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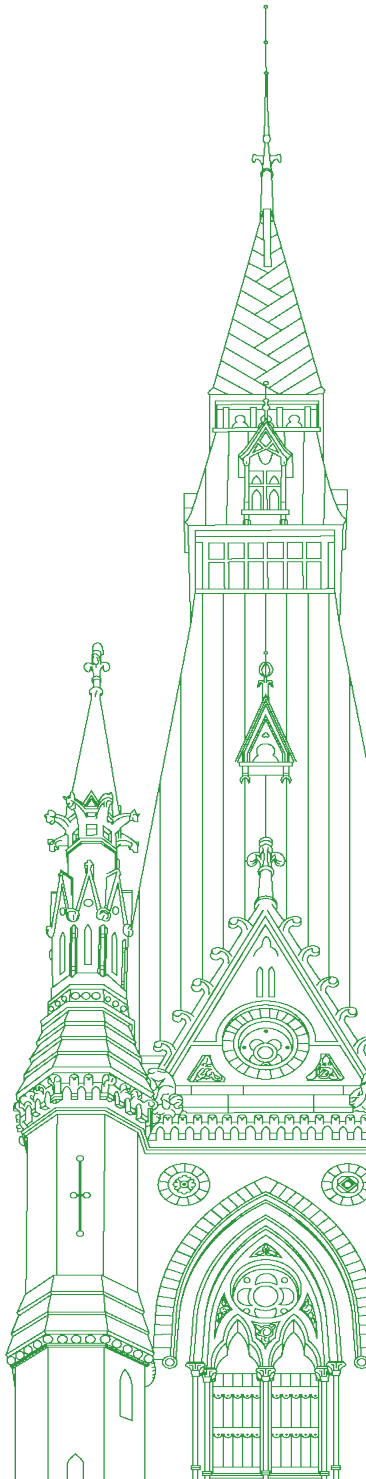
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Chair: Marie-France Lalonde

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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● (1535)

[*Translation*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 46 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 are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

[*English*]

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

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

To those in the room, on your screen you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses.

From the Canadian Union of Skilled Workers, we have Mr. Kyle Krakenberg, trustee, education and training trust fund. From Coding for Veterans, we have Mr. Jeff Musson, executive director.

I will open the floor for five minutes for each for you to deliver your opening remarks. After this, for the rest of the hour, there will be a series of questions from the members of our committee.

Mr. Krakenberg, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Kyle Krakenberg (Trustee, Education and Training Trust Fund, Canadian Union of Skilled Workers): As you heard, my name's Kyle Krakenberg. I'm an electrician by trade.

I'm also a trustee, working in a more formal capacity with the Canadian Union of Skilled Workers, and I work as well in a local community capacity with the Kingston-Ottawa unit as its treasurer. I'm also the joint health and safety committee member at my workplace.

Although I feel I'm not particularly qualified or knowledgeable enough yet to provide recommendations to you on the subject matter of Veterans Affairs, I am a very curious person who just strives to learn as much as I can to expand my knowledge base. What better way to do that than by raising my understanding with you here today in that formal way? I'm grateful for the opportunity and I look forward to this discussion.

Much of my understanding of the struggles of veterans comes from sound bites of information. I imagine that's much of civilians' day-to-day life: what you read in articles and what you listen to in podcasts. I do have an immense respect for the virtues that are developed through a military career: the discipline, determination, physical skill and psychological grit that's required to excel in a military career. I believe that's directly transferable to a skilled trades working capacity.

It's my belief that the community is underserved and underutilized in the general workforce. I'm trying to brush up on some general statistics. I know that the bulk of the retiring veterans are actually of a young age, much like myself. I started a second career of sorts in the skilled trades at the age of 28. I'm now 32. That's not far off that general stat of a retiring veteran. It's never too late to start a new career. If they're being underutilized and there is a shortage in the workplace, I think that's a direct fit into the skilled trades.

I'm here to learn today what actions can be taken to help facilitate that and move forward.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Krakenberg. Welcome to our committee.

Mr. Musson, it's a pleasure to see you. You are not familiar, but we've seen you before, so welcome back, sir. We look forward to hearing from you.

The floor is yours for five minutes.

Jeff Musson (Executive Director, Coding for Veterans): I appreciate the opportunity.

I'm the executive director of Coding for Veterans. For those of you who don't know about our program, Coding for Veterans is a program dedicated to retraining Canada's military veterans, specifically in the areas of software development, cybersecurity and generative AI.

The program is delivered 100% online through the University of Ottawa, and students can take the program either full time or part time. On average, it'll take someone about 12 months to complete our program. Since we launched in 2019, over 1,000 veterans have come through our program.

A cornerstone of our program is helping veterans translate their military experience into skills that civilian employers recognize. Our student success team and career advisers work directly with veterans to identify and communicate their technical expertise, leadership abilities and skills in ways that resonate with Canada's tech companies.

We also have a partnership with the Commissionaires, who mentor our students through their online security operations team, which has been very effective.

With all of these touchpoints, however, there are still barriers that need to be addressed. One significant barrier we continue to encounter, and one on which we have consistently advocated, is the issue of military security clearances and what happens with them after someone leaves the military. Specifically, we believe that veterans should have an ability to retain their existing security clearances while participating in civilian retraining programs, with the option to then transfer those clearances to an employer upon completion of their training.

As the federal government places a greater emphasis on strengthening Canada's digital sovereignty and domestic capabilities, removing this barrier represents, in our opinion, a high-impact, low-cost opportunity to improve the transition from military service to civilian employment.

Our first recommendation is that the Department of National Defence maintain the responsibility for a veteran's existing security clearance for a period of up to 24 months following their release from the military. During this period, the veteran would have the opportunity to transfer their clearance to an eligible employer. If no transfer occurs within this time frame, the clearance would just expire. This approach would help preserve valuable security credentials, reduce unnecessary duplication and allow employers to recruit qualified veterans more effectively.

The second thing I want to talk about is the importance of aligning retraining programs with the actual workforce needs of industry.

In our case, obviously, we've done this with technology. When we were building the Coding for Veterans program, we consulted with employers to understand the technical skills, industry certifications and qualifications they required when evaluating potential employees. This helped us to position our graduates for future employment.

At the same time, we saw that it was very critical to engage veterans to understand what they want out of a successful retraining program. One thing that we want to recommend to the committee is to establish a guideline or a template for program design that identifies the key success factors when establishing a retraining program, not only in tech but across the board.

Finally, I'd like to share findings from a pilot project we have ongoing with the Government of Ontario in the area of re-skilling and upskilling.

Accenture conducted an independent economic study on our program. One of the key findings was that when someone leaves the military, on average they'll make $50,000. When they leave the military and have a robust training program like ours, which takes approximately 12 months to complete, that average starting salary actually bumps up to $80,000 to $82,000 a year. It's quite significant.

More importantly, it puts that individual on the same earning trajectory as someone with a three-year or four-year general university degree. In our opinion, this demonstrates that investing in effective industry-aligned retraining programs improves employment outcomes, increases earning potential and maximizes contributions.

Madam Chair, those are our recommendations. They are intended to ensure that military experience is recognized, valuable credentials are preserved and retraining programs are designed with employment outcomes in mind.

● (1540)

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee. I welcome your questions.

Also, we have copies here, in both French and English, not only of that Accenture study but also of the pilot program we have with the Province of Ontario.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now start our questions for round one. Each member will have six minutes to ask questions.

We will start with Mr. Barrett for six minutes.

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

Thanks to the witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Musson, what is the biggest barrier preventing veterans from accessing programs, which you've provided evidence of, that would give increased earning potential and provide future employment opportunities and also serve as a conduit, potentially, for veterans to be able to port their security clearance from the military? What's the barrier for them to access programs like yours?

Jeff Musson: There are a couple of things.

One is education. In the overall Canadian tech industry, it's projected that in the next 12 to 18 months, there are going to be over 75,000 open IT jobs. What I mean by that is that it's important to get the message out to veterans that this is a career to go toward.

One thing we like to say about our program is that you go from serving on the battlefield to serving in cyberspace, so it makes for a very nice transition into a career that they know. Educating and getting the word out about opportunities in the tech sector becomes critical at this point.

The second thing is that when it comes to that security clearance—and I've really been pushing this for a while—it seems to be a bureaucratic government thing. It seems as though we have a consensus on it, but how do we implement it? Do you transfer that security clearance over to VAC to hold it? Do you transfer it somewhere else?

In discussions with people, they've said that maybe it makes the most sense to just leave that security clearance at DND and then, when that individual gets their first job, transfer it from DND to that first employer.

● (1545)

Michael Barrett: When I left the military, I stayed on the supplementary reserve list, as many do, for five years. What would stop DND from holding a member's clearance during that time? I had top secret clearance. It took time and effort for the bureaucracy to make sure that I could hold that clearance. What's the argument against it being parked with DND while a member stays on the supplementary reserve list?

If I may, you were here three years ago. You said exactly what you're saying now.

Jeff Musson: Yes.

Michael Barrett: It made as much sense then as it makes today. You're making great sense, and you described everyone as in agreement. If you're making sense and there's agreement with what you're saying, what's the missing component here? Why can't DND just do that?

Jeff Musson: That's a good question. If I could find the right person inside DND to make this become a reality, it would be great.

Part of the issue that also ends up happening is....

You were fortunate. You went on the supplementary reserve, so you were able to hold that clearance. I know there are some people who were in the regular force and qualified for the ETB—the education and training benefit—and they actually wanted to continue serving as a reservists. Guess what—they can't do that and maintain their education benefits, so consequently.... That used to happen with the supplementary reserve up until a couple of years ago. At least now, when you're on the supplementary list, you're able to access that funding.

To answer your question more directly, I know it's not on the industry side that we're having that hurdle. I've been pushing it. It's just finding the right individual to talk to.

Michael Barrett: I have good news: We all sit in the same room with the individual who can make that happen. It's the Minister of National Defence. For those who are in agreement, I think we can all make an overture to the minister. What I'll undertake to you today is that I will do that very thing. I'm going to do that, and perhaps you could seek that same undertaking from other people around the table.

The last thing I would say, Mr. Krakenberg, is this: What do you think, as a Canadian and as a taxpayer and as an expert in your field, is the argument against, or maybe for, allowing members of the Canadian Armed Forces to receive certain skills that would allow them to be credentialed so that when they leave the military, they'd be able to directly enter a skilled trade like yours, one that's very important to our economy? How important is that?

Kyle Krakenberg: I think it's vitally important.

As you said, security clearance is a big one. Working in nuclear sectors requires that, as does working in hydroelectric and critical infrastructure. It seems to come down to bureaucracy and paperwork, ultimately, as to why these things don't get put through. They get lost in the weeds, in a sense.

Yes, it needs to move forward. Get those security clearances through, as well as transferable skills that are readily available.

Michael Barrett: Mr. Musson, do you have anything to add?

Jeff Musson: I kind of agree with your position. If we are able to get the powers that be to be onside on this, I can tell you that it would unlock tremendous value, not only by increasing the number of individuals in occupations that need a security clearance but also by really streamlining the process.

● (1550)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we have Ms. Royer for six minutes.

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

Thank you, witnesses.

Throughout this study, I've been particularly interested in some of the work that's being done internationally around helping veterans transition back into civilian life and the workforce.

The United Kingdom has more than 14,000 businesses listed as signatories to its Armed Forces Covenant, and Australia has more than 620 organizations participating in its Veteran Employment Commitment. These are very impressive examples of employers stepping forward to support veterans.

That's why I was especially pleased to see Minister Jill McKnight, our own Minister for Veterans Affairs, launch Canada's new veteran employer recognition initiative last week. It's an important step in our national veterans employment strategy. It recognizes employers who recruit, hire and retain veterans and encourages more Canadian businesses to participate.

My first question is for you, Mr. Musson.

I know you founded Coding for Veterans, and I want to ask you this. Are you a veteran?

Jeff Musson: No, I'm not, but I have a number of family members who are. I affectionately say, “I'm a geek.” I come from the tech sector, so that was my entry into this.

Zoe Royer: I'm always interested in genesis conversations around what inspired the rationale for a great idea, but we don't have time for that. Congratulations on your success. You've had over a thousand participants in the past six years, I think.

My first question looks at the new initiative by our government and the success of employer recognition programs in Australia.

What would encourage technology employers to participate and create more career opportunities for veterans?

Jeff Musson: From our perspective, the banks hire from our programs, as do the federal government and multinational corporations, and one thing we found is that success breeds success.

Our graduates become employed. Banks hire out of our programs, and I have to tell you that they especially love the fact that when someone comes from the military and has served, those people know first-hand about attention to detail, leadership and teamwork. Those are the perfect soft skills that align with top IT jobs.

For us to get employers to buy in, and I hate to say it, is a bit of a process. I like the idea that the process is starting, and once you get one person hired, that multiplies to two and then four, and eventually it takes over.

Zoe Royer: How is the prevalence of AI changing your curriculum?

Jeff Musson: We listen to employers. It was two years ago when people hiring graduates out of our program said that it would be great if our graduates had some skills related to AI. When we first launched Coding for Veterans, it was strictly, as you can tell with the name, about software. Then we got into cyber, and now we have AI. For us, it's where the future is.

What's interesting is that people asked if our software development program was dying off. Quite frankly, it's not. The reason is that you still need software developers. You can't rely on AI for everything, so you still need software developers to do coding and what have you. In order to do that, you have to have a strong foundation. AI plays a role by making software development in those jobs much more efficient.

Zoe Royer: My next question is for Mr. Krakenberg.

Welcome.

Given your role as trustee of the Canadian Union of Skilled Workers' education and training trust fund, what challenges do you think veterans face when trying to have their military training, technical qualifications and hands-on experience recognized toward civilian skilled trades, certification and apprenticeships?

Kyle Krakenberg: I believe it's much like a transition from province to province. Even my own skill might not be directly transferable. It's advancing the paperwork and recognizing that both hard skills and soft skills are directly transmittable there.

Yes, there's going to be a buffering period of 12 to 24 months, or whatever it might be. If you have to go through a preapprenticeship program, for example, I think the resources need to be in place to do that, because even the most basic of lives is expensive. You can't just drop everything, not be earning an income for your family and trying to get into a preapprenticeship program that isn't paying you.

The beautiful thing about skilled trades is that once you do start an apprenticeship, after getting those skills approved and being partway through that career, you're not having to start from the very beginning. It's critical to be able to get to that point.

● (1555)

Zoe Royer: On the types of partnerships between labour unions and training organizations, what would be helpful in accelerating veterans' integration?

Kyle Krakenberg: I think it's just making them aware that this is a possibility. Obviously, it's a career that's here to stay. There is a lot of fluctuation in certain workforces; this one's here, and it's a valuable, meaningful and very gainful career for them, so creating awareness is a big thing.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I will now have Madame DeBellefeuille asking questions. She will be addressing you in French, and I see that you received our clerk's instructions. We will start our clock as soon as you can hear me.

[*Translation*]

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

Claude DeBellefeuille (Vallée-du-Haut-Saint-Laurent, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you very much for clarifying how to better communicate with the witnesses, whom I thank for being here at the committee.

Mr. Musson, you know that the government launched the national veterans employment strategy in June 2024. As a school and training provider, did your organization take part in the consultation on implementing the national strategy?

[*English*]

Jeff Musson: Yes, we did.

[*Translation*]

Claude DeBellefeuille: Two years after the strategy was launched, do you think a lot of related measures have been implemented, or are measures still being sought to achieve the objectives set out in the strategy?

[*English*]

Jeff Musson: The opportunity in the way the strategy was set up provided early wins, but it's still a work in progress. When you look at Veterans Affairs and helping veterans transition from military life to civilian life, you see that it's an ongoing process.

[*Translation*]

Claude DeBellefeuille: Excuse me, Madam Chair, I have a point of order because I didn't understand the interpretation at all.

The Chair: Okay. We'll stop the clock.

Claude DeBellefeuille: The witness may be speaking fast, making it hard for the interpreter to interpret what he is saying. Do you mind if the witness repeats his answer?

The Chair: Not at all. We'll just stop the clock so that he can repeat his answer.

[*English*]

Jeff Musson: I was part of that consultation group. For me, yes, some of the recommendations out of that report have taken place. However, there's much more work to be done.

One thing I have learned as it relates to Veterans Affairs and helping veterans translate their military occupation to civilian employment is that there are many things that need to be worked on—everything from skills to opportunities for employment. Yes, there's still much more work to be done.

[*Translation*]

Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Musson, you know that we are conducting another study on the transition from military to civilian life. Canada has had a national strategy since 2024. You're telling me that there's still a lot to do, but the strategy has already been in effect for two years. Can you give some examples of things related to the strategy that still need to be done?

● (1600)

[*English*]

Jeff Musson: One thing that continues to need to be done relates to opportunities related to funding and what ends up happening to those individuals who don't qualify for existing funding programs like the VAC ETB, the education and training benefit fund.

We have a number of individuals coming into our program who become funded through that education transition fund, but there's a lot of work that still....

I'll be slower.

[*Translation*]

Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you.

The Chair: Are you okay with the interpretation, Mrs. DeBellefeuille?

Claude DeBellefeuille: I think if Mr. Musson slows down, the interpreter should be able to keep up. There is perhaps the odd difficulty.

The Chair: Great. Go ahead, Mr. Musson.

[*English*]

Jeff Musson: I'm sorry.

To answer your question on what still needs to be done on the funding aspect, there are a lot of veterans who don't qualify for existing funding programs.

When it comes to medically released people and the process to have a medically released person approved to come in for a training program, there is still a lot of work to be done in that area. Two recommendations that were part of that study are still ongoing.

[*Translation*]

Claude DeBellefeuille: Is work ongoing with the Department of Veterans Affairs and your organization to put the measures in place? At the committee, we sometimes get the feeling that people spend a long time thinking, but less time acting. Are you optimistic, and do you think that the actions you are proposing in relation to the national veterans employment strategy will be implemented?

[*English*]

Jeff Musson: To me, things have been getting done. I can point to the over 1,000 people who have enrolled in our program since 2019. However, we do run into individual cases that took longer than they should have for someone to be approved to come into our program.

We have very good relations and dialogue with Veterans Affairs, and that relationship is key, not only for where our program is today but for where we want it to go in the future.

[*Translation*]

Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you.

I'm a bit lost about how much time I have, Madam Chair.

The Chair: You have a minute and a half.

Claude DeBellefeuille: Great, thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Musson.

Mr. Krakenberg, you're an electrician, right? That's what you said at the outset of your presentation. Which province are you from?

[*English*]

Kyle Krakenberg: I come from Ontario.

[*Translation*]

Claude DeBellefeuille: You're a veteran. During your military life, were you working as an electrician, or did you have to train and get your qualifications in your province to be an electrician?

[*English*]

Kyle Krakenberg: I'm sorry. There was some confusion there. I never did military service, although I do recognize that there have been individuals in my line of work who have transitioned from being mechanics and other things, such as from airline traffic and stuff like that. They were not direct transfers into electrical trades, per se. It's just that those skills are critical.

[*Translation*]

Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you.

The Chair: Is that okay, Mrs. DeBellefeuille?

Great. Thank you.

[*English*]

Thank you.

This completes our first round. We will start our second round of questions.

We will invite Mr. Tolmie for five minutes.

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

Thank you to our witnesses for joining us. I do have questions for both of you.

Welcome back, Mr. Musson. I remember your first testimony, and I appreciated it. That wasn't meant to ignore you, Mr. Krakenberg, so I'm going to start with you.

You just mentioned the critical need for veterans in your trades, recognizing the importance of their background. I'd like to know, from your first-hand perspective, how well they integrate when they're working with you.

We've talked about the need for them to get in, but you've mentioned that you don't have a military background. What's it like, for someone who doesn't have a military background, to work with someone who does have a military background?

● (1605)

Kyle Krakenberg: We're all humans, honestly. It doesn't need to be a conflict. They all have skills from working in harsh conditions. They're there to get a paycheque at the end of the day. They want to learn and do something meaningful.

I don't see a direct barrier for military personnel to enter a skilled trades civilian workplace.

Fraser Tolmie: Would you say that you get along with them, and they fit in quite easily?

Kyle Krakenberg: Yes, absolutely.

Fraser Tolmie: The reason I'm asking that question is that the obstacle to getting them there is the challenge. Talk about that as a challenge to getting veterans, who you seem able to work very well with, into the trades.

Kyle Krakenberg: It's a real challenge. I think the biggest thing is awareness for a lot of people. We get inundated with so much information.

Perhaps they felt they were going to stay in the military for their entire careers. I came to skilled trades later in life despite having a family background in it. Whether that's the case for military personnel to get into that—

Fraser Tolmie: Can I interject? You mentioned earlier on bureaucracy and paperwork. Is that a challenge for veterans to get through in order to get into the trades?

Kyle Krakenberg: I believe it would be, yes.

Fraser Tolmie: Thanks. I really appreciate it. I don't mean to put you on the spot. I think what you've brought up is very valuable.

Mr. Musson, welcome back.

We've talked about the regulatory changes that would help, such as the security clearance and being able to maintain it. What does it mean for your students to have a security clearance and get integrated into the workforce?

Jeff Musson: If someone, when they graduate from our program, doesn't have a security clearance, they obviously cannot work in top secured positions until the security clearance happens. The way we would like to see it go is that the moment they graduate out of a program from the University of Ottawa, they can start working in a security operations centre at one of the banks, in government or wherever literally the next day. As it is right now, an individual obviously has to have a lower position or hiring gets paused until the security clearance happens.

Fraser Tolmie: Madam Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair: You have a minute, sir.

Fraser Tolmie: If I'm not mistaken, when I went through my top security clearance, it was done by the RCMP. You've mentioned that it's being held with DND. Do you think that maybe the RCMP could play a role, that the security clearance could be held at the RCMP headquarters? It would be easy and accessible for employers to access it through there.

Jeff Musson: I agree 100%. The question is, how do we make that happen?

Fraser Tolmie: Thank you.

I think that's my time.

The Chair: You had 20 seconds. Thank you.

We will now invite Mr. Fanjoy for five minutes.

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

Thank you, witnesses.

Mr. Musson, I'd like to start with you.

Coding for veterans, as I understand it, is the entire universe of information technology. They could be coding. They could be managing networks or doing risk assessments and such. In your experience, are veterans particularly suited to this line of work, or is this one avenue that you understand and can help them with? Is there some connection that makes it a particularly good bridge to a civilian career for veterans?

● (1610)

Jeff Musson: As I said earlier, when you're in the IT industry, detail matters, teamwork matters and execution of projects matters. Those are key things that happen in the military. To go back to our Accenture study, the average age of someone in our program is 39.2 years old. When they come into our program, they're looking to take all the skills they've learned in the military and go for a civilian occupation.

When we look at it, we say, “What better way is there to honour the service and sacrifice of the men and women in our military than providing them with stable employment?” That then provides a good foundation for later on. When you look at the economic impact of someone coming out of our program, again referring back to the study, by the time that individual retires at age 65, they will have pumped an additional $1.3 million into Canada's GDP, so it's significant.

Bruce Fanjoy: How does coding for veterans differ from coding for other people wanting to get into this field?

Jeff Musson: There are a few things.

Number one, we have what's called a protected cohort. Everyone in our program has a tie-in with the military. That is important because there's a cultural fit and understanding, a learning process where they very much can rely on each other. That's number one.

Number two, before anyone actually comes into our program, they do a soft skills assessment. We also interview everybody. We make sure the right people are in the program for the right reasons in order to have success at the end.

Bruce Fanjoy: You mentioned a couple of big players: the federal government, of course, and the banking sector. They've obviously had experience and success with hiring people from this program. Are there barriers to having other doors open? Are they cultural? Are they practical barriers?

Jeff Musson: There are always barriers. One thing that happens when we focus on this.... It's when it comes to the soft skills. We call it a “career suite”. It's being able to put together a résumé that highlights all the skills they learned in the military and translate them to a civilian occupation.

The second thing is practice interviews. You need to be able to tell an employer why they want to hire you.

The third thing, especially in today's day and age, is establishing a footprint on social media—on LinkedIn and others. Typically, that doesn't happen in the military, but when you get out, when you're released from the military, finding jobs online is how it all happens.

Bruce Fanjoy: Thank you.

Mr. Krakenberg, I have about 30 seconds. You have a mix of civilian people and veterans going through apprenticeship programs. For veterans, is the program tailored, or is it similar to a program that a civilian would have?

Kyle Krakenberg: It's definitely underutilized. That's not to say the vast majority of new apprentices, for example, are of a veteran background. It's just that it is a career that is fitting of both their soft and hard skills. There's Build a Dream, which is getting women into the trades, tapping into an underutilized part of our workforce.

Yes, ultimately it does come down to, as I said, the awareness of it all.

Bruce Fanjoy: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Witnesses, Mrs. DeBellefeuille will speak to you for two and a half minutes, so I suggest you put in your earpieces.

[*English*]

Just to let you know, we're having some interpretation difficulties. Madame DeBellefeuille is hearing a very strong delay in French. Please try to speak a bit slower, and I will be very sensitive to your time.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Musson, you work with industrial partners, such as the Commissionaires. You have no doubt heard about the fact that the Commissionaires are going to lose their privilege, their right of first refusal. Will the fact that the Commissionaires will probably, or perhaps, lose federal contracts have an impact on you? Will that have an impact on your ability to place veterans?

● (1615)

[*English*]

Jeff Musson: Our collaboration with the Commissionaires is a mentorship kind of role. I think they're speaking after us. They have a security operations centre in Montreal and other locations to handle online security.

When it comes to the contracts you're referring to, I think those are security contracts more on the physical side than in the online area. As of now, that question is probably better suited for the Commissionaires when that organization testifies.

[*Translation*]

Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Musson, we will certainly hear the argument that if we undermine the funding of Commissionaires, we also undermine their social mandate, and hence their ability to work with other people. It's thought that if they lose their right of first refusal as of April 1 for all contracts awarded by Public Services and Procurement Canada, it will weaken the organization itself, including its capacities.

It has also been noted that, when a private company provides the services instead of the Commissionaires, salaries are greatly reduced. In the lost contract with the Canada Revenue Agency, salaries will drop from $24-$26 per hour to $18-$20 per hour. It's a pay cut for the private sector.

Are you somewhat concerned that, for the cybersecurity contracts you have, there will also be pressure to lower the wages of veterans who return to the labour market?

[*English*]

Jeff Musson: I agree with your analysis. A strong Commissionaires will benefit us in a multitude of organizations. When it comes to individuals and the pay rate, I can tell you when it comes to veterans, we as a country need to support them in whatever it is. Specifically, we obviously focus on the technology side of things.

[*Translation*]

Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Gill, you have five minutes.

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

Gentlemen, first of all, I want to thank you for being here today and testifying.

Mr. Musson, I didn't get the pleasure of meeting you initially when you came in 2023, but I'm hearing that a lot of the same recommendations being put forward today were previously put forward. It's appalling that we haven't gotten to work fast enough or as quickly as we should have for veterans who serve our country.

Thank you very much, Mr. Krakenberg, for being here as well.

I want to start with you, Mr. Musson. I want to first say that I agreed with my colleague Mr. Barrett when he said that we would be bringing this subject to the minister. My colleagues and I will make sure it is our priority that we bring your recommendations forward to the minister as well.

In the meantime, I want to ask you this: Have you seen any progress since you last appeared and testified?

Jeff Musson: Progress in terms of....

Sukhman Gill: I mean on making sure that your recommendations are being taken into consideration. Is the government taking them into consideration, and is the study being pushed forward to make a policy that veterans can benefit from?

Jeff Musson: Overall, yes, there's been work there specifically as it relates to security clearances. I haven't seen it yet; hence, it's still a recommendation that we're talking about.

As I said earlier, you have a broad consensus of support. The key is getting the right decision-makers onside. We are fully in favour and we appreciate any help in making it a reality.

Sukhman Gill: Currently, where would you say the delays are? Where are the barriers that we are seeing? Why is this not being fast-tracked per the recommendations initially made in 2023? It's 2026, so it's been three years. Where do you see that there are delays or barriers based on your time following this case?

● (1620)

Jeff Musson: There are a few things, and they're more on the bureaucratic side. I know we've had a couple of different defence ministers. When you have a changeover in staff, things typically get reset. However, I think now is a great opportunity, especially given the way that things are. In the new world that we're living in, hopefully we're able to get some momentum with which to make this recommendation a reality.

Sukhman Gill: Your field is cybersecurity specifically. I want to ask you what barriers you are seeing. I know you've mentioned some before, but can you expand on and even review the barriers you face in your category of business, specifically in cybersecurity? Can you touch on those?

Jeff Musson: In terms of employment of veterans, there are a few things.

Number one is obviously getting individuals security-cleared so they can hit the ground running. One thing that happens in our program is that when individuals graduate, they write their industry certifications. Not only do they receive a University of Ottawa certificate, but they write a globally recognized certification, whether it be the CISSP, the CompTIA or what have you. That unlocks the jobs out there.

When it comes to barriers, number one, as I said earlier, is educating veterans on opportunities in the tech sector. We've seen an improvement on the flip side, with employers educating them on the value of veterans and why they would want to hire them.

Sukhman Gill: Mr. Krakenberg, I'm going to shift over to you quickly.

You've said there are bureaucratic delays that you see in the system. I know you touched on that briefly. Would you like to expand on the specific barriers or anything you think is being delayed here? As we just talked about with Mr. Musson, it has been three years that these recommendations have been on the table. They're being discussed still. Would you like to comment on that?

Kyle Krakenberg: It's about a recognition of transferable skills, security clearances and other hard skills as well. Our organization has, if you were to sign up, a “My Skills” platform. I can submit my firearms safety course, for example. I imagine every veteran would go through a process like that. It's about getting those skills recognized, with any accredited document. That's not as much of a barrier to getting into a skilled trade. I imagine that for working for a large organization—a bank or something like that—it could be a bit more cumbersome and time-consuming.

Ultimately, it's about getting skills uploaded and realizing that although they were not obtained from within the company.... In the company I work for, I might have a skill that was obtained outside of that workplace, but they want to train you from the ground up, which is obviously the way the military works as well.

Yes, we need to reduce barriers. There are great shortages in the energy sector, so reducing that delay is critical.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now for our final five-minute round with our witnesses, Ms. Hirtle, five minutes go to you.

Alana Hirtle (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon, everyone. I'm assuming you can hear me.

Mr. Musson, it's nice to see you back again at committee. I have a few questions for you.

What careers are you training for at Coding for Veterans? Can you give us a handful of examples?

Jeff Musson: For sure.

When it comes to cybersecurity, it's a cybersecurity analyst, a SOC operator or anything related to building and defending networks, whether they be in the private sector or, obviously, with the federal government. When it comes to AI, we've seen that part of the industry grow. It's everyone from AI analysts to, when we have our prompt engineering classes...being able to tie in AI as the new occupation. Then, obviously, there is traditional software development—everything from Python to Java to you name it.

● (1625)

Alana Hirtle: It sounds fascinating. Thank you.

Are there some that are more popular than others?

Jeff Musson: It's funny. Our students ask this question when they're coming into the program. Quite frankly, there is demand across the board in Canada for all three areas. When it comes to salary expectations and opportunities, they're equal.

What's interesting is that when you look at the tech sector.... I said that a lot of bad things came out of the pandemic. One good thing was that it pulled the workforce about 15 years into the future. We have an individual who graduated from our program. He resides in Greenwood, Nova Scotia, and he wanted to stay there. He was hired by one of the banks in downtown Toronto, and he can stay in Nova Scotia, work there and commute in two or three times a year. For an individual, that is great.

Alana Hirtle: That's awesome, and it's in Greenwood, Nova Scotia—right on.

Pardon my ignorance about this, but there has been much talk about security clearances today. Would a higher-level security clearance be required for the majority of the positions you're training for?

Jeff Musson: It would. To put it into financial terms, if an individual graduates out of our program, they may make *x*. If they graduate out of a program and end up having a security clearance already ready to go, that translates into a higher starting salary because they are a much higher value employee for a company.

Alana Hirtle: That's fair. I get it.

I'm just curious. You've had 1,000 individuals participate in the program up to this point. What percentage of graduates find their preferred employment at the end of the program?

Jeff Musson: We're quite proud of this stat. We have an over 70% employment rate among people coming out of the program. Individuals are saying, “How does this happen?” Well, it happens because we spend a lot of time at the beginning to make sure we have the right people in the program.

You have a robust retraining program delivered through a recognized university. Ultimately, that curriculum is put together with input from industry. In essence, if you think about it this way, we built the program backwards. We talked to the employers, figured out what they wanted and then ended up making sure the courses that were taught, the certifications, would all green-light someone for an interview.

Alana Hirtle: Wonderful. Thank you for that.

In my last minute, I'll ask Mr. Krakenberg a couple of questions, if I could.

I'm wondering what level of demand there is for skilled trades across the country right now. Can you talk to that?

Kyle Krakenberg: It's thousands. Forgive me; I don't have the immediate number, but obviously, the skilled labour workforce is aging into the point of retirement, so there are many thousands across the country. I know immediately that in Ontario, where I'm working, we're seeing a desperate need, and growth is also coming about. I believe they're looking at a 50% increase coming into our infrastructure in electricity in the coming decade, so it's something we need to think about now.

Alana Hirtle: With Build Canada Homes and all the construction we're planning to have across the country, we will need you and all of your brothers and sisters in the skilled trades.

That should be my time. Thank you very much, gentlemen.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Hirtle. It was actually just about your time.

This concludes our first round. I want to say thank you to both of you for coming today.

We will be suspending to welcome our other witnesses.

● (1625)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1635)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

I would like to make a few comments for the new witnesses.

For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: either floor, English or French. Please mute yourself when you are not speaking.

I would now like to welcome our second panel of witnesses.

From Commissionaires Ottawa, we have Michel Charron, chief executive officer, joining us by video conference. From Commissionnaires du Québec, we have Marc Parent, chief executive officer.

We will begin by giving each of you five minutes to deliver your remarks. Afterwards, we will proceed with a round of questions from committee members.

I know you're online, so if ever you go over five minutes, I'm going to have to cut you off. I apologize in advance, witnesses.

Marc Parent from Commissionnaires du Québec, I now give you the floor.

● (1640)

Marc Parent (Chief Executive Officer, Commissionnaires du Québec): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, committee members.

I am Marc Parent, chief executive officer of Commissionnaires du Québec, the Quebec division of the Canadian Corps of Commissionaires. With me is Michel Charron from Commissionaires Ottawa. We are very pleased to be here and thank the committee for undertaking this very important work.

Witnesses have told you that Canada understands the problem, but that it sometimes drags its feet when it comes to taking care of the veteran community. Canadians are telling us the same thing: It's important to support veterans properly.

In its 2024 national client survey, Veterans Affairs Canada found that only 53% of veterans released between 2014 and 2024 felt they had transitioned well to civilian life after service. The top challenges were identified as health, sense of purpose, cultural and social environment, and sense of belonging. These are not résumé issues. It's about whether veterans have a place where they feel they belong. In uniform, military members have a mission, a team and an identity. When all this ends, they need a job that does more than pay the bills. It must give them a renewed sense of purpose, belonging and continuity. It must also offer them a new place to belong and a new place to contribute and continue to serve. It needs to replace some of the structure that veterans have experienced in the past.

Canadians see it as well. According to a Leger poll conducted in 2024, half of respondents feel that the government is not doing enough to support veterans. You're hearing it from veterans and you're hearing it from Canadians.

We would like to show you what our action looks like in concrete terms, because we've been doing this for 100 years now. The Commissionaires were founded in 1925 so that veterans returning from the war would have work when they returned. Today, we are a non-profit organization with no shareholders. We employ more than 22,000 people, including approximately 3,500 veterans. Almost 90% of our revenue is reinvested in our people. Over the past decade, we've spent over $15 million on programs and organizations to support veterans.

To us, recognizing military skills is not a theoretical framework: It's what we do every day. Veterans bring discipline, leadership, how-to and wide-ranging knowledge. We bring those skills to bear at all levels, from security guard to chief executive officer.

A veteran doesn't have to explain to us what a chain of command is or translate a posting into terms that an employer can understand. We already understand that, because many of us have lived through it.

You've heard from witnesses who have described a real problem with that. Employers often have trouble reading a military résumé, and veterans have to translate their service themselves. A national framework for translating rank and experience would be helpful, and we support that.

We also heard strong support for beginning transition planning while members are still serving, as well as for creating a one-stop shop so that veterans don't have to guess which door to knock on. We agree with all that, but the one point we want to emphasize today is that recognizing military skills should not be an end in itself. Its true value is measured when a veteran gets a job, regains a sense of purpose and continues to contribute to society. That's what the Corps of Commissionaires is all about, and that's why we believe we need to preserve mechanisms that actually support the hiring of veterans, to make sure that these skills and these people have a place to land.

A credential with no opportunities is just a piece of paper. Veterans don't just need recognition for their experience; they need doors opened for them. At the Commissionaires, veterans can work in sectors as varied as cybersecurity, risk and threat assessment, investigations, the integration and operation of security technologies, including anti-intrusion and anti-drone systems, as well as court-ordered electronic monitoring for offenders, particularly in domestic violence cases.

● (1645)

It has to be the right job. When we ask our veterans what work brings them, their answers match the challenges identified by Veterans Affairs Canada. In our own survey, 58% of our team said that working with the Canadian Corps of Commissionaires gives them a sense of purpose. Thirty-four per cent of members said it supports their physical, mental or emotional health. Finally, 90% of members like to be able to work alongside other veterans—

The Chair: Mr. Parent, I'm so sorry. As I explained, you have unfortunately gone over the five minutes. I want to turn it over to Mr. Charron.

I'll give you 10 seconds to finish that lovely sentence, and then I'll give the floor to Mr. Charron.

Marc Parent: I'll wrap it up in 10 seconds.

You heard from Jeff Musson from Coding for Veterans earlier. He gave you another example of participation and synergy: We have hosted his organization free of charge since 2024.

In conclusion, our veterans have served their country, and we now have a collective responsibility to provide them with a place to keep contributing. For over 100 years, this is how the Commissionaires have transformed military service into lasting contributions to Canadian society.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Parent.

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

Michel Charron (Chief Executive Officer, Commissionaires Ottawa): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the members of the committee for the opportunity to testify before you.

[*English*]

ourI would like to build upon what my colleague just said.

Behind every figure my colleague gave you is a person who put up their hand to serve when Canada asked. They trained and deployed, and many gave years of their lives and their health. At the end of this, Canada told them that it would give them a post-service future. For a great many veterans, a job at the corps is how that commitment has been kept for decades: a team, a purpose and a paycheque.

The right of first refusal was a program that worked, and it worked for exactly the purpose of this study. It was a civilian recognition of military skills and service, implemented with meaningful employment at the end of it. In regard to service at federal sites, it connected a government need with real work for veterans.

Today, 86% of our clients report being satisfied. The work is done by a security-cleared and experienced workforce, and the veterans doing it stay. Retention is about 75%, which is excellent for the industry in which we operate.

What concerns us is what is now being put in its place. The national veterans employment strategy, as we read it, doesn't make the practical commitments or set the implementation requirements that the RFR did. The RFR was a practical solution for government. We are replacing it with something more abstract.

That brings me to the question in front of this committee. You have heard witnesses say that the barriers are well understood and that the problem is implementation. We agree.

Ms. Lowther asked this committee to show which earlier recommendations were actually implemented. The RFR is one that was. Mr. Booth and Mr. Blanchard each spoke about using federal procurement to require or reward veteran hiring, and Mr. Thorne asked for transition programming that is hands-on programming.

Those are the same principles. Recognition has to come with a mechanism, and a mechanism has to come with a requirement. We ask that before the RFR is set aside, Canada makes sure that whatever replaces it carries the same practical commitment, measured and reported. Let's build on what has already been tested with the people who are doing it instead of starting over.

With that in mind, I'd like to leave you with three recommendations.

First, use procurement. Members asked whether federal contracts should require veteran hiring, and our answer is simple: Yes. A requirement that is written into a contract, measured and reported on, creates jobs, and encouragement doesn't. That is what the RFR did for guard services.

Second, build a bridge to the employers. A national framework that translates rank and experience is welcome, but recognition matters only if there's an employer at the other end. Connect veterans with employers who hire at scale while they're still serving, not after release, and recognize those employers as partners in the transition program.

Third, measure what matters. Count more than programs delivered. Ask whether a veteran has a stable job, an income and a home a year after release. VAC's own survey found that only 53% say they have transitioned well. That number needs to be improved.

We agree that the recognition of skills is necessary, but recognition without a job is only a certificate. These are people who put up their hand when we asked, and the question for this committee is whether we honour our commitment to them.

The test of the study will be whether veterans leaving the service next year have somewhere real to go. For the past century, the Commissionaires has been that place. We want to keep being it, and we would welcome the committee's help in making sure there are more.

Thank you, Madam Chair. We're happy to take questions.

● (1650)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Charron.

[*English*]

We will now open our first round of questions.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

Michael Barrett: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Gentlemen, thanks very much for being here. I'm pretty tight for time, so I'd like to move through my questions quickly, if I can.

Mr. Charron, I was asked today during a press conference by the media what I thought about the special technical capabilities that are available to the government through the use of an American contractor. A $12-million security contract from CRA was awarded in place of the Commissionaires, which bid on the contract as well.

I know that members of the Canadian Armed Forces have a great amount of experience—bomb detection, cybersecurity, CBRN—and are the best of the best. Could you speak quickly to what capabilities members of the Commissionaires organization were unable to fulfill in this RFP that the American organization that was awarded the contract maybe developed through its work in executing the agenda for ICE on behalf of the Trump administration?

Mr. Charron, please go ahead.

Michel Charron: I cannot speak to the fact that people are saying we are not as well qualified. As you've mentioned, our veteran workforce is very well qualified across the board to provide the services required from a security-guarding perspective. We have a robust training program, internal to the Commissionaires, that prepares every employee to meet the requirements of every contract that we are contracted for and our people are employed on, so there are no shortages of training qualifications for the Commissionaires.

As my colleague alluded to earlier, the Commissionaires is a progressive organization that is diversifying into cybersecurity, drone operations, etc. From my perspective, we are well qualified as an organization to fulfill any security contract the federal government might put up for bid.

Michael Barrett: I appreciate that response.

As a Canadian, sir, I'd ask you, with your unique experience with the Commissionaires, if it's your impression or understanding that any kind of consideration was given to the social benefit of employing veterans through Canada's largest non-governmental employer of veterans—the Commissionaires—in the awarding of the $12-million CRA contract to Allied Universal.

Michel Charron: You will recall that in my opening statement, one of the things I recommended to the committee was that veterans' experience and employment be recognized in governmental contracts. At this time, that is not the case.

Michael Barrett: I've raised this directly with the minister, and I've said it here in committee. I said it earlier today in the House and in the press conference I just mentioned. I don't understand why we can't just be up front about the need to have the creation of employment opportunities for veterans as a criteria for or as a benefit to employers bidding on government contracts. I'm not sure that I see the drawback there. Can you see any limitations to veterans in that?

I'll put it this way. The announcement last week from the Minister of Veterans Affairs revealed a badge that organizations can apply for, yet I didn't see where the department had reporting requirements. If there's no creation of employment opportunities for veterans as a result of this emoji, what does it do for the men and women who served Canada in terms of creating employment opportunities for them?

● (1655)

Michel Charron: What I can tell you is that the Commissionaires organization truly recognizes the experience and expertise that veterans bring to the organization. We're truly proud to have so many in our employ. They make all the difference. We use them for mentorship. We use them for leadership. They contribute significantly to the development of our younger workforce, and that is a significant benefit to the corps. We are hoping to continue that for years to come.

As for federal contracts and the recognition of the veteran aspect in them, as I've mentioned, we would love nothing more than to have the federal government recognize that in their governmental contracts.

Michael Barrett: In the announcement last week, the department's own terms said that their listings are not an endorsement or recommendation of these organizations. That's exactly the wrong approach. Frankly, I think that's evidenced in what we've seen with the awarding of the $12-million security contract to this American firm instead of to a Canadian not-for-profit that has a history and that has demonstrated having not only a willingness but a raison d'être to employ the men and women of the Canadian Armed Forces. Isn't that exactly the kind of endorsement the government should be giving when it's considering contractors?

Michel Charron: The Commissionaires prides itself on being able to provide Canadian services and on employing thousands of veterans across the board. It's not only that; we also contribute to veteran causes, at large, across Canada. As my colleague mentioned earlier, 50 million causes in the past decade—

The Chair: Monsieur Charron, I'm so sorry. The member definitely knows his time, and we have passed his time.

[*Translation*]

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

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

We've heard a lot of testimony before this committee to the effect that we absolutely have to change the narrative when we talk about the employability of veterans, because times have really changed. New veterans are people who have acquired experience in dual-use technologies, meaning both military and industrial. They're very agile with technologies, whether cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, aerospace or drones.

We had a witness here who talked about the Red Seal trades. In the next 10 years alone, our major construction sites will require 597,000 new workers in these trades.

I think that our obligation to all our veteran communities goes beyond the right of first refusal. It's about seeing how we can recognize their skills as quickly as possible. Canada needs its veterans. I think it's clear in the industrial sector and in the sectors I mentioned earlier that we need our veterans and their talents. Their talents are not well understood or recognized by employers, and I think that is pretty much across the board.

Knowledge of dual-use technologies will help us. Someone who works at Bombardier, Pratt & Whitney or DRAKKAR, for example, works with both the military and the civilian aerospace industry. A veteran will probably have already crossed paths with that person as part of their operations, which will make the transition easier.

I really wonder how we can better target needs. What we've heard from our veterans goes beyond a right of first refusal on security contracts. What they seem to be asking for is the security clearance. That is a gateway for Red Seal tradespeople to go and work at a nuclear or hydroelectric power plant, for example.

The second thing they ask for is that their skills be recognized, as you were saying, Mr. Charron, even before they become veterans, long before the transition.

The third is to prepare for the transition much earlier, as you said, Mr. Charron.

Within Canadian industrial imperatives, how can we use the 8,000 veterans who leave the Canadian Armed Forces every year and properly direct them to sectors experiencing major labour shortages? Our national security is at stake.

I'll start with you, Mr. Parent, and then I'll go to Mr. Charron.

● (1700)

Marc Parent: I was listening to you talk about the ecosystem in which we operate and about rubbing shoulders with other colleagues. Obviously, when our military members who become veterans find themselves within Commissionaires, a synergy is created not only between them, but also with the other employees, the civilian employees. That means there's a mentoring effect and a positive influence in terms of their knowledge and careers. For the organization, that becomes an environment in which they can develop, with points of reference that they can identify with.

You raised the issue of security clearance. I don't know if you want us to go into detail about that. We obviously have little control over that, even though we manage everything related to workplace security clearance, because we're a pan-Canadian organization that can support workers, new employees who are going to work within government entities.

I place a lot of importance on the ecosystem and the life cycle of veterans, or military members on their way to a second life as a veteran, because I think that's where we really make a difference. We may be a less understood organization or an overly well-kept secret.

Sophie Chatel: I think you're quite right.

I would also like to hear from Mr. Charron on the importance of starting the transition early and recognizing talent in sectors where there are major labour shortages.

The Chair: There are 40 seconds left, Mr. Charron.

Michel Charron: I'm a former military member myself, with a 36-year career in the Canadian Armed Forces. One of the problems I encountered when I retired from the Canadian Armed Forces was that I had started thinking about retirement much too late in my military life.

If it were possible for a system to start preparing us three or four years before our retirement—a system that explains what's available on the civilian side and that compares our military qualifications and certifications with their civilian equivalents—I'm telling you that many more military members would be involved in civilian life than there are right now.

The lack of information and knowledge is striking.

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

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

Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Mr. Parent, what sets you apart is that unlike your private sector competitors, who need to generate profits for their—sometimes foreign—shareholders, you return 90% of your revenue to employees. From what I understand, that allows you to fund your social mission of reintegrating veterans. That's what sets you apart.

From what I gather, the government doesn't understand that fact. It treats your commissionaire contracts as ordinary contracts, which are competing with ordinary companies in the market. However, what sets you apart is that you reinvest in your social mission. That's why you have, among other things, a right of first refusal in Canadian government procurement contracts. Rumour has it that this right will end on March 31.

What's going to happen to the current commissionaires? If you lose other contracts on April 1, what will be the consequences for the veterans who are currently under your employment? Are they going to lose their jobs? Have plans been made to transfer them to other businesses? It's a matter of impact. I have a feeling that the government wants to trivialize the number of veterans affected or the impact on veterans. Can you tell us what concrete and human consequences this will have on the job stability of the veterans you employ?

● (1705)

Marc Parent: I would say that the first impact is already being felt. It's clear that this is giving those veterans a feeling of insecurity or a form of anxiety about their careers, because they don't know what the future holds.

We can't claim to know exactly what the job losses will be in concrete terms, because we don't know the outcome and, obviously, we still want the government to reverse its decision.

We're going to have to look at opportunities for transitioning to new sites, but that obviously means there have to be opportunities in the first place. Certainly, for us, as a major organization across Canada, it will lead us to rethink how we manage the veteran transition life cycle I mentioned earlier.

For example, in our organization's human resources, we have someone who works full time to support veterans who are transitioning to a new career to ensure that they integrate well. That means there are also impacts on our capacity to allocate resources to the Commissionaires' cause, which is a non-profit social mission.

Claude DeBellefeuille: In terms of the government's perception, the Department of Veterans Affairs says that the exclusivity model needs to be evaluated to adapt to the market. You're being criticized for not meeting the target of giving veterans 60% of the work hours.

The parliamentary secretary is basically saying that veterans can do more than security. They're going to be in high demand. That means we no longer need the right of first refusal, because there will be so many jobs to fill that veterans will find new ones.

Does the government's optimistic outlook reflect the reality of veterans?

The Chair: Before you answer, Mr. Parent, just a moment.

I have stopped your time, Mrs. DeBellefeuille. Don't worry.

I'm very open to having these witnesses come speak to us, but I would like to remind all members that we are here to conduct a study on the civilian recognition of military skills. Thank you.

Marc Parent: We currently have 3,500 employees who may be affected by this decision. We're also forgetting that we support a number of organizations that assist military members in their transition to civilian life, regardless of where the veterans end up. We're major contributors to a number of non-profit organizations that also need funding.

That means this discussion also has to include the decision's impact on all the organizations that support our veterans in the life cycle of their transition to civilian life. It's very important.

● (1710)

Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Parent, I understand that the Commissionaires play a key role in supporting military members' transition to civilian work and that you want to continue your mission. To do so, you need to have all the necessary means at your disposal. Federal procurement contracts are certainly one tool among many others, but it's worth remembering that you're a key player and that veterans know about you. In my opinion, you deserve to be better known on the government side.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

I'll say this for all members. We are studying the civilian recognition of military skills, so I would like to remind members that as they are asking questions, they should stay on topic.

Mr. Gill, go ahead for five minutes.

Sukhman Gill: Thank you very much, Chair.

I want to start with questions for Mr. Charron.

The Commissionaires have been providing meaningful employment opportunities for Canadian veterans for over 100 years, as we know. It's the largest non-governmental employer of veterans in Canada.

We recently found out news that CRA awarded a nearly $12-million security contract to a Canadian subsidiary of an American-owned company instead of to the Commissionaires. From my understanding, the difference between the two bids was approximately $80,000, which is less than 1% of the total contract value.

What was your reaction to this decision, first of all, especially when the government has been talking about making sure that we support Canadians, Canadian workers and putting Canada first? What was the shortfall here?

Michel Charron: As always, when you lose a contract, you're disappointed and you do a revision, looking at the contract to see where you could have improved or done things differently.

We feel in this case that we had a solid bid. Our employees were well trained to do the contract. We had been on that contract for 10 years. We continued to improve the qualifications and certifications of those individuals. As I mentioned earlier, we have a robust training program across the federation with continuous improvement and professional development, and we feel our submission for that contract was well suited, as a long-standing security company in Canada that's Canadian-based.

Sukhman Gill: I definitely agree, sir, that you should have been considered, if not the first ones to get this contract.

I want to understand what losing this contract means for you. How does it affect your employees and your employment base, as the opportunity could have been brought here, at home, in Canada?

Michel Charron: In this case, we had to look at our employees and offer comparable employment elsewhere within the organization. The situation is not a pleasant one. You always try to look out for your individuals. That's what we did in this case.

We took care of the members. We repatriated as many of those who wanted to come back with the organization as we could. We paid special attention to the veterans, because we highly value their contributions to the organization in terms of the leadership they bring, as well as the skill set and the expertise.

Sukhman Gill: Mr. Charron, do you think the government is doing enough to take into consideration organizations like yours before awarding contracts like these?

Michel Charron: We can always do more. It's a matter of being able to have the conversation.

I recall that back in 2023, when we renegotiated the NMSO contract, we had proposed to the ADM at VAC and the ADM at PSPC forming a working group where we could talk about the modernization and changing the construct of the contract so that the skill sets of the individuals would be recognized and we could grow the expansion of our service offering.

● (1715)

Sukhman Gill: I also want to touch on the government's decision to end the Commissionaires' right of first refusal for federal security contracts next April. We spend a lot of time in committees talking about how we can help veterans find meaningful employment after they leave their military service, yet at the same time, the government is getting rid of these policies that are specifically designed to help veterans find these jobs.

What do you think of this decision, with veterans looking for employment? How does that affect that?

Michel Charron: I would say it sends a bit of a shock wave when you're looking at it from the outside, but you need to look at it from different perspectives.

I go back to what Madame Chatel said a while back. The veterans who retire from the armed forces today have different skill sets, and employers offer different services and types of employment. The Commissionaires is particularly focused on a certain demographic of the military members who are retiring from the forces. We complement, and we have been complementing and offering gainful, meaningful employment to that group for the past 80 years.

Regrettably, come March 31, we could possibly lose the RFR, and it's going to be tough on that group, because that group is normally less specialized.

The Chair: I'm so sorry, Mr. Charron. The time is up.

[*Translation*]

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

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

I'd like to start by thanking Mr. Charron for his 36 years of military service to Canada.

Mr. Parent, I also want to thank you for your service within the Service de police de la Ville de Montréal. We're very grateful for the work you have done for Canadians.

Marc Parent: Thank you.

Tatiana Auguste: Your organization has truly extensive experience in veterans employment. I would like to know what skills, qualifications or professional aptitudes military members have that you think are most easily transferable to the civilian labour market. In addition, which ones do civilian employers often overlook or misunderstand, and how could we help these employers understand them better?

Both of you can answer.

Marc Parent: We touched on that in our opening remarks. There are obviously skills related to team management, leadership and discipline. There is also professionalism and rigour, as well as an understanding of the concept of security in general. That's an important aspect.

In terms of things that employers could take into greater account—and that we successfully take into account on the Commissionaires' side—there's the fact that the new generation of military members have skills related to technology and telecommunications. They understand the digital shift that's currently under way. We have greatly adapted our employment opportunities to enable younger veterans to better achieve their potential in these new areas.

For example, at Commissionnaires du Québec, we're responsible for monitoring violent men in Quebec using anti-approach bracelets. From a monitoring centre, we monitor more than 600 men who pose a risk of violence. That is an example of what can be offered to former military members who have technological skills.

However, perhaps the ability to operate in a telecommunications and technology environment is underestimated. The new generation has very much developed that ability.

Michel Charron: I would add that the military members currently working with us have a very high level of training. They have participated in operations, they possess experience and they possess leadership. They're able to manage risks on the fly, improve procedures and address incidents on a daily basis. They're able to use their judgment to protect people, information and infrastructure.

With their leadership, expertise and experience, in addition to what Mr. Parent just mentioned, they really bring a wide variety of qualifications that are rarely found elsewhere.

● (1720)

Tatiana Auguste: Thank you very much.

Mr. Parent, what specific changes can be made to the existing recognition framework, hiring practices or even transition programs so that veterans' military experience is fully valued and veterans can fully access civilian careers without any barriers?

Marc Parent: I would say that it's necessary to be a bit more informed—I say that with all due respect—about the military journey and the skills that are generally developed there. It's necessary to have a better understanding of the military environment, which is quite inaccessible for civilians. It's a matter of clearly understanding the specific nature of the training that veterans have accessed on an ongoing basis for several years. It's truly a unique environment.

Tatiana Auguste: Thank you very much.

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

Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Mr. Charron and Mr. Parent, I would first like to thank you for taking the time to appear today. You're here on a special day, since you were the subject of an opposition day in the House. You have been spoken about a great deal in the House today.

Mr. Parent, I'll give you the last word on our study. I understand that you agree with many of the witnesses that it's also necessary to think about the second career of military members during their military service. I think all the witnesses agree on that point.

What do you want us to take away from your testimony today?

Marc Parent: At Commissionnaires du Québec and the Canadian Corps of Commissionaires, our claim is that people should draw on our expertise. For 100 years, we have learned to do better, to better understand and to better adapt things for veterans. We have a unique and exceptional history, and no other organization can claim to master what we have learned to master.

We're also continuing to evolve. As part of the current shift in matters of defence, sovereignty and autonomy as a Canadian unit, I think a great deal of inspiration can be drawn from the Commissionaires. There is no better context in which to showcase us and consult us going forward. That's what we want: to be heard so that we can share our knowledge with the government as well as all members of Parliament.

Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Mr. Parent.

Mr. Charron, I have just a minute left. Do you want to add anything?

The Chair: You have 45 seconds left.

Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Charron, would you like to add anything?

Michel Charron: I would just like to add something to what Mr. Parent said. Commissionaires is a progressive organization. We have grown and have made a lot of changes over the past couple of decades. We are adapting to the new reality. The people who come to work for us are highly skilled and motivated. The organization can only grow if we are given the chance.

Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

We will end this round with four minutes for Mr. Tolmie and four minutes for Mr. Clark.

Mr. Tolmie, you have four minutes.

Fraser Tolmie: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate it.

Thank you to our witnesses for joining us. Thank you for your service, not only to your community as a police officer but to the military. I appreciate your service in your roles now.

One of the things that I find very interesting about the Commissionaires is that they're a not-for-profit organization. What they do is reinvest the profits back into veterans.

I'm just wondering, Mr. Charron, if you could share a bit about that and open up a bit of perspective with regard to skill sets and how veterans benefit from your organization.

● (1725)

Michel Charron: The veterans who join the organization arrive here knowing it's an organization that is similar to what they've known in the past. The culture inside the Commissionaires is very much aligned with what they were accustomed to throughout their careers.

We also have programs internally that will allow them to further develop certain skills based on the operational requirements of the organization. Mr. Parent alluded to the cybersecurity perspective and the additional work we're starting to do with the armed forces, considering the new security arrangements the forces want to roll out over the course of the next couple of years.

In addition to that, I would say the contribution to veterans causes is a significant endeavour as well. Take, for example, the Perley Health hospital in Ottawa, which we've donated to on three separate occasions. We've built an accommodations tower for the veterans. We've also contributed to the development of a frailty centre and, as recently as this year, again for accommodations, we've contributed to bringing in 120 suites that will be available for veterans and their spouses to be able to live in an apartment context and have a sense of belonging.

All of those—

Fraser Tolmie: Thank you, sir. I'm limited on time.

What you shared in your testimony is that you have an 86% satisfactory rate with your clientele, and you've just lost a contract over $80,000. Did the government ever say to you that you're not properly reinvesting your profits into giving it better trained commissionaires?

We're trying to talk about keeping people employed. Where do you think that went wrong?

Michel Charron: As I said earlier in my testimony, we at the Commissionaires pride ourselves on being fully trained and fully equipped in terms of readiness. We are a progressive organization that is always looking to improve.

To my knowledge, we have never had a conversation with the government where we were told we were not meeting the training standards or the requirements of the specific contracts.

Fraser Tolmie: Mr. Charron, to your knowledge, have you ever denied meeting with the government?

Michel Charron: No, never.

Fraser Tolmie: Has the government ever denied meeting with you?

Michel Charron: We've had occasions when it's been difficult to contact individuals.

Fraser Tolmie: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will end our round with four minutes for Mr. Clark.

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

Thank you, Monsieur Charron and Monsieur Parent, for your service and your work with the Commissionaires.

Over the last number of years, I've had the good fortune of working with the Commissionaires quite closely in a couple of different ways. The Nova Scotia division is headquartered in my riding, which is wonderful. Previously, as a member of the provincial legislature in Halifax—the Commissionaires has the security contract at Province House as well—I got to see the professionalism and good cheer of the Commissionaires every day for years.

Thank you for leading that organization.

Monsieur Charron, I will ask the question of you first, and then, Monsieur Parent, you could answer as well afterwards.

One of the things we often hear.... I don't have the exact figure at hand, but a previous witness made mention of how a lot of private sector employers simply don't have the capacity, knowledge or skills to recognize what is in front of them when a veteran applies for a job at their organization.

Obviously, the Commissionaires is a major employer of veterans. What is it that the Commissionaires knows or is aware of that other employers could learn from? Are there lessons we can draw from your experience that we could apply to other parts of the private sector to make sure that veterans are able to access the full breadth of opportunities afforded to them?

Monsieur Charron, you can go first.

[*Translation*]

I would then like Mr. Parent to answer my question.

[*English*]

Michel Charron: I will begin by saying that we have 100 years of knowledge, expertise and military experience within the corps. From its creation back in 1925, positions have been occupied primarily by military folks. Today, as an example, our board of directors is mostly composed of ex-military veterans who do this on a voluntary basis.

We understand the community. Many of us come from that organization, so we have a very good understanding of the shortfalls regarding the transition from the military, as well as what they bring to the table, based on our own personal experiences.

● (1730)

Braedon Clark: Thank you very much.

Monsieur Parent, I have the same question for you. Are there any lessons that other organizations can learn from the Commissionaires that would make it easier for them to identify, recruit and train veterans for gainful employment, and recognize skills as well?

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Marc Parent: I touched on that in one of my earlier answers.

First, it's about having a better understanding of the military journey, that is, being better informed and having a better understanding of the skills related to the environment in which the military member operates. I would say it's a unique environment, because these are niche, highly specialized skills that are increasingly rooted in the digital shift.

Second, our organization has human resources staff with military backgrounds. That way, when a new veteran employee joins us, that staff member will be able to better support the future veteran commissionaire who is looking for a new job. That's something we have put in place that enables us to support the veteran on their journey as a new commissioner, regardless of their position, whether it be in human resources, finance, technology or simply physical security, on a military base or elsewhere.

The Chair: Thank you very much to the witnesses.

Mr. Charron, thank you for your 36 years of service in our military. Thank you for being here today as the chief executive officer of Commissionaires Ottawa and for all you do in this area.

Mr. Parent, thank you for your service as a police officer. I don't remember exactly how many years of service you have accumulated, but thank you for all those years of police service in Quebec. Thank you as well for being with us today for this very important study.

With that, I will thank you and allow you to leave the room.

I believe there's a point of order.

Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I don't want to delay my colleagues, but I would like to take a few seconds to sincerely say that I found the meeting extremely difficult in terms of interpretation. I'm the only unilingual francophone around the table, so I work entirely off the interpretation. The interpreter was working remotely, and I was unable to fully participate in the meeting.

I feel that my privileges have been breached today. I did the best I could, but, frankly, there are technical issues in the room. You had to shorten my colleagues' second round because time was taken at the beginning of the meeting to resolve some technical issues.

There are issues in this room, and I don't believe remote interpretation is ideal. I felt quite a great deal of frustration, and I wanted to put it on record so that the clerk could send a request to the procedural team to assign in-person interpreters to our committee.

Frankly, I'm really disappointed that I wasn't able to participate fully in the meeting because of the interpretation, which, in my opinion, fell short and didn't allow me to follow the conversations.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your comment.

I can attest to that fact: I, too, put on the earpiece to listen to the interpretation and found it really unfortunate. We apologize for that. The clerk and I are certainly taking note of the difficulty you encountered. We will do our best to ensure that our next meetings take place in a more welcoming environment when it comes to interpretation. We always appreciate the role of our interpreters, and I know they work hard. Today, interpretation was done remotely, which caused connectivity issues for a number of members who were in the room.

Before adjourning the meeting, I would like to bring members' attention to the fact that our next meeting will be on Thursday, November 5, from 8:15 a.m. to 10:15 a.m. It will be a briefing, which will be in camera, on trauma-informed practices.

With that, is it the will of the committee to adjourn?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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