

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Thursday, November 15, 2007

Committee Room 1

Veterans Independence Program

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VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Harold Theriault (Chair)
Keith Bain
Patrick Dunn
Chuck Porter
Gordon Gosse
David Wilson (Sackville-Cobequid)
Percy Paris
Manning MacDonald
Wayne Gaudet

[Wayne Gaudet was replaced by Michel Samson.]

In Attendance:

Darlene Henry
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESS

Joyce Carter



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2007

STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Harold Theriault

THE CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. I would like to call this meeting to order. First of all, we'd like to thank you, Mrs. Carter, for coming here today. It's going to be interesting, I think, your presentation - we hope it is.

First of all, I would like for us all to introduce ourselves around the table. Then you can go ahead with your presentation and following that, there may be some questions from some of the members. We'll just go around the table and ask you a few questions about your presentation.

[The committee members and witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: So you can go ahead, Mrs. Carter, with your presentation. Take your time, no rush.

JOYCE CARTER: If I go too long, just let me know. I think I'll have a drink of water first, before I start.

My husband, Murdock H. Carter, served in the Royal Canadian Army during the Second World War. He fought in France, Belgium, Holland and Germany. He died on the 15th of November, seven years today. After his death, I received a VIP benefit, which is housekeeping and groundskeeping; also the same income as when he was living, which continued for one year.

In October 2001, a letter written by Cliff Chadderton - published in the local newspaper - was brought to my attention by a friend of mine. Cliff Chadderton mentioned that since World War II, the Royal Canadian Legion have been lobbying the government to grant the VIP to all the veterans' widows, back to the Second World War. The war was over 50 years ago and the veterans' widows were still not receiving the VIP.

When I received my last cheque from the Department of Veterans Affairs exactly one year after my husband died, I was devastated. It felt as though the very ground had been moved from under my feet. I knew I had to do something, not only for myself but for all the veterans' widows across Canada who were in the same situation.

On the 1st of November, 2001, I started a petition lobbying the government to grant the VIP to every veteran's widow, back to the Second World War, and to continue until their death. The information for the petition was published in the local newspapers, including The ChronicleHerald. The first letter I wrote to the Prime Minister on the 14th of November, 2001, was also mailed to the Minister of Veterans Affairs and 14 Members of Parliament. After a few months conversing with many veterans' widows, I found most of them were finding it financially difficult to maintain their homes, spending sleepless nights wondering how much longer they would be able to stay in their own home.

In April 2001, I sent copies of a letter I wrote to the Prime Minister, the Minister of Veterans Affairs, all the Members of Parliament - 297 - also 27 Senators, and received only 60 acknowledgments. Finally, in September 2002, with the message of the petition published in 26 newspapers, also the Legion Magazine, we reached many of the veterans' widows from St. John's, Newfoundland, across this vast country of Canada to Vancouver, British Columbia.

On the 20th of January, 2003, with 996 names on the petition, I sent copies of the petition to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, also the Minister of Finance, for them to receive before the budget was read in February. Disappointed but not surprised, the VIP benefits for the veterans' widows were not mentioned in the budget. The government finally granted the VIP on the 12th of May, 2003, to the veterans' widows, who at that time were receiving the VIP benefit for one year. They would continue to receive the VIP for the rest of their lives.

On the 6th of November, the VIP was granted to the veterans' widows, back to the first of September, 1990, at which time I received my VIP benefits. Over a year later, on the 7th of December, 2004, the VIP was granted to the veterans' widows back to the 7th of April, 1981. The veterans' widows previous to the 7th of April, 1981, were for the third time ignored as though they did not exist, which is shameful and despicable of the government to discriminate against any one of the veterans' widows.

Lobbying the government continued. In October 2005, I received a letter written on behalf of Stephen Harper, in answer to my letter, in which was said, "You will be pleased to know that a Conservative government would immediately extend Veterans Independence Program services to the widows of all Second World War and Korean War veterans regardless of when the Veteran died or how long they had been receiving the benefit before they passed away."

When Stephen Harper became the Prime Minister, I brought his attention to the promise he made not only to me, but to all of the veterans' widows on the 4th of October, 2005, when he was the Leader of the Opposition Party. The hopes of many veterans' widows were built up high, believing that Stephen Harper would honour his promise to them. When the Minister of Veterans Affairs stopped by the Royal Canadian Legion, Branch 139 in Williams Lake, British Columbia, on the 25th of July, 2006, Vivian MacNeil, Zone Commander for the Royal Canadian Legion, Cariboo Zone, handed a copy of my letter to Gregory Thompson, which mentioned Stephen Harper's promise of the VIP to veterans' widows.

During Gregory Thompson's visit with MP Dick Harris, Vivian MacNeil and members of the Royal Canadian Legion, Gregory Thompson said, "The Prime Minister asked me to put a package together and cost it out and I've done that. We're trying to identify areas that will make the most difference."

A few weeks ago I accidentally found a letter written in answer to mine, from Stephen Harper, dated the 28th of June, 2005, with his promise to all the veterans' widows and signed by Stephen Harper. He cannot deny that he made the promise and I intend to keep him to his promise. Several Members of Parliament are lobbying the government for VIP benefits for veterans' widows.

The review by Gregory Thompson is ongoing and has supposedly been continuous since the last 15 months. This is definitely absurd; the government is prolonging the issue and for how much longer? They are hoping that many of the veterans' widows, now in their 80's and 90's, will soon die. The situation should not be existing, there is no earthly reason why this VIP benefit could not be given to these veterans' widows immediately. They are only asking for what, in all justification, they are entitled to.

Since November 2001, I have mailed a letter to the following persons at least every five weeks, 59 letters in all to: the Prime Minister, the Minister of Veterans Affairs, two Senators, the Senate Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs, two MLAs, the Royal Canadian Legions and 26 newspapers from St. John's, Newfoundland, across to Vancouver, British Columbia. I have also mailed a letter to each and every one of the Members of Parliament at least five or six times since 2001, wrote to Premiers, veterans, widows and countless individuals. All in all I have written a numerous amount of letters. I certainly intend to keep lobbying the government until Stephen Harper honours his promise.

Many of the veterans' widows may have voted for the Conservative Party, believing they would be receiving the VIP immediately when the Conservatives came to power. Sad to say their hopes were shattered once again. This treatment of the veterans' widows by the government has to end. The honourable Prime Minister needs to honour his promise immediately.

Looking back at a letter written to me by a Member of Parliament, I read the following, "It seems that Mr. Thompson is not very committed to his promise on this issue.

Today it is most difficult for veterans to get the Veterans Independence Program. A recent denial to a frail 82-year-old one stated that it was only available as a last resort if one is to be institutionalized. Our office will continue to press the widows and former participants."

[9:15 a.m.]

This is outrageous to even think of our veterans who gave their all for us and over 60 years after the war they are being treated so inhumanely by their government, who would not be there if it had not been for the brave men and women who went through hell on earth for their country.

Several Members of Parliament are lobbying the government for the VIP to be granted immediately: Peter Stoffer, Rodger Cuzner, Robert Thibault and others. We need to give them our full support by also lobbying the government. I thank each and every one of you for your kind attention. Thank you. I read that at a presentation I made in Truro to the Veteran Widow and Widowers Association, which was done on May 9th.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs. Carter, that was a great presentation. Now if you don't mind, we'll go around the table, probably five minutes each or something and ask any questions we may have or comments. Maybe we can start with the fellow you know quite well, Mr. Samson.

MICHEL SAMSON: First of all, Joyce, you said you were nervous, but I can tell you that you did a great presentation and we're certainly very pleased to be able to hear from a veteran's widow directly, to hear exactly your crusade. Just for the benefit of my colleagues around the table and to confirm, you are currently receiving VIP benefits, aren't you?

JOYCE CARTER: Yes, since 2003.

MICHEL SAMSON: So this is not an issue for yourself, I think I want to make that clear to all of my colleagues, that you are receiving the benefits and there's really nothing forcing you to carry on this crusade other than a desire to look out for the interests of so many widows out there who are not getting the benefits.

JOYCE CARTER: That's right. When I started, Michel, this was my intention, not only for myself but for the rest of them.

MICHEL SAMSON: I think what's remarkable is that you started this crusade when you weren't receiving benefits and even after you did receive benefits, you've continued the crusade and many widows are fortunate to have you as their spokesperson. It's difficult for many of them to come forward and to be able to share their stories, and age is certainly getting up there. The other thing that I wanted my colleagues to know, Mrs. Carter, is that you're a war bride, aren't you?

JOYCE CARTER: Oh, yes.

MICHEL SAMSON: And you recently celebrated a milestone, didn't you? How many years has it been now that you've been here in Canada?

JOYCE CARTER: I've been here since 1945, so that's 62 years, I guess - or 61 years, whatever.

MICHEL SAMSON: One of the things that you didn't mention in your presentation, Mrs. Carter - which some of the members may be aware of, but some may not - you were recently in Ottawa. I'm wondering if you could tell us a bit of what took place when you were in Ottawa and why you were in Ottawa.

JOYCE CARTER: Well, the reason I was in Ottawa was to meet, I hoped to meet him, which I did.

MICHEL SAMSON: Now, when you say him . . .

JOYCE CARTER: The Prime Minister, sorry. I always said all those years after I started this that if the House of Parliament was as close to us as Sydney, I would have been there long ago on the doorsteps waiting to meet him. (Laughter) But I don't like travelling by plane and it wasn't too easy, but I got there and managed to see both the Prime Minister and Gregory Thompson, Minister of Veterans Affairs; they were both in the office at the same time and I spoke with them.

Of course, the first thing I said to the Prime Minister was, why did you not keep your promise - it's been 18 months since you promised to grant this VIP? Of course, well, [he said] the Liberal Government didn't do anything for the veterans' widows and I said, indeed they did. I said, they gave it to them back to 1981 and if they had been in power this time, maybe all the veterans' widows would have it by now. We are going to give it, was the answer, in the next budget. I knew when the next budget would be, but I just said, when is that, Prime Minister? Next June. Well, I said, that's far too long. That's a whole 12 months away, that's too long for the widows to wait. If you don't give it within the next month, I'll be back to torment you. (Laughter) That didn't happen, I'm still writing the letters as you know and I'll continue to do so while I can and I hope, for goodness sake, that he will grant it before I die and kick the bucket like he's waiting for us all to do.

MICHEL SAMSON: I think that's a concern we all share with you and I think what's important - most of my colleagues would be aware of this - is that the House of Assembly has adopted at least on two occasions a unanimous resolution calling upon the federal government to immediately extend the VIP benefits - in fact, I believe both times they were introduced by the honourable Murray Scott - which was unanimously adopted by all members of the House. As I mentioned to you before, Mrs. Carter, you've got friendly faces all around the table regardless of our political stripe, I think we all share the concerns you've expressed and certainly want to comment you.

Just to finish this round of questioning, Mr. Chairman, the other thing I think is important that my colleagues be aware of which I learned when I went to visit your home with Rodger Cuzner, Mrs. Carter - I'm wondering if you could tell us, you're typing these letters, but I wonder if you could tell us, how are you typing these letters?

JOYCE CARTER: I just type the letter on a typewriter belonging to one of my granddaughters, who was kind enough to let me have it. Anyway, I type the letter and then, of course, my son usually gets the job of going to get them all photocopied, then I type the addresses on the envelopes and I type the names on the photocopies when that's done. It takes me about two days with doing other things, I guess. I'm not that quick on the typewriter.

MICHEL SAMSON: Yes, and I can tell you there aren't too many of us around this table who are still using a typewriter, so the fact that you're still able to use a typewriter and all of those addresses and the amount of time that takes - I'm proud to say I'm one of the two MLAs who gets a copy of each one of your correspondence and I want to commend you again. I know some of my other colleagues will have questions and, Mr. Chairman, hopefully I'll have an opportunity to ask a few more afterwards. Thank you.

JOYCE CARTER: And I know you're going to find a spelling mistake in the last one. (Laughter)

MICHEL SAMSON: Just to indicate to my colleagues, I got my most recent copy of a letter from Mrs. Carter hand-delivered this morning, so thank you for that.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Paris.

PERCY PARIS: I too want to say congratulations, you're doing a wonderful job. It saddens me to think that this task you've taken on is still continuing. I just have a couple of questions. You were reinstated - I shouldn't say reinstated - you were given the VIP. Did it just start and was there anything retroactive in that reinstatement?

JOYCE CARTER: No, it wasn't retroactive.

PERCY PARIS: You had mentioned some support that you were getting from a couple of Members of Parliament and you mentioned some Legions. I have to ask you, there must be an enormous cost even with respect to postage, not taking into consideration the paper and all of the other things. Are you getting any sort of support from the Legions?

JOYCE CARTER: I did get a little help from one of the Legions for 20 months, which was good, they did all the photocopies for me, but the stamps I continued myself. There are about, I would say, 40 stamps a month I get, so I keep on with that. Right now I'm back to getting the photocopies myself again. There has been an odd one or two that

have helped me the odd time but, you know, I didn't think of that when I started and I've managed so far.

PERCY PARIS: You mentioned photocopying. What other ways have organizations and individuals been able to assist you in this?

JOYCE CARTER: Well, I really don't know in what way they would assist me. When I started, first with the petition, I did try to find - I had to find the original signatures, so many, and I forget how many there had to be. I had to write to certain people like the Legion members and then there was the widows' association. I sent to them and they were able to get some of the widows' signatures for me, which I put together until I got enough. I sent them to different ones like that where I knew the widows would be, and I got as many as I needed. Then the rest of the signatures - I received two letters that the widows wrote to me. When I sent word to them through the media, then they got in touch with me by phone or by letter. I guess I probably wrote going on 900 signatures myself, at home, which wasn't easy sometimes.

PERCY PARIS: You had also mentioned that somebody had suggested to you that they were going to do some sort of cost analysis as to how many individuals would be eligible for the VIP. To your knowledge, was that ever done? Did anybody ever report back to you?

JOYCE CARTER: No, not that I know of, I don't think - no. I tried to find out how many veterans' widows there would be by calling Veterans Affairs, but they could never tell me. I thought they would have an idea.

PERCY PARIS: Do you get many letters or much correspondence from veterans' wives who are still living, and support . . .

JOYCE CARTER: Not too many now. There are some who are receiving the benefits, and I'm very grateful. It's very gratifying to me to know that they are receiving it and I might have helped, if only in a small way, for them to be getting it, you know.

PERCY PARIS: Well, I think you've helped them in a large way.

JOYCE CARTER: I don't know. Maybe I started the apple cart rolling.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Porter.

CHUCK PORTER: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mrs. Carter, thank you very much for being here today. It was a great presentation.

JOYCE CARTER: You're welcome.

CHUCK PORTER: I can tell you that you are an amazing woman by way of what you've done over the years and continue to do. I don't think that I know many people who would have taken that on and continued after getting correspondence back with promises and so on, and suggestions that something would happen and it never does. It's a constant battle for you. I can only imagine that the people you are representing and the support that they probably have for you as well, I'm sure.

I'll only speak for my own constituency, but I'm sure it happens in all of our areas, that there are a number of veterans and widows that we deal with on a regular basis in the same situation. It's something that I'm very passionate about. It's very close to me. My grandfather was in World War II and unfortunately did not come back. It is about the veterans, it is about the widows, but it's also - when we look at today's military, there are many more veterans to come. So what you are doing, I want you to know, will be very beneficial for many, many years ahead. Continue that hard work and thank you so very much.

JOYCE CARTER: You're very welcome.

CHUCK PORTER: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

JOYCE CARTER: Sorry, I just can't remember your name. I have the list somewhere.

CHUCK PORTER: It doesn't matter, it's not important.

JOYCE CARTER: Sorry, I'm terrible at remembering names.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Bain.

KEITH BAIN: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Mrs. Carter. You're certainly to be commended for your untiring efforts. After the honourable member mentioned that you are already receiving VIP benefits - it's not self-serving. You're out there to help the broader community and you're to be commended for that. It's also nice to hear that you are getting help from your family as you continue on your crusade.

JOYCE CARTER: Yes, that's right.

KEITH BAIN: Mr. Samson has indicated that the support is certainly here from all Parties of the Legislature and that is very true. I'm just wondering what the response has been from other veterans' widows who are out there, or have any of them or some of the veterans' families offered to assist you in your campaign?

JOYCE CARTER: Well, there has been the odd one - a few of them who would send a few dollars for stamps and different things like that. Occasionally, yes, they do.

KEITH BAIN: That's interesting. I'm sure, as I indicated, that we as a Legislature will certainly do all we can to support your cause as well. I thank you very much for today.

JOYCE CARTER: You know everyone I speak to is in support of the widows getting the VIP, but what can we do to get it for them is another question.

KEITH BAIN: Thank you very much.

JOYCE CARTER: You're welcome, sir.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Mr. MacDonald.

MANNING MACDONALD: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I suppose in listening to your presentation one of the things that came to mind was how you must feel about what I consider to be a betrayal of your group, in terms of a promise made was a promise not kept. I find that extremely offensive to read the letters that we have here and some of the quotes in it, for example, "You may be interested to know that this was adopted as part of the Conservative Party of Canada's policy last March . . . while I appreciate your dedication to this issue, you are writing to the converted." This was signed by Betty Hinton, MP. That, to me, is an offensive statement to make, that they're converted yet they won't do anything about it right now.

[9:30 a.m.]

The other one that jumps off the page is, "You will be pleased to know that a Conservative government would immediately extend Veterans Independence Program services to the widows of all Second World War and Korean War veterans . . .", and that was signed by Salpie Stepanian, Assistant to Stephen Harper. Then you have the letter from Stephen Harper himself.

So with all of this correspondence back and forth - and again I'll say what other people have said around this table, that you're not doing this for yourself. You're an advocate for a group of people who deserve this and should be getting it and I commend you for that.

Also, the logistics of what you're doing, I try to come up with some thoughts about how that might be improved and I was thinking about when you're sending letters to the MPs, leave the stamp off it and send it.

JOYCE CARTER: Oh, I don't put the stamp to the envelope.

MANNING MACDONALD: Okay, that's a good thing. Please don't incur any debt by writing to Members of Parliament, that's for sure. (Laughter) We wouldn't like to see that happen.

I think if nothing else happens here today, Mrs. Carter, I think this group should adopt a resolution at some point today, calling on Stephen Harper to keep his promise to your group. I would certainly support that and I think at some point your own member might want to move that at some point before the meeting is over. So okay, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Dunn.

PATRICK DUNN: Once again, as many of my colleagues have mentioned here earlier, I really admire your role that you're pursuing; your tenacity in pursuing this particular goal. Again we certainly are all in support of what you're trying to do and not only sympathetic towards it, but if there's anything that we are able to do to assist and to help you reaching what you're trying to, we are certainly 100 per cent behind you. I really enjoyed your presentation.

I have a friend, an MP who lives about a two-minute walk from where I live in New Glasgow - the Defence Minister - and I will be speaking to him personally and also giving him a copy of these letters here to pursue what we're trying to do here today. So once again, I want to thank you for coming here. I really enjoyed your presentation and I wish you all the success with it. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Mr. Wilson.

DAVID WILSON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to thank you for coming here today and just showing us a little more about what your situation is and the fight that you have been battling over the last number of years. It tells a lot about an individual's character for one to continue a fight that they've obviously won, so it tells a lot about your character to continue this, because it would have been a lot easier for you to stop once you received your benefits. I think that just shows how important this is to you and to all war veterans and war brides. I want to personally thank you on behalf of my grandmother, who too was a war bride and came over with my mother, through Pier 21 many, many years ago. I won't say how many, because my mom might be listening to the transcripts of this. (Laughter)

I know for someone like her, who might not have it in her to have the fight that you have, I know that she appreciates it and I know that the veterans' widows, and especially the association, appreciate what you've been doing. I don't really have any questions for you, I just want to thank you, not just on behalf of my grandmother but on behalf of all the widows across the country.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Gosse.

GORDON GOSSE: Thank you and thank you for coming today, Mrs. Carter. It was a beautiful presentation and I did manage to follow your story now over the last number of years. I've seen you in Ottawa on the news and I've seen other - I've been in contact with the MP and know your situation. To be an advocate on behalf of all widows is a very important task that you've taken and it's appreciated from one end of this country to the

other. Also, even as we speak here today, there's another widow in Cape Breton who is in Ottawa today from Cape Breton, who has been denied her benefits on a clerical error, since 1968. (Interruption) She's been waiting 39 years. They owe her 39 years of back time. That was a clerical error and she was a widow with six children - Mrs. MacKenzie, from Glace Bay.

JOYCE CARTER: Mrs. MacKenzie - the copy is here to leave with you.

GORDON GOSSE: Six children, a widow, a clerical error, lived in poverty, and still this government in Ottawa refuses - as we speak here today - to appropriately compensate that lady. She is on her way to Ottawa today, on the same crusade like yourself, fighting for what's rightfully hers that she was denied on a clerical error.

I don't have any respect for a government that treats our widows of veterans, and especially our veterans, the way they've been treating them. All the correspondence that you've sent them over the years and all the things that other widows and veterans did, and a lot of war brides - this country was built on war brides. Thousands and thousands of war brides like yourself came here to make this country what it is today. Those are the things that we appreciate, as a legislator, myself and other people around this table. To see an elected official sending a letter to somebody saying that when our turn comes, we'll look after you, and not to look after you today - it's a shameful thing. It's a shameful thing for yourself and all the other widows and it's a shameful thing for this lady to be in Ottawa today, looking for her back time for 39 years and her children were raised in poverty and again, it's delay, delay.

Have you heard anything lately - the only question I have for you - on the review by Veterans Affairs, that they're doing considering the VIP program and when it will be completed?

JOYCE CARTER: No, I didn't, sir. The last letter I got from - did I bring that letter with me? Maybe I didn't. Gregory Thompson is still reviewing it. I mean to me that's very absurd, because it doesn't take - what is it, 20 months now since they came into power? - it doesn't take that long to do it, I'm sure.

I spoke to Gregory Thompson and he spoke about the veterans themselves, and it's a very sad thing to think that there would be veterans themselves going through hell for the ones in the Parliament and all of us, not to be getting what they're entitled to. They're not even getting the groundskeeping and housekeeping - some of the veterans - so far, and I think that's terrible. Gregory Thompson mentioned that and he mentioned that they go so far that they have to be institutionalized. I said, well, if you gave them the VIP, that would avoid them being institutionalized. You know it's only common sense, it's going to cost them far more to have them institutionalized than it would be if they gave them the groundskeeping and housekeeping. That's very little, that's just a pittance compared to what they should be getting.

GORDON GOSSE: You're absolutely right. The way that the veterans are dealt with, with certain drug coverage, is by codes on the back of their cards, so when a veteran comes into your office, as an elected official the first thing you ask for is his card so that you can look at what letters are on the back of the card that determine what coverage he has. There are certain drugs, like those for emphysema, and other drugs - which they suffered from over there - and lung diseases that are not covered, so we do see that. When they come into the home to help with a wheelchair ramp and put in a new bathroom, there are little things that I have difficulty with. They'll pay for the ramp, they'll pay for the bathroom, but they won't pay for the fixtures, little tiny things like that. I think that they all should be covered. I commend you on your fight in bringing attention to this all across this country, and also thank you for helping to build this nation as a war bride.

THE CHAIR: Are there any other questions? Mr. Samson.

MICHEL SAMSON: I want to touch on one of the matters that was raised by both Mr. MacDonald and Mr. Gosse. It was the commitment that was made to you in the correspondence from the Prime Minister himself, when he was Leader of the Opposition. As elected officials, we sometimes see where governments in Opposition or Parties in Opposition may make commitments, only to find out when they get in office that they can't financially honour that commitment. Do you believe that the reason they have not extended the VIP benefits is because the Conservative Government of Stephen Harper cannot afford to do so?

JOYCE CARTER: Not for one moment. They've got the money - they've had it all along. What I did hear, whether it was true or not, was that money was taken out of Veterans Affairs for some other issue of the government - why would they do that? The government themselves have the money. They had - what? - a \$14 billion surplus this year and they go and give it to the oil companies and the banks that don't need it any more than we need a hole in the head, to put it into plain English. It's absolutely outrageous that they can't give this VIP and look after the veterans themselves in the first place and the veterans' widows.

MICHEL SAMSON: Have they ever given you an excuse other than they're reviewing the program, as to why they are not honouring this commitment? Is there anything that they've told you that we're not being told as to why they are simply just not doing this?

JOYCE CARTER: No, they never said, just what Gregory Thompson put in this letter there that they're reviewing different - the health and everything, but I mean it doesn't take that long. Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't think it does take that long.

MICHEL SAMSON: And I think the point that you've raised is that we often see governments undertaking reviews of programs and that can take some time, but I think as you mentioned earlier in your presentation, in this case an extra week, an extra month could make the difference between whether a widow is alive to see the benefit or is not.

JOYCE CARTER: And you know, Mr. Samson, it's sad to think of how many widows had to leave their homes because they couldn't maintain them. Some were only widowed for perhaps a month or two and they had to leave their home. Like the lady that was mentioned who had the six children, I think it's not too long ago that she - or quite a few years ago, I forget now, I read that letter so many times - she had to give up her home after bringing up six children on her own with no financial help. To lose your home, I can't imagine, I would hate to leave mine. Like I said many a time, I hope they take me out of there in a pine box or whatever, I don't want to go anywhere else, I want to be able to stay there.

MICHEL SAMSON: I think that's one of the important elements that we need to consider as well, as a province, that it's not only the right thing to do, but there are some economic benefits to our province. It's in all of our best interests that veterans' widows be allowed to stay in their own homes as long as they wish. We have to realize ourselves that there's an economic impact to that as well because if they are having to go into long-term care earlier than they may have to because of economic circumstances, there's a cost as well to our province as a result of that. I think it's something that we need to consider, not only is it the right thing to do by widows, but as a province there's an economic benefit to us as well and the fact of having widows being able to stay in their home communities.

[9:45 a.m.]

I think it has been mentioned by many of my colleagues that you are an important part of our fabric as Canadians and as Nova Scotians and we want you to be able to stay in your homes and we want you especially, Mrs. Carter, to stay in your home as long as you can. We want to see all widows, regardless of when they became a widow and regardless of when their husbands may have served, that they are extended those benefits as well.

JOYCE CARTER: The government always says, we want them to stay in their homes, but what are they doing to help us do that? We should never have had to look for the VIP right from the start. What we got when our husbands died was the same income, along with the groundskeeping and housekeeping, as when he was living, for one year, but then the whole thing was cut off. Some widows lost their groundskeeping, housekeeping, plus up to as much as \$900 or more a month. How do you maintain a home, all alone on one poverty income, because any less than \$20,000 a year is a poverty income these days. Some, I think, at this time are only getting \$1,000, maybe less. I know myself, I think I'm getting \$1,200, maybe a little more, and I'm getting the groundskeeping and housekeeping. If I wasn't getting the VIP, I don't know how I'd be able to pay it. You have your other bills to pay with your income and how far does that go today?

You go to buy anything, it's gone sky-high. We're bled to death with taxes, taxes on everything you buy except the food, which is a blessing that we don't have to pay tax on most of that. If you're lucky enough to go to a restaurant to eat, you're paying taxes on that. Everything you buy - if you sell a car, you're paying tax. If it's sold 10 or 20 times you

pay tax again on it. You go to these - what do they call them, Nadine? - consignment stores and you buy something second-hand, there's tax on that, which should never be. For the children up to 16, there should not be taxes on their clothes. They don't wear them out they grow out of them, it's just ridiculous.

I'm going off the VIP, but I can't help it. (Laughter)

MICHEL SAMSON: I think you're being very honest with us and we appreciate that.

JOYCE CARTER: I'm saying what's in my heart.

MICHEL SAMSON: We certainly hear those concerns. Mr. Chairman, I don't know if there are any more comments, but I'd certainly be prepared to introduce a motion, unless there are any more questions from my colleagues?

THE CHAIR: Are there any more questions? Mr. Dunn.

PATRICK DUNN: Just maybe a comment or observation with regard to the volatile world that we live in today and the fact that we are continuing to have more widows with regard to the Armed Forces today. It's something that certainly is not going away and it's something that, as a country, we have to face and look after the men and women who are serving in the Armed Forces. Many of them are not returning home.

JOYCE CARTER: I hope you're going to look after the ones coming along in the future a lot better than a lot of them have been since the Second World War. When you think of them going 60 years and still not being looked after, what's going to happen to the ones who are coming today?

PATRICK DUNN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs. Carter. I, too, commend you for what you're doing and we here as an all-Party committee for the province, we certainly can't sign a cheque for you, but we can sign a letter to the federal government in full support of what you're going. I think that's where we could head today. If somebody would like to make a motion on that to support what Mrs. Carter is doing, I would appreciate it.

MICHEL SAMSON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think what's important following Mr. Dunn's comments to keep in mind is that any widow after 1981 will receive the VIP benefits. What we are talking about here are the widows who lost their husbands prior to 1981. Those ladies aren't getting any younger and we're not talking about a group that's growing - we're talking about a group where the numbers are going down all the time. I think the point Mrs. Carter raised is that every week that goes by you run the risk of losing more and more widows. I think it's important, as you pointed out, to make sure that any widows of veterans in the future are taken care of, but I think what's most appalling here is

that these are widows who became widowed over 20 years ago - over 25 years ago - and are not being looked after. I think that's where it's unconscionable for the government to continue that.

Mr. Chairman, I would move that as Chairman of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, that you write to both the Prime Minister and the Honourable Gregory Thompson, Minister of Veterans Affairs Canada, and include copies of the letters that were presented to us today by Mrs. Carter and that you call upon them on behalf of this committee to honour the commitment made to Mrs. Carter back in 2005, to extend VIP benefits to all widows in Canada, regardless of when their spouse may have passed away, and that we are calling upon them to honour that commitment immediately, without any further delay.

I would further move that, as Chairman of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, that upon the resumption of the House of Assembly you once again introduce a resolution calling upon the Prime Minister and the Minister of Veterans Affairs to honour the commitment made to Mrs. Carter, and to all veterans' widows here in Canada, for the extension of the Veterans Independence Program.

I would further move that you write to our provincial Minister responsible for Military Relations and call upon our provincial minister to become an advocate as well for widows in Nova Scotia, to have the federal government extend the Veterans Independence Program benefits. In other words, through our minister's meetings with his federal counterparts that he also become an advocate on this issue as well. I would so move.

GORDON GOSSE: I second it.

THE CHAIR: There's a motion on floor. Are there any further questions? Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay. The motion is carried.

In closing, we usually give the presenters time to say a few words or say goodbye at least. Mrs. Carter, if you have any closing comments or you, Ms. MacNeil, if you would like to say a few words, you're certainly welcome. I just want to assure you these letters will be going off in the very near future and you'll be receiving copies of them. So if there are any closing comments from either one of you, we would appreciate it.

JOYCE CARTER: There's one widow I would like to mention, she's out in Thunder Bay. When she died she was left with a mortgage to pay of \$500 a month out of her income. She's not receiving the benefit and she should be because she lost her husband about the same time that I did, so she would be entitled to it. Her husband received what they called the Veterans Attendance Program (VAP) and because of that, she's not entitled to the VIP. It's those widows also who need to be covered with this VIP.

There was someone else, oh yes, because their husbands didn't receive it when they died, they're not getting it either and these widows all have to be covered, each and every one of them, they're entitled to it. There was no difference between one soldier that was fighting than another one; it's the same with the widows, they're all the same.

I really appreciate being invited here today and meeting so many wonderful people who are doing their jobs and supporting in this VIP for us. I'm sure a lot of the widows will appreciate it. It should be given immediately, every month that goes by they're suffering not only physically, but mentally. Some are not able to do their work, they're not able to get money to have someone come in and help them in their homes. They lay awake nights wondering when will they have to leave their homes, which is a very sad thing. I just can't imagine the trauma they go through, the ones who have left their homes, because I don't want to go through it.

Widows will call and say, what are they waiting for, why don't they give it, they're waiting until we die. I said, that's probably what it is because they have the money, they could give it, but we haven't got a say in it, I guess. All we can do is keep fighting them and I intend to fight until the last breath is in me. (Applause)

I really do appreciate being here. It's a privilege and an honour, and it was a pleasure to meet each and every one of you. I'm very sorry I didn't mention your names, but I'm terrible - I must tell you this and I was going to tell you, sir, when you were talking with me. I was here in Canada, in Samsonville for - I don't know how many years. When my husband was living, I drove to town to St. Peter's and somebody would ask about him. How is he? Well, I'd say he's fine - he was at that time. When I would get home I would say, there was somebody asking about you. He said, who was it? I said, oh, dear, I can't remember his name. (Laughter) That was a long time ago. So now I have my age to blame on that. I didn't then. But it's been a pleasure being here. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mrs. Carter. Ms. MacNeil, would you like to say a few words?

NADINE MACNEIL: I would like to say thank you, I'm glad I came. It's been interesting. It's good to know that my grandmother has all your support. She needs it. She's tough, I'm proud of you.

JOYCE CARTER: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much.

JOYCE CARTER: My family's support and, I guess, everyone that I have wrote to is in support of it. The only thing, I wish I could get in touch with some of the veterans' widows, which I can't. I write through the media, they will not give my name and address or phone number for them to call me. I would just like to get in touch with them and have them all write to the minister and the Prime Minister. Maybe, with an impact like that, they

may do something about it. But it's not possible. Even over the radio I can't get through to them.

NADINE MACNEIL: There's a camera right there.

THE CHAIR: I believe the media may help you some today. We have media here.

JOYCE CARTER: I hope so, I hope so. With my phone number, let them phone me please.

THE CHAIR: They're very good to this committee, the media is.

JOYCE CARTER: That's good.

THE CHAIR: I'm sure they'll help you out. Anyway, thank you very much.

JOYCE CARTER: Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: If there are no other comments, we'll call for adjournment.

We have a little business to wrap up before we go. (Interruptions) I'm sorry. Can we set a date here? Can we call this back to order for a moment? We just need to set a date, that's all we need to do. Say goodbye first.

MANNING MACDONALD: I thought you had a date there.

THE CHAIR: Well, we have the 13th, is it agreed to is all we're asking.

MANNING MACDONALD: The House is - when's that?

DARLENE HENRY: That's a Thursday.

MANNING MACDONALD: The House will be in session.

THE CHAIR: What we've done to other committees is, we've said if something comes up urgent, leave it to the Chair to call the committee back. That's what we've been doing with all the others while the House is sitting.

MANNING MACDONALD: Not to meet, only if absolutely necessary, while the House is sitting.

THE CHAIR: Unless it's an emergency, if we have to. (Interruptions)

DARLENE HENRY: Are you all happy with the annual report?

THE CHAIR: I'm sorry.

DARLENE HENRY: That's okay.

MICHEL SAMSON: Do you need us to sit down again?

THE CHAIR: Darlene does. (Interruptions)

DARLENE HENRY: I just want to know if everybody's happy with the annual report, if we can sign . . .

THE CHAIR: We just need to know if everybody agrees with the annual report, if you've had time to read the annual report. We need to get the annual report passed. We could have done this the next meeting anyway.

[The committee adjourned at 9:58 a.m.]