

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Thursday, February 28, 2013

Committee Room 1

Canadian Forces Long Term Disability Benefit Reduction

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In Attendance:

Kim Langille
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESSES

Dennis Manuge

Medric Cousineau



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2013

STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIR
Jim Boudreau

THE CHAIR: I'm sorry for the lateness of the start but we were waiting for a few members. This morning we have before us Mr. Dennis Manuge and Retired Captain Medric Cousineau who will be here to do a presentation and to answer any questions the committee has so we're very pleased to have you here this morning.

I'll call the meeting to order and just review a few of the meeting procedures. Again, one of the reminders we want to make is that the meeting is open to the public, however, there is no ability for members of the public to speak or ask questions during the meeting. The presenters and ourselves will certainly be available at the end of the meeting to discuss anything or any questions you may have.

Another thing that I had to remind myself and I'll have to remind you is if you do have cellphones, please either shut them off or put them in a silent mode of some sort and that would be greatly appreciated.

So everyone has the agenda in front of them. After the presentation and questions, we have a few items of committee business to deal with and we certainly have to make a decision on whether we will be meeting during the House session and, if we are, we have to decide on a date.

With that, I will ask the presenters to proceed. You have time to do a presentation. (Interruption) Yes, we definitely should do some introductions today - you may know most of these people because I think people have been introducing themselves as they come in. However, officially we'll start with Mr. MacLeod.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: With that, we'll turn the floor over to you two gentlemen and you'll have time to do a presentation and hopefully we'll have ample time for a question and answer, so thank you.

DENNIS MANUGE: Thank you very much, sir, and also thank you very much for the opportunity to come and address the committee today on behalf of the SISIP class action, I'll call it. You may hear me refer to it a few different ways but I'll try to keep my language consistent. Of course I'm really happy to have my good friend and fellow veteran, disabled veteran, Medric Cousineau along with me.

I guess first of all I'd just like to start with kind of a quick overview of what my experience has been in a timeline. Most of it is here in the backgrounder which is phenomenal, I thank Kim and the folks for preparing that. The starting point really for the SISIP class action, as it became known in 2007-08, was really when I was medically released, I guess officially in December 2003, immediately upon my release I was in receipt of a Veterans Affairs Canada disability pension and had to go on the SISIP long-term disability income replacement as I retrained to enter civilian life.

The first time I received my income replacement pay, which is known as the long-term disability, there was a deduction of my Veterans Affairs Canada disability payment from what I expected to be my income. So that, in itself, is the offset. One form of financial compensation, if you will, is income replacement. That is the long-term disability insurance program known as SISIP, or Service Income Security Insurance Plan, but that Veterans Affairs disability payment is meant - and it is stated in the Pension Act and in the Veterans Affairs literature - as a pain and suffering payment that is in no way, shape or form tied to income. That is the crux of this issue and that's kind of what got me started down my path and then eventually hooked up with our lead counsel Peter Driscoll, and the lawsuit.

At the time - it's kind of ironic and funny - my deduction was only about \$380 a month at the time, but I had just released from the Canadian Forces, lost my career, my way of life, my culture, if you will, and I lost a quarter of my income. I still had the same bills and was going to school, but then I lost even more of my income because my income was reduced by the amount of my pain and suffering payment. Immediately I said to myself, this is absolutely and fundamentally wrong; something has to be done to change this. That was 2003-04 so as you folks most likely know, that was several years before we filed in federal court in March 2007 to have our action certified.

Technology at the time was a huge friend to me and to what would become the class. Why I say that is the only way a citizen of Canada can access other people is by meeting them or connecting with them by phone or by e-mail. Early on, what perpetuated and assisted my drive and my tenacity was that I started to hear from and connect with members of what would become the class that were not losing \$380 per month, but were losing \$2,500 per month or \$3,000 per month. I thought to myself, okay, now this is really wrong - something has to be done.

So that's kind of where I was and the frame of mind I was in. I was excited because I was going back to school, but at the same token I had this group of people that was increasing on a daily basis that were being mistreated financially by the federal Government of Canada. What I like to say, and what most members of the class would tell you, is we held up our end of the bargain; we volunteered for service in the Canadian Forces and the RCMP and the entire time we felt that should something happen to us - death or injury - our families and/or us would be looked after. That's some of the fundamental background of why I got heavily engaged and involved at the time and, for lack of a better term, just started my journey and advocating and pushing forward.

It took a long time. Like I said, I started in 2003-04. I did not meet Peter Driscoll until late in March 2006 and that was actually coincidentally just when Peter Stoffer's motion had been voted for in the House of Commons in November 2006. We actually had the Members of Parliament vote in our favour on a private member's bill introduced by Mr. Stoffer to end the clawback, but the federal Conservative Government chose to ignore the voice of the people at the time and there was no action taken.

So I met with Peter Driscoll. He was at Boyne Clarke in Dartmouth at the time and then moved over to McInnes Cooper and I followed him. I chose to follow him and leave our case with him. We ended up filing in federal court in March 2007. We heard back, I believe it was in early 2008, that we were certified as a class action. It's interesting that the number of members of the class at the time was estimated between 3,600 and 4,500 - definitely under 5,000 - and what we now know today is there are 7,500 members of the class.

All that to say early on, and due to the Privacy Act and privacy restrictions, other than hearing from class members directly, I had no means or way to access all the members of the class, nor did our legal staff have any way to access all the members of the class. Once it became a legal proceeding, we had to wait for disclosure and things of that nature.

I bring that point up only for the committee's understanding that in some ways we were flying blind, just due to the size of the class and the fact that technology was great - that got me connected with probably 1,000 or 1,500 members of the class - but there was still this whole other group of people out there who kind of had to be brought up to speed. We did that through the legal process and through the notification. There was the first

notification to the class of what they could expect, the contingency fee arrangement, legal fees, everything was disclosed at that time in early 2008.

Then we went to the Federal Court of Appeal. The Government of Canada decided to challenge us and say that Mr. Manuge needed to go by way of judicial review alone and sort out the issue, that we did not deserve to be a class action right away. The Federal Court of Appeal agreed with that. That was probably one of the worst days of my life in that after the Federal Court of Appeal overturned our certification, it was estimated by our legal team and other legal scholars across the country that we had probably a one in 20, or a 5 per cent chance, of taking the case forward to a successful conclusion.

So here you are, you're sitting in your home and you're talking to your legal team and they're telling you that we have about a 5 per cent chance of taking this case anywhere. But, to their credit, and by "them" I mean our legal team, and to my credit, we decided to bash on, seek leave to appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada and see if we couldn't get things turned around. Again, eventually in 2010, things did turn around, we got the decision. We were heard in January up in Ottawa in the Supreme Court of Canada, January 2010. I was at the IWK in Halifax in December 2010, my wife was nine months pregnant at the time when we got the news from McInnes Cooper that we were successful in the Supreme Court of Canada, a unanimous decision, seven of the justices said that Mr. Manuge in this case and this team of legal counsel have every right to proceed as a class proceeding on behalf of the class.

I kind of wanted to bring those two periods up just to allow the committee an opportunity to see in the period of one year, through this process, I went from probably one of the lowest and darkest times of my life to one of the best and happiest, knowing that we were now going to get our day in court. Again, now having the ability to look back in hindsight, and as I've addressed a few of the members and some of the folks here previous to the committee meeting beginning, that's what makes Dennis Manuge proud to be a Canadian, to have worn the uniform, that we live in a country where one man and some tenacity and some good legal folks can make a difference, can stand up and be heard.

The process is a marathon, not a sprint. It has just been exciting to be part of that process. I won't focus too much more because the details are well known and that. Eventually we were heard on two questions of law, back in the Federal Court of Canada, November 2011, we were heard here in Halifax in Federal Court. Our brilliant lawyer Dan Wallace attacked the language of the insurance policy as written, as compared to the Pension Act and, as I knew all along, if a reasonable man or a reasonable body of people were made aware of the issue, were made aware of the differences between the two types of disability components, we would be successful. Our reasonable man turned out to be Justice Barnes in the Federal Court of Canada.

I just turned to Page 28 of the little backgrounder that was prepared and I'll just read the last line. He sums up what was going on with this clawback and he just simply

said, "That is an outcome that could not reasonably have been intended and I reject it unreservedly." So that's the language in our final decision by a reasonable man, by a Federal Court justice that changed the lives of all 7,500 of us plus another 2,000 veterans who were negatively impacted by the same clawback under the new Veterans Charter and the Earnings Loss Benefit program.

All in all, I'll gladly take a pat on the back and say proudly, the "Manuge law" and the "Manuge effect" will potentially - well, not potentially, it will put \$1.9 billion back in the hands of disabled veterans over the next seven years due to our settlement if it's approved by federal Justice Barnes, the bulk of it within the first six months of approval of the settlement. That's not something to be taken lightly. It's something to be proud of, but what the committee also has to recognize is that it wasn't just Dennis. Although my name is attached to the case, a lot of credit goes to my friends - people like Medric Cousineau, countless veterans and their families that reached out to me over the period of almost a decade and recharged my batteries almost on a daily basis, telling me their stories and encouraging me and thanking me and supporting me - and without saying, our stellar legal representation from Ward Branch, Peter Driscoll, and Dan Wallace.

What I can tell you today, and where we are exactly, is we were heard about a week and a half ago in the Federal Court of Canada, Department of Justice lawyers representing the Government of Canada. Our legal team met with Justice Barnes up at the World Trade and Convention Centre. We switched venues because we were expecting a lot of support. It's a good thing we did - we probably had 200 to 250 veterans and their families show up. Justice Barnes heard from the Crown and from our legal team about how and why they came to the negotiated, proposed settlement, why they were putting it before him and why, in fact, both sides supported it wholeheartedly.

The other issue that was addressed at that hearing were the legal fees that McInnes Cooper would be awarded for their work on behalf of this case and our class. The decision was reserved. Justice Barnes is very well aware of the impact or the requirement of him to get his decision out quickly because it is a decision that has a very profound financial impact on the class members. We suspect due to some translation issues as well - because he cannot release his decision to us or to the public until the document has been translated into both languages and that process alone takes two to three weeks - we are looking at probably six to eight weeks from the hearing time, so we're certainly hoping by mid-April that the settlement will be approved.

The judge will set the legal fees. McInnes Cooper has asked for an amount but the judge has final say on that, based on legal precedent, he will look at other cases. A few of them that the committee would recognize would be the tainted blood, the Hepatitis C case, the residential schools case. Those kinds of things will be taken into account, as well as the billable hours, the amount worked, the risk associated with the file and things like that.

The amount that McInnes Cooper has asked for is around \$66 million. It seems like an incredibly large amount of money but I supported what they asked for wholeheartedly and I certainly would welcome any questions or anything as we progress through the meeting, around the legal fees, why I supported them and that kind of thing, but knowing full well the whole time that Justice Barnes will set them. He will tell the lawyers what they are going to get. So that's where we are.

It's an exciting time right now; we're 99.9 per cent sure that Justice Barnes will approve this settlement. It's just a matter of waiting the last few weeks, I'll call them. After a decade in the trenches, waiting has gotten easier. I think I look forward to it being over, just from the perspective that it has just been a long haul with a lot of emotional and mental, physical strain, ups and downs, travel, dealing with media, all things that I took on. Some of the things I could be prepared for, some of the things I couldn't be prepared for.

We've certainly experienced some negativity from what I'll call a handful of class members, relating to the proposed settlement - 15 to 20 people out of 7,500 people have had negative comments around taxes, tax implications on retro monies, legal fees, things of that nature, but the nature of a class action is you have to pursue the best settlement for the whole. I can live with that number of people perhaps being unhappy or perhaps in their illness and physical discomfort, not being able to grasp or really understand the process that was at play.

I would be remiss if I didn't include the fact that there are some people who are disappointed with the proposed settlement. Taxes, we couldn't do anything about. As all of you know and as all of us know, you folks are responsible for tax monies and you folks pay income tax, as does every citizen of Canada. It was a non-start issue, we were limited in what we could achieve in tax relief. Legal fees, again I would say and I have said to many of those people who are unhappy with that large figure, they weren't along for the whole ride, they didn't experience, they didn't get an opportunity - through no fault of their own - but again, due to the nature of the class action, I'm the one who got to develop the relationships with our legal team, develop the trust, saw them at work, was engaged in the process.

That is something that is very hard to explain or to educate other members of the class who kind of only got involved when we got a positive decision. It's virtually impossible to cram the amount of learning, reading and understanding that I had to do - not necessarily had to but wanted to do, so I was very well prepared to be the representative plaintiff. I can't very well go and say to the class members, in particular the few folks who are unhappy, go do your homework, come back and talk to me when you've done your homework. That's not fair for me to say but I can tell you that it has run through my mind a few times because it was an incredible amount of work for me. You can't jump on the bus on the last five minutes of the ride and expect to understand the whole process, if I may say that. It might be a little bit easier to understand for you guys.

That being said, I personally am very happy with the proposed settlement, very happy with the legal fees asked for. Again, knowing that the judge is going to set those anyway, I would not be surprised if Justice Barnes reduces the legal fees as most often happens in these types of cases.

The other big thing for the committee to know and understand is not only did we change the law and things in terms of veterans, but my case is now being referred to and at by legal scholars and academics as a case that may have quite possibly changed access to justice for all Canadians if they have a problem or a legal beef with the federal Government of Canada. Because of the whole judicial review and class action issue and the time limitations on bringing an action against the Federal Court of Canada, my case has kind of changed how the justice system is going to look at these things. In fact, it seems to be leaning more towards let's let people have their day in court; let's let this process unfold and happen and ultimately let's let our justice system and our judges look at the merits of the case and the legalese of these cases and let's let our government be challenged. That's something to be incredibly proud of, and I am.

In a nutshell, I would say that's really all I have to say to begin. I know it covers a long period of time and I know there's a heck of a lot more to it than that, but I also know that you guys are fairly well aware of the situation. I think both Medric and I would be more than willing to entertain questions and further the discussion based on some of that.

Quickly, along the lines with that, I wanted to just introduce Medric again, if it's okay at this time with the committee. Medric is going to speak to the committee as somebody who fell through the cracks of the SISIP Long Term Disability program, through no fault of his own, and is somebody who has been pretty severely disabled for a very long time - 26 years - who has only recently been re-introduced to Veterans Affairs Canada in a positive way and now is - I can say proudly - the beneficiary of the Earnings Loss Benefit, which is the sister program or the newer program that's basically parallel and exactly similar to the SISIP program.

Again, he's on the Earnings Loss Benefit program. It's 75 per cent of your last rate of pay while serving in the Canadian Forces, but now Medric gets to receive his 75 per cent rate of pay as a Captain in the military, but on top of that he receives his Veterans Affairs Canada disability monthly payments that are for the non-economic losses associated with the disability on top of his 75 per cent. That is the end result of what we achieved. I can say - and I'll let Medric speak to it more - that Medric and his family are going to be okay financially.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Manuge. Medric, you have the floor.

MEDRIC COUSINEAU: Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for having me here today and allowing me to speak. In a few minutes, I will speak to a case that I know very well - it is my own, but before I do that, I need to speak on behalf of somebody else. That

person's name is Mike Sellar; his wife is Alissa Hare Sellar. Their two children grow up here. Mike could never be with us today; it would be logistically impossible to put Mike in this room for this meeting, he is that seriously disabled. He resides in Room 115 of Glasgow Hall on Baker Drive. The facility is beautiful, there's no doubt. I implore you to take a few minutes one day and go in and visit Mike. Do it yourself, do it privately. When you leave, you will leave changed.

Mike was thrown out of the military with 11 years and seven months' worth of service. Five months before he should have received his Canadian Forces decoration, he was dumped into the SISIP system. His family has fought since 1991 and will be the direct beneficiaries of the Manuge case. I spoke before Justice Barnes on the three points and I spoke with Alissa's knowledge and on Mike's behalf.

There was one other point that Dennis did not mention this morning: Justice Barnes had to make a decision on whether Dennis would be awarded \$50,000 of the lawyer's money. It has to be approved or else everybody else in that process will incur the wrath of Justice Barnes and the consequences are ugly. For anybody who knows what Mr. Manuge and his family went through over the number of years and you divide it out to some hourly rate, it's actually less than the minimum wage to turn your entire life into an undying hell, have the weight of 7,500 veterans' financial futures weighing on shoulders. So with Mike's concurrence, the \$50,000 is actually less than enough. Justice Barnes made it quite clear as to why changing that figure might cause some problems.

I also spoke to the legal fees. The members of the class that signed the paper at McInnes Cooper, or formerly Boyne Clarke, as the case may be, signed for a contingency fee of 30 per cent. They are men and women of honour, they signed contracts which they intend to keep. They do not renegotiate like pro athletes when they decide that the contract doesn't meet their current needs. These men and women signed up for things both in this case and with their lives and bodies, that they intended to keep.

The agreement was for 30 per cent. McInnes Cooper appeared before Justice Barnes, asking for a number that was significantly less than 30 per cent. As odious as the concept of \$66 million in legal fees paid by veterans to get what is rightfully theirs from their government falls probably into morally indefensible and repugnant - I can't think of the words that continue to describe that concept - because they signed, know that those men and women will as a majority pay those fees and wear that number as a dual-edged sword; \$66 million will become a veteran badge of honour. Every time that somebody sees a veteran with that number on their shoulder, they will know that that family, that those people were very seriously impacted - 7,500 disabled veterans and counting.

The third point was that Justice Barnes has to make an up or out decision; basically he gives it a thumbs-up or he sends it out the door. If he does, he made it quite clear that there will be at least a three-year legal battle. We have members of the 7,500 class action suit who do not have 1,000 days. Mike is one of them. He knows it, his wife knows it,

Dennis and I know it and the world needs to know it because that's what happens to our seriously disabled veterans.

The Manuge effect - I'm about to tell you about the Manuge effect version 2.0 because it is starting and it will come. It began with a chance meeting, or a chance conversation actually, on Dennis' deck on a sunny afternoon during the summer where Dennis and I were trying to keep each other propped up and keep a somewhat tenuous grasp on reality as we knew it. In that meeting, I congratulated Dennis for the historic win and not only that, the fact that the ongoing practice of clawing back disability payments from SISIP would end and I congratulated him for it. I was happy for him and he said, well, I'm happy for you too - it affects you. I said, no, it doesn't, not one iota. It could make no more difference in my life than flying to the moon at this exact point. He said to me, if you are not a SISIP client, then you are by definition an ELB client.

I'm a former aviator. ELB stands for emergency locator beacon; it falls off of the arse end of your airplane when you have serious problems. I was attempting to put these two pieces together when Dennis explained that under the New Veterans Charter there was a program where I would be entitled to receive 75 per cent of my pre-military salary minus my Forces pension in addition to my pain and suffering award.

"Incredulous" is the first word that - I couldn't believe it. Dennis was sure that I would apply. I went home and explained it to my wife and she was scared. She was scared because it presented one more time an opportunity for my family to fall through the cracks. The entire version you don't want to hear this morning, you don't have the time. I have the documents that will prove exactly everything that I said, but we fell through several layers of social safety net as it applies to Veterans Affairs Canada, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, and several other government departments and agencies. So I'm sitting out there on Dennis' deck, aware of a program that I'm eligible for, that will make a huge differential.

In 2006, I had a complete mental and physical breakdown. There was no war. It happened as a result - it happened at the failure of several levels, departments and agencies of governments. I represent what happens when a system goes horribly wrong. If I was the only one, we could fix this very easily. We could probably fix my situation in less than a week with the will and the right government departments. I doubt that will ever happen, because for that to happen, it means that we as a country must look very seriously at what we are looking at right now.

I spent 15 years in a pharmacological, Rip Van Winkle, chemical-induced coma. The scars of that I will carry for life. Now that I'm able to think a little more clearly after the past six months and things have started to change, I get to take a sit-back and take a serious look at what has happened to Canada - our country, our provinces. I know that I'm speaking here today with people who have to talk about things on a provincial level, but you also have cohorts at the federal level and you also have cohorts at the municipal level.

As I speak to you today about Veterans Affairs, know that every level and department and agency in this country has seriously disenfranchised veterans who are struggling to get what is rightfully theirs.

What is rightfully theirs? Canada remains a sovereign nation, only inasmuch as we can protect that position. We either do it by force, with a self-sufficient military, or we do it through a series of strategic alliances. Both of those have serious downstream, enduring consequences. You cannot form an ally or become the ally of another sovereign nation where mutual defence and aid is the premise and at the point they call on you, say sorry, we're not coming. This is not the way that works.

The same thing applies to our military. We have brave men and women who will protect our sovereignty, they will go and do to the best of their ability what it is that the political arm of this country asks them to do. They only go and exercise those tasks as determined appropriate by our governments, our governments determining what we, the people of Canada, supposedly stand for.

May I put it to you that a multi-year, multi-million dollar lawsuit of disabled veterans against the government that they had sworn to protect and die for - people who paid with their minds, bodies and in their blood - should expect more than what they are getting. There comes a point when contract becomes covenant; contract for fair and equal value received. You cannot buy something for \$1 million with \$1 and say that it was a fair and equal contract so we will struggle as we try and determine, what is the contractual value of a life? Is there such a thing? Do we as a people have the right to even expect somebody else to go, act on our behalf, and when they come back and they are broken - and trust me, we will break people, it is the nature of the military beast. If we can break a battleship, a warship, a helicopter, a fighter jet, a tank, an armoured personnel carrier or whatever, know that we can break people.

You will hear people argue that we should stop that. Unfortunately, we can only stop breaking people at the point that we no longer need a military to enforce our sovereignty. I do not believe that given the world's state of affairs, we are going to arrive at that point any time quickly.

We will continue to have a need for veterans because we will continue to have a need for a military. Veterans are the by-products of that military environment. We owe them debts of gratitude, we owe their families debts of gratitude because they will go to places and do things because we ask them. Many of them will be asked to do things that will challenge them to the very core. It will rock their belief systems and they will return trying to make sense of what happened to them when we went there.

Some of them do it in times of peace, others do it in times of war. Some have never seen a shot fired in anger. I, thankfully, am one of those, but know that my actions led to a

horrific case of PTSD - post traumatic stress disorder. You'll hear a lot of it in the coming years because we're getting a lot of it out of our existing military.

What happened? Why now? In former times, after the First World War and the Second World War when we pledged that certain things would never happen again, we had a lot of veterans - our uncles, our fathers, our grandfathers - who retired to a rural setting to be left alone in peace. It is important, the time to heal from those things. There are no set timelines. There are things that leave marks on people's souls that you do not get rid of, ever.

You will hear people say that you can come to terms with these things. I believe that is not the case. Know that on the 6th of October 1986, I ran out, there was no more - not because I could not, because I truly had challenged the limits of every physical and mental ability that I had. Know that when you arrive at that point and somebody loses their life, no matter what you did, it leaves a mark that never goes away. I have that mark and there are countless thousands of other veterans who have their own marks. Those marks take time to heal, they need to come back to a "True North strong and free," a country that they believed in what they were doing, the value. What is the quid pro quo? I trade my life for what? I trade my family's future for what?

Those are very important questions because down the road, as we, the Canadian people - and I'm part of it - struggle to figure out how we are going to maintain our sovereignty and how we are going to remain fiscally responsible, drives us to certain junctures.

So where are we in Canada? Two weeks ago I spoke in front of the Federal Court and upon leaving that court, knowing that in my heart of hearts I believed that Justice Barnes will approve and settle this, I also talked with one of the class counsel who, while this court settlement hearing was ongoing, was informed that the government intends to pursue, to the fullest extent of the law, the exact same course against over 500 disabled RCMP veterans on the exact same points of law.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is only one word for that - it is "wrong". It is categorically, unequivocally wrong. It's wrong because they are wasting our taxpayers' money. Even more than that, it is wrong because it is repugnant. We do not do that to our people - our people. Those people were hurt because we asked them to go do something and when they come back and reach out their hands, what do they get? Well, currently they get a country that will tell them one thing and act differently. We have RCMP veterans fighting that exact same lawsuit.

We have another entire class of veterans fighting the New Veterans Charter. There will be another class action certified by the Equitas Society and it will challenge the New Veterans Charter. I need you to think about this one point: a disabled military veteran under the New Veterans Charter will receive for disabilities related to his injury, a financial

compensation that is significantly lower than the worst level of workers' compensation at any province or territory in this country. The worst by a significant margin.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is a word for that, the word is "wrong". You've heard, I believe - I'm not sure - I believe Jim Lowther of Veterans Emergency Transition Services may have appeared before the committee at some point. Jim is not with us this morning because Jim is actually out there, doing on the streets that which governments do not acknowledge that in some cases even exist - homeless veterans. I know one thing - and I may not know everything - nobody musters out of the military homeless. How many levels of safety nets? How big is the tear in our social fabric when veterans wind up homeless?

I believe at the root of the homelessness issue, because in talking with Jim, because of what is happening in the veterans' suicide world, numbers and concepts that nobody wants to talk about. Right here in Canada, my best estimation, we're losing a minimum of two a month - two military veterans who decided that Canada offers nothing and they leave. I do not believe you arrive at that point unless you have a serious mental health issue. You don't arrive homeless without a serious mental health issue. Many members of the SISIP class action now have consequential trauma from their treatment at the hands of Veterans Affairs and, most specifically, an entity called the Veterans Review and Appeal Board, a quasi-judicial board that is supposed to review evidence and barring any to the contrary will rule in favour of the veteran on the presented evidence. It's a beautiful concept and it should work well. It is anything but the way that system works.

When I appeared before Justice Barnes, and with his permission we conducted a small social experiment. Everyone who was a member of either the old Veterans Charter or the new Veterans Charter, who was a VAC client was asked to put up their hand. Except for counsel in Chambers and a few supporting spouses - both male and female - 95 per cent of the room raised their hand. When I asked them how many had made it there today without appeals, hearings, denials and whatnot, not one single hand remained - not one. Every single veteran has multiple hearings and appeals.

I've gone through at least five VRAB hearings. In 1996, the date that they commenced when I became a DVA client, they started the clock running. Two years later, I had to go see a gentleman who was the regimental doctor for the Black Watch. If you are going to pull the wool over somebody's eyes, trust me, this was not the man you were ever going to do that with. I took as his assessment God's view of the world and he wrote down that my disability assessment level was 70 per cent. They upgraded me from 10 to 30 per cent.

It took five more appeals, countless hearings. They dragged my wife to the end of the earth and back, and eventually I got there - not by their own choice, but because my wife took over and yelled and screamed. She continued when I could not. They broke me - something that had not been done at the Royal Military College of Canada, something that had not been done at basic training, something that not had been done in infantry battle

school or at the gun park where I trained as an artillery officer. It had not been done when I got my wings. It had not been done when I flew operationally at sea. It did not happen on the night of the 6th of October 1986, but the day for the final time that I felt ultimately betrayed by the government of a country that I would have died for. Then it was over.

The next four years were probably the darkest of my life and I sunk into a despair that is unrivalled. It is only through the actions of a couple of caring people - among them Dennis and that chance conversation of, you should qualify for the ELB. I now have a case manager at DVA - sorry, I use DVA, I have been around so long with this process it is hard to break the habit. I have a case manager and my wife is scared to death again only because this case manager - for the first time since I have been dealing with the ugly situation of my mental health and what has happened in any level of government, we now have somebody who cares and my wife is afraid that we're going to lose her. Imagine the state of affairs when the one person that you get, who cares, causes your wife to live in fear that what we've established over the last six to eight months will come crumbling down.

Ladies and gentlemen, what happens to our veterans is not good. It is becoming things that we cannot get away from. I need you to consider certain things. We have a word for when a lady loses her husband, we call her a widow; we have a word for when you husbands lose your wives, a widower; we have words when children lose their parents, we call them orphans. Ladies and gentlemen, we have no word for what you call parents who lose their children. It is a concept that is hideous, odious and undefinable.

In Canada we have a word, someone who betrays their government is a traitor, guilty of treason and formerly punishable by death. There is no word that describes the betrayal that veterans feel when they become marginalized by their government. Ladies and gentlemen, that is the honest state of Veterans Affairs, both in our province and in our country.

You'll receive a handout today on an initiative that I am undertaking on behalf of other disabled veterans. It is fought around one simple number, zero. Zero represents the number of suicidal, PTSD veterans who have hurt themselves after bonding with a service dog. The plural of anecdote is not data but when anecdotal evidence becomes so overwhelming and there is only one variable which is clearly definable, is the veteran alive or dead, when you look at the ones who are in the alive column, the ones with service dogs who will now tell you, as I will, I'll sit before this House right now and tell you that injury by my own hand is no longer even on the page, we do not consider that option anymore. You do not want to know how recently that option was still in play and I am not alone, there are many; they are homeless, they are suicidal, and they are ours.

So, ladies and gentlemen, to leave you time for questions and answers, of which I am sure you have some, I'll wrap it up here. Know that the great work that Dennis did has actually opened up another entire can of worms, you will find more people like me; they

will come forward. They will need your help, they are your constituents and they are our veterans.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Cousineau. We will move on to questions because that's a very important component of what we're trying to do here today. Thank you very much. I know it was difficult for you and we certainly appreciate what you've said today.

Our first questioner is Becky Kent.

BECKY KENT: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I feel almost - well, I feel impacted, I have to tell you, and emotional. Medric, you're in my constituency and I've known you for a long time, I know your family. I know your girls and Jocelyn but I've never, frankly, had the honour of hearing your story. Dennis, I had the honour of meeting you very early in your journey on the issue that you brought to us, when I first became a municipal official, while not as connected as I kind of now wish I were. I've kept in touch, we've kept in touch, I've followed it, certainly supported your efforts where I could.

I guess I want to start with, number one, congratulations for being at this stage and for both of you certainly coming in today, but I want a big thank you to you both and all of the comrades who have brought the strength to you for your journey through this. Not only for your service to us in the Canadian Armed Forces, but for your post-service. Not just for your impact of what you have incredibly achieved to this date for the veterans that gave you the passion to move forward, but for all of the Canadians who you've been an incredible role model for. That's still not fully measured, but I want you to know that I recognize in our communities, that we face every day the challenges of the constituents that we represent - my friends, my family, my boys - the impact that you will have and, frankly, all of our veterans have had and will continue to have on their lives and their children's lives. Thank you for that.

Your presentation today - and I have some questions for you but before I do that, as a human being and as an elected official who is in a world of decision making, influence, I want to tell you that the story that I heard today - and I know it's out there, but sometimes I'm thankful that you brought this to us because it's shameful what has happened to you and I want to apologize for that . . .

DENNIS MANUGE: Thank you.

MEDRIC COUSINEAU: Thank you.

BECKY KENT: . . . and to say that I'm so sorry that this has happened, not only to you, but many and will continue to have negative impacts on Canadians and Nova Scotians. I'm sorry for that.

Okay, I have to pull myself together a bit. If I could go back to the suit at this stage, can I ask how did the veterans that are part of that 7,500 - how did they get engaged in this with you and, more importantly, is there still an opportunity for them to become engaged? Further to that, are there still veterans in Canada who you feel are still not engaged and is what has happened so far, the benefits that can come forward - and I pray will - is it still open for them to get a benefit from what I hope will continue to a very positive outcome? I have another question after that, but maybe we can start there because I think that's a really important layer.

DENNIS MANUGE: Now by "engaged", Becky, do you mean become part of the class or in Medric's case be able to receive benefits under the new Veterans Charter or do you just mean engaged in the veterans' movement?

BECKY KENT: That is part of the second question. We have these 7,500 people who are engaged in the class action suit, so when - I'm going to say when - the money starts rolling into the families' hands and that veteran's family's hands, is that limited to those who are there and on a piece of paper right now?

The second part of that is, and I kind of think Medric was alluding to this - will the decision that the Supreme Court has made, should it come to the full conclusion that we all hope - will it be an ongoing benefit to those who didn't necessarily get engaged in your suit, but have every right to have expectation that it will, in fact, give them benefits?

DENNIS MANUGE: Yes. Absolutely, I'm with you, and trust me, I know better than anybody the complexity of even talking about this issue because we have the nature of the beast - we're dealing with DND; we're dealing with the insurance company, SISIP Manulife, Veterans Affairs Canada and on it goes and two types of benefits. It has been an incredibly complex issue to talk about.

The short answer to your question, Becky, is yes, and yes in a couple of ways. There have been 7,500 members identified on paper as class action members, through what was, in fact, ordered by the court, ordered by Justice Barnes in our case, a very, very unique court order. Veterans Affairs Canada, SISIP and DND were ordered by the court to forego privacy legislation - or not forego it but kind of park it aside - to share information to make sure we identify everyone.

What I mean by that is they are not going to invade people's privacy but the only entity of those three that truly has the information is Veterans Affairs Canada. They are the ones who know if an individual has a client service number, their veteran's number, they are a client of Veterans Affairs Canada and they are in receipt of that monthly disability payment. So Veterans Affairs Canada is the only one that knows every name, every person, every veteran who could be impacted by this. They have been ordered to share that information with SISIP so they can jibe up, okay, who was on long-term disability for two years; who has been on it continuously; who was on it for two years and realized they were

offset to zero and would get nothing, so why should I fill out the paperwork and send it back to them? We've even identified those people who stopped sending the paperwork.

The third piece of that answer is, McInnes Cooper is going to stay on board long after this settlement is approved, to oversee and to make sure that people, because of the homelessness issue, are sought out. It's going to be their responsibility, in partnership probably with Veterans Affairs Canada, to seek those people out, to some limit I have to say, because theoretically there could be somebody walking the streets of Montreal who there is just no way, unless a Jim Lowther walks into them and reconnects them, there's just no way. That's why it's so hard with respect to the committee and with the rules of the committee it's so hard not to diverge when you're talking about one issue because they're all interconnected.

So the good news is yes, that those people will be identified and targeted and sought after, to a limit. I can honestly say I'm happy with how that's going to happen but I'm also happy we have somebody like Jim out on the street because he might find the ones who have slipped through that final crack.

The other thing is, as we move forward every day, there are still CF and RCMP members being released who would have been impacted by the clawback but will not be, and also to their luck and to their benefit, they will never have to pay a dime in legal fees because our lawyers have so much integrity they're only charging legal fees on retroactive money because they didn't ever want to dare claw back or offset anybody's monthly finances anymore. That's another piece that relates back to the legal fees.

So to kind of sum up that question, yes, somebody who is released today, who has served long enough prior to April 2006 and is in receipt of that monthly - say they hurt their knee back then, maybe they stayed in the same job or maybe they were able to move into a lesser physical trade or something like that. They could be released today and have been in receipt of a disability pension, while serving for this many years and prior to this decision they would have just automatically become members of the class, so that would have been 7,501, and 7,502 and 7,503. That's how that number jumped from those early days when they were saying 3,600, 4,000. That's how we got to 7,500. That's what Afghanistan did to us. That's the answer right there to that question.

The second part - and if I'm jumping around, please don't be shy and ask me to clarify - the earnings loss benefit that is now impacting Medric. This is where this committee member at a provincial level has some room to help. As we identify people like Medric who have slipped through the cracks, who are unaware of the new services and benefits or, in fact - essentially we've got people like Medric out there who have been injured or released a long time ago who have been disengaged from Veterans Affairs Canada for obvious reasons, I will say. We have to find those people because they're eligible under the New Veterans Charter. The one good thing about the New Veterans Charter is it doesn't leave anybody behind from April 2006; it has just changed the way

benefits are applied. So we need to find those people and make sure that if they're not receiving income replacement - he was living off his monthly pain and suffering payment, along with what his wife, Jocelyn, brought in, for 26 years.

MEDRIC COUSINEAU: Well actually, since 2006 the worst. Becky, one of the easiest ways and I think, if I may - your question about how do we make sure nobody gets left behind, there is one way to do it. When I tell you what it is, you're going to say, oh my and the answer is, oh yes. The easiest way to find out that nobody gets left behind is a full review at Veterans Affairs of everybody's case file. We've already found 7,500 - those we've got. There are people like me who have given up. They've walked away. There is a terminology; it's called "envelope trauma". You get a brown envelope from Veterans Affairs Canada. It can pancake a veteran for three days minimum, usually. The last one, my wife came home and she knew when she walked through the front door something was seriously wrong; she saw the envelope and she knew.

If we take all the veterans who have been identified in Dennis' case and take all the ones who aren't, a very quick computer audit will give you a list. One form letter and we can identify so many more.

DENNIS MANUGE: That's a really good point. The other point is with the earnings loss benefit, now the people just are not clawed back. If a member got in after April 2006, went to Afghanistan, mental and physical injuries, comes home - let's say they were in prior to 2006 - this is how it gets complicated. They had a pre-existing injury, they went to Afghanistan or somewhere else and got hurt - or got hurt training in Canada. If they have that monthly payment, it is not clawed back. It will never be touched. The only thing we're waiting on - and if the good Minister Blaney visits the Province of Nova Scotia, I would ask the committee members, if they're in his presence, to walk up to Minister Blaney and say, what's going on with the retroactivity for the earnings loss benefit members - where is it?

They changed the law and the clawback based on our case; they knew they would lose if we went after them for the ELB so they changed it automatically. But the last letter I got from the minister's office was that there has been no decision made on the retroactivity for the ELB members, of which I'm one. In one year, I lost more to the earnings loss benefit clawback than I did in the whole SISIP issue. So the earnings loss benefit people are protected and the SISIP people are protected, but only if they're an active member or an active client, if you will, of Veterans Affairs. It's the ones that aren't active that have the envelope trauma. When we were asked to call the 1-866 number, like the general 1-800 number for Veterans Affairs Canada, just talking to you about it now makes me physically ill. I hope that answers the question.

We're actively looking to identify and people, there is no more clawback, that's already - all the settlement is, is retroactivity now. Nobody who is receiving it today is being clawed back, on either the SISIP or the ELB.

BECKY KENT: Thank you. In the interest of others having an opportunity, I'll forgo my other questions and ask them if there's time at the end.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Kent. I certainly do appreciate that. Mr. Colwell.

HON. KEITH COLWELL: Thank you very much. It's a horrible situation when you've got to sit in this room and listen to this story. I mean in the country we live in, this should not happen, period. My father was in Italy and in South Africa, and he was badly wounded. He showed me a picture of his regiment before he went overseas, he picked out the six people, counting himself, who survived out of the whole regiment - 200, almost 300 men.

My father-in-law landed on D-Day. He was one of the very fortunate ones who lived and didn't get wounded but both of them had, I guess, post-traumatic stress disorder, especially my father, and I never realized until I was in my late 20s. One time we went camping. We went in the woods, it was a very dark night and we turned out the lanterns and everything. We no sooner did that and he was up and all night we had this monster campfire going. He couldn't stand being in the dark because he was in a tank during the war.

I started to realize - I wondered why he always had a streetlight right beside the house. I've seen a couple of times after that he would sort of let me see what happened but he never would, so I understand where you're coming from.

I don't think we spend enough money on our military in this country, I've always thought that and we definitely do not look after veterans well enough, period. It shouldn't be a question. There shouldn't be all these appeals, this is stupid; it's absolutely stupid. People give their lives, their whole lives and whether it's the fact that somebody gets killed or has to live with the issues afterwards, as you've been describing here today, I think it's disgraceful.

I would hope that today we can agree to write a letter to the minister in support of the retroactivity . . .

DENNIS MANUGE: For the earnings loss benefits?

KEITH COLWELL: From our committee.

DENNIS MANUGE: That would be very much appreciated, Mr. Colwell.

KEITH COLWELL: Maybe you could give our chairman, possibly the clerk, the information exactly how you want that worded and I would suggest that every member of the committee sign it - every member - before it goes to the minister.

THE CHAIR: Actually, Mr. Colwell, if you would be so kind as to put that motion on the floor, we'd be happy to deal with it right now.

KEITH COLWELL: I will so move.

THE CHAIR: So it has been duly moved and seconded. Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried - has been passed unanimously.

KEITH COLWELL: I would like the record to show which it is, that it was unanimously passed.

THE CHAIR: I did make that statement, unanimously passed.

MEDRIC COUSINEAU: Mr. Chairman, from this end of the table, we'd just like to say thank you. If enough people write enough letters, it may get this turned around. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Colwell, you may proceed.

KEITH COLWELL: I think that's a good start for our committee here. During the court case you talked a lot about people being informed, did the judge make any reference to informing people who fall through the cracks beyond your court case? Any orders going to lay down on Veterans Affairs?

MEDRIC COUSINEAU: Did you mention the arbitrator, sorry . . .

DENNIS MANUGE: Oh yes, ok. He did not - I don't think I recall him specifically giving anything further, other than laying it out to McInnes Cooper with their continued engagement that that would be something that would fall under the purview of our legal counsel. So they have a vested interest to pursue that to the best of their ability. Will they get to the level of perhaps having to hire investigators to go and look for these people? I don't think any of us have discussed that yet - either myself as a representative plaintiff with legal counsel, or what have you. But again, sometimes just talking about it and getting a question like that is a light-bulb moment so I'm going to mark that one down and just pursue it a little further.

Again, we're just limited, I guess in the worst-case scenario we're limited in finding them if they're on the street. The best-case scenario is that the government entities are already under a court order to share that information and that's where we're hoping we're going to catch even more people.

Medric just reminded me there will have been people who are not on the list but will have - and this is identified in the settlement and was recognized by the judge - an opportunity to go before a totally independent adjudicator and just lay out the information they have, medically. That independent adjudicator has final say on whether they do, in fact, become members of the class on a retro level or a go-forward level or both.

One of the strengths of the settlement and the work of our side was getting that arbitrator put in place. It's an arbitrator of our legal team's choosing and it's an arbitrator who is going to be paid for by the federal Government of Canada. So on a case-by-case basis, if there's any doubt, if the insurance company as insurance companies do, are saying no way, you're denied, every member of the class has the right, or every potential member who has been identified, has the right to go before this independent adjudicator and get a once and for all, no way, the heck with the insurance company, you've met the criteria, you're disabled, you're in. Does that help?

KEITH COLWELL: It does. One thing with the homeless people, there are several organizations that we deal with individuals who are in that situation. The police are number one because they're picking them up for whatever reason. Because of them being former military, they would have photos, all the things you would need - if the police all across the country could be informed, say here's people we're looking for, what a pleasant surprise it would be to somebody who is homeless, being picked up by the police and say wow. . .

DENNIS MANUGE: We got a match.

KEITH COLWELL: . . . We got a match, and here's some help.

DENNIS MANUGE: That's a great idea, Keith, I'm going to mark that down.

KEITH COLWELL: I would think the RCMP would be quite interested because it would be some of their colleagues and if they're not their colleagues, they would be former military who are in the same situation as some of their colleagues would be.

There are pretty simple ways you could do this that would pretty quickly gather up most of the people and at least inform them and decide - maybe they can decide themselves what they want to do, of course. I really give you credit for the work you've done.

DENNIS MANUGE: Thank you.

KEITH COLWELL: I've worked on a lot of workers' compensation cases, I don't know what I ever did to deserve to become the critic in my caucus for workers' comp but anyway, I got it and I enjoy working at it, actually. I did a lot of Canada Pension disability cases and I've lost one case ever. We set some precedent-setting cases in the country. It takes a lot of work. I mean the work I've done is nothing compared to what you've done.

DENNIS MANUGE: No, but many people make light work, too, right?

KEITH COLWELL: Yes, and it takes a lot of time and dedication and it's not for the lighthearted to go at these things, so I do give you a lot of credit and for everybody who has helped. I know in my own family's case, my father and Veterans Affairs at that time the systems they had and my father-in-law's, they were very helpful with long-term pensions and stuff. It seems like that has gone off the rails some since then. I think it's more the penny-pinchers rather than look at individuals, so I think that your court case is going to have a profound effect on that and I think that's very, very positive. You deserve to get a medal from the military for doing this. I mean that in all sincerity.

DENNIS MANUGE: Thank you, Mr. Colwell.

MEDRIC COUSINEAU: Mr. Manuge would meet the criteria for the Order of Canada. I'm not sure if that would be very palatable at the upper echelons of the rare and stratified air in Ottawa.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Colwell. We've got approximately 10 minutes left of questioning and answers. We'll move to Mr. MacLeod.

ALFIE MACLEOD: I want to thank both of you. We've read about it, we've watched it on TV, but nothing like today. I personally don't believe there's anything more honourable in public service than joining the military as you two gentlemen have done. I think Maritimers in general, as we know, always answer the call. We are a small portion of the population of Canada, but we have a major number in the armed services. I really am awed at what you do and why you do it.

I'm a little bit ashamed to hear how you and other members have been treated. I think collectively we all owe you an apology and a thank you mixed together. My understanding, as Dennis said - really at the end of the day, the amount of money that will be coming back to you is really not huge compared to some of your colleagues, but you just never let it go because it was the right thing to do and again, I congratulate on that.

Captain, wow. My colleagues will tell you it's not very often I'm speechless, but you did it to me. I want to say that after listening to what you had to say and hearing the impact that it has had, I just wonder - and it's not a fair question, but I'm going to ask it anyway - in a perfect world, which it's not, but if there was one thing that could take place, that needed to take place that would help correct some of what has happened to people like yourself who have fallen through the cracks? We have that in so many different facets of things that we do as governments across this country, I'm just wondering what thing that you think, Captain, would be the thing that would be the one that would make a difference, because this doesn't just impact on you. It impacted on your wife, your children and probably your grandchildren.

MEDRIC COUSINEAU: You speak to a key point. I come from a family where my father served, my mother served, my brother served and I served - all of us, 100 per cent. My youngest daughter will never serve; she has made that clear. That is a result of what she grew up witnessing. What could happen, what could change this? There is not a quick answer to that question. Every Veterans Ombudsman - Pat Stogran, Guy Parent - both of them have been embattled with governments that do not want to acknowledge the veracity of their reports. You asked me for one thing. It is that biggest breakdown right there.

Jim Lowther is so effective at pulling disabled veterans off the street because he speaks their language. The military is different, we're trained different, we are different, we become different, our families are different. It's just the way it is, and in a world where everybody is so desperately deemed to be equal, equal opportunity does not mean equal in terms of the way some things happen. So what could we reach out - on a large scale, obviously the Veterans Ombudsman is full-on engaged in those.

Here on the home front, your confrères who handle both the mental health portfolios, the veterans portfolios and those engaged on the suicide, homelessness and disabled veterans, i.e. there are both physical and mental that fall into those categories. Those all speak to a similar problem - both an administrative problem in VRAB and a serious mental health problem that needs addressing within society. If I got to write my Christmas list, it would be a meeting of those three departments, with a firm resolve that nobody leaves the meeting until we have clear action - action in deeds.

DENNIS MANUGE: The other answer, just quickly, one initiative that I'm trying to get another veteran - perhaps Medric and Jim - to assist with an answer to that question. What one thing we could do - I think a buddy system upon medical release would go a long way. When we're serving and posted to a new base or whatever, somebody is assigned to us to make sure we get to the administration office, meet the CO, meet the RSM and all of that.

Veterans are placed on a public service priority hiring list but that has been turned into a farce and a joke. Why not create an environment where veterans who are able to work, either full-time or part-time, be trained in Veterans Affairs Canada, and insurance, and as one of the requirements, as a member is releasing from the CF or the RCMP is they have a meeting with their buddy. Their buddy knows the ins and outs, knows where to go to apply what paperwork, how to fill it out, that kind of thing. That would be my answer to that question.

ALFIE MACLEOD: I want to thank you both and I really appreciate the fact that you've been here today and thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity.

THE CHAIR: Well thank you, sir. So what we will do in a few moments is basically give you an opportunity to sort of sum up because we're getting close to the quarter of the hour, so to speak.

On behalf of the committee I would just like to make a few - I spoke personally myself but some of this has been reflected in what the committee members have said. I would certainly like to thank you gentlemen for both coming in here today and sharing a story which obviously is and has been a very difficult story. Your passion and your concern for each other and for other vulnerable members of our society has certainly been apparent here today. The fact of the matter is that 7,500 disabled veterans and their families, and I think this is extremely important and I know it has not been lost and it has not been lost on this committee, and the members are affected and have been affected by this.

Your commitment to righting a wrong, and that statement came out quite a bit, is to be certainly commended. It's unfortunate that you had to use so much of your personal time and your resources to basically fight a government which you folks pledged your support and allegiance to many, many years ago and did a job as you were asked to do. It is too bad that had to happen because I think you stated that in 2006 the Parliament of Canada passed a motion and unfortunately, that motion was denied by the present government and you folks had to continue fighting this battle.

I want to commend you and I want to thank you and, like my colleagues, I know we all feel somewhat embarrassed by this and we, too, share your hope that Veterans Affairs Ombudsman and so on, those types of people who are put in place to help Canadian citizens will be listened to in the future. I am very pleased that this committee passed a motion to move ahead with what you're asking.

To me, this day - and I think my committee members would agree - has been very productive so thank you very much. If you do want to take a moment to say anything, we'll give you a couple more minutes.

DENNIS MANUGE: I appreciate that, Mr. Chairman. Yes, again thank you for having us, thank you for allowing me to bring Medric. Make no mistake about it, I have enough experience and time involved in this stuff to understand that we're addressing a provincial body today so I really understand the limitations and stuff that you guys face.

What I'm so proud of with this committee is first for the motion and your commitment to follow through on that, but second of all, I would feel horrible if I didn't recognize the support that we have had from Becky, and I met this gentleman before at events and stuff like that, so there is a role to play for folks at the provincial level. It's just to be supportive and continue to do what you're doing and asking folks to come in and listen to what we're saying because yes, it's bad, yes it happened, but the only way things get changed is for people to get together like we're doing here today, like I addressed the Senate of Canada and all of that. We're all ordinary Canadians and the only way we make positive change or effect positive change is to do it together. I'm just very grateful, very humbled and very appreciative of the committee.

Thank you for the latitude to allow Medric because it just was very important for me for the committee to kind of get that story because he's one of thousands. If you get a call to your constituency office, at the very least point him in our direction and we'll make sure they get hooked up with the right folks in the right place. Thank you very much.

MEDRIC COUSINEAU: Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for allowing me the time to speak today. I realize that my story is not pretty, but my story is reflective of what is happening within the veterans' community in so many ways. In some ways it leaves people uncomfortable. Unfortunately, the truth often has a tendency to do that, so thank you very much for your time today. Our country will remain strong only inasmuch as we remember it is our country - our country, "True North strong and free" - our people.

THE CHAIR: Gentlemen, well said, and we certainly appreciate your attendance here today. If you would be so kind, we're going to deal with a couple of items and if you would be so kind perhaps to just take a few minutes and wait. I would like for you to give the clerk your contact information because we want to follow up on what we've talked about. There are members who may want to make direct contact with you as well.

The next item of business would be dealing with committee business on the agenda. We will perhaps get our clerk here to deal with our correspondence.

KIM LANGILLE: Did you want to maybe deal with the meetings during the House session first and get that out of the way?

THE CHAIR: That's fine. We will do that. Meetings during the House session. Will this committee meet during the upcoming session? I know we haven't.

KEITH COLWELL: I know most committees don't, but this committee - and I'm not a member of the committee, I'm just filling in today, but I've been on every committee in the Legislature over the years. This is one committee that it's probably wise if it did sit during the session, if the members agree to do that.

After what we've heard today, and every time I've filled in on this committee - I've never been a full-time member - it has always been the same situation that it's a lot of things we should be hearing about. I'm just reading through some of the correspondence here and I think the committee does good work and it's not a political committee; it's a committee that really is there to help our veterans. That's just my opinion. Again, I'm not a member of the committee.

BECKY KENT: I agree. On behalf of our caucus, the same idea that there is a tremendous benefit here - but not being a committee member.

THE CHAIR: Well, Mr. MacLeod, you are a committee member.

ALFIE MACLEOD: I am a committee member and I don't see any reason for us not to be able to meet because we can meet in the morning on whatever day the House happens to be sitting. As my colleagues have said, I think the business is too important. It's not a lot of time, but the issues that we deal with are very important so I would be in full favour of meeting during the session of the House.

THE CHAIR: This is just a suggestion, since we do not have the full complement of committee members, perhaps what we could do is ask the clerk to poll the committee members - would that be acceptable?

HAROLD THERIAULT: That was my suggestion.

THE CHAIR: Okay, that would be yours.

ALFIE MACLEOD: You already have my answer.

THE CHAIR: Yes, we do.

HAROLD THERIAULT: Let's poll all the regular committee members.

KEITH COLWELL: But make them aware of the comments.

HAROLD THERIAULT: I don't think three of us should make that decision. You two newcomers here, you have great intentions . . .

THE CHAIR: That would be my preference as well. Okay, very good, we have consensus on that. Then our next item?

KIM LANGILLE: Just with regard to correspondence. You'll see the first item noted there is a letter we received from the Nova Scotia Nunavut Command, basically requesting to appear themselves and the UN-NATO Veterans Association regarding the expansion of the veteran licence plate program to include veteran plates for motorcycles.

You'll also see in the information this year our sort of approved witness list, so I guess that's what the committee has to decide, whether or not we would agree to hear from them and where we might place them on our list.

THE CHAIR: Okay, go ahead, Mr. Colwell.

KEITH COLWELL: I'm not a regular member here but I think it would be a good idea to hear from all of them, I really would, because I mean it's all related to the work the committee does. I think it's important to hear this.

THE CHAIR: So would the consensus be to have the clerk put this on the list and deal with it in the usual manner?

KEITH COLWELL: So moved.

THE CHAIR: Okay, it has been moved then. Consensus I think is fine here at this point. Okay, very good.

KIM LANGILLE: So we're just going to add them to the list and they will just go in the normal rotation as we're proceeding along, is that correct?

THE CHAIR: Yes, that's the intent. Okay.

KIM LANGILLE: The next item is correspondence that came from the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal. Really it's just a letter thanking us for our correspondence and giving them direction on the Highway of Heroes sign and who the designation is going to be representing. I really don't think there's anything for us to do, otherwise . . .

THE CHAIR: An information item.

KIM LANGILLE: Yes.

THE CHAIR: This has been dealt with, so that's an information item. Then the next one we have is the Pictou County Health Authority. So Kim, if you could just update everybody on that one.

KIM LANGILLE: I attached some of the background correspondence that had gone out on that. Essentially we got a letter from someone who had been concerned about the food changes to the veterans unit at the Northumberland Veterans Unit. The committee passed a motion to call in the folks from Pictou County Health and have a special meeting. We then received correspondence from Pictou County Health saying they would be glad to but there was an evaluation underway at the time and had asked that they have their appearance after the evaluation had been complete.

They have now provided us with an update on sort of where that stands so I guess it's for the committee to sort of look at that and make a decision on whether we do want to proceed to have a special meeting or do we want to wait until they have completed. They have some dates noted in there as to when they expect things to be happening so I guess that's what the committee needs to decide today, how to proceed further.

HAROLD THERIAULT: I'd like to move that we have this group in as soon as possible. This past week or so there's been a couple of veterans who died in that area. One

of them is Joe Currie. He was one of the people who took up this fight and now his son is going to continue on.

I would also like to move that maybe this committee send Mr. Joe Currie's family a card or a letter of condolence from this committee, if everyone could agree on that. I believe also that we should have that group in as soon as possible, that health authority. It's a serious situation and we brought this up.

THE CHAIR: You have a comment, Mr. MacLeod?

ALFIE MACLEOD: I guess I'd just like to add to what Junior has to say there, Mr. Chairman, that indeed, with the House going in and with us going to be here on a fairly regular basis, that there may be an opportunity to have a special meeting with them during that time. We're all in Halifax anyway, so if there's a morning there that would make this work, to me that would be a very logical thing to do and that should also meet the requirements of the dates that they've set out in this letter.

THE CHAIR: My comment would be that we've already authorized a special meeting so that has already been done. It's just a matter of scheduling the meeting so I think that would meet with the committee's direction in the past and I would concur with the comments there. I think we can do this and we can proceed.

ALFIE MACLEOD: We'll leave it in the hands of our clerk and the chairman to follow through, knowing they have the support of the committee, or the ones who are here.

HAROLD THERIAULT: Can we send condolences to Joe Currie's family - a letter from this committee? I think it would be appropriate. I mean, he was one of the fighters for this and he has passed on.

THE CHAIR: Okay, very good. I think that concludes it, other than the next meeting date. We have April 11th.

KIM LANGILLE: If the committee decides that they're going to meet while the House is in session.

THE CHAIR: Yes. That date will be the one that we will fall back on if the committee decides on that. Is that acceptable to everyone? Very good. Is there any other business? Hearing none, then we'll entertain a motion to adjourn.

KEITH COLWELL: So moved.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Colwell, thank you. We are adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10:56 a.m.]

