

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Monday, February 17, 2014

Membertou Trade & Convention Centre

Veterans Affairs Canada office closures

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VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

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Hon. Pat Dunn
Larry Harrison
Hon. Dave Wilson
Gordon Gosse

[Larry Harrison was replaced by Alfie MacLeod.]
[Hon. Pat Dunn was replaced by Eddie Orrell.]
[Hon. Dave Wilson was replaced by Hon. Frank Corbett.]

In Attendance:

Kim Leadley
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESSES

Ron Clarke
Vince Rigby
John Ardelli
Simon Gillis
Mel Birmingham
Blair McIvor
Joe Wilson



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

MEMBERTOU, MONDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2014

STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

11:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Pam Eyking

VICE-CHAIR

Ben Jessome

THE CHAIR: Good morning. I'd like to call the meeting to order. My name is Pam Eyking. I am the chairman for the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. I'm the MLA for Victoria-The Lakes.

We are here because we're going to witness Mr. Clarke today. Mr. Clarke, it is an honour to have you here today, however, I wish it was under different circumstances. Mr. Clarke, as you know, the focus of this committee is on the issues veterans face. Today we are focusing on one of the most important issues our veterans are facing - the closure of the Veterans Affairs Offices across the country, including the office in Sydney.

Mr. Clarke, as you know, it was our hope that the federal budget would reverse its decision to close these offices. However, the federal Conservatives have decided to leave our veterans vulnerable. I am aware that the federal budget has allocated additional funding for the veterans, and I recognize the importance of this. However, the fact remains, the offices are closing or have already closed.

A note to committee members, as we all know this is an emergency meeting. The nature of this meeting is to listen to the concerns the veterans have. I would ask that any committee members who may have any motions they wish to introduce, to hold them until our next regular meeting. Again, we are here today to listen. Mr. Clarke, thank you for coming.

I would ask the committee members to introduce themselves, please.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I would like to remind everyone to have their cellphones turned off or put on silence during this meeting. Without further ado, Mr. Clarke, would you please introduce yourself and begin your presentation.

RON CLARKE: Good morning, members of the Legislature, ladies and gentlemen who are here to attend this meeting. My name is Ron Clarke and I'm a 36-year veteran of the Canadian Armed Forces. I served in Alert, Northwest Territories, Cyprus, Southwest Africa, Vietnam, Germany, as well as in Canada. The reason I am here today is to enlighten you on some of the problems the vets are experiencing because of the actions of Veterans Affairs and the Prime Minister.

I want to start by telling you a story about a dear friend of mine from Oshawa, Ontario. He was wounded in Cyprus and had a bullet lodged in his chest. When he went to Veterans Affairs to get something done about it, on the first review they said no - that's the old no-and-go thing. However, with him one "no" was too much and they found him hanging outside his house; he committed suicide. I tell that story because I don't think the government understands the difference between a phone line or the Internet and having a trained human being there so our vets can have a one-on-one, face-to-face experience. A human being who knows enough about PTSD to recognize the signs, someone who has been trained about triggers and how not to trigger, someone trained to recognize the signs of depression and anxiety, someone trained to ask the right kinds of questions.

Not all veterans, of course, are living with PTSD, anxiety and depression, but many of those need face-to-face help as well. They need to be able to talk to someone about the services they are entitled to, someone who has been trained in all the programs and how they have evolved over the years, someone who knows enough to actively help veterans get everything they are entitled to not just what they know enough to ask for.

That's the key here, proactive service. Most vets often don't know what they are entitled to unless there is someone there to tell them. I used to think that the government was making a mistake by closing these offices. I used to think that they just didn't understand how difficult it is for some of us to use the phone or the computer. Now I have come to a different conclusion - I believe now this government knows exactly what it is doing. It is taking away the people who are trained to make sure we get all the services and benefits we are entitled to, so that veterans will stop using services and benefits.

First they make the services and benefits harder to access and then they can say fewer veterans are using them, which they have done out West. After the 2012 budget, they cut back on services, laid people off and, of course, that meant there were fewer people

going to the offices and that's why they say they had to close them because no one was going. Then they can use that to cut more and save money on the backs of the veterans.

Here is where their mistake comes in. The real mistake was believing the veterans would just swallow our pride and walk away - to hell with that idea. Now, with the help of the workers who used to serve us and their union, we are united across the country. Believe me, when I say across the country, that's exactly what I mean. We are fighting back.

You all have a very special responsibility to take a close look at what is happening to veterans across this province. The closure of the Sydney office doesn't hurt just Sydney veterans - it hurts all veterans in Nova Scotia. Just look at the numbers in 2012, the Sydney office has 17 workers serving 4,200 veterans and their families. That's gone now, now there's just one worker in the Service Canada office.

In 2012, the Halifax office had 53 workers serving 14,629 clients. Now it has about 50 and it is taking on the 4,200 clients from the Sydney office. Nova Scotia has four less case managers to deal with high-risk veterans, and those case managers are all in Halifax, more than five hours from Sydney. Nova Scotia vets used to have 22 client service agents to serve them; now they have 18. That is why it is so hard to understand how the government can say that services won't change.

Services have changed and will continue to change. Here's the scary part - unless we stand up and make ourselves heard, soon the government will be able to say that it was right, fewer veterans are using the services so we don't need them anyway. I'm here to say that's wrong, veterans in Nova Scotia and across the country deserve better. The friend I told you about deserves better so I'm here today for him and for all of us. I hope you'll do everything you can to help, not just here in Nova Scotia but across Canada.

Mr. Julian Fantino, the Minister of Veterans Affairs, must go. He is utterly and obscenely out of sync with Canada's veterans, so are his actions and lack of honour in keeping his word and promises. He has caused much grief for veterans of this country and their families, in trying to deflect the blame onto someone other than himself or his government.

In July 2013 Mr. Fantino was appointed Minister of Veterans Affairs. In the beginning his words were full of promise for Canada's veterans. Since then it has become very apparent that his words were meaningless and he has blatantly demonstrated his true intentions. Here I quote him:

"We owe a tremendous debt to those who have served the interests of our country, in preserving our freedoms, ensuring our prosperity and securing our future. They warrant our support and assistance and we are committed to delivering for them."

The support and assistance he had committed to delivering to us is now in the wind. Mr. Fantino has closed nine Veterans Affairs offices. In Cape Breton alone there are approximately 4,200 veterans who would be losing the urgently required services that our office provides.

Case management is very important to veterans, to help prevent them from falling through the cracks. For instance, Mr. Fantino himself said that case management is a very real necessity for Canada veterans and their families. We cannot receive that in Service Canada with only one trained DVA worker. "Case management is a service offered to Veterans with complex needs, and their families. Case managers are frontline personnel who build relationships with Veterans and their families; identify their needs and goals; develop a case plan with the Veteran and family to reach those goals; and then monitor and evaluate progress."

Another quote from Mr. Fantino:

"We owe a tremendous debt to those who have served the interests of our country, in preserving our freedoms, ensuring our prosperity and securing our future. They warrant our support and assistance and we are committed to delivering for them. As Minister of Veterans Affairs, along with our Government and my department, this is a commitment that I take with the utmost of respect, responsibility and consideration. Our Veterans deserve no less."

Mr. Fantino has said that PSAC has lied about his intentions. How can that be? His actions are proving his intentions. The closure of nine Veterans Affairs offices is proving his intentions - how can he hide from this? By attempting to cloud the issue, the issue is simple. People have given their all and put their lives on the line for this country and every Canadian living in it were promised and deserve the desperately-needed assistance and support they require to live a normal life.

Out of absolute desperation, veterans have reached out to the Public Service Alliance of Canada for help in retaining these services which we currently have and are entitled to. In sheer desperation we were trying to reach out and save fellow veterans through telling the Canadian public what is happening to their fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, uncles, cousins, sons and daughters, who have given so much that we may live in a free country. They are being let down, shunned like a drop of bacteria, discarded like yesterday's trash by the government that deploys them into war zones and conflicts.

The audacity of Mr. Fantino and his government is unfathomable. The decision to close these nine Veterans Affairs offices that serve tens of thousands of veterans could be reversed with a word from the Prime Minister or the stroke of a pen, yet the only voices heard are the echoes and desperate cries of our fallen colleagues who have felt no help and departed this life. The devastated loved ones left behind our current veterans and their

families all crying out to our government for the help they were promised, the help they are entitled to. All cries are falling upon deaf ears. Why should we have to beg?

Mr. Fantino, current service members, and veterans alike are very highly-trained and skilled people. We have an esprit de corps that surpasses any group commonality. We depend upon one another in times of peace and in times of conflict and war. We depend upon one another for our lives - we, citizens of Canada, the veterans of Canada, current serving members of the Armed Forces of Canada and the Public Service Alliance of Canada are now working together to protect those who have protected all of us Canadians.

We will work together until the next election and if no consideration is to be given to the value of the lives of our veterans and their families, then no consideration will be given to you on election day. Thank you. (Applause)

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Clarke. I just wanted to add that this meeting is public and open for the public to observe. The meeting will be recorded and transcribed and proceedings prepared. I'd like for everyone to take notice of the exit signs in case of an emergency.

I am going to open the floor up for questions. I will start with Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Thank you, Mr. Clarke, for your presentation. Certainly it is nice to hear your testimony directly and I think it was a really good idea for us to come up here so that we could do that. In your presentation, you alluded to a gap between what military veterans know they're entitled to and what they're actually entitled to, and the benefits of a caseworker being able to communicate the maximum of what services and supports you are entitled to. Can you kind of elaborate on that a little bit, maybe talk about a couple of examples where a caseworker would have brought something up that was really beneficial to yourself or one of your comrades?

RON CLARKE: Okay, let's take somebody with an injury, like myself. I also have had a back injury as well as PTSD. I didn't know what my entitlement was, i.e. a wheelchair, building a ramp up to my house, getting me mobility like one of those - they're not race cars because they're not too fast. So I knew nothing about that, stuff for my bathroom, the handles so I can get in and out of the tub. I knew nothing about that, it was my case manager who told me I am entitled to this and got it for me.

BEN JESSOME: Okay, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Gosse.

GORDIE GOSSE: Yes, my question, Ron, would be if there's any support that the province can give to help veterans dealing with the closure of the Sydney offices? Is there anything you can think of?

RON CLARKE: Yes, there's one thing you can do and I had mentioned that to someone, you can pass a resolution in the Legislature, asking the feds to reopen the offices. You did that?

GORDIE GOSSE: I did that already earlier.

RON CLARKE: And it was voted on?

GORDIE GOSSE: Unanimous consent of all members in the House of Assembly last December.

RON CLARKE: That's great, I'm sorry, I didn't know that. Thank you.

Mr. Gosse, you had an idea - I just heard of it yesterday and it's an excellent idea - in reference to having sort an ombudsman for the province, someone who can look after the veterans, i.e. when there's problems or what have you, they can go and find out what the problems are and report back to the Legislature about that. That's an excellent idea.

GORDIE GOSSE: My motion was for support for a veterans advocate to report actually back to the Minister responsible for Military Relations, who is actually the Premier, and to be able to provide advocacy on behalf of veterans in the Province of Nova Scotia. That motion at that time was not passed.

RON CLARKE: Well anyway, we can probably even bring it up again, I guess maybe, because I think it's an excellent idea.

GORDIE GOSSE: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Gough.

STEPHEN GOUGH: Yes, Mr. Clarke, could you inform our committee here today on how strong the veterans community is here in Sydney?

RON CLARKE: Yes, I can. Our last March of Concern brought out over 3,000 people within the city itself. That's not all veterans - that's veterans' families and ordinary civilians. They were all out there to support us so we have great support here on the Island.

STEPHEN GOUGH: Great, wonderful, thank you.

RON CLARKE: You're welcome.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Orrell.

EDDIE ORRELL: Thank you, Mr. Clarke - Ron, as I like to call you. Just in listening to your presentation, it's very well done. Is there anything else this committee can do to make sure that the plight of the veterans is realized and that may benefit you guys in your fight to keep these offices open? Is there anything as such, because it is a Veterans Affairs Committee?

RON CLARKE: Yes, well making representation to Mr. Fantino and the Prime Minister I think is what you can do. You can chat with him and let him know the concerns of the veterans here and across Canada. This is not just here anymore, this is across Canada.

I realize you're here just for Nova Scotia but anything you can do with the Prime Minister or the Minister of Veterans Affairs would be most appreciated.

EDDIE ORRELL: So we could probably draft a letter from this committee to go to the Prime Minister . . .

RON CLARKE: Yes, that would be an excellent idea, I appreciate that.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: Thank you, Madam Chairman. I want to thank you, Ron, for what I thought was a very powerful presentation. I am honoured to appear before you today and I really appreciate your strong words on this issue.

Just perhaps to start with, I wondered if you had any comments on the Veterans Bill of Rights that was passed a number of years ago and signed by the Prime Minister. I believe Romeo Dallaire reviewed that and submitted a report. Do you feel that document is assisting in this discussion? What's your feeling in terms of how the government is doing with respect to that Bill of Rights for veterans?

RON CLARKE: In my opinion, the government is violating the right to privacy and confidentiality. As you know, a few of our veterans had their files exposed, some of them had them destroyed and that to me is wrong. They are violating the Veterans Charter and I think that should be addressed and changed. Somebody should pay for that.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Corbett please.

HON. FRANK CORBETT: Madam Chair, I was remiss at the beginning of this when I introduced myself also that I'm subbing for Hon. David Wilson, who couldn't make it.

Mr. Clarke, good to see you.

RON CLARKE: Good to see you as well.

FRANK CORBETT: I have a few questions if you don't mind. You've been around a bit.

RON CLARKE: A little bit.

FRANK CORBETT: A little bit, you look great.

RON CLARKE: Thank you.

FRANK CORBETT: I read where you've served. It's not an exaggeration - all over the world, right?

RON CLARKE: Yes.

FRANK CORBETT: You served not only with the Canadian Forces, but I would suspect other international expeditions?

RON CLARKE: Yes.

FRANK CORBETT: I want to talk about Canadian Forces in particular. Am I wrong in assuming that most of the men and women that you've served with - is it fair to say that most of them have come from small and rural areas like Sydney Mines, New Waterford, those areas and even more rural than that? Is that accurate - like rural Saskatchewan and rural Newfoundland?

RON CLARKE: That is very accurate. I joined in 1956 and there were five of us from this area who joined together and, of course, at Sydney Mines, North Sydney and New Waterford. We even had a row on the train going up there.

FRANK CORBETT: Guys from North Sydney, eh? (Laughter)

RON CLARKE: No, you guys from New Waterford. (Laughter) At that time was with the Royal Highland Regiment, the Black Watch and that at the time was made up of Maritimers, Newfoundlanders, Cape Bretoners, New Brunswickers, I don't know how they got there, but we even had a few from Ontario.

FRANK CORBETT: Oh well, everyone has some bad apples. (Laughter)

The reason I'm asking you these questions, Mr. Clarke, is what we've seen here is - there should be no receding from the amount of service that veterans get. With that said, there was never even ever any consultation with you. You were 36 years in the services, right?

RON CLARKE: Yes.

FRANK CORBETT: And you're past president of the peacekeepers association. There was never any discussion of saying, you know the reality of these women and men, these veterans, they live in rural areas. With all due respect, per capita they're not from Halifax, they're not from Ottawa, they're not from Toronto, they're from Northern Saskatchewan, the out ports of Newfoundland, Baie St. Lawrence - I think you know where I'm going with this. Was there ever any discussion with the federal government saying, do you know what, instead of giving you an Internet address or phone number, actually what we're going to do is bring services closer to you? With people of your ilk?

RON CLARKE: Never was there any discussion. When Mr. Blaney was Minister of Veterans Affairs, I personally sent an invitation to him to come down and talk with the veterans. He didn't even send us a reply. When Mr. Fantino took over, I did the same. I sent him a personal request and not me alone, by the way - I understand there were other people who sent him requests to come down and talk to the veterans. There was no reply there either; it was totally ignored. Right from the get-go, he obviously didn't want any discussions. They made up their minds and this was what they were going to do.

FRANK CORBETT: Is it fair for me to characterize it as a deal made in Ottawa for Ottawa, and not a deal made with veterans for veterans? Is that it?

RON CLARKE: No, it was a deal made in Hell.

FRANK CORBETT: Okay and you're getting burned?

RON CLARKE: Yes, you got it.

FRANK CORBETT: I've a few quick ones, I don't want to dominate the time of the committee. It's interesting - I really don't know you personally, Mr. Clarke . . .

RON CLARKE: You wouldn't want to. (Laughter)

FRANK CORBETT: I think I would, you're a pretty good guy. I know some of your relatives and they're decent people, Mr. Clarke.

What comes through, and I see you through the media and read stories on you, is that you are a pull-no-punches type of guy, you're not "full of it", as they say and so we all respect that. I know when you say - and I'm going to paraphrase it - Fantino lied or broke his word - and I don't think words come out of you easily like that, I don't think you're prone to calling people liars or anything like that.

I want to give you a chance to kind of put some meat on that bone. When you tell me he lied, can you give me an instance where you say that he lied?

RON CLARKE: Lied or misinformation, I believe I used. To start with, Mr. Fantino said that everybody would be looked after and the case managers would come to people when they needed them. Well, the fact remains that if you don't have a case manager, then you will not get one to come to you. Case managers only look after people with certain problems - right? Otherwise, you don't get a case manager, even though it says in the good book that every veteran is entitled to a case manager, but it doesn't happen.

Also he said there would be no cost for people travelling. Well, that's another bit of bullshit. If I have to go to - not me, personally - but if you don't have a case manager and you have to go to Halifax, you pay for your trip, you pay for your meals, hotel lodgings if you have to stay overnight, that's your expense. He wasn't mentioning that at all, he was saying that they are looking after everything. Well, those are just a couple of the incidents. There's more but I'll let it go at that.

FRANK CORBETT: Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Arab.

PATRICIA ARAB: Mr. Clarke, now that the federal government has closed the Veterans Affairs offices, where are you and your fellow veterans going?

RON CLARKE: Well I went over to the office just last week but I knew I was going to be looked after because the person who is there used to be the manager in Sydney so he's well informed. I did ask him how long he was going to be there and he couldn't give me an answer. He said maybe June or July, so then we wouldn't have him there, right? We would have Service Canada personnel who are not trained to look after the veterans.

PATRICIA ARAB: Have you had anybody tell you that their experiences haven't been as . . .

RON CLARKE: Yes, I have but I really don't want to go into that right now because the phase that we're in right now is we're gathering all the information, the complaints and we're going to compile them. We're going to do that for a few months and then we're going to present them to the ombudsman so the ombudsman can take it to the veterans committee.

PATRICIA ARAB: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. MacLeod.

ALFIE MACLEOD: Thank you, Ron, for your presentation. You'll have to excuse my voice; I'm playing with a frog. I just wanted to say first and foremost, thank you for your service to our country. You joined in 1956, that's actually the year I was born and you gave two-thirds of my lifetime to the service of this country and sir, I don't know how to thank you for that. The very fact that we're sitting around this table is in relation to people like yourself and the other veterans who are sitting here and we owe them a great deal of thanks.

To say to a veteran that you should call on a phone or go on a computer, my guess is that when they asked you to go overseas, they didn't ask you to do it by computer. They probably asked you to go in person.

RON CLARKE: They didn't have any computers in those days. (Laughter)

ALFIE MACLEOD: That would be my point. I don't know how many people here know, but Nova Scotia is the only province that has a committee for Veterans Affairs as part of the makeup of the Legislature of our province. That's because here in Nova Scotia there are a great deal of people who do, indeed, go into the military. It's a vocation that people take a great deal of pride in, and we take a great deal of pride in the fact that we have so many veterans here. What is taking place, in my opinion, is not right, it's not fair.

I was wondering if you could tell the people here on the committee, some who are not aware, of what a visit to the office would entail? What I'm interested in, Ron, is when you call us and you need to get a visit, what was the turnaround time? Was there a constraint when you went there as far as time - we only have 15 minutes for you, that kind of things? The people who were there, how they reacted to the veterans who went in there?

I think part of the problem that we see in government in general not just in the Veterans Affairs Department, is people are now numbers. They're not faces, they're not humans, they're not considered to be looked at as individuals, everybody wants to put a number on you so that when they're making decisions it doesn't have a real effect. I think that's the part that we're hearing that you, as veterans, are going to miss. I was wondering if you could sort of put a face on what a visit was like to give the committee a better understanding of what it is that we're talking about here?

RON CLARKE: Sure. First of all with the Sydney office, we didn't have to call to make an appointment; we could just walk in. We would walk in, announce ourselves, sit in a chair and within five minutes somebody would be out there calling you in the office to sit down and find out what your problems are. They would go to work on those problems immediately.

In relation to Service Canada, when I went in the other day, I didn't have a clue where to go, but there seemed to be a young fella there in front of a table so I figured hey, he must be the guy to talk to. I said excuse me, I'm here looking for Veterans Affairs and he

said Veterans Affairs, that was over on George Street. I said yes, I know, it was over there, but apparently there's somebody here now. He then said yes, oh yes, there's a fellow around the corner there - that was the other extent of the experience.

From what I understand, that young lad could have gone on the computer or his iPhone - whatever in the Hell that is - and ordered forms, but there are only certain forms he can order. He can't help you fill them out; there's no way he knows the answers to the questions. So that, of course, is a very big inconvenience for us veterans. Does that help you?

ALFIE MACLEOD: Madam Chairman, I wonder if I could ask another question?

THE CHAIR: Sure, go ahead.

ALFIE MACLEOD: Thank you. Ron, I think you quoted 4,200 people as being serviced by the office. Could you give us an indication as to all of the different types of services that you can get there? Again, it's an education thing for us to understand better the types of services that you could get from the office and now you're expected to call a 1-800 number or go on the computer. The minister keeps saying that somebody will come, but if somebody comes down here I think my colleagues from Halifax can tell you that's not the easiest thing in the world. My colleagues on this side of the table who travel back and forth every week will tell you that's not the easiest thing in the world.

I know you talked earlier about the cost it could be to the veterans, but what about just putting a little more light on that subject?

RON CLARKE: At the office you can see a nurse and you can see a doctor. They'll make an appointment for a shrink if you need it. Physiotherapy - they can send you to physiotherapists. They can do all that stuff at the office, whereas Service Canada, they're not trained. That was another thing that Mr. Fantino gave misinformation about. He started out saying there would be 450 service points, then 500, then 550 and now he's up to 600. I asked him, do you have courses, training set up for these people who will be at the office? That's when he left and he had no answer for that, and I can tell you they don't. They don't have any training set up, no courses set up for these people so what are they going to be able to do for us? Very little - they'll give you the paperwork and let you work it out yourself. That's wrong. We can't have that. We have to have this one-on-one with Veterans Affairs people, the PSAC people who know what the hell they're doing. Does that help you?

ALFIE MACLEOD: Yes, I think we're going in the right direction. The other thing I just want to clarify - there is one service representative in one of the Service Canada offices, is that correct - on Cape Breton Island?

RON CLARKE: Yes, that is correct.

ALFIE MACLEOD: Before, when the office was around, would there be people who would go to Cheticamp for a day or Port Hawkesbury?

RON CLARKE: Yes, we had 17 people in the office and, without looking at the paperwork, I don't remember how many were caseworkers, but yes, they travelled. As a matter of fact, they were travelling right up to Halifax. They had some cases in Halifax that they had to look after, so yes, they travelled from one end of Cape Breton to the other end of Cape Breton and beyond, but that day is no more.

ALFIE MACLEOD: Is it your understanding that the person who is in the Service Canada office, that is the location and he or she will not be doing any travelling?

RON CLARKE: No, how the hell can he travel and keep the office open? That is not the answer. They will not be able to give the service that we as veterans require and need.

ALFIE MACLEOD: One final question, if I could, Madam Chairman. If you have a disabled veteran who has mobility challenges, transportation challenges - how is that person now to get that type of service that we've been talking about?

RON CLARKE: Well, he would probably have to do what they've been doing - they get somebody to drive them to Halifax to get the authorization to get the treatment that he requires. He's not going to be able to do that by telephone. He's going to get on the phone, he's going to say this is Joe Blow and my leg is bothering me and I'm crippled up with it and I need to see a caseworker. Do you have a caseworker, Mr. Joe Blow? No, I haven't. Well, you'll have to come to Halifax to see us because we don't send caseworkers out to people who don't have them - there you go. He's going to have to pay for everything himself so there's that side of the coin.

ALFIE MACLEOD: What would happen to that same individual had he called the Sydney office?

RON CLARKE: He wouldn't have had to call the Sydney office. He would just go over and go in the shop and they would look after him right there, no problem. They went above and beyond what they had to do. Yes, they're PSAC workers - they're paid workers for the government, but these people were like your uncle, cousin, brother, sister - they looked after you and believe me, they looked after you well.

ALFIE MACLEOD: Thank you, Ron.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. MacLeod. Legal counsel has advised us that motions will be permitted in this meeting. Ms. Arab.

PATRICIA ARAB: I have just a quick question. You were saying that it can be a five-hour drive for someone who lives on the Island to go to the office in Halifax. We're here to talk about this province but there were six other offices that were closed across the country. What distance do these other veterans have to travel?

RON CLARKE: Well I can't speak to too many of them but I certainly can speak to the one in Newfoundland and Labrador; they closed that office in Cornerbrook and moved it to St. John's and the people who live in the outports and Labrador would have to travel all the way up the coast. They're looking at maybe a 10-hour drive, that's totally unacceptable.

PATRICIA ARAB: Thank you.

RON CLARKE: You're welcome.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Corbett.

FRANK CORBETT: Ron, I guess it's no surprise for you but I'm kind of perplexed by the letter we have in front of us that the Honourable Julian Fantino wrote to Ms. Mitchell and the committee. I'm going to try to be quick in reading this. I've got a couple of questions, this is a paragraph (Interruption) Spit it out - okay, buddy, let's have at 'er, it's me and you, okay?

“Curiously we have discovered that certain groups in our country believe that fewer application steps for a Veteran should mean more administration costs at Veterans Affairs. That is simply not the case. In fact, these changes have allowed our Government to invest resources towards expanded front-line medical treatment centres or expanded programs, and on reducing the number of visits a Veteran must make to a Government office in the first place.”

There's a couple of questions that come out of that. Have you had complaints from veterans about making visits to the offices?

RON CLARKE: Yes.

FRANK CORBETT: And what were they?

RON CLARKE: Lack of knowledge, people were not able to answer their questions. They had no knowledge of what they were talking about, they had no access to their files.

FRANK CORBETT: I get the drift. So “certain groups in our country believe” - who are those certain groups? These shadowy people in shadowy corners?

RON CLARKE: I believe the government was talking about unions. I think that was a pet peeve of Mr. O'Toole. I think he hates unions with a passion and I think it's him that's causing all that getup about unions helping the veterans. Let me put it this way - if the government won't help us, we'll take it wherever we can get it. When PSAC who do have, yes, they do have an interest because of their workers, but when they said to us hey look, we'll pay your way to Ottawa, we said thank you, we're there.

FRANK CORBETT: My mamma didn't raise no fool, eh?

RON CLARKE: No fools here, boy, no.

FRANK CORBETT: Now I find this paragraph very odd because he then keeps going on about all this enhanced medical care.

RON CLARKE: Bullshit. He closed down a number of these places where people could get psychology - shrinks - closed down a number of those. The one out West that they had for people who were injured, post-traumatic stress disorder and what have you - there was a Chief Warrant Officer who was working out there at that place. His report was totally negative - they didn't have the staff to run and operate the place. As a matter of fact there were two of them out there who committed suicide. They were not getting the treatment they needed and, because of that, of course with the stress, they did themselves in. Anyway, that's the one out West. No good words about it whatsoever, it's a bad place to go.

FRANK CORBETT: Look, I really appreciate your candour and your openness, I knew I would get that.

The idea here seems to be that they've dreamed up a model. Sometimes you'll see a government program change and say, we've taken the model that worked over here or over there, but this seems to be a model without parallel. It seems to be literally made up on the back of a napkin, as they would say.

I would assume veterans are like everybody else in society - they're not all the same, their wants and needs are different. Women and men from the Second World War would have different issues from the Korean War, that would have different issues from some peacekeeping missions, that would have different issues from Afghanistan. I would say they try the pantyhose effect - one size fits all. Is this one where no size fits nobody?

RON CLARKE: Correct, you said it right. In the old days, of course, the Second World War vets would come home from overseas and I know one in particular. I was five years old when he arrived on the train in Sydney Mines. He wasn't the only one, but there was a pile of people there to welcome them home and give them a big treat. We went home with him and we weren't there an hour and a half when we all had to get out of there in a

hurry because he went berserk. The reason he went berserk was because he had post-traumatic stress disorder, which was not known in those days. They used to call it shell-shock and cracking eggs, I believe. He went through his life with that. I mean, he got himself in more situations than you could shake a stick at because of it, but nobody realized.

Now they realize it. These Afghan vets are coming home and, believe me, I'm in touch with quite a few of them, the ones with post-traumatic stress disorder. I had one fellow who went to Ottawa with me. I won't repeat his name, but he's not in very good shape at all. He lives out in the boonies - I guess off the main road he's about three miles - and he just can't be around people because of his problem. There are a few more like that.

Now me, I'm a little different. I'm very emotional because of my post-traumatic stress disorder. Some of the triggers, I got through them here this morning, but sometimes there's no stopping. I break up and say good-bye.

FRANK CORBETT: Like I said many times in the last bit here about how respectful we are having you come here. I know this is a largely redundant question - I know the answer is that there has been no consultation with you folks at all. Nobody has ever really sat down with you folks - and that's kind of a cheap way of putting it - the whole group. Governments pretty much know the cost - if someone goes in the hospital today for an appendectomy and they come out, they pretty well can tell you the cost and all that. You can't put a cost on a veteran, but the actual cost of the service and because of their medical, physical and mental needs. Has anybody ever really said, you know, minister, it isn't about dollars and cents, it's about common sense?

RON CLARKE: No, this government - ever since they announced the closing, they've been flying by the seat of their pants. They didn't have a plan, I can assure you - they didn't have a plan. They just said, hey, we'll close them down and get rid of them, and then of course the uproar started. A fella by the name of Ron Clarke, I think, from North Sydney.

FRANK CORBETT: Oh, crazy guy. (Laughter)

RON CLARKE: Said, yes, crazy as me arse (Laughter). He said, this ain't gonna happen. Anyway, without any consultation at all, they just started this program - we'll do this, we'll do that, do the other thing and none of it is working, of course. We as veterans need a one-on-one face-to-face and we can only get that with the PSAC members who looked after us.

FRANK CORBETT: Thank you, Ron.

RON CLARKE: You're welcome.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: Just to follow up on that - there's a bit of a theme there - I'd like to understand, or like us all to understand, a little bit more about PTSD. I was wondering if you could tell us a story - whether it's personal or about someone that you know - of how the caseworkers helped a veteran get over or learn to live with this? I think it's important for us to understand what's working and why. You've outlined that the caseworker is important. Do you have some success stories of where that's worked well and why this decision puts those success stories at risk into the future?

RON CLARKE: There's one success story here, and right behind me is another gentleman, a success story for him and it's only with the caseworkers, they were able to help us. I know they're not psychologists, they're not trained shrinks, however, they know the game, they know how to work us so we don't get into problems. That is something Service Canada would never be able to do for us.

KEITH IRVING: Is it fair to say that PTSD is something you live your life with, that you don't get over it?

RON CLARKE: No, you don't get over it. I'm going to give you an example of what happened to me. I'm going to do this because it always helps to talk about it, right. When I was in Vietnam, the second day I was there I met a Newfoundlander, he was a first sergeant with the American Forces. We got to shooting the breeze, and he said he'd be back tomorrow and he'd take me and show me around. He picked me up the next day and took me off the base and we drove out to the countryside. On the road he took me on, there was a stack of Vietnamese bodies, stacked up like cordwood waiting to be taken away. That was not very nice to see.

When we got past that he took me onto the base, showed me around the base and then took me to one of the hangars and there in the hangar were body bags - thousands of body bags - just stacked, waiting to go back to the United States. That made one hell of an impression upon me and I have to live with that. I see that all the time, I live with it. I wake up at night in sweats, it's not easy. Anyway, I told you my story and that's only one of the things I've seen in my career that bothers me, but you have it.

KEITH IRVING: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Gosse.

GORDIE GOSSE: Thank you, Mr. Clarke. I wanted to ask you, if a veterans advocate office was created, would the veterans be willing to work with that person to find solutions for Nova Scotia veterans impacted by the closure of the Sydney office?

RON CLARKE: I would categorically say, yes. Anything that would help the veterans - and that would definitely help the veterans - get their problems across. This

province, of course, has been good to the veterans and that would just be the icing on the cake, so to speak.

GORDIE GOSSE: I sat on this committee back in 2003, probably until 2009, for six years, and this committee always did great work with the veterans across the Province of Nova Scotia. We have been advocates for veterans; like my colleague said earlier, this is the only province that has a Veterans Affairs Committee and I think we've done good work. I remember when the new Veterans Charter came in, in 2005 - the issues around that, and meeting with the Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command, meeting with the Legions, the Year of the Veteran and all of those different things that we celebrated here in Nova Scotia. I mean, the veterans stood up for us and I just feel that we have to stand up for them now.

My office, I'm very fortunate, I have two guys there - actually my constituency assistant is a retired military peacekeeper from the Golan Heights.

RON CLARKE: What branch did he serve with, Army, Navy or Air Force?

GORDIE GOSSE: He was a clerk, and I guess being a clerk they could put him in any branch.

RON CLARKE: That's correct, yes.

GORDIE GOSSE: I always tease him because he was from the Class of '78 from Cornwallis, in the Navy and ended up going to the Golan Heights and I tried to figure out, why was he going there, but he said he was a clerk and being a clerk they could put him in any service, so he also served on the ships.

Then the other gentleman who works in my office has been there - his father was Abby Neville who just recently, when the Queen was here, honoured him for 55 years of service as the Service Officer for the Whitney Pier Legion. He was honoured when the Queen was here. So between both of those guys in my office, actually we have four veterans' appeals coming up to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. The same thing, now that that has happened, we can't do those appeals at the Veterans Affairs Office so we're actually doing them at Service Canada, starting next month. They've set aside a room in Service Canada on Dorchester Street for staff to go in - along with the veterans and my staff - to sit down and do those appeals, via conference calls.

Going through those for many years, I just think - and I know the Premier was quoted as saying that every MLA should be an advocate. I've gone across Party lines over the years in the Legislature and helped other members and other Parties deal with Veterans Affairs issues, as far as even the former member for Clare had an issue and some other members in Lunenburg, to help them because I've been involved in the system in trying to help.

I just think that they were blindsided here by the federal government just saying that we're going to downsize Veterans Affairs. I listen to everything, I've been at every rally. As a matter of fact, even two days after the provincial election I showed up in the Branch 12 Legion for the March of Concern. Somebody said, what are you doing here - the election was just over. I mean I was the only elected person there for the provincial part of it, I just realized that these issues - my father-in-law was in the service, my wife was a military brat, I guess, who travelled all over the country, she has been stationed - she always teases me and says that this is the longest that she's ever been in one place, in Cape Breton, because she was posted so many places, from Winnipeg, to Gagetown to Lahr, so those are important.

I still think that the Service Canada thing, having one person there, and I do know the gentleman from the DVA office who's there in that office. He has worked closely with my staff over the years but to have that access being denied, I think it's very important that we, as a province, have some avenue to help veterans. I still think we have to do something, as elected officials in Nova Scotia, to help veterans try to be an advocate for them to make sure that their issues are being heard, not only in Nova Scotia but all across Canada. I want to thank you for being here today and thank you for your service to this country.

RON CLARKE: Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: This weekend it was brought to my attention that our government has transferred the medical records of veterans to an American company. I think I know the answer to this, but can you just comment on that a little bit?

RON CLARKE: It is terrible. The fact that they take our documents, confidentiality, and give it to a company or to an organization that belongs to the Americans is totally unacceptable. I have a theory and I hope I'm totally wrong, but you could see that the government was starting to deplete the staff from Veterans Affairs, closing the offices. Now they're moving the files; I have a terrible feeling that the government will be closing down all my offices. They've been centralizing everything. Our payments are made by Blue Cross, right? How much money are they paying Blue Cross to do the work and how much are they paying this company to look after our files, which they shouldn't be doing in the first place?

All this travel that they're talking about for caseworkers and having to pay those people who do have caseworkers, how much money are they spending there, right? So if they had just left things alone - right - it was working well but some ass said we need to save money so we'll do it on the backs of the veterans. It's sad.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Arab.

PATRICIA ARAB: Mr. Clarke, I've heard bits and pieces about your experience in Ottawa last month but I'm wondering if you could maybe tell our committee a bit more about how you were received.

RON CLARKE: Sure. We were fortunate enough that Mr. Fantino was going to have a meeting with us. We didn't know that when we first went up, but we were happy and surprised that he was going to do it.

Anyway, through all the security they have up there and all that good stuff, they took us down to this room where we were supposed to meet. We also had another engagement at a certain time in Ottawa. But anyway, if they've got this time here, you had better be there at that time or it's not going to happen. Anyway, we were to have a news conference, that's why we went to Ottawa in the first place.

When we got into the room and Mr. Fantino wasn't there, two of his flunkies were there - Mr. O'Toole and Mr. Hawn. We were waiting and waiting and he wasn't coming so I said to our lads, let's get out of here now and get upstairs. At that time Mr. O'Toole started to say well, can we do a little talking here? So we started to do a little chatting and what he had to say was, right off the bat, blaming the union for agitating us so we would get all fired up. Goddamn it, we didn't need them to get us agitated. We were agitated before we went there because they closed the offices down.

Anyway, there was another chap who came in just as we were maybe a couple of minutes away from leaving and boy oh boy, what an arrogant son of a so-and-so. He came in, he sat down and one of our members was answering a question from Mr. Goldie Hawn. This other chap says, well now listen, my name is so-and-so and I got totally upset, you know me. I said, who in the hell are you and shut your mouth, we'll talk to you when we're finished talking to this fellow, mind your own business. Well, he never said another word. I guess he was Mr. Fantino's right-hand man, tough.

So Mr. Fantino didn't show up. We had to get the hell out of there and get upstairs where they were going to do the news conference. They shuffled us into this little room just to keep us there for a few minutes until the proper time. We had about four minutes, and then Mr. Fantino showed up. All hell broke loose. We wanted to know why he didn't show. One of our people accused him of setting it up anyway, setting it up that way.

Mr. Fantino got upset, we got upset. Then he used the old cliché - well you know, we're still going to look after cutting your grass and snowblowing. Well, well, he got a reaction from all of us on that. We all said, this is not what we want, we're here about the closing of the offices. One fellow said it was bullshit and the other fellow said - I forget what he said, it was comical anyway. Anyway, Fantino disappeared and then we had our conference. That's what happened, my dear.

PATRICIA ARAB: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Gough.

STEPHEN GOUGH: Yes, Mr. Clarke, I just want to ask, have there been any changes to your insurance or homecare, as a result of these closures?

RON CLARKE: No, there hasn't been and I don't expect there will be, not unless they pick on me personally, but if they do that they are in for another good war, believe me. No, there hasn't been any change, I still get the services.

STEPHEN GOUGH: Okay, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: Thank you, Madam Chairman. Just on that, I did actually receive something on the iPhone this morning from a concerned citizen from somewhere in the Twitterverse, saying that the insurance that veterans are paying has recently gone up significantly, by \$500 or something. Are you aware of that or can you shed any light on that for us?

RON CLARKE: It hasn't gone up yet; that's our Public Service Health Plan. Mr. Clement, is it, from the Government Treasury Board, he's proposing to increase it and in fact double it. I don't believe that has been done yet.

THE CHAIR: Any further questions? Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: Just one final thought. I wonder, given what is happening here in this country, what's happening to the treatment of our veterans, what's happening to democracy that we're seeing at the federal level - it's concerning me and I'd like to hear from someone who fought for that democracy about your concerns?

RON CLARKE: Glad you asked the question because - look behind me. We've all talked about it, the democracy which is not very prevalent in the federal government. It's the old line, if you don't toe the line you're out. These fellows want their jobs so I guess they follow the coattails of the Prime Minister and do what he asks of them. Believe me, I'm sure some of them are not going to be able to follow his coattails come the election in 2015. We will really have democracy working then, believe me.

KEITH IRVING: Thank you, sir, for fighting for our democracy in the past and in the future.

RON CLARKE: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Any further questions. Mr. Clarke, would you like to take an opportunity to present your closing remarks?

RON CLARKE: I certainly would. There are a couple of things I would like to mention. I am proposing that veterans in this province and every province in Canada establish a veterans war chest. The government can do it, they have their own war chests, so we're going to do it. We are going to be looking for donations from the people. I didn't want to do this but in order for us to carry on with our fight, we're going to need funds and that's hard to come by, unless the provincial government might have a little bit they can chuck at us, we'd appreciate that. However, that's going to happen and we're working on that right now.

The other thing is the government said that the Legion Service Officers are their first-line people for veterans. Legion Service Officers have plenty to do to look after our veterans and their families without having to do the work of Veterans Affairs. What I'm doing is asking the Legion Service Officers to cease working with the veterans on first-line for the government. That first line, of course, is filling out forms and getting forms for them and what have you. That is the responsibility, as far as I'm concerned, of the government - not of the Legions. I'm asking all Legion Service Officers to cease and desist in the supplying of forms for the veterans - let the government do its job. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Clarke. Are there any other comments?

I think we are going to take a recess for a few minutes and let Mr. Clarke just (Interruption) Yes, cool his jets. (Interruption) We'll need a motion, so after recess we'll present a motion for that. (Interruption) We'll do the motion then now, we'll make a motion. Just one moment, Mr. Palmer - go ahead.

ALFIE MACLEOD: Madam Chairman, I move that the committee be allowed to hear from those who are here in the audience regarding the Veterans Affairs issue that we're here to deal with.

THE CHAIR: Okay, so there's a motion to allow the public to speak.

BEN JESSOME: I'll second that.

THE CHAIR: Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

Mr. Palmer, would you like to come up and have a seat there.

Mr. Corbett, please.

HON. FRANK CORBETT: I'm wondering, that was a very wide invitation so I think for the purpose of the committee, Will Mr. Palmer be the only speaker?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Palmer, will you be speaking on behalf of the veterans in the audience today?

CHARLES PALMER: Well, I was hoping as a concerned veteran that I would have the opportunity of supporting the work that has been done here by Ron. It's as simple as that.

THE CHAIR: Okay, we just ask that you keep your comments brief and anything that we've already covered, maybe just consider that those have been brought forward already. Mr. Palmer, can you just state your name.

CHARLES PALMER: My name is Charles Palmer, I am a former alderman of the City of Sydney, probably interested in politics and what has been going on, and I'm very angry with the treatment that they've been receiving from the federal government. I just want to say, Ron was mentioning the fact that it was falling on deaf ears - maybe so, but I think that Fantino, the minister, is absolutely informed as to what was going on. I think that it's absolutely unacceptable that we here in Cape Breton, with an out-migration, a population that has been going on, should accept the loss of another 13 or 14 jobs. We can't afford it.

Now, we spoke here this morning on the veterans. As a matter of fact, the veterans from the Second World War, which I am one, would have great difficulty going to Halifax. I'm 93 years old and I'm going to say that. I'm not speaking about myself, I've been fortunate, I'm here today speaking, but most of my colleagues in that particular war couldn't make it here today. Now, if someone can tell me how in the hell they can make it to Halifax, then I'd love to really reason this out with Minister Fantino.

The treatment we've been receiving here in Cape Breton regarding our jobs and our out-migration has been desperate, really desperate. We now have our people all out West working. They want to come home. They can't get home; they're stuck in airports because they took the bloody railway away from us. What kind of treatment is that?

Ron, they know exactly what's going on. I'm very fearful that what they're going to do is say, forget about it down there, we don't have the population to support. We're okay, and across the rest of the country, you'll balance the budget and that'll do the trick, and the veterans can go you know where. But when you speak to the veterans, they'll speak in the kindest words; when you walk in, they'll treat you with the greatest respect.

But we're not looking for treatment with respect, what we're asking for is to maintain what we've had. We had a good office operating here for the people and for those

veterans, God bless them, they had problems. I don't know, maybe I have problems, too, and I don't know it, but the thing is I know that they had serious problems and the problems should be dealt with. They should be dealt with in a position where they can go to the people face to face and talk to them as they've done in the past - good qualified people, with good-paying jobs. Now they're gone.

As veterans, we're not only concerned about the veterans, we're also concerned about our communities and our communities can't stand this kind of disrespect from our federal government, they are tearing apart this area. As I've said before, it will never survive as a tourist destination, we have to have jobs and we have to maintain the jobs we have. You would have thought the least they would have done is put a moratorium on any loss of any federal jobs moving out of this area until we get our people back working in Cape Breton, instead of working out West. It's terrible what has happened, now they're doing it to the veterans.

As Ron said, it's a real damaging thing to those who can't look after themselves. I can look after myself pretty well up to this point in time, but all I'm saying is for God's sake, let them know exactly where we fit and that we're not going to be accepting this any longer. We need to look after our veterans and we need to look after our people because the veterans love our people. If they didn't love our people they wouldn't do what they did. Thank you. (Applause)

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Palmer. I am going to call a five-minute recess and anyone else who would like to have some comments, please see the clerk here and she'll take your name. Thank you.

[12:22 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[12:37 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon, I'd like to bring the meeting back to order, please.

Okay, we're going to ask the first person to come up to the mike. We have six people who want to speak and our meeting was scheduled to wind up at 1:00 p.m. I will just ask anyone who is going to come to the mike to keep their comments as short as they can. We're going to start with Vince Rigby. Sorry, Mr. MacLeod.

ALFIE MACLEOD: Madam Chairman, considering this is an emergency meeting and considering the distance some of the members have travelled, and considering the severity of the issue that is being discussed, I would suggest to you that it would be right to extend the time to allow those who need to talk, talk - and those who would like to make discussion from the committee, give them the time to do what it needs.

As we called this as an emergency meeting, it is evident to me that it is important, as we would do in the Law Amendments Committee, we keep going until we hear everyone who wants to speak and I think we should do the same today in this meeting.

THE CHAIR: Is that a motion?

ALFIE MACLEOD: That's a motion.

THE CHAIR: Seconded?

Are you ready for the question? Would all those in favour of the motion please say. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

Go ahead, Vince.

VINCE RIGBY: My name is Vince Rigby. I did 22 years of service. I served in Cyprus, Germany, and the former Yugoslavia. I had my medal handed to me in a paper bag instead of in a parade. This stuff going on with our VAC, I don't know if anybody knows but our disability applications are 18 pages long, our quality of life applications are four pages long, the doctor's part of it is six pages long - it's 28 pages that we have to do in 60 days.

Once you fill out all those papers you send them in and you wait for word to see what happens. Usually your first answer is "no", and then you have to go through the appeal system, which takes months and months. For me it took over nine years, and that was working with the DVA staff and my doctor and my wife and the other people that helped us out from Legions and stuff.

A great deal of help came from our VAC employees. They show you how to fill out your forms properly, what not to put in, what to put in. You have to literally be a lawyer to figure out half of this. Then after all this, DVA still has a doctor who you have to see, and then he or she has the last input on your DVA status. That's where your "no" comes in, that's where all your appeals come in.

A friend of mine sitting around back, since February 9th, he can't see a case manager now until March. Myself, I haven't got a case manager anymore, my case manager was taken away from me. Now if I have a problem, I have to call 911, go to the hospital, or see my doctor, if and when I can see her. It takes usually two or three weeks just to get an appointment with my own doctor.

Now the government is putting us on our health care system because if any of us has problems, we're going to have to call 911. I don't think that's feasible.

Are there any questions? I can answer one quick question.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Just a comment or maybe elaborate a little bit on, you said it took you nine years. What specifically were you applying for?

VINCE RIGBY: Most veterans, we haven't got just one condition, we've got multiple conditions, so with each condition comes a pensionable act, so for each of your disabilities you have 28 pages. If you have massive migraines, there's a page; if you have eye loss, there's a page; some bowel problems, there's a page; if you have broken bones, there's a page; PTSD, there's another one - so each condition is 28 pages long.

BEN JESSOME: So it took you nine years, from start to finish, to get it.

VINCE RIGBY: And I'm still not finished.

BEN JESSOME: Okay, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Corbett.

FRANK CORBETT: Vince, when you applied for your pension, is it an apportionment? Say if you were making, and I'll make up a number - if you're making \$100 a week in the military, if you're deemed disabled, do you get a disability pension or is a portion? Maybe they'll say you're 10 per cent disabled or 20 per cent disabled. How do they do that?

VINCE RIGBY: That's correct. For my post-traumatic stress, I think I'm at 60 per cent or 30 per cent.

FRANK CORBETT: Is there a maximum?

VINCE RIGBY: No, that's not the maximum, there's higher than that. Then there's back problems, 5 per cent; migraines, 10 per cent; eye loss, another percentage; bowel problems, another percentage. It's all gathered up until you hit 100 per cent and once you hit 100 per cent, then they cut you off. Any other condition you have after that you won't receive any money for. They'll give you health benefits, but you don't receive any money for that, no.

FRANK CORBETT: No cash, okay, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Are there any other questions?

VINCE RIGBY: Oh, one other thing - I heard a rumour that any veteran born after 1954 will not be able to go into a VA hospital because the government is not going to pay for us anymore. I don't know if it's true or not but that's a good rumour going around. That's how we've been getting stuff from the government - by rumour mills - and this is why we're so upset. It makes us worse, conditions are going crazy because people don't know what's going on.

We don't need this kind of stuff. This dictatorship that's going on has got to stop. That's all I have to say.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Corbett would like to speak to that.

FRANK CORBETT: Thanks for your indulgence - really quick. Is this in line with what we hear, that they will be - a place like Taigh Na Mara in Glace Bay, where they'll stop funding actual beds? Like, right now they pay the Province of Nova Scotia so much money per bed, at Camp Hill and those other ones. What you're hearing then is that they'll retreat from that wholly and you will be put in line - although DVA will pay for it, if you will, but they will not be targeted beds -15 beds in a long-term care unit - it'll just be the luck of the draw. If the turn of the chamber of that gun is loaded, you get it; if not, you don't.

VINCE RIGBY: That's right. We had another centre, too, somewhere - I'm not sure if it was Ontario or Quebec or whatever. In Quebec, if you have severe PTSD, they'll take you there for a three-week program - put you in almost an Alcoholics Anonymous type of thing. You go in and they sort you out for the three weeks - change your meds around so you can go back and cope with civilization. Now I've heard that place is being closed. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you Mr. Rigby . . .

RON CLARKE: I'd just like to speak to one thing that he mentioned there about the appeal system where you apply for a pension and they say no. Now that has been the standard - they say no. I referred to that earlier with my friend - "no and go": if they keep saying no long enough, you'll go. That's what has been happening and it's terrible. Sorry, Madam Chairman.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Blair MacIvor.

BLAIR MACIVOR: Good afternoon, my name is Blair MacIvor. I served 20 years with the military. I did three tours in Bosnia; a tour in the Golan Heights; a tour in Afghanistan; I did the Swissair flight crash; the flight in Manitoba - I've been all over Canada doing everything too. I'm not here to talk about myself - I'm here to talk about the people who can't speak for themselves, the people with PTSD. I work for OSISS, I'm a volunteer peer counsellor. This non-face-to-face is going to be horrendous. They need to

have somebody that they feel they can go and establish a connection to in order to start the healing process. Right now it's not there.

For these people, rage and frustration are two of the key components of PTSD. As soon as they pick up a phone and dial this 1-800 number and they get an automated system, they're going to rip the phone out of the wall, they're not going to call back. They're going to turn to whatever it is that they can deal with to help it - alcohol, drugs, whatever - and it's just going to be all downhill.

These people need to be able to go into a place where they can feel comfortable, safe, and secure, and without actually speaking their mind, have somebody who is on the other side, who can look inside them and say, we know what's wrong; we need to know how to fix it. People at Service Canada can't do that. They have no knowledge, they have absolutely none. I've been dealing with - I've got 16 people down here that we're dealing with right now who have PTSD. It's going to get even bigger now that the centre is closed. The problem with this is that they don't know that we exist. Nobody tells them that OSISS is there. VAC was the one that pushed them to us. They'd go in, they'd start getting their healing process and VAC would say, call Blair MacIvor, call Tim Elliott, and they would try to get hold of us to start the healing process.

The second thing is the Phoenix rehab centre, which is here in Cape Breton - a key piece of material that's used in the healing process can only be gotten to through VAC. VAC has to send a submission through saying, this is a referral for so-and-so to come in and see a social worker or a psychiatrist. You can't walk through the door - you can't. It has to be a referral process and it only comes from face-to-face. Service Canada can't do that either. So where are these people getting help?

THE CHAIR: Are there any questions for Mr. MacIvor? Ms. Arab.

PATRICIA ARAB: I have a question - or statement, I don't know - and it's based on what you've just said, but also on what Mr. Clarke said. Mr. Clarke in his closing statements talked about having an ask of the Legion service officers not supplying the front line. How easy is that going to be to enforce, because the people who understand what you're going through are going to have a really hard time saying no to you? Then it goes back to - if other people are picking up the slack, then those numbers get back to Ottawa that there isn't a need or that we were right to close the offices because other people are doing the work.

Maybe it's just something to think about, maybe you don't have the answer, but how do we make sure that people are not being left in desperation, but we're still able to get that message back to Ottawa that the services need to be put back in place.

BLAIR MACIVOR: Mr. Gosse's advocacy board is a good start. My only problem with that is you have to have people on the ground who will be the middle man between the

advocacy board and those who need it because they're not going to look for help, that's part of the huge problem with people who have disabilities or PTSD, they have to go through a huge denial period where they're not looking for help, it's everybody else's fault, it's not theirs. They're not going to take the steps forward to go to this advocacy board and say, I need help, but they might talk to their grandmother, who knows about OSISS or knows about the Legion and says, my grandson needs help. Well, if we have everything in place that can start that healing process, that's what needs to be there, and they take away the centre.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Any other questions?

BLAIR MACIVOR: And it's an oligarchy, the question that you asked, it's an oligarchy. Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. John Ardelli.

JOHN ARDELLI: Thank you. I'm not a veteran myself, obviously, but I wanted to talk a little bit about my perspective on this since I've been following this story and how I did get involved. As a species I'd love to see a day when humans are going to be able to work out their differences without needing a military, but in the meantime, as long as you have people who are misbehaving themselves we kind of need these people to do that and they go through a great deal of pain to do that, beyond what anyone like myself would ever even be able to comprehend. I've always known that so I've always respected what they do.

What got me involved with the closing of the Veterans Affairs Office and with this whole thing was when I was sitting reading the paper one day and I see this that they're going to close the Veterans Affairs Offices and there was a comment there that says, they'll be fine, they were going to be able to access all of their services through this smartphone app. That was probably the stupidest thing I had ever seen in my entire life. Some of these people - think about World War II, you could get into the Army even if you didn't have a high school diploma. That's not possible today because we need to learn computers, most of the weapons are controlled by computer now. But back then some of these men who sacrificed their very mental health and their physical health for us, oftentimes don't know how to operate a computer, never have operated a computer and don't want to have to learn and shouldn't have to learn.

That is what really got my attention more than anything else - the very idea that somebody anywhere thought that a smartphone app was a good idea. When I did some more research on it learning about it, this actually got me to do a little research on post-traumatic stress disorder. I can't pretend to know what it's like to feel it, but based on what I've seen, if you go on-line, you can't expect somebody who has that kind of mental stress to handle this little, tiny screen or wait on a line with 1-800 numbers.

I work in customer service in a call centre and sometimes customers end up having to wait, I have to put them on hold to ask questions of my supervisor. That is why a face-to-face thing is very important. So these people who were in the Service Canada offices already know exactly what these veterans earned, they know what they're entitled to, they don't have to look it up. If a veteran comes up and says they need this, they need that they know where they have to go, they know what they have to do they can do it like that. These people in the Service Canada offices, like they were saying, they're no more equipped than I am. If I was working in a Service Canada office and a veteran came to me and said, I want this help, of course, I'd do everything I could to help them, but what could I do? I don't know, I've not been with them for years and years.

I can't understand how Harper and Fantino can completely ignore the massive outcry. I never used to care about politics, to be honest with you, I figured, I'll leave that to somebody else. But when this came out, I'm thinking to myself, no, I want Harper out. I don't care who else is there - whether it's the Liberals or the Progressive Conservatives, Bloc Québécois, the Canadian Action Party - I don't care as long as it's not Harper, because I've never been so angry at any government or even had so much passion for anything. It flies so much in the face of common sense that I can't see how we don't have everybody in Canada storming Ottawa and saying, what the heck are you doing here, and dragging him out by his feet. Seriously. All right, I might be a little emotional here, but that's how I got involved.

RON CLARKE: We're working on it.

JOHN ARDELLI: Well, I wish you the best, Mr. Fantino. (Interruptions) Fantino, oh my God! I'm sorry, Mr. Clarke. (Laughter) That was stupid on my part.

RON CLARKE: I'll see you outside. (Laughter)

JOHN ARDELLI: By all means - I deserve a punch in the head for that. I've got Fantino on the brain, seriously, I do because he irritates me. I can't understand how he can completely ignore it after all that has been done. Anyway, I think that's pretty much all I have to say from the perspective of a person who - yes, closing.

The long story short is we should be spending as much - like, what is this going to save, \$3.8 million? They spend (Interruptions) Well, thank you - that's a good example. Not that that's not a good thing, mind you, but if they can find the money for that, why can't they find \$3.8 million for the veterans?

The last thing I would like to say is, I am actually here because I have a YouTube channel. I produce a show on YouTube - the PedalingPrince is the name of the channel and I want you to think about this. YouTube - a service that allows you to reach the world in an instant. Do you think we'd have a service like that if it wasn't for men like him? No. If Hitler was running this place right now, or his descendants, would we have YouTube or

even the Internet? Highly unlikely. So I basically have this gentleman, Mr. Clarke, to thank for the fact that I even have this show and can say this, and anyone else on YouTube - here, even in the United States or anywhere in the world can access that. If it wasn't for our veterans we would not have that technology - not because we couldn't do it, but because we wouldn't be allowed to do it. I think they should be thanked for that.

THE CHAIR: Very good points, Mr. Ardelli. Do you have anything else to add? Are there any questions for Mr. Ardelli? Ms. Arab.

PATRICIA ARAB: I have a statement too. I like to talk, and now that we've extended our time, I feel free to do that. I come from a counselling background. I was a school counsellor before entering politics, so your point on a smartphone app is really well taken because it doesn't matter how well versed you are in technology, and if you're on your iPhone or your iPad or your Android every single day, when you're in crisis, having to access service or being told to access service through an app is not going to help you in any way and will probably make things a lot worse. So thank you for bringing that point up.

JOHN ARDELLI: Absolutely and actually I'd like to add, since you've said that, apps are wonderful pieces of technology and they will be - like, 20 years from now when they're more reliable and they've been developed, they will be great. But you have to remember, the technology we're using right now is as new as television was in the 1950s. These things aren't perfect. Even if you could teach the veterans to use it, it might crash while they're in the middle of trying to use it. What will that do to somebody with post-traumatic stress disorder? This technology is not yet reliable enough to even provide the services, even if the veterans could use it. That's what really bothers me.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Ardelli. I'm going to call on Simon Gillis.

SIMON GILLIS: Thank you, Madam Chairman and your committee. I welcome you all to Cape Breton. For those who are from Cape Breton, you know where we stand. My name is Simon Gillis. I'm from Whitney Pier now, formerly from New Waterford. I was a PMQ brat. My dad was a career Army man. I worked in a few mess halls in Shilo, Manitoba, and I saw how they got fed so I joined the Air Force. You eat much better in the Air Force.

That being said, a little anecdote from the very first day in military law class in St. James, which was taught by a Corporal Ken Turple from up around the Antigonish area, the very first things out of his mouth were, how many are here from Cape Breton? There were about eight of us, we put our hands up. He turned to the rest of the class, now you people here see these boys are from Cape Breton, you all know that Cape Breton is the derriere of the country, but keep this in mind and get the smirks off your faces, the further west you go, the further up you go. Keep that in mind. That may explain a little bit for Mr. Clarke why these decisions are made above and beyond our area of the country.

On the closure bit, I have a friend who passed away eight years ago in Charlottetown, after 30 years with the Air Force. His widow had a contact in Charlottetown to deal with. They took that away from her. The very first call she ever made on the hot line, she ends up talking to somebody in northern Ontario. I think that is a blessed shame. I will curtail my comments by saying I did pass in a letter here today - I don't know if you've seen it or not - I passed it in to The Cape Breton Post and I mailed it to the ChronicleHerald. It may or may not have any effect but it makes me feel better to get it off my chest. I thank you for the opportunity and I hope you have much success with this. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Gillis. Mr. Mel Birmingham. Welcome, Mr. Birmingham.

MEL BIRMINGHAM: Madam Chairman, neighbour, as I look here around the table the lines are drawn already - we have PCs here, the Liberals here and you as Chair. I'm sorry, but it seems that the lines are drawn.

What I am going to read here, I'm going to be like Mr. Julian Fantino and I have just as much time as he has; democracy is a form of government in which all eligible citizens participate equally, either directly or through elected representatives. Importantly, democracy supposedly serves to check unaccountable power - unaccountable power, I'd like to emphasize that - manipulated by few, at the expense of many. I think that sums it up. It works out provincially and federally, in my observations of watching the House and what have you.

It's a fallacy, there's no democracy anymore; either you vote with the Party or you are under the bus, this I have been hearing for a number of months. Listen to Mr. Fantino, they go behind closed doors, they listen to the bureaucrats and of course they feed them all this fodder just to support their agenda and to feed a lot of gobbledygook to mask their intent. They vote en masse, not being allowed to vote as representation of the elective people. If they do, they will be shunned or they will be out of the Party or sitting on the back bench. That's how I see it.

Myself, I've served five years, eight months and 14 days in the military - not counting. I spent nine months in Kosovo, in North Mitrovica, the hellhole of all missions. Just like Ron, I didn't have an army. I slept alone, in a Serb house on the Albanian side. I did crime scene and forensics, I've seen a lot of mutilated bodies, children and so forth. I do suffer from PTSD. I've been fighting 13 years, to no avail, to get police officers as veterans. I've been told a number of years ago - I've been up and down the political ladder, I was asked to go to Ottawa to speak, got turned away from the table. It's difficult to sit here and think about that gentleman back there, 93 years old, to have to get up and fight for us, for those guys back there coming back from Afghanistan.

I belong to about three different organizations because I was in the Army, Navy and a UN veteran. I can't get anything for my PTSD. I can't get anything for the injuries I

suffered in Kosovo because this government here doesn't recognize civilian police. We, here in Cape Breton, have sent 18 police officers to missions all over the world. How many more are in Nova Scotia? How many more are in Toronto, out West? That's another issue. The issue here today is what are you people going to do to help us because obviously the federal government is a closed shop and we can't infiltrate it?

We have to get you people and your support to get them to stand up. Please take off your political coats and work together on this - please, work together on this, forget the Party line. You had a vote the other day, Madam Chairman, you cast the deciding vote and I'm sure you were told to do so, forget the Party line, think of the veterans. Thank you. (Applause)

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Birmingham. Any questions? Mr. Corbett.

FRANK CORBETT: In your role as a police officer in Kosovo, who were you paid by?

MEL BIRMINGHAM: That's interesting. When you sign up for United Nations missions, the United Nations from New York is in charge. The local police office is compensated through the RCMP, through the UN so it's a downhill thing. I have a contract with Her Majesty The Queen and the Dominion of Canada; it's not worth the paper it's written on. It's exactly the same as the military, exactly the same as the RCMP. The RCMP are considered veterans because it goes back to the Northwest Territories, the military.

As one politician said to me, you were hired just like the ditch digger, just like the ditch diggers were through the UN. Again, I've been fighting for 13 years, I have a file that thick. I could answer some questions here because like I said, I've been fighting this for 13 years and you mentioned the hospitals. Those beds in Harbour View Hospital will be gone, workers will be laid off, so it's like throwing a pebble into a lake, there's going to be a rippling effect.

In Quebec they sold the veterans hospital to private enterprise. They mention PTSD, a friend of mine came back, he's got in excess of 30 years, he just spent three months up there, they closed it. They were to hire 54 psychologists - they haven't hired one yet to my knowledge. Through all the jigs and reels and the smoke and mirrors, let's get down to the bottom of it. If you were to take all of this water as knowledge that was in that office and pour it into that glass, where's it going to go? Think about it, 17 workers with all that knowledge, with all that expertise and then you're going to shove somebody down there who hasn't got a bloody clue because Joe's going, he's going.

I thank you for having this, but I get so frustrated; again, I'm like Ron, I get emotional and sometimes my train of thought gets off the rails. I would be open to any questions because like I said, I've been dealing with this through the three organizations,

correspondence through all government agencies - Pat Stroman, Cecil Clarke, Mr. Eyking, the whole nine yards, to no avail.

When I went to Veterans Affairs in Sydney, unbelievable, the professionalism, the compassion they had, I can expound on it all day. We're not going to have that anymore, but that's what we, as veterans, need. I'm open for any more questions.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: Madam Chairman, just so that I'm clear, so that I understand you, if military go and serve on a UN peacekeeping mission, they qualify for services, but if an RCMP . . .

MEL BIRMINGHAM: RCMP still qualify.

KEITH IRVING: So you've been fighting for 13 years, just clarify exactly.

MEL BIRMINGHAM: I'm fighting for all civilian police officers, by the way, not only myself but all civilian police officers (Interruption) Toronto Metro . . .

KEITH IRVING: The difference is not RCMP, it's . . .

MEL BIRMINGHAM: Federal police.

KEITH IRVING: Got you, okay.

MEL BIRMINGHAM: One politician and one member, president of one of the military organizations said, you didn't pay into the superannuation pension so you're not entitled. If I got hurt in Kosovo, I would have to pay my way home. That has since changed. Of course if I got killed - that just changed last year - they will pay to fly me home. That's how we're treated.

KEITH IRVING: And the main reason that they deny this to civil police is what? What's their reasoning?

MEL BIRMINGHAM: What they've told me is that it would take an Act of Parliament to change the Veterans Charter. It's a living document, they tell me. This was my argument - they changed it from the old Pension Act into the new charter. It is supposed to be a living document; to me, a lot of it is dead in the water.

I'll give you an example, like they said, my injuries, and I came under the old meat chart, I would probably get more than double in my lifetime because the new charter only gives you a shorter percentage - more bridges to cross, more barriers to jump over to get it. This lump sum payment, that's what I'm specifically talking about, that's to save money. I

don't know what their thinking is because - I mean they are politicians, they're looking for votes. That's what counts to get you behind that desk there and make the big bucks and the big pension after two terms. There's a man 30-some years, guys back there 20-some, they get 50 per cent. Think about it.

I hope you go home and reflect on this and again, work collectively because as I see it up there in Ottawa, it's mass voting, it's all done behind the door. Give them independent votes, let them vote their conscience, as representation of the people who put them there. No, it's the Party line, as some of them found out and who now sit as Independents.

As far as Mr. Fantino goes, the gall of him to say, consider me a veteran. He sat behind a desk in Toronto Metro. (Interruption) He was in the trenches all right. (Interruption) I was front line, I was on foot patrol right up until the time I retired. I had to retire and I was so embarrassed, I couldn't tell my superiors that I had PTSD but I told Dr. Ryan. I'm carrying a 9mm gun and it came to a point that if I shot somebody, you are going to be sued and the municipality is going to be. Chief Burke, God bless his soul, he signed the papers, but there is the stigma of this PTSD.

THE CHAIR: Are there any more questions? Thank you, Mr. Birmingham.

MEL BIRMINGHAM: Thank you, Madam Chairman.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Clarke.

RON CLARKE: I'll just add, if I may, Bruce Moncur in Afghanistan when the American aircraft shot up a bunch of Canadians, he lost 10 per cent of his brain. They offered him \$22,000. I can lose that finger and they'll give me more. Does that make sense? No.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Clarke. I'm going to call on Joe Wilson.

JOE WILSON: Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak. My name is Joe Wilson. I have approximately 19 years in the military. I was injured and medically discharged. I can't help but think of going back to the old ways. When I first came out there was no DVA office in Sydney - I had to travel to Halifax. It hasn't been mentioned here, but at that time I had no money, no income or nothing. I don't know if it's still the same, but at that time you didn't get unemployment insurance when you got out of the military. I had no income whatsoever and was a married man with two children.

If they wanted to see me in Halifax, it was entirely up to me to get there. When I would get there or how I would get there - I have seen me go hitchhiking. Now, I was discharged because I had one leg fused and it was two and a half inches shorter than the other, plus other medical problems, but I came out with a fused leg and that was one of the

major reasons. They told me that I would be able to stand, they would be able to employ me, but nevertheless I had to get out.

During that time, I had no way of getting back and forth to Halifax. I'd seen times that I would arrive in Halifax too late for my appointment at Camp Hill - I had to go down and sleep in the railroad station, and I've done that. This is where I see this going back to. If you were late getting out of Camp Hill Hospital after seeing a doctor, if you couldn't get a travel warrant to come back and get your tickets you'd have to go down to the railroad station and sleep there for the night and then go the next day to the hospital and get a travel warrant to be able to get your money to come back home again. That's where this can lead to. It wasn't very nice. I certainly didn't feel that I deserved that, but nevertheless that was the way it was.

Last July, I had the opportunity of going back to Korea and it was really something. I was never more proud that I had served in the military and served the country. Mr. Fantino was there. Every chance - the Korean people think there's nobody like we Canadians. I suppose it's the same with anybody who has helped liberate their country, but with us, we were very special over there. Mr. Fantino was there and I'm telling you, he was sucking it in. As we were loving it, he was loving it too because he got plenty of publicity. We spoke to him at that time and every time I pick up a newspaper today and I see him mention the union - we're supporting the union - there was myself, Archie Walsh and two other veterans who had spoken to him from Cape Breton about this office in Sydney.

He was there for three days - I don't think there was a day that went by that I didn't speak to him half a dozen times about this office in Sydney and how important it was because I knew what would happen if it was gone. I knew the importance of having it, how much it has changed. He did not promise us anything and I have to say he's a very fine man to talk to. I really walked out of there after our meetings and felt very good about meeting Mr. Fantino. He knows a lot of people here in Cape Breton. He asked about a lot of police officers. He knows the area very well. He knows the distance we have to travel. It's not something that somebody told him about - he knows it.

He asked about Myles Burke and other police officers - he knew them well. He talked about the areas - we went back and forth there quite a bit. So I don't understand how he could talk to us the way he did and then walk away and treat us the way we've been treated. It has been said to me here today - well, he's told by somebody else to do it. That may be so, I don't know, but if he's that much of a liar he's in the right place, I guess.

Another thing that hasn't been mentioned here today is if this office goes, my wife is very dependent on what I have looked after since we were married, she's very dependent on my income. If something was to happen to me first, where does my wife turn? She knows nothing about DVA, absolutely nothing. There are many wives out there who are the same way. I heard no mention of that today.

My wife, I always felt they should have given her a pension when I got out, because in 1959 she was told at one o'clock in the morning to get on a train, you're going to Germany. She had never been off this island before - with two children - and she had to be in Sydney the next morning at seven o'clock and get on a train. She landed in Quebec and was put on a boat and sent to Holland. She got to Germany - I wasn't there to meet her, they got her up from Rotterdam to where I was. I wasn't there due to other commitments, we didn't have time off.

There were many times over there that she was left alone and I'd be taken and sent here and sent there. Thinking back, she's raising two children in a foreign country, she couldn't speak any German. Looking back on it, I said they should have given her a pension, too, it has been very difficult.

Now what she has gone through there, she could go through the same thing in her own country because it appears as though the government has definitely turned their back on us. Other than that, Mr. Fantino - how he approached us and to see him on television talking about unions, I'm very disappointed in the man; very, very disappointed. I just hope that something will come of this and we don't have to go back to what we had before, but I really see that that's where it is headed. Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Wilson. Are there any questions for Mr. Wilson? Thank you.

I want to thank everyone for coming. My colleagues travelled a great distance to get here, in horrible weather yesterday. All of you who came out today, it's a cold day and I'm sure there are other things you would all rather be doing than fighting this fight.

We're just going to move on to some other committee business, so thank you.

We will recess for five minutes.

[1:23 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[1:46 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: I will now call the meeting back to order. We will move on to new business. Mr. Gosse.

GORDIE GOSSE: Thank you very much. I thank the committee for coming here today. I raised the motion at the previous meeting, but now that the members had an opportunity to consider it for the last few days and also to hear what veterans had to say, I'd like to introduce the motion again - word it differently, if that's possible.

My motion is that the Veterans Affairs Committee support the creation of a veterans advocate, who would report directly to the Minister responsible for Military Relations and advise the province about what steps need to be taken to replace the services lost by the closure of the Veterans Affairs office in Sydney, and I so move.

FRANK CORBETT: I second the motion.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion on that? (Interruptions)

GORDIE GOSSE: That the Veterans Affairs Committee support the creation of a veterans advocate, who would report directly to the Minister responsible for Military Relations and advise the province about what steps need to be taken to replace the services lost by the closure of the Veterans Affairs office in Sydney.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion on that? Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: Madam Chairman, I appreciate you bringing this back to the table. Certainly, today's events and the stories we heard shed some more light on the issue. That being said, I'm just wondering what the role of this committee is if we're not the advocates, if we, as nine politicians, should be the advocates for this and provide recommendations to the minister. I fully support the underlying tone or philosophy behind the motion, but I would like us to look at not only just in terms of the short-term issues of Sydney, but the long-term role of this committee in terms of us interviewing, learning what the issues are, and making recommendations to the minister.

I would suggest that we let this committee get down to work at advocating on behalf of the veterans and continuing to do the work at this table. Certainly there are nine elected officials here who should be able to provide a strong voice for veterans and that we shouldn't take that away from this table. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Is there any more discussion? Mr. Corbett.

FRANK CORBETT: Madam Chairman, I think we're doing exactly what the member wants us to do, and what we're doing is taking it from a committee stage and offering advice that the minister would not have heard directly, advice that we would have gotten previous to today, to the minister.

I think that all committees of the House are charged with certain responsibilities and that this doesn't stop - and I'm not a member of this committee - but any time that some other activist group or a group about another issue, we've heard issues about today - the federal government possibly retreating from support for long-term care beds. I think it's well within - and it's the duty of committees - to report back to ministers and tell them what we've found and provide what we would see as - because we've seen first-hand evidence - a possible resolve.

The wider breadth of that is that all committees of the House do a report and present it to the Speaker for his approbation, but I think there are issues that we can rightfully put in front of the minister. Clearly, he or she is not duty-bound to adhere by it, but clearly it provides direction and I would think considerable information, considering what we have today. I think this is a motion that we can accept, move forward with and then it's up to the minister and the office to do what they see more fit because they have the appropriate appropriations to do something like that.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Arab.

PATRICIA ARAB: I think we need to take it one step further. I don't like the idea of just saying we support having an advocate for veterans. I want to actually know what that looks like. I don't like the arbitrariness of it. I think that we as a committee need to go beyond that. I think that we need to look at who is going to benefit from these services. What is this going to look like? Where is the funding going to come from for something like this? I think that we need to take it beyond just having a motion of appointing somebody or the recommendation that somebody be appointed. Maybe I'm wrong - I just think that there needs to be a little bit more thought put out to this and more discussion from all Parties on what we would actually be proposing.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Gosse.

GORDIE GOSSE: Thank you. I did change my motion a bit earlier from the last one that I did on Thursday in Halifax. My motion originally introduced was that we support the idea of a Veterans Affairs advocate for the Province of Nova Scotia. Now it changed today, and if any of the committee members would like to put an amendment into the motion - advised that we look at this and ask the minister for the minister's response. Many committees through government over the years had good ideas from all standing committees in the province that have gone to ministers. Some have been accepted, some haven't, but the point is that, as any committee can make a motion and ask a minister for an idea or ask the minister what they think of that idea. I think it's important that we go forward with this.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: I don't want to debate back and forth, but I guess that's what I'm going to do here. We're just getting started here as a committee. We've not set a mandate out of the work. I think these presentations today have flagged a number of areas in which we can begin to work on solutions and begin advocacy. I applaud the members opposite who made a trip to Ottawa to advocate on behalf of veterans and I think we as a committee need to roll our sleeves up and take a more proactive role as politicians, as opposed to just making a motion and kicking the work down the table to someone when we don't really

know what their mandate is, who's funding it, et cetera. Let's roll our sleeves up and begin to work at this table. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. MacLeod.

ALFIE MACLEOD: The issue here is about time. One thing that was consistent from veteran after veteran after veteran after statement after statement after statement was that the office is already closed - we don't have a whole lot of time. This committee meets once a month. Are we going to roll this out so it takes us six months or 10 months to come up with a solution, or are we going to be proactive and do what needs to be done to help the veterans now? The office is already closed and the longer you leave it closed, like anything else, the harder it is going to be to do the advocacy work that needs to be done.

Each of us, as members, has a number of committees that we serve on. Besides that, we have constituency work that we have to do, and shortly we'll be going back into the House of Assembly. The whole idea behind the advocate is so that there is somebody who can take it and do the legwork to make sure that the different things that need to be done and what's happening - whether it's about the closure of the office, the increase in the medical insurance, the closure of the vets' hospitals, all of those things - but somebody has to actually have the ability and the time to go and put that package together so that they can bring it back to the minister and to this committee, so we have an opportunity then to deal with all the facts.

If we're going to piecemeal it, if we're going to wait until next month - and I forget what date we talked about. I believe it was March 7th before we meet again.

GORDIE GOSSE: The 27th - the same day the House opens.

ALFIE MACLEOD: The 27th - well, that's a month and a half away, gang. I know what I heard - there's urgency here. I know what I heard in November and that's why we went to Ottawa. So I think that the motion that has been put forward by the member for Sydney-Whitney Pier is a valid one and it's one that we as a committee can take. We have limited resources at a committee. We don't have the ability to hire or fire people. We don't have a budget to go out and do any kind of legwork in that time, but hopefully the minister's office can do that.

So we're saying we're recommending that, minister, you do this and that you do it in a timely fashion so that it does have an impact on the veterans, rather than wait until March 27th to say, well, oh my gosh, we'd better do something about that.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Arab.

PATRICIA ARAB: I appreciate the need for urgency 100 per cent, but something else that I heard from the veterans was the fact that the solutions from the federal

government came as afterthoughts, so putting somebody in Service Canada came as - okay, well, we didn't think that there was going to be such an uproar of support against closing down the veterans offices, so we're going to give them a quick solution of having somebody in Service Canada.

I personally do not want to make a rush decision, again, by having some arbitrary decision of a veterans advocate without laying down different criteria. Who would be eligible to be a veterans advocate? We're the ones who are listening. Again, where is the funding going to come from? We all know - all of you who have way more years of service as an MLA than I do know the financial difficulties that are part of our province. Is this going to be a permanent position? Are we going to do any sort of - is that advocate going to work to try to speak to their federal counterparts or speak to the minister's office in the federal government to try to get some funding back?

I agree with you - I don't want to wait until March 27th and again, this is new to me, so is it possible to have the opportunity to go back to our respective caucuses and have this conversation before we vote on it, and then meet in another week's time and not wait until March 27th? I agree that March 27th is too long, but I don't want to rush into something. I don't want to vote on something that I don't know enough about yet. (Interruption)

Can I answer that, about doing it last week? We met on Thursday. Our caucuses meet on Wednesday and we're here on Monday. I want the ability to go to caucus on Wednesday and have this discussion. I don't want to wait until March 27th either, but I don't know what we're able to do in terms of time.

GORDIE GOSSE: I do think it's a good time because aren't budget consultations going on right now? So if we meet on the 27th, the budget will be five or six days after we meet so it is time now, if there are any costs to this or if there is anything to this, this has to be worked out and I understand that.

To give you an example, I sent a letter to Mr. Fantino on November 18, 2013. I haven't received a response yet. As a parliamentarian on one level of government sending a letter to a minister - November 18th and I haven't gotten a response back from the federal minister yet. I know budget consultations are underway right now and this would be a decent time if you want to take it back to the caucuses, but we're not going to meet again until then and I doubt if we'll meet on the 27th because that's the day the House is going back in, that was announced last week and I said it would be pretty close that I think the House is going back in on the 27th. According to the media, the 30-day notice hasn't been given by the Speaker, but it was reported by the Premier that we're going back in on the 27th. Was that not the date we chose for this meeting?

THE CHAIR: I believe so.

GORDIE GOSSE: That's what I thought. It is a good time now with budget consultations going on if there's any cost or what we can do to be an advocate to help these people in their time of need.

THE CHAIR: Any more comments or questions? Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: So can we table that motion until our next meeting and bump up our next meeting? Frankly, yes, we would probably have to change when the next meeting was if it's on the same day the House goes back in.

THE CHAIR: March Break, that's a good week for me. The committee doesn't meet on March Break? Mr. MacLeod.

ALFIE MACLEOD: This just speaks to what I spoke about. Here we are, we can't even decide on when we're going to have a meeting let alone . . .

THE CHAIR: Well we have a meeting scheduled for the 27th. We want to have it sooner.

ALFIE MACLEOD: My very point is this thing is going to get pushed and pushed away because we can't even make a decision as to when a meeting should be, let alone dealing with the issue that needs to be dealt with. I just want to use that as an example of why this is important to pass it on to the minister's office so they can deal with it on a regular and timely basis.

THE CHAIR: So Wednesday afternoon is available on the 5th. We can have it in the afternoon? Wednesday afternoon, yes. (Interruptions) So it would be a late day meeting?

PATRICIA ARAB: That's fine with me, I don't want to vote on this. I don't feel comfortable voting on this right now until I discuss it, until we look further into it and we have ideas. I appreciate that might sound funny to my esteemed colleague but I'm just stating my preference.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: Madam Chairman, I'd like to put a motion on the floor to table the motion. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

GORDIE GOSSE: The motion was to table my motion.

ALFIE MACLEOD: I have a couple of motions that I'd like to put forward.

THE CHAIR: Alfie - sorry, Mr. MacLeod.

ALFIE MACLEOD: No, no, Alfie works. We're pretty informal around the table so you can do that.

Madam Chairman, in light of some of the conversations we heard today, I would like to move a motion that this committee send a letter to the Minister Tony Clement, saying we are not in favour of the 100 per cent increase in the medical and the insurance for retired military personnel and RCMP officers.

THE CHAIR: Okay, a seconder, please.

EDDIE ORRELL: I'll second.

THE CHAIR: Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

Mr. MacLeod.

ALFIE MACLEOD: I have a second motion that I'd like to make. This motion is that we have, indeed, an emergency meeting this Thursday of the Veterans Affairs Committee, at which time we will invite the Minister responsible for Military Relations to talk about the plan.

In interviews earlier this week the minister said they were waiting for the federal budget to come down before they made any moves. The federal budget has come down, there was no movement there so there must be a plan in place. I believe it would only be right for us, as a committee, to talk with the Minister responsible for Military Relations to move forward what we can do as a committee and as a province for the veterans of this province.

THE CHAIR: Are there any seconders for that motion? Is there any discussion? Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: The minister responsible isn't going to be here on Thursday. The point of tabling this discussion at this point in time was so that we could take it back to caucus. That happens on Wednesday. The decisions don't get made overnight.

I understand that it's an urgent matter and I'm certainly sensitive to that. The point is that we're asking for more time so that we can present it to caucus and then move forward from there.

THE CHAIR: Mr. MacLeod.

ALFIE MACLEOD: Cabinet is held on Thursday. Generally speaking, the ministers are all at Cabinet, which is held on Thursdays. That was the reason that the emergency meeting date was picked for that day. If the minister is not going to be there then it should be the following Thursday when the Cabinet meets. The reason for it is so that we can get this on the agenda and moving forward.

I heard the Minister responsible for Military Relations say the other day that this is an issue that all 51 members of the House should be proactive on. I'm sure he wants to be proactive as well and we need his input. I heard the chairman of this committee say earlier today that there are no communications between this committee and the federal government, so maybe we need to step it up so that it's a minister talking to a minister.

THE CHAIR: Is there any more discussion? Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: My comment is, why does it have to be the minister responsible? Our mandate is to step up for the rights and whatnot of veterans across the province, why isn't that our responsibility to do that?

ALFIE MACLEOD: My question is then if we don't need a Minister responsible for Military Relations, what's he doing there? What's his role? What is the role of the Minister responsible for Military Relations if it is not to speak out on behalf of the military, the people who are in the service and the people who have served this country so well. If we don't need that minister then why, indeed, is he in the Cabinet of the Province of Nova Scotia?

THE CHAIR: Are there any more comments? Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: I think it would be more appropriate if we invited the deputy minister, as was suggested, but I'd rather, actually, re-invite Mr. Fantino. I don't think there's anything inappropriate for saying thank you for your letter, I understand you were busy last week, so we'll give you a bit more notice, a date of your choice. Clearly the problem here is not with this committee or the minister of veteran affairs in the Province of Nova Scotia. Our issue and where our citizens and our veterans want us to advocate is with the federal government. Let's put the federal government in our targets and get to work on that. Thank you.

ALFIE MACLEOD: I have no problem re-inviting the minister, I think we should do that. If not we should offer to send a representative from each Party to go to Ottawa to

see him. However, I also heard you, Madam Chairman, tell the media that there was no communication between this committee and the federal government. Therefore, if that's the case, then we need to have a minister speak to the minister. Are we going to play around here and wait until time is up? If you don't want the Minister responsible for Military Relations to do his job, then who does it?

PATRICIA ARAB: I really think that we need to bring it back to why we're here and why we've met here and that's to make sure that we're here to support the veterans - all of the men and women who came out today, all of the men and women who couldn't come out today - who are being directly impacted by the closure of this office. I think if we could have somebody from our federal minister's office come and speak to us on this, preferably our federal minister, if we can have somebody from our provincial minister's office come and speak to us on this, I think we should be open to whomever wants to have discussions with us from those two offices.

ALFIE MACLEOD: I wouldn't disagree with my colleague, but what does that mean? Are those the only two offices that can speak on behalf of this issue, are those the only two people we should be hearing from? Is it not right - correct me if I'm wrong - that we do have a Minister responsible for Military Relations in this province? We do. What would you see the role of that individual as being?

PATRICIA ARAB: Great, we're going to have a dialogue? The minister responsible for any department in this province is to oversee the ministry and to make sure that their department is running properly and that the people they're made to serve are being served properly. All I'm saying is if we want to have a meeting right away, we don't know what peoples' availability are, we went ahead with this meeting knowing that the federal minister wasn't going to be in attendance.

I want to not limit ourselves to just having to speak to one representative from an office when those of you - not me - who have been in ministry positions know first-hand that it's not just one person who can speak and help us. Our mandate here is to try to get something done, trying to move forward on something, so why would we limit ourselves to have just an invite to one speaker on behalf of a department when there could be somebody else who would be willing and capable of speaking on behalf of that department?

ALFIE MACLEOD: That's exactly what you did last week. You asked one minister to come, you never said in the request if he could send somebody else or the deputy minister. I'm in favour of having a deputy minister come, but what I'm not in favour of is waiting. That's the problem here - it's the waiting. We as a group have not done our job, because the offices are closed. The minister sent back a reply - said he had only heard from two MLAs in the province.

We've all been members for over 100 days. We've all had the opportunity to go. The Speaker's Office affords you the opportunity to go to Ottawa to put a case forward for

the people you represent. Are we going to wait another 100 days and do nothing or are we going to be proactive as a committee?

THE CHAIR: So we all agree we want the meeting sooner rather than later. According to the calendar here the next possible date would be the 18th. We can't meet on March break. It's legislated that we can't meet on March break. Would someone like to put out a motion for the 18th?

ALFIE MACLEOD: I would be happy to amend my motion for the 18th.

PATRICIA ARAB: I would ask that we make a further amendment that representatives from the federal minister's office and the provincial minister's office be invited and encouraged to attend our meeting on the 18th.

GORDIE GOSSE: The original ask was not just for the Minister of Veterans Affairs - it was for the minister and the deputy minister, Ms. Chaput. Both were asked from that department. I'll second that motion and to asking both departments, absolutely.

THE CHAIR: Is there any more discussion? Mr. Corbett.

FRANK CORBETT: Am I to understand that what we're asking is that the federal deputy minister and minister and the provincial deputy come?

PATRICIA ARAB: My amendment is asking that a representative from both of those offices come, and I don't want to limit who it is. (Interruption) I'm talking both.

THE CHAIR: How does the motion stand, Ms. Arab?

PATRICIA ARAB: My amendment to the motion is that we have a representative from both the federal and provincial ministerial offices present at our meeting.

ALFIE MACLEOD: I wonder if we could make a friendly amendment and say that we would like to have an opportunity to meet with both offices before the end of March and allow them to help pick the time because of their schedules. That way there would be more flexibility.

THE CHAIR: We'll have to clear it with the clerk. Her schedule is pretty heavy here.

ALFIE MACLEOD: I just don't want to give a date - although I already did. If we're working to try to find a reasonable solution, then a reasonable solution is for them to have somebody come when they're available. If that means a Saturday or Sunday, game on. (Interruptions)

THE CHAIR: So that's February 27th now? Sorry, Mr. MacLeod.

ALFIE MACLEOD: Again, Madam Chairman, what I said is that we ask them to come, but I think what we need to do is put an end timeline on it. Maybe not be so specific about the date - it's a date when they're available but that's not April or May or June either, that's got to be in a sufficient amount of time, whether that be mid-February or mid-March or whatever. I think we need to put a specific end time on it but be flexible in between that now and then.

THE CHAIR: Okay, is that how the motion stands, the amendment to the motion? (Interruption) We're going to actually consult . . .

BEN JESSOME: Before March 27th.

THE CHAIR: And who is going to be asking them? Who is going to be communicating with them? (Interruptions)

KIM LEADLEY: We will. You do a letter through us.

THE CHAIR: Okay. So the motion is that we consult with the witnesses or the ministers, the deputy ministers for when they're available. (Interruption)

PATRICIA ARAB: Representatives from the office. I don't want to limit myself to anybody. I want somebody to come who's actually going to be able to be productive and give us answers.

THE CHAIR: Would all those in favour of the motion . . .

KIM LEADLEY: Can I just ask - you want an answer before the 27th?

ALFIE MACLEOD: I believe that the meeting should take place before the 27th. We should put the answer - although not an answer as quick as you did the other day; that was pretty quick.

PATRICIA ARAB: And in all fairness, you mean before March 27th because now we're looking at two for the 27th - we've talked about February 27th and we've talked about March 27th. Is that correct, you want an answer from both departments?

ALFIE MACLEOD: No, I want a meeting.

PATRICIA ARAB: You want a meeting with both departments before March 27th?

ALFIE MACLEOD: An answer before February 27th, or something to that effect. I'm certain the Chair can work that out.

KIM LEADLEY: So you want an answer before February 27th, if they're available to come before March 27th?

ALFIE MACLEOD: Again, Kim, it's what works, whenever you can make it work. You guys are better at that . . .

THE CHAIR: The meeting time pending their availability. Maybe they could give us their available dates and then we'll compare it to committees when they're available.

KIM LEADLEY: So you're looking at possibly Minister Fantino or Deputy Minister Mary Chaput and . . .

PATRICIA ARAB: If the federal office is willing to send us somebody who can answer questions and can speak to this, it doesn't matter to me who they send - I just want them to be here and speak to us on it, right? Sorry, I don't mean to get overly - my mike's not on.

KIM LEADLEY: And who are you proposing provincially?

PATRICIA ARAB: The same, it would be the same ask - somebody who can sit down with us, and by that time we will have had an opportunity to speak to our caucuses and come with more concrete ideas and asks as to what this would look like.

KIM LEADLEY: Okay.

THE CHAIR: Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

KIM LEADLEY: So the next meeting is still the 27th?

THE CHAIR: Is the next meeting still the 27th? (Interruption) March 27th. Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Well, I mean based on our conversation, we need to set a meeting earlier . . .

PATRICIA ARAB: This is what the whole motion is trying to - we're leaving it up to the departments.

ALFIE MACLEOD: I think the regular scheduled meeting . . .

THE CHAIR: The regular scheduled meeting will be the 27th.

BEN JESSOME: Okay, so we don't need to touch that right now.

KIM LEADLEY: So that leaves a specific time spot because if the House goes in in the afternoon, you need a morning time for that date.

THE CHAIR: For the 27th?

KIM LEADLEY: Right.

THE CHAIR: I think we already have 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.

ALFIE MACLEOD: Not if the House goes in.

THE CHAIR: Right, yes.

FRANK CORBETT: My thought would be that if the House is going in that day, I would suspect there would be something else maybe going on in the Red Room and that may not be available for committees.

THE CHAIR: How about the 18th, we're throwing that out there?

PATRICIA ARAB: March 18th for our regular meeting?

THE CHAIR: Is everyone in agreement for March 18th? Does someone want to put a motion out there - Mr. MacLeod?

ALFIE MACLEOD: Sure.

THE CHAIR: Do you want to second that motion? Mr. Gosse.

KIM LEADLEY: So that takes it back to the 18th for the original motion now, too, as well? You want to know before the 27th (Interruptions) It would be March 18th as opposed to March 27th.

BEN JESSOME: Are we mandated to have a meeting in the month if we don't have it by the 27th? (Interruptions) The point is we're waiting for approval from the other offices for them to send a representative.

KIM LEADLEY: But we might not be able to meet with him if the House goes in. Oh, we could meet in the afternoon of the 26th.

THE CHAIR: This is February. (Interruptions) So is the 18th - sorry, Mr. MacLeod.

ALFIE MACLEOD: If in the invitation you could say, we believe that our House will be going in on the 27th and then whoever the invitation is going to would understand the ramifications of that and deal with it appropriately, I hope.

KIM LEADLEY: So we're having our regular meeting on the 18th but if the minister or whoever can come, we'll just schedule around that. If we don't hear anything, we're still having a meeting on the 18th. So are you saying you may have an additional meeting as well?

THE CHAIR: Before March 18th.

KIM LEADLEY: All right.

THE CHAIR: A motion to adjourn is in order. (Interruption) Mr. Corbett.

We are adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 2:28 p.m.]