

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Thursday, January 20, 2005

Committee Room 1

Veterans Affairs Canada – Atlantic Region

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VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Gerald Sampson (Chair)
William Dooks
William Langille
Cecil O'Donnell
Jerry Pye
Gordon Gosse
David Wilson (Sackville-Cobequid)
Harold Theriault
Stephen McNeil

In Attendance:

Darlene Henry
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESSES

Royal Canadian Legion – Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command

Victor Barnes
President

Jack Hatcher
Honorary Treasurer

John Walker
Acting Regional Director General

Barry Gallant
Associate Regional Director General

Paul Brown
District Director for Halifax

Susan Whitehouse
Acting Regional Director of Client Services



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, THURSDAY, JANUARY 20, 2005

STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Gerald Sampson

THE CHAIR: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. We've reached the appointed hour, 9:00 o'clock, to convene the meeting. I'm Gerald Sampson, and this is my first time to chair the meeting of the committee. What I would like to do as chairman is just take leave of the agenda for a moment. John Chataway was an outstanding member of this committee. This is the first meeting that John will not be attending. Maybe some of you are not aware that John passed away recently. Out of respect for such a good member of the committee and member of our Legislature, I would like to begin the meeting by asking everyone to stand and we'll just observe a moment's silence in respect for John.

[One minute of silence was observed.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We will begin in our usual fashion by asking the members of the committee who are present to introduce themselves. We'll go clockwise.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you, committee members who are present. I would also like to introduce, at this time, in attendance from the Royal Canadian Legion, Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command, Mr. Victor Barnes, Command President, observing from the side; alongside of him is Mr. Jack Hatcher, who is the Treasurer, as an observer also. From Veterans Affairs Canada - Atlantic Region, we have in our presence Mr. John Walker, Acting Regional Director General; Mr. Barry Gallant, Associate Regional Director General; Mr. Paul Brown, District Director Halifax; and we also have Ms. Susan Whitehouse, Acting Regional Director of Client Services. Welcome to all four of you. I would ask at this time that you begin your presentation.

JOHN WALKER: Thank you, sir. First off, on behalf of Veterans Affairs Canada, I would like to extend our condolences on the passing of Mr. Chataway. First of all, by way

of introduction as to who I am and who you're dealing with, I started with Veterans Affairs after finishing school at Dalhousie University in May 1983. I've worked predominantly in the Charlottetown office but have spent almost four years in Kirkland Lake, where today it's -40, so we've gone up a bit on the weather scale to the positive and, predominantly, the rest of it was in our headquarters in Charlottetown.

As of April 1st last year, I assumed the position of Regional Director General here in the Atlantic Region. So that's just a bit by way of introduction. We do have a presentation that we'll go through, but any time there are questions, I'm not sure if you want to stop me or if you want to hold them to the end, I'm comfortable with however you'd like to deal with that. We could follow the process as we did last year - I've gone through the minutes from last year - and anything that we cannot answer here today, we will take note of it and get back to you in writing as soon as we can, the way they did last year, if that's acceptable with you, sir.

THE CHAIR: It's acceptable. What I would do with the members present is ask that they hold any questions they have until your presentation is complete, because I find sometimes if we interrupt the presentation, then we risk going off on a tangent and don't get the full presentation results.

JOHN WALKER: Having gone through the notes from last year, I noticed that they did give you - I believe that was our first presentation - an overview of our structure and who reports to who, and how we fit in with the national scheme, and an overview of what, indeed, our programs are that are available for our clients across the Atlantic Provinces. So I don't propose to go through and replicate that, rather I'll provide an update on some of the issues that came out last year: there were some questions on the Last Post Fund and certainly on changes to our VIP program.

Perhaps most importantly, I'm going to go into a little bit of detail about our two initiatives that we're undertaking this year, first and foremost, the Year of the Veteran, which is a year-long celebration across the country dedicated to Canada's veterans, and the second of our new initiatives is what we call the Modernization Task Force. I'll get into it later, but essentially that's an updating of the benefits that were available to Canadian veterans immediately after the war. We're going to update those benefits to the year 2005 and make them available for the CF members. It's kind of reinventing our business.

Right now I find that Veterans Affairs Canada has two different groups of clients in broad strokes. We've got, essentially, the World War II/Korean veteran cadre and then we've got the Canada Forces veterans; I think the average age is 42, 43, whereas the average age for the World War II veteran is approximately 82. So to try to have one suite of benefits which would encompass all their needs, their needs are too different. There's not a whole lot of need for the World War II veteran for job placement, there's not a big demand for that.

With that, just by way of introduction, I guess we'll just go into our presentation. If we look at the national client base, you'll see we have our classic pie chart. The veteran

population right now in Canada, clients of Veterans Affairs, is just over 209,000. There's still a substantial group out there. You'll see that Atlantic Canada has 33,868 or 16.2 per cent of the total. To bring it down another level - this chart was not in last year's presentation - this is Nova Scotia by client type. In Nova Scotia we do have the lion's share of the veteran clients in Atlantic Canada with 15,400. Of that, you can see that the war service veterans still represent the largest group of it, but the survivor group is not only the second biggest but it is the fastest growing. If not next year, the year after, that will probably be our biggest group of clients. The other two groups, you'll see the Canadian Forces at 26 per cent and growing, that is growing reasonably fast as well, and you'll see the RCMP there with 309 clients. So that's the composition of our client base.

I know that in working in Charlottetown, my fellow Charlottetownians would ask me, exactly, the war has been over now for quite some time, what is it that you're doing? People don't realize that we still have over 200,000 clients across the country and expenditures of over \$2.3 or \$2.4 billion, which is still the tenth largest expenditure of a government department for the federal government. So it's still a meaningful force and it's by no means on the downside just yet.

The Veterans Independence Program, we had made some changes since the last time we were here, to reintroduce benefits for caregiving spouses of housekeeping and grounds-keeping. We did go back in the initial go-around to provide those benefits to spouses whose spouse was in receipt of benefits back to 1990. However, having done that - because that's when spouses became eligible for the benefit, in other words the caregiving spouse could become eligible for those benefits after the death of the veteran, it had originated in 1990 - we went back and made it that they could continue it for their lifetime, we went back to 1990 and reinstated those benefits. We thought that was the appropriate response and then after some quick reflection we went back to the origin of the program, which was 1981.

So any spouse or caregiver who was providing that care for the veteran and the veteran has since passed away is now eligible or about to be eligible and will have those benefits reinstated. That was the expressed wish of the veterans' organizations and it was pretty broadly spread across the country. So we did quickly reverse our field on that one. The original extension, our forecast showed that there were 18,000 that were made eligible as a result of the first extension of it and then the further extension back to 1981 will see an additional 4,000 made eligible for benefits. Now, the reason, clearly, why the first, going back to 1990, garnered so many more than going back to 1980 was simply because between that time that many had passed away.

We have introduced a new term here because we didn't feel that the term spouse encompassed enough so we have changed it in our legislation to primary caregivers, which encompasses common law partners, adult children, siblings or others who may qualify as being the primary caregiver for the veteran at the time of his death. Now, we've included in the package a toll-free number, if there are any questions on this issue or this program,

the 1-800 number is there in the package and that number should be able to answer any questions on specific cases.

Now, the Last Post Fund, provision of grave markers. It's administered clearly by the Last Post Fund, which is an independent body apart from Veterans Affairs, it does receive some funding from VAC and some public donations. I'm pleased to report that right now there are no outstanding applications from prior years and we only have 10 placements pending and those are simply due to the weather. Once the Spring comes and it dries out, those will be looked after. So I think the situation there is much more favourable than it was at this time last year. I think it should be acknowledged that I think this committee had a role in that last year to bring that situation to where it is today. Thank you for that.

[9:15 a.m.]

Now, the next one has to do with our Service and Program Modernization Task Force. Over the years, Veterans Affairs has made steady progress towards improving the services for Canadian Forces veterans. In the past, when CF members were through with their military career, either by way of injury or by way of retirement, the transformation from the DND roster to the Veterans Affairs roster was not smooth. It was not where it should be, too often there was, you're their responsibility, no you're DND's responsibility, and the roles and responsibilities of each department, I think it's fair to say, were not clear. So we have taken steps towards an enhanced or improved sponsorship or provisions of the benefits that we're providing, but we were dealing with tools that were essentially there for an aging population vis-à-vis a younger population such as the CF have provided.

A Service and Program Modernization Task Force was established in September 2003 and the task force's goal is to re-establish and redesign a comprehensive approach to the re-establishment of CF veterans in civilian life. The "Modern Day Veterans Charter" was announced in May 2004 by then Minister John McCallum and Minister of Defence David Pratt. So what we're trying to do is to take the benefits that are now available to these veterans but are also available to the World War II veterans but to realign them more with their need. So the types of things that we are going to have is instead of a disability pension, we're going to change it to a disability award. That will be a lump sum award provided to these recipients, which will assess their disability and say, okay, instead of a lifelong pension, we're going to provide you with x number of thousand dollars, dependent upon your disability. So that is a significant change.

Then we're going to provide a rehab program, comprehensive services to veterans incorporating their medical and vocational rehabilitation to address their disabilities and to bring them such that they can overcome their disabilities and be ready to reintegrate into the workforce.

The health services that they will have will have a health care program that will be similar to the one that is available for the Public Service, which will include the families, which was not the case before. So it's a much more comprehensive and far-reaching program.

The earnings loss and income support, this is for temporary loss of earnings assistance to veterans undergoing the rehab program, who don't have an income and while they are undergoing rehab to reintegrate them back into the workforce, we will be providing them with loss of income earnings.

If the disability is such that their rehabilitation is not a possibility, they will be provided with a loss of income for the duration until they turn 65 and then they would go over on to the other available federal programs.

The final one is job placement, which is simply, we're going to have services which would help the CF veteran find employment. These five things right now as we speak, the programs are not developed, I cannot give you the definitive that it's going to be this amount for this long for this amount of money. But that is what those will be and the details should be in place, we hope, by January 1, 2006. So those are the types of things we're moving towards in broad strokes. For example, job placement, will we have veterans preference for, for example, jobs in the federal government? I don't know, but it's certainly a possibility that they would look at, because it did exist after World War II.

The other initiative for this year, 2005, the Year of the Veteran. A year-long tribute to honour veterans of the wars of the last century and Canadian Forces who served at home and abroad in the service of peace. It is also to mark the 60th Anniversary of the end of the Second World War. We did have our kickoff on Tuesday at Camp Hill, which was very well attended and it is just the start of what will be, hopefully, a year-long celebration with a number of significant events across the country.

The key events in Atlantic Canada, the Battle of the Atlantic, the Liberation of Holland, VE Day ceremonies and activities, Beaumont-Hamel Commemoration, Black Battalion. Am I missing some? Okay. Anyway, the list is there.

We are encouraging provincial and municipal governments to proclaim the Year of the Veteran. It has already happened in New Brunswick. Here in Halifax, we formed a working group to plan and organize activities and events which we hope will provide a model for communities across Nova Scotia to be involved.

Information on the Year of the Veteran is available on our Web site with ideas, kits, et cetera. If there is anything that we can help you with, by all means, phone our offices and we will be sure to get what you're looking for.

So, now, for questions, we have a contact centre for phone-in or people can call their district office. The number is there for the spouses, primary caregivers and for the Year of the Veteran and there is our Web site.

That is my little introduction to it. We will go from there.

THE CHAIR: I will begin by asking the committee if they have any questions. Just as a point of information, I would like to remind everyone that, with the passing of John

Chataway, Mr. Bill Dooks is the replacement on the committee. I failed to say that at the beginning. Welcome, Bill, you're a very competent member to have as a replacement.

Cecil O'Donnell.

CECIL O'DONNELL: First, I want to thank you for your comments this morning. I guess, probably, this question I am going to ask doesn't really involve what you are speaking to here this morning. But lately in the news we have been hearing a lot about the veterans' medals. I understand that the medals are earned by the veterans so they are the sole possession of the veterans. What is your position on whether the veterans have that right to sell them or their family has the right to sell them?

JOHN WALKER: My position would be that that would remain with the family. Veterans Affairs does try to back away and not get in the middle of that type of event because the veteran earned them and how the family or the veteran chooses to deal with them, we would try vigorously to stay out of that, to stay on the sidelines of that. It's their personal property. That's my point of view.

CECIL O'DONNELL: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Dooks.

WILLIAM DOOKS: Yes, thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's nice having you here today. A question about services and programs. You're going to make some changes there.

JOHN WALKER: Yes.

WILLIAM DOOKS: You're going to change the disability pension to a disability award. In doing that, how do you make that decision? Do you go out to the stakeholders, to the Legions, and if this is the case, are they in support of the award instead of a pension?

JOHN WALKER: Very good question. We have had - and they're ongoing right now - extensive consultations with focus groups of members to get their feedback on it. But, for sure, we would not have gone down this road without the support of the major veterans groups. To do otherwise, it just wouldn't make sense.

WILLIAM DOOKS: Yes. My concern surrounding that, if you were to give someone a lump sum of money and, for some reason, if that money should disappear, for whatever reason, here we have a veteran that is up against the wall and then would have to find other, I guess, opportunities - and I have some concern about that. I live in a rural area. There are a lot of veterans and, certainly, in support of their accomplishments and the dedication. But from time to time, we are contacted, as the MLAs, to find support, still, for veterans or to take up their cause on certain issues. I just have concern about that, that's all, if that's not managed appropriately.

JOHN WALKER: Your concern is one that we share with you and we are trying to find ways to mitigate against it. Will we be able to do it 100 per cent properly to make sure that the money doesn't disappear? I doubt that we will be able to do that.

WILLIAM DOOKS: Yes, that's right.

JOHN WALKER: There will have to be some assessment of the individual's capabilities to handle the monies, okay?

WILLIAM DOOKS: Yes.

JOHN WALKER: There will be financial counselling available. But the disability award is for the disability. There are other monies available while they're on rehab, to reintegrate back into the workforce.

WILLIAM DOOKS: Support program, yes.

JOHN WALKER: So if the individual wasn't able to reintegrate back into the workplace, they would also get money in lieu of being able to work. So the question you raised has been brought up and will continue to be brought up with the focus groups, and how we deal with it will be one of an evolutionary nature, because we think we have the tools in place to make sure that there is some income coming into the home.

WILLIAM DOOKS: Just one other quick one, bringing up issues that are commonly brought up. General maintenance for the residents, snowplowing, lawn mowing - I've always wanted to ask this question and now I have the opportunity - what programs are in place to support veterans or spouses of veterans for general maintenance and I would say of a minor nature, not necessarily windows and roofs, but general maintenance, their lawns and their driveways? Of course with the climate changing, we often have the ice issue, the snowplowing issue, and as simple as shovelling off their front porch or steps, that seems to be a more complicated issue rather than the snowplowing of the drive, because, of course, they can hire someone to do that quickly, but just to shovel their steps which is a constant problem . . .

JOHN WALKER: It's interesting because the point you raise is one of the cornerstones of our Veterans Independence Program. Last year, nationally, we spent \$27.5 million across the country, and just over \$6 million in Nova Scotia on that very thing, what we call grounds-keeping, and that is in the Summer, your lawn, your raking and stuff like that, and in the Winter, snow shovelling and just getting your driveway plowed.

There aren't many provincial home care programs that encompass those benefits, but in our research back in the early 1980s when we did this, we found that not being able to keep the driveway cleared or keep the grass cut was a primary reason why people would move from their primary residence into a long-term care facility or a condo or an apartment or something. With these simple things, such as that, we're able to keep people in their own homes that much longer. VIP is meant to enable people to stay at home longer, rather than

going into a long-term care facility because people don't want to go into a long-term care facility, and from a government's perspective, it's much more expensive. There's 44,000 people nationally on the program, and in Nova Scotia alone there's 10,122. So that is a cornerstone of that program.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Wilson.

DAVID WILSON: Thank you for your presentation. Just a few questions here, some on your presentation and some off. Let's see if we can get some answers. One is definitely about the Last Post Fund, which I brought up last time you guys made a presentation. There was a backlog, I understand there were about 30 or so headstones covered throughout the Summer, and there are about 10 pending. A lot of that, I have to say, is through the generosity of the public, through the donations that come into the Last Post Fund. My question is, is the department increasing their funding to it, or are they going to monitor it to make sure there's no more backlog? Definitely, it wasn't just in Nova Scotia, which I know we're dealing with here, it was across the country. Are they increasing the budget for the Last Post Fund, or are they just going to monitor it to make sure there's no backlog?

JOHN WALKER: I don't know that we need to increase the budget, because over the entirety of the country there was adequate funding in place. That's what we're led to believe.

SUSAN WHITEHOUSE: We spent \$1.6 million in Nova Scotia.

JOHN WALKER: I think the money is there, but we do have to, as you say, more carefully monitor it and make sure that we don't fall behind, where we did in the last year, as we pointed out. I should point out at this time, though, that we were recently in receipt of a significant amount of funding from the government for commemorative activities. It's something that in my almost 23 or 24 years with the department we didn't pay enough attention to, perhaps. We are now realizing that, and with the public, when you go to the Remembrance ceremonies on November 11th, the attendance is now greater than it has ever been. The Remembrance theme is going to be really emphasized, considerably more than it was in the past. I think that's in recognition of just how very important people view this activity.

DAVID WILSON: Definitely. I think it's important, just viewing what's happened over the last year with some of the schools kind of going to some of the burial sites and improving some of the headstones. Definitely, I applaud you and hopefully encourage you to continue that. I was at the event the other day for the launch of the Year of the Veteran. I listened to your speech, and in that was definitely the emphasis on encouraging our youth and our young to hopefully continue the remembrance of our veterans and the sacrifice they made. With that, and I don't know if you can answer this or not, is there any additional funding this year to kind of target the youth programs that we see?

[9:30 a.m.]

A lot of the Legions in our province initiate different programs throughout the year, one like the youth leadership camp they have every year, and I believe they've made presentations for our committee about funding issues. It's harder for Legions to continue to support these different initiatives, especially for the youth. Another one is the youth Legion track and field meet that they have provincially, who go on to national meets. I think it's important to emphasize to the youth, especially if it's a Legion-funded or Legion-backed event, I think it's a perfect opportunity to infuse some money in there. Are you looking at any additional funding targeted . . .

JOHN WALKER: There is additional funding targeted for youth, and there are several initiatives underway which will engage the schools in an even more enhanced fashion than they have in the past. For example, the Queen's Own Regiment has struck a number of coin-like medallions and on it it has the deceased veteran's name, his regiment and his file number, his regimental number. We're looking at a program where we could provide a medal to each of the schools across the country, in particular classes, and they would do research on that individual and make presentations to a national organization. They would have a contest to see who could come up with the most research. It's interesting, because the kids get to know this particular individual who is just picked at random. They would look up all the details on Mr. Smith or whoever, and they would come to know his story and his war experience and about his personal life, whatever they could find. We're reaching out to that extent. There's a distinct thrust to engage the schools, no question about it.

DAVID WILSON: That's good to see. With my daughter just starting school, there are different programs that they initiate through different parts of the province. They learn about those communities. I think it's a great opportunity, maybe even dealing with the issue around medals. If the government could obtain some of these medals and maybe put them into the schools, have a memorial in a school, if they're from that area. I think it's a perfect opportunity, and that's going to be there for as long as the school is there. Maybe it's an initiative you could look at but, definitely, I think that's an avenue we could maybe look at.

For these youth programs - I know in my office we've had people come in, especially with the Legions, about funding - what is the avenue if we have someone who comes into our office? Where can we send them to look at where they can apply to a certain program for funding, especially around the youth programs and stuff that we see in our province?

JOHN WALKER: Two areas I would suggest would be the veteran toll-free Web site for the Year of the Veteran and the numbers there, or our Web site. If you're not getting what you think . . .

DAVID WILSON: I can call you personally? (Laughter)

JOHN WALKER: I will leave my number. (Interruptions) They've already warned me about that on several occasions, not to give out my number. I will definitely leave my card with you. I don't have any problem with people phoning.

DAVID WILSON: Just on this year, especially around the Legion track and field, it's an important year for Legions because it's the year of the Canada Games and it's really momentum and a stepping stone for many athletes. Definitely, maybe, we'll have a conversation.

THE CHAIR: Just before I call on Mr. Theriault, you'll notice that Stephen McNeil has left the meeting. He was called out on a matter that he must attend to, so he'll be absent for the remainder of the meeting. I'll just say that for the record. Mr. Theriault.

HAROLD THERIAULT: Thank you for your presentation. What is the Veterans Affairs policy, or does it have a policy, for Legions of this country?

JOHN WALKER: A policy in which sense?

HAROLD THERIAULT: A policy of helping Legions in a way that - I'm going to bring this up and maybe Mr. Barnes could jump in here and help us with this. I have five Legions in my riding. This past two or three months this corporation called SOCAN has been sending bills to these Legions in the \$200 to \$500 range for playing music in the Legions. I wrote a letter, and I haven't brought it with me. I believe I cc'd it to Veterans Affairs in Ottawa. I've never heard anything back from that. I'm just wondering why we have five Legions down there on the verge of bankruptcy, and a corporation - how they do this, I don't know, I don't know how they would know what music you were playing or when you were playing it, but all these Legions received these bills. It was brought to my attention, and I've never heard anything back from it for over two months. Maybe Mr. Barnes could step in here and fill the committee in a little on SOCAN. Then maybe you could answer that question about policy.

THE CHAIR: I'd invite Mr. Barnes to sit at a chair so he is able to use a mic.

VICTOR BARNES: SOCAN is devastating the Legions right now. Quite a few of them are probably going to close because of it. It's being handled, as I understand right now, by the Dominion Command of the Royal Canadian Legion. It has been turned over to them. So far we haven't heard anything back from them. We're still getting the bills and everything, and we're after Dominion Command to give us some answers. It's certainly being looked into. I think Ontario Command is having a real problem with it. The last I heard they had an answer, but I didn't hear what the answer was. There's no question SOCAN is going to close some of our Legions, no question about it at all.

HAROLD THERIAULT: Mr. Barnes, how do they determine how to charge a Legion \$200 to \$500 a year? Do they record the music somehow that's being played in that facility?

VICTOR BARNES: If I could answer that, sir, I don't think I'd be here, because nobody can figure that out.

HAROLD THERIAULT: Mr. Walker, does Veterans Affairs have a policy somehow that they could help the Legions of this country deal with that?

JOHN WALKER: Veterans Affairs works very closely with the RCL on a number of issues. We're engaging, more and more, the services of the Legions through people from the Legion, volunteers, who go out into long-term care facilities and do client satisfaction surveys with our clients. They are heavily engaged in the pension process and a variety of other aspects. But the Royal Canadian Legion, and rightly so, guards their independence from Veterans Affairs quite judiciously because they do have to have independence from us because of the type of working relationship that we have.

We had, in the past, provided to Dominion Command an annual grant, I think it was in the magnitude of \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year, but the Legion chose not to accept that grant - and I forget how many years ago it was, but I can verify it - because they didn't want to be seen to have too close a working relationship with Veterans Affairs. From time to time, dare I say it, we do come at odds with one another because it is the role of the Legion to try to get us to do as much as we can for veterans and it is our role to do that as well, given the amount of money that we are accorded by the federal Treasury because it is not open-ended. So from time to time we do have disagreements, shall we say. Therein lies the problem. We do not have a policy that would see us have an ability to accord funding to any of the 1,600 individual branches across the country.

I don't want to speak on behalf of Mr. Barnes but the Legion finds itself now at a bit of a crossroads because their membership is dwindling because of the age of the World War II veterans and the same participation rate is not being taken up by associate members. Is that fair to say, Mr. Barnes?

VICTOR BARNES: That is pretty fair to say.

JOHN WALKER: So I don't know if I've answered your question, Mr. Theriault, but the straight answer, after all of that is, no, our policy is that we do not provide funding to individual Legion branches.

HAROLD THERIAULT: But couldn't Veterans Affairs go to bat with SOCAN and try to negotiate maybe something fair?

JOHN WALKER: Okay, well, that I can look into because you did mention that you had sent a letter to Ottawa and I wouldn't have seen that letter. I have not seen that letter but I will find out where that letter is and where the response is to it and get you an answer to your question because that is only fair. For me to say that we can or we can't, that is beyond my scope because we would have, I'm sure, a few lawyers involved in that and when a few lawyers get involved, they don't need my help because I would only run asunder.

HAROLD THERIAULT: Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: If I could interject as chairman here, the next meeting, on February 17th, the Royal Canadian Legion are the guests that will be attending. They will be the witnesses at the meeting and I'm just wondering if that could be a timeline that you and Mr. Barnes could search for an answer to the question of SOCAN and maybe be able to bring something back and that would put a timeline on it, February 17th, so that we might be able to resolve that situation or have some definite information by that time and hopefully that will give you enough time to look into the letter that Mr. Theriault has sent, if it is all right with yourself.

JOHN WALKER: That is perfect. Now, I can't say what the answer will be but I will make sure we have an answer.

THE CHAIR: No, but it will give you a timeline on which to know that we would like a response by that time. Is that satisfactory with yourself, Mr. Theriault?

HAROLD THERIAULT: I won't be here at that time but sure, it will be all right. Somebody will be here for me.

THE CHAIR: They are big shoes but we will try our best, Mr. Theriault, to fill them for you.

Are there any further questions from the committee? Gordie, do you have some questions? Okay, yes, you are next then.

GORDON GOSSE: Hi, Gordie Gosse, MLA, Cape Breton Nova. My question was concerning the primary caregiver. Looking at that issue, you said an adult child. In Cape Breton we have lots of veterans and some of the children are looking after them, an adult child, like an older daughter is looking after both parents who are veterans and the father had passed away and the mother is still alive but now she is ill with lung cancer and the daughter had quit work to look after both, at that time, but the father is gone and now looking after the mother and has no income as her unemployment has run out and there is a certain length of time for that, I think it was 15 weeks or something. Now she has no income and I don't think Veterans Affairs will pay her to look after her mother. Is that a possibility?

I have sent letters off to Veterans Affairs myself and I met with the minister in December on that issue in Ottawa to find out, in this case, because the daughter now has no income looking after the mother and they said they would pay for somebody else outside the family to come in as a primary respite care but that person cannot give a needle. The mother needs a needle for her illness and the daughter gives the needle so I'm just wondering about that. That's just a case that I have in my riding.

JOHN WALKER: What I would do is, if you could give me the name of that person afterwards, I will look into the specifics of it for you and get you an answer. In general, my

definition here is, on the expansion of the spouses' primary caregivers is most primary caregivers are spouses, common law partners but adult children, siblings and others may also qualify. So given the outline that you have provided and that definition, what I can see there is there should be some leeway where that could be accommodated.

SUSAN WHITEHOUSE: It would depend though because if the spouse was the primary caregiver for the veteran, then she would be the primary caregiver rather than the . . .

GORDON GOSSE: But in this case they were both veterans. They both served overseas.

SUSAN WHITEHOUSE: Oh, they are both veterans.

GORDON GOSSE: They are both veterans and she was the primary caregiver and he had passed away, so the adult daughter is looking after her. So they were both veterans and both served overseas and I have not been able to be successful to help in that matter.

JOHN WALKER: According to the definition, there seems to be some latitude there but if we could get together after, you could give me the name and I can have it looked into for you specifically, but I don't want the name on the . . .

GORDON GOSSE: Oh, not a problem. I wouldn't do that but I did send letters off to Veterans Affairs in Ottawa in December and in November, I think it was.

JOHN WALKER: And did you get an answer?

GORDON GOSSE: Not yet, no. I actually hand-delivered a letter to the minister in Ottawa on December 7th.

JOHN WALKER: And you didn't get an answer yet.

GORDON GOSSE: Actually, no.

JOHN WALKER: Can I get a copy?

GORDON GOSSE: My colleague, Dave Wilson, was with me and we both met with the Veterans Affairs Minister on December 7th in Ottawa.

JOHN WALKER: Okay, if I could get a copy of those letters.

GORDON GOSSE: My second question is around the 2005 Year of the Veteran. There are a lot of veterans going overseas, in my area, the Cape Breton Highlanders are going to Italy and the North Novies are going to France and that but I had a question from a Legion member by the name of Mr. Abbie Neville, who is actually Past President of the Whitney Pier Branch 128 Legion and wants to know why there isn't anybody going to London. He brought this up to me, actually, at the swearing-in of the executive at last

month's meeting I attended and wanted to know why they have all these things going to Italy and France but nobody actually going to London and thousands and thousands of people were in London and have never - like he said, they go to France and he talked about other things and he said there has never been actually anybody go to London.

[9:45 a.m.]

He explained it to me this way, that after the invasion and everything else, if he had have taken a leave and went across on the boat to France and then came back to London, he would have qualified - I forget where it stands in there - he would have gotten the Star of France or something for serving in France but he didn't want to go over there just on a seven-day leave so he spent five years in London. He was just wondering if there is ever anyone going to London to recognize that, the service that they did in London preparing for the invasion and all the training that they did in London and everything else, there have never been any veterans who have gone to London. That was just a question by him and he does read the minutes from this meeting very carefully.

JOHN WALKER: Okay. My understanding on that one is that there is a pilgrimage in May to Holland. There will be an option available for veterans, there is going to be upwards of 150 veterans, I believe, going on that pilgrimage. There will be an opportunity, while they are there, should they so choose to visit London during that pilgrimage. Now, I don't know if that specifically answers your question or not. There is no plan to have a separate pilgrimage from Canada to London but there will be an option, as I understand it, in the pilgrimage to Holland this May. So we are quasi meeting your request.

I will say, though, to have a pilgrimage, when we are taking 150 veterans at an average age of 82 or 83 overseas, it is one big undertaking. You have to have one caregiver per veteran or someone to accompany the veteran. You take several doctors and several nurses with you because the pilgrimages are hard work. It's from sun-up to sundown. They are on the go, they are everywhere and inevitably it is 100 degrees Fahrenheit and there is no shade or whatever but it does take a significant toll.

So it's not something that we do all that often and when we do, clearly the one for the liberation of Holland is probably - they said the 50th one was the last one and in Holland they are calling this the Big Bang. Those are not our words but I'm just reporting back to you what they are calling it. So this is going to be a significant event and I think if we were going to choose between London and Holland, Holland would be the ticket.

GORDON GOSSE: Which would make sense in Cape Breton because the Highlanders were actually one of the main forces in that and there are war brides living in Cape Breton from Holland, who came back after World War II, but it was just a question by a Legion member and I thought I would get an answer for him. He asked that question and he is pretty persistent in his matters. He has been a tireless fighter for veterans for 60 years. As you said, the average age is 82 and a lot of the guys in my Legion - I have three Legions in my riding but the Whitney Pier one is where I grew up next to my whole life and I know everybody in that Legion and they are a pretty feisty bunch. They had quite a

reunion, I think, in 1962 themselves. So they are quite a crew and I have nothing but the utmost respect for those guys. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Gordon. No other questions? I have a question for the panel myself. Is there money for veterans for rehabilitation of their homes? I know there was at one time but what I'm looking at is windows, doors, just to refurbish the home that is probably . . .

JOHN WALKER: Under our Veterans Independence Program, we do have what we call an element of it which is called home modifications but it is not for windows or doors but it is to make modifications. For example, they used to be able to get up and down the stairs, well now they can't, so we need to modify the home, either put in a Stair-Glide so they can get up and down the stairs or to put a washroom or a bedroom down on the first floor. For eligible veterans, those types of things are available. For low-income veterans, there is \$500 a year, what we call the assistance fund, which is available on an emergency basis. Now, \$500 won't do much for your windows but it is if the fridge breaks or something like that. That is available but it is only for what we qualify as "low-income veterans".

So on home modifications, last year in Atlantic Canada we spent \$362,000. I don't have it broken down by Nova Scotia but we did spend that amount of money across Atlantic Canada and Nova Scotia would probably be half of that amount. So it's there but it's not something that's one of our larger programs.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. This, I guess, finishes the question portion. I want to bring a different topic to you while you are here, being the federal representatives. I read the report that we will be dealing with later as a committee, the year-end report. The concern with veterans, seniors, people who are handicapped - and a lot of veterans fall under all three categories - is about the self-serve gas stations. What I was wondering, it's something that we will probably write a letter to the providers of the gas stations and whatnot and I would like your support on it if the committee approves this and I will just throw this out to you now while you are here.

We have the blue sign that we hang in the window of the vehicle to show that it's a handicap vehicle. We have blue painted parking spots for handicap parking spots and I'm thinking why can't we have a painted blue and white pump at service stations, put there with the permission of the owner/operator of the station, that if it's all self-serve, then that pump only, they agree, as the owner or operator of the station, that they themselves, or somebody else, go out and attend to that pump so when the person who has the handicap, who has the veterans' plate on there, who is a senior or somebody with a disability, they pull up to that pump and they are served. That, I think, would be an excellent promotion tool for the Irvings and the Shells and the Essos and all the other service stations and why not show a little bit of compassion and I'm sure the goodwill that they would attain would more than cover the cost of the blue and white paint on the pump.

That's just something that came out of the report when I read it and I was just thinking now, this is the Year of the Veteran, no better time to promote something like that

than now. In order to entice these big money guzzlers, the gas companies, there has to be a profit in there for them in order to do it and I'm sure that they would look at that as a good selling tool, as a marketing tool and at the same time all we are interested in is having our public served, especially those with disabilities and maybe through the Veterans Affairs Committee we could generate that thought and maybe it might come into being.

JOHN WALKER: Certainly from our perspective, it's beyond our scope or our legislation to tell the oil companies how to do their business but purely from a social policy point of view, we would be supportive of that. I don't know if the companies would want to set aside a pump specifically just to look after the needs of "disabled" citizens, but if they were to pull up and display to the person at the cash register that they did have the sticker that they use in the window for the parking meters, and if the gas companies could agree to come out and provide them with the service free of charge, I think that would be a very valid request. I don't know if they'd be in a position - and I can't speak for the gas companies, obviously - to designate one pump of six, or however many they would have, as only being used for people with the blue identifier.

PAUL BROWN: Not from any expertise from Veterans Affairs but just reacting to it as a citizen, I would assume that a gas company might say, well, we have our full-service pumps right now. So what I would suggest in the proposal would be that, as we all know, the full-service pumps charge more money than the self-service and that perhaps someone who has the handicap sticker, whatever, would actually be given the self-serve price type of thing at a full-service pump as perhaps being something that would be maybe more palatable, perhaps, to the gas companies. But, as John says, we can't really tell them how to do their business. I think that would be something that might have some teeth to it.

THE CHAIR: They may even have a leather apron made up, blue and white with the handicap sign on it, to throw over the top of a pump, so rather than people pulling up indiscriminately to five or six pumps, they just pull up to that pump in particular, and then show their sign or whatever. I throw that out for discussion, and I'll get some more guidance from the committee. I just wanted you to be aware of that, and hopefully the committee will agree to send a letter, and a copy to yourself, when we discuss it.

JOHN WALKER: The fuel companies may have different options. From a public policy point of view, it's a winning suggestion, there's no doubt about it. They may have their own ideas on how to actually implement it. They would know far better their business than I would, I'll tell you that.

THE CHAIR: I was just thinking veterans basically covers all categories of senior, disability or handicapped or whatever. I just thought it might be something that we could ask for the support of the veterans to do that. Does anybody else have anything to add or ask of the witnesses this morning?

With that, I'll take the opportunity on behalf of the committee to thank you very much for coming. We're up to date, and looking forward to a reply from you by February

14th on what Mr. Theriault asked. We'll go from there. I see the snow has started outside, so have a safe return home.

JOHN WALKER: On behalf of Veterans Affairs, thanks for having us, and any time you want us back, let us know. I'll leave my card, and don't hesitate to call. We'll do what we can do.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, we appreciate having you here.

We stand in recess for five minutes to give our goodbyes to the witnesses.

[9:59 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[10:09 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Let's call the meeting back to order, I would like to reconvene the meeting at this time and move on with committee business. What we do have on the agenda is the signing off of the annual report for last year. All the members except probably the new member, Mr. Dooks, had a chance to read it. Is there anything in there that anybody disagrees with, or is the committee willing to sign off on the annual report?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE CHAIR: So we'll sign off on that. One further, for permission, we have a list of the names of myself as chairman and the members of the committee - Bill, your name is on the new slip, are you willing to sign that?

WILLIAM DOOKS: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Okay, that's the form we will sign, and we will pass that around to have that signed. It's come to our attention that the meeting in February is not a good time. Are both Legion members gone? (Interruptions) Are they pretty well available? I was just wondering, that conflicts with the NDP out-of-the-area meeting. (Interruptions)

Would March 3rd be sufficient, that's two weeks' past, before the March break? Is that okay? (Interruptions) So we'll tentatively put March 3rd. We'll have that confirmed by notice, and we'll cancel out February 17th. Is there anything further to come before the meeting?

We have a letter here that I'll read quickly, and it's in recognition:

"The Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs would like to take this opportunity to introduce and recognize the Canadian Youth Remembrance Society."

That's work that was done by the previous committee.

"The Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs congratulates the Canadian Youth Remembrance Society on becoming an official society. This momentous occasion was officially marked by Her Honour, Lieutenant Governor Myra Freeman on November 5, 2004.

The Chairman and Members of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs wish the Canadian Youth Remembrance Society well in their future endeavours."

So they're wondering, can we send that letter giving them recognition, and I'll sign as chairman on behalf of the committee. There's a Certificate of Recognition, which lists the present members, myself as chairman, and our new member as well. Is it in agreement with the committee that we'll send that?

It is agreed.

DAVID WILSON: Just to make note, I was talking with the young gentlemen who made the presentation. They asked me about it on Wednesday, when they had their kickoff to the Year of the Veteran. So that's great. (Interruptions)

THE CHAIR: We'll clean off all the old business from the past and begin with a new slate. Is there any further business to come before the committee?

Having heard none, then, as chairman, we'll stand adjourned until March 3rd, if that's in agreement with the Legion. We'll be notified.

[The committee adjourned at 10:13 a.m.]