

Joseph Blanchard: My biggest recommendation is to create something called a sector council. We had them 25 years ago. They left the concept. This is an intermediary that takes industry and the diplomatic or political corps, and it represents this type of organization that can do skills recognition, prior learning assessment and interactions with other colleges and universities that have been spoken about, especially with connected campuses. I would recommend a national sector council specifically for soldiers and veterans.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Claude DeBellefeuille): Mr. Diotte, your time is up.

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

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

[*English*]

Thank you to all of our witnesses for being here this morning.

Mr. Thorne, you made an important point at the beginning. You talked about the hiring of veterans as part of the defence industrial strategy. I'm an MP from the Halifax area. Our region is going to be disproportionately affected in a very positive way by the major investments flowing through that. Certainly, I deal on a very regular basis with businesses that are in the defence and security space and have hired and are actively hiring veterans. It's going to be an increasing concern as we move forward.

There is one thing I want to ask Mr. Blanchard and Mr. Thorne about. A big part of our conversation is about how veterans transition from active service into postmilitary life.

Mr. Blanchard, you've personally done this. Are you familiar, sir, with the Canadian Armed Forces transition group? If so, how does that program work, in your mind? Where can it be improved upon? It is an existing program. Obviously, it's not perfect, or we wouldn't be here talking about this today.

I'm wondering if you're familiar with that program. Can you give us your thoughts on how that program works and interplays with all the things we're trying to achieve?

● (1020)

Joseph Blanchard: I'm very familiar with the transition group. I've been working, over the past 12 years, in regard to the transitioning of soldiers and veterans. They came up with transition command.

When you're a for-profit organization, they will not provide any allegiance or alliance with you. As a not-for-profit, they still have limited interaction. Their purpose is.... When a soldier has been told they're leaving or a soldier has been asked to leave service, they are engaged. Those who are medically released have programming structured for day one of their civilian world. Once they're out of the military, they become an issue for Veterans Affairs.

There is programming that is beneficial. There could be more happening. There could be more of an opportunity to meet with organizations such as Mr. Thorne's organization and several others, in which we could help influence that career path out of the military.

Braedon Clark: Mr. Thorne, I would ask you the same question.

I wonder what connections you have had with the transition group and how that is working. It's easier to improve something that exists rather than build something entirely new, in a lot of ways.

What's your experience with that, and where do you think it can be working better?

Oliver Thorne: Thank you for the question.

We are also very familiar with the transition group. We've had quite a lot of contact with them over the years, including some consultation on the in-house transition programming that they were building as part of their mandate. I'm quite familiar with what they do and how they function.

The challenge we see is this: They have to build programming that is accessible to the thousands of people per year who are transitioning. It means that this kind of education and programming is often delivered by PowerPoint. As we say, you didn't learn to become a soldier by watching a series of PowerPoints—although there were many PowerPoints involved—and you won't learn to become a civilian by doing the same thing. It requires active, hands-on integration of skills and the practising of those skills in a social setting.

We believe the transition group would do better with targeted and enacted skills development in person for those who are encountering the most difficult transitions. We know from the research who that is. It is folks who serve in the regular forces, the combat arms, the junior ranks and those who are medically released. They are at the greatest risk of a more challenging and more difficult transition. We need more intensive transition and skill development programming for those folks.

Braedon Clark: Thank you very much, Mr. Thorne.

I appreciate your testimony. It sounds as though we certainly need to have more of an active, ongoing approach to improve the transition group. It's a very interesting component that we need to think seriously about as we work on the recommendations of our report. We need to think about how we can improve that system—the DND and VAC handover—which is the critical decision point.

I thank all of our witnesses very much for your presence today.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Claude DeBellefeuille): Thank you very much, Mr. Clark.

I'm going to take my two and a half minutes of speaking time, but first, I'm going to ask the committee if it consents to this being the last intervention, so that we can then move on to committee business.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

● (1025)

The Vice-Chair (Claude DeBellefeuille): Ms. Larochelle, you told us about all the subcommittees that exist in the Canadian Military, Veteran and Family Connected Campus Consortium. You find that this is a little-known and underused path, and that it would benefit from being better known. Could you tell us more about it so that we can pass on the information?

Manon Larochelle: Yes. The Canadian Military, Veteran and Family Connected Campus Consortium is really trying to bring all the potential stakeholders together. It didn't start from scratch. It sort of came about following the end of the national advanced placement and prior learning program that existed previously. That may not be entirely accurate, but the consortium came about afterward.

The people in the consortium didn't want to reinvent the wheel, as has been mentioned. They wanted to do what works. They tried to put together everything that had already been done so that everyone could learn from each other's best practices.

The Vice-Chair (Claude DeBellefeuille): Is it a Canadian organization?

Manon Larochelle: Yes, it's Canadian.

There are meetings on the second Friday of every month. All members are welcome to participate. There are also two-day symposiums twice a year. They're held in various locations across Canada and are available online. It's really about bringing all the stakeholders together to put some oil in the gears and help things go as smoothly as possible.

The Vice-Chair (Claude DeBellefeuille): You have 30 seconds. For my colleagues from other provinces, can you give us examples of partners who are members of the consortium and who attend these meetings to work on the transition from the military to civilian life?

Manon Larochelle: In fact, the people from the consortium put a lot of emphasis on post-secondary institutions. They really want the best practices to be shared. There are obviously many military members. I don't know all the organizations, but all the stakeholders are there.

The Vice-Chair (Claude DeBellefeuille): Thank you very much, Ms. Larochelle.

That concludes our witness testimony.

Mr. Thorne and Mr. Blanchard, thank you for being here today.

Thank you, all three witnesses, for taking the time to prepare to answer the parliamentarians' questions today. Thank you very much for attending the meeting. If you don't mind, we will now ask you to leave the room, as we have some committee business to attend to.

If the rumours are true, I believe that Mr. Tolmie would like to propose a motion.

[*English*]

Fraser Tolmie: Thank you, Madam Vice-Chair.

You are so on it. I want to let you know you're doing a great job. I really appreciate you. It's not easy to do that.

Our thoughts are with the chair.

We have an administrative motion that we'd like to bring forward. I don't know if you want me to read it out.

I'm pretty sure that all the parties have agreed to it. We would like to submit it. It's in both official languages. We'd ask for unanimous consent on that.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Claude DeBellefeuille): Thank you, Mr. Tolmie.

Everyone has the motion in their possession, then. Is the committee in agreement to adopt it by unanimous consent?

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

The Vice-Chair (Claude DeBellefeuille): I will use the time I have left to tell you that our next meeting will be on November 2 and that we will continue the study on civilian recognition of military skills.

The meeting is adjourned.

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