

# **HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**VETERANS AFFAIRS**

**Monday, March 24, 2014**

**Red Room, Province House**

**Closure of Veterans Affairs Canada office**

**Printed and Published by Nova Scotia Hansard Reporting Services**

## **VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

Pam Eyking (Chair)  
Ben Jessome (Vice-Chair)  
Patricia Arab  
Stephen Gough  
Keith Irving  
Hon. Pat Dunn  
Larry Harrison  
Hon. Dave Wilson  
Gordon Gosse

[Patricia Arab was replaced by Allan Rowe.]  
[Hon. Pat Dunn was replaced by Eddie Orrell.]

In Attendance:

Kim Langille  
Legislative Committee Clerk

### WITNESSES

#### Intergovernmental Affairs

Catherine Blewett,  
Deputy Minister

Paul Gillis,  
Executive Director



House of Assembly  
*Nova Scotia*

**HALIFAX, MONDAY, MARCH 24, 2014**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS**

**2:00 P.M.**

CHAIR  
Pam Eyking

VICE-CHAIR  
Ben Jessome

THE CHAIR: I'm going to call this meeting to order. It's the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. I'm the Chairman, MLA Pam Eyking for Victoria-The Lakes, Cape Breton. Today the committee will be receiving a presentation from an Intergovernmental Affairs official relating to the closure of a Veterans Affairs Canada area office. The witnesses will be introduced more fully shortly.

I am going to ask the committee members to introduce themselves for the record by stating their name and riding.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I'm just going to review the evacuation procedure. If we need to evacuate the building, please leave the Red Room and proceed down one flight of stairs and exit through the doors onto Granville Street. Please gather in the parking lot across from Province House and remain there until further instructions are provided. I am going to remind everyone to keep their phones off or on vibrate and not around the microphones. We're going to wrap up the questioning of the witnesses around 3:40 p.m. to allow time for committee business.

I want to welcome our officials from Intergovernmental Affairs and may I ask you to introduce yourselves, please.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: If the witnesses have any remarks or presentations they would like to put forth, please do so. Ms. Blewett.

CATHERINE BLEWETT: Thank you very much. Honourable members thank you for the invitation to join you this afternoon. I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to your examination and to provide some information on the role of Military Relations.

Canada's military in Nova Scotia represents a strategic asset for the province as a vehicle for public safety and security, as a major employer, as an economic generator, and as a significant component of the social fabric of the province. In recognition of the importance of the Canadian military to our society and to our economy, the position of Minister of Military Relations was established by an Order in Council in October 2006, to provide the Government of Nova Scotia with a means to communicate and work directly with the headquarters, offices, and agencies of the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces in Nova Scotia. Departmental responsibility and accountability for the province's defence and military-related activities was assigned to the Department of Intergovernmental Affairs.

Nova Scotia is home to more than 40 per cent of Canada's military assets. Canadian Forces Base Halifax is Canada's largest military base. Nova Scotia is part of Maritime Forces Atlantic, the largest naval presence in Canada. Her Majesty's Canadian Dockyard is the hub of the Royal Canadian Navy's Atlantic Fleet. Nova Scotians have contributed to the defence and security of Canada and have participated in all of Canada's military operations including both World Wars, Korea, peacekeeping operations, the Gulf War and the operation in Afghanistan.

Halifax, of course, was a key asset in both of the World Wars, operating as a protective shield and assembly point for convoys prior to heading into the Atlantic, serving as a major departure point for Canadian soldiers heading overseas and a return point for wounded soldiers returning on hospital ships. Today, the Department of National Defence is one of the province's largest single employers and a major contributor to Nova Scotia's economy, accounting for about 3.5 per cent of GDP.

Net DND expenditures, wages and salaries, operations, and grants and contributions in Nova Scotia amount to about \$1 billion annually. Despite representing 2.7 per cent of Canada's population, 11 per cent of all military personnel in Canada are in Nova Scotia. DND employs approximately 15,000 people in the province, approximately two-thirds in the Halifax Regional Municipality. Approximately 10,000 are full-time members of the Canadian Forces, concentrated in HRM - CFB Halifax and 12 Wing Shearwater - and in Greenwood - 14 Wing Greenwood. Approximately 2,000 are civilian DND employees, concentrated in HRM. Additionally, approximately 2,700 are reservists who have variable hours and are located throughout Nova Scotia.

About a dozen multinational defence companies have acquired or have located a link in their global value chain in Nova Scotia. Canadian Defence Review magazine recently ranked Irving Shipbuilding sixth among the top 50 defence companies in the country, based on economic impact, innovation, and contribution to national security, and support for Canada's military.

Halifax also hosts the regional headquarters for the Canadian Coast Guard, the Marine Security Operations Centre, and the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre which is responsible for the coordination of all search and rescue operations associated with aircraft and marine emergencies in eastern Canada.

The Minister responsible for Military Relations is a unique ministerial role within Canada. The federal government has exclusive constitutional responsibility for defence. However, this portfolio recognizes the important economic and social contributions military personnel and families make to Nova Scotia.

Since 2006, the nature of the support Intergovernmental Affairs provides on the Military Relations file has evolved. Like all ministries, the current Minister responsible for Military Relations has provided direction on his interest to advance the province's interests on the file, including proactive outreach to the military community in Nova Scotia.

Madam Chairman, those are my opening comments. I'd be very pleased to answer any questions that the members may have.

THE CHAIR: I will open the floor to questions, please. Mr. Orrell.

EDDIE ORRELL: Thank you, Ms. Blewett, for your presentation. Obviously we just heard that the military is a very important issue here in the Province of Nova Scotia. It provides to our economy and puts a lot of our citizens to work. I know that you guys, as well as we are, are very concerned about the closure of the Veterans Affairs offices that deal with some of the effects of post-deployment and post-military employment in the province. This being such an important issue, I just want to know how often and how many times has the Premier - the Minister responsible for Military Relations, I guess is the best way to put it - contacted the Minister of Veterans Affairs about the closure of these offices, and were any significant gains made when he contacted the office?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: Thank you for the question. On November 29<sup>th</sup>, of course, the Legislature passed a unanimous bipartisan endorsement urging the Department of Veterans Affairs to reverse the decision, so the minister would have participated in that. The Minister responsible for Military Relations also wrote directly to Minister Fantino. I actually have copies of those letters, Madam Chairman, if it's helpful for me to . . .

THE CHAIR: Would you mind reading it, please?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: Read it - certainly, yes.

THE CHAIR: Are there a lot? Are there many? Can we pass them out?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: I actually brought copies, if that's helpful.

THE CHAIR: Okay, thank you.

CATHERINE BLEWETT: Would you like me to read the letter?

THE CHAIR: Yes, sure.

CATHERINE BLEWETT: So this would be dated February 25<sup>th</sup> to the Honourable Julian Fantino:

“Dear Minister Fantino:

I am writing to you in my capacity as Premier of Nova Scotia to share with you my and my government's concerns about the closure of Veteran's Affairs Offices and the impact this has on our shared constituents.

The office that recently closed in Sydney managed 4,200 files. These individuals and their families feel that they have lost much needed support that was once provided. Many of these men and women are facing serious challenges and do not know where to turn.

Veterans have requested the services of a Veteran's Advocate and my government and I agree that this could be a positive step for the federal government to take in light of service reductions. It was suggested in a public meeting that such an advocate could travel to legions throughout to meet with Veterans and hear first-hand about the issues they face. The Advocate could then report back to your department on what is being heard and what issues veterans face.

Veterans face unique challenges and they need an opportunity to be heard by government in order for your department to best meet those challenges. I'm sure you can appreciate the great sacrifice veterans have made for Canada. I trust that you and your government will consider creating the position of a Veteran's Advocate to better meet the needs of our veterans and their families.

Thank you for considering my request. Should you require any further information or should you wish to discuss this option further, please do not hesitate to contact me directly.”

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Blewett. Any further questions? Mr. Irving, sorry you were on the list.

KEITH IRVING: Thank you for your presentation. Ms. Blewett, I was wondering if you could expand on exactly what the role of the Premier is in this portfolio and how staff support him in that role?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: Certainly. The Premier is Minister of Military Relations and the Department of Intergovernmental Affairs is essentially home department for that function. We have regularized the staffing within Intergovernmental Affairs and we conduct increasingly more activity on this file. We are undertaking some policy work, we actually are trying to build our statistics and get a better picture on some of the key issues. We are looking at staffing capacity and we’re also putting it in context of what’s happening across the federal system in terms of federal downloading. We also do some outreach activities with specific organizations and we’re in the process of developing a funding model, if you will, to support a variety of military organizations.

KEITH IRVING: Thank you, and just a quick supplementary. I take it from your statement that these are recent changes that have been initiated by the minister in terms of policy work and changing of staffing capacity. Are these new initiatives by the minister?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: I think I mentioned various ministers have chosen to approach the portfolio in different ways. Premier McNeil, as minister, wanted to have a fairly proactive role in the military relations function so we actually have taken steps to regularize the staffing. Previously, staffing actually was located in the Premier’s Office. We’ve actually taken that staffing out of the Premier’s Office and brought it back into the Department of Intergovernmental Affairs. We think it’s important to have a fairly clear policy approach to the file. We want to give our best advice to government and we want to understand what some of the options and implications are. That has been a recent change, certainly in terms of the staffing, as has some of the planned advocacy work that we are undertaking. I should say - Paul, don’t hesitate to jump in - we are beefing up our role within Intergovernmental Affairs to make sure it’s adequately resourced.

One of the interesting intersects, actually, in our advocacy work, what we’re trying to do - and this would be fairly new - we’re trying to make sure that a number of important connections are made. We are facilitating, through Intergovernmental Affairs, high-level meetings - so that would be between our minister and, for example, Rear Admiral John Newton. We’ve been working with our minister and other staff to meet, for example, with VETS Canada. They’re a federal not-for-profit veterans’ organization that actually

provides emergency support for homeless and at-risk veterans, so we're trying to have a more regimented approach to that.

The other thing that we actually did quite recently - we connected Mi'kmaq veterans to a World War I commemorative veterans' group. It's pretty important for the Minister responsible for Military Relations - also the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs - to recognize the significant role that Mi'kmaq veterans played in the World Wars and in the fabric of Nova Scotia's history.

So we are moving forward, I would say, on a more regularized approach. My job as deputy minister is to be the policy lead and the implementation lead to see some progress through.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Mr. Orrell.

EDDIE ORRELL: The question I asked earlier about how many times the minister has contacted the federal veterans minister - is that the only time the minister has had any involvement with the minister, February 25<sup>th</sup>, after the Veterans Affairs office closed?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: The resolution and that letter - that would be the extent that I'm aware of, yes.

EDDIE ORRELL: Because we had the meeting here and the resolution that was passed was asking the provincial government to look at an advocacy for the Veterans Affairs Minister, and he passed that on to the federal government, but this is such an important issue, I would have thought that the minister would have had a little more contact with the federal Minister of Veterans Affairs to try to stop the closure instead of trying to reverse the closure after it happened. I think that's just absurd.

I guess the other question is, have there been any policies or programs developed since that has happened that are aimed specifically at veterans since either the election in October and/or the closure of the Veterans Affairs offices?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: Just to make sure I get your question correct, you want to know if any new activities have been undertaken since the election in October?

EDDIE ORRELL: Yes, and/or since the closures of the Veterans Affairs offices.

CATHERINE BLEWETT: I think I referenced that - and it would have been actually since the provincial election - the Minister responsible for Military Relations actually asked that we take a more proactive role, so we have regularized the staffing; we have taken that staffing from the Premier's Office to have a more focused approach and to broaden our capacity to understand the impact of military relations in the province.



All of the pieces that I referenced in terms of engaging with veterans' groups, but not limited to veterans' groups - engaging with other military organizations, engaging with Mi'kmaq veterans - there actually has been a fair bit of, I would say, quite absolutely new activity. The other thing that we are looking at is developing a framework to provide some funding and we're currently very actively looking at the scope and criteria for support for some military organizations, some military groups and again, that's all very new activity.

In terms of advocacy, a bit more to your question about engagement with the federal government, the Department of Intergovernmental Affairs has been requesting information from Veterans Affairs, we actually want to get a bit of the profile of the veteran community in Nova Scotia. We want to understand to the extent that privacy laws allow us - and that's a real issue for us - we do not have constitutional jurisdiction for veterans so some of the privacy considerations around that are a challenge for us to just request and receive information. But we've actually been actively asking through our ministry to Veterans Affairs Canada to get some more detail. We're still waiting for that.

EDDIE ORRELL: I guess I'm talking specifically about the closure of the veterans offices. We were told at one meeting that the government was waiting until after the federal budget came down before they were to push to see about the closure of the offices, especially in Sydney, which affects myself and the member for Sydney-Whitney Pier. It seems like there was nothing done until after the closure had happened before the government stepped in and tried to change that because of what they said might come down in the budget, but that kind of seems like it's closing the gate after the horse got out.

I was just wondering if there was anything before that expressing concern of this government and this province about the closures by the federal government of the offices, especially in Sydney. It just seems like everything happened after the closures happened instead of before the closures happened and that kind of concerns me and it concerns a lot of the veterans that I deal with home in my constituency.

CATHERINE BLEWETT: Paul, if you want to comment.

PAUL GILLIS: I think we were all in a similar situation. We knew that there were pressures on Veterans Affairs to keep all of the offices open and we were anticipating a positive response in the federal budget. We were disappointed with the outcomes of the federal budget and hence the response.

EDDIE ORRELL: So nothing was done until the budget was down on the part of the government to try to reverse those potential closures, I guess, at that time. We waited until the budget came down before we decided to do anything - is that what you're saying?

PAUL GILLIS: We were anticipating that the pressure that was being brought on Veterans Affairs - that they would take a positive reaction.

EDDIE ORRELL: So there was nothing done other than that until after the budget came down.

CATHERINE BLEWETT: Prior to the federal budget the work we were doing, again, we really had the opportunity to start to engage with the new Minister responsible for Military Relations very early in November and again, we wanted to start to get some of the resources and support brought into Intergovernmental Affairs so we could start our work. So we were doing work from early November on.

EDDIE ORRELL: With regard to the closure of the veterans office is what I'm asking. I understand that military relations is very important in the province and I've heard that and I appreciate that, but we knew these offices were going to be closed at the end of the month, the end of January and we had done nothing until February 25<sup>th</sup>, as a provincial government.

CATHERINE BLEWETT: Well, that's not quite . . .

EDDIE ORRELL: Some of us had gone to rallies and the member for Sydney-Whitney Pier will attest to that and we travelled to Ottawa to deal with this and try to reverse that. I don't see anything here that says the government of the day has done anything other than send this letter off to Minister Fantino at the time. I'm just wondering, is that the case?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: The provincial Legislature on November 29<sup>th</sup> unanimously passed a bipartisan motion to urge the federal government to reverse the decision, so that was well in advance of the federal budget. That was certainly a strong advocacy message that was sent unanimously from all of the members of the Legislature.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms. Blewett. Mr. Rowe.

ALLAN ROWE: Ms. Blewett, I know all of my colleagues here share all of our concerns about what you've said a couple of times now, which is the federal downloading of its constitutional responsibility to look after veterans. All of us are trying to do whatever we can for all veterans in this province and throughout the rest of the country.

I'm curious if you could shed some light because really that's the purpose of this committee, to act as a conduit to our veterans. What should we, as members of the Legislature and as members of this committee be doing to assist yourself and members of your staff in this regard? What is it we can and should be doing?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: Thank you very much for the question, I appreciate it. I have to say, just like the function of Minister responsible for Military Relations is unique in the country, it's fairly unique to have a Veterans Affairs Standing Committee as well. Just

by virtue of having this committee in place, that's a natural advocacy position and really to be commended.

If I could offer a suggestion or a possible approach, there are two, and one of the key issues - there is a federal Ombudsman for Veterans Affairs. That federal Ombudsman has a direct responsibility and directly reports to the federal system and he is meant to respond to issues of concern for veterans and their families.

Separately from the Veterans Ombudsman, there is also a Veterans Advisory Committee on Veterans Affairs. It's like 21 members and I actually think it might be very interesting - because they are highly qualified folks from the RCMP, the military, they've got a broad range of very deep experience - it might be very interesting to hear what they have to say.

The issue really is, from a downloading perspective, who would have some responsibility and it's pretty interesting. We follow a lot of federal downloading, if I can say with my other hat on as Deputy Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs. Very recently in British Columbia, there is a court case going on right now that the federal government is stepping away from their obligation to veterans; it's unfortunate my federal colleague with direct responsibility wasn't here because that is where the questions are appropriately placed. I think though - I would be surprised if you didn't get a positive response from the federal Ombudsman and some of the members, perhaps, of the federal Veterans Ombudsman Advisory Council. As a way forward, I think that might be quite instructive for you.

ALLAN ROWE: So you would see value in actually having the federal Ombudsman appear here?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: I would, certainly.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Mr. Gosse.

GORDON GOSSE: Have you received a response from Mr. Fantino to the Premier's request that his office create a veterans advocate? Have you had any response back from the minister?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: We have received no response.

GORDON GOSSE: Surprisingly I sent him the same type of letter back in November 2013 - I haven't got a response yet. I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for that, I guess.

CATHERINE BLEWETT: Point taken.

GORDON GOSSE: Has there been an ongoing discussion between your office and the federal office subsequently since the letter? Has there been any ongoing discussion between your office and the federal office of Veterans Affairs?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: At an officials' level, we do engage with the Department of Veterans Affairs. Again, most recently we wanted to get some data from them. We wanted to understand the demographics of veterans in Nova Scotia. We wanted to find out which conflicts they served in, what the numbers were, where they lived, the kinds of services that they were accessing, and to your point earlier, funny, no response.

GORDON GOSSE: Have you ever provided the minister with a cost analysis on what it would cost to create a veterans advocate for the Province of Nova Scotia - do something similar like they did with the MV Miner, clean it up and then send the bill to the feds? Has there ever been any discussion on the cost analysis of how much it would cost to set up a veterans affairs advocate in the Province of Nova Scotia?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: There has been discussion, yes, and that is something that we have very actively discussed and the question that has come from this committee and, I have to say, it has been taken well and it has been taken seriously. The challenge though, very honestly, before going down the road of actually backfilling where the Government of Canada is stepping out of, we have substantive and growing concerns, if I might say, about the extent to which the federal government is stepping away from their responsibilities on a number of files.

It would be no surprise to anybody in this room that we monitor and track what is going on in terms of federal withdrawal, some of the changes on the health side that they're mounting. Nova Scotian veterans and Canadian veterans, they've given of their lives and their time and made supreme sacrifices, so it's really challenging to not want to do something special, but respectfully the federal government has stepped away from Aboriginal populations in Nova Scotia, they've stepped away from other vulnerable populations, they've stepped away from immigrants. The funding withdrawal, I'm not kidding - right at the close of business last week I learned about another federal withdrawal for immigration settlement services from the Government of Canada, so I'm really challenged.

My job is to give my best advice to my minister and I don't think I can say to my minister in an intergovernmental context this is something that we should be backfilling until we understand the impact so we're waiting, again, to get the data. We want to do this properly. We want to understand who is impacted. Also, very bluntly, I don't think it's appropriate to let the Government of Canada off the hook.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: Thank you, Ms. Blewett, for coming here today. I was hoping you could elaborate a little bit, specifically on the ambitions for changing personnel in the department and the changes you made to staffing, kind of why that was the case and what specifically has been done around the changes to staffing and personnel?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: As Deputy Minister responsible for Military Relations, it was important to make sure that we had a substantive role and again, we do have a unique minister within all Canadian Governments and we really wanted to have some substance behind it, so we did regularize the staffing. We moved resources from the Premier's Office and the minister was actually quite supportive of moving it to the Department of Intergovernmental Affairs to make sure that we could, I'll say, give it some legs. Again, by virtue of the presence of the military concentrated in Halifax and in Nova Scotia, there is a lot more engagement we can have.

I know that the minister had some very proactive things that he wanted to do, for example, meeting with - and a perfect example for this committee this afternoon is the VETS Canada group. When any minister engages with stakeholders, we want to have the capacity to support that work.

One of the things - and again, it's a very good example, I think, for this afternoon's discussions - is the Premier has met with VETS Canada and subsequently staff has followed up with VETS Canada. What we're doing is looking at a couple of things. We don't think it's appropriate to start trying to offer the services that Canada is meant to offer, but one of the things that we found out - and again, this is why it's important to regularize the staffing and have a thorough approach. After sitting down and meeting with the VETS Canada group - they don't want a handout, if you will, but they were very interested in finding out about the provincial services that already exist that they didn't know about. So through our advocacy function working with groups like VETS Canada, we were able to tell them where they were able to access existing provincial services through Community Services on the homelessness side, on the at-risk side, and through the Department of Health and Wellness. We wanted to support them in accessing provincial services to the best of their ability.

I did make reference to something else that we would like to do in a more transparent and a more regular way: providing some funding to support military organizations. It's very interesting, there was a situation where military cadets weren't able to get their uniforms and, again, that was the Government of Canada stepping away, not providing uniforms for cadets. We didn't step forward and provide uniforms, but we have provided support for cadets to do some training and to have transportation so they can participate in military events. We're working on actually developing some criteria.

There are veterans' groups that are also interested in memorializing the contributions that they've made, and I think they're pretty important in their communities geographically around the province. This is probably not the right room to make a budget

pitch, it's not a lot of money, but we're looking at how to put some terms and conditions around some funding so that memorials can pay credit and homage to the contribution that veterans have made in small communities from Nova Scotia, so we're doing that kind of work as well.

My colleague will tell you I'm pretty careful on the financial side, so we're putting terms and conditions around it, but I'm hoping that we're ready for the new fiscal year to be able to more routinely provide that kind of small funding support for military organizations.

BEN JESSOME: Through the Chair - I don't want to suggest that we're accepting of this downloading that's going on from the Government of Canada, but it sounds like there's a lot going on in your department in terms of trying to get ahead of potential cuts. Would you say that there are things that you're doing or some of the things that you've talked about are things that are being done proactively or in consequence to something that has been done federally?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: I was going to make a cheeky remark about the time that I might push to expand it because, seriously, the downloading impact and what we're feeling from the federal government is actually incredible. One of the things that we are doing very clearly is we're looking at the impact of just the military cuts in Nova Scotia. They're pretty substantive.

We've been tracking and engaging with federal departments in terms of the diminishing federal presence and so our most recent estimate that came out of the Deficit Reduction Action Plan that the federal government implemented - and these are the ones that we can categorically say are gone but there are many associated consequences - over 2,000 positions have been eliminated in Nova Scotia. So it's about a \$145 million payroll - actually again, specifically to the point of the veterans, veterans' long-term beds. The province stands to lose just about \$42 million per year. These are big, substantive cuts.

The Canada Health Transfer - there are successive cuts coming in the way health care is funded by the federal government, and I should say they've been unilateral cuts. There has been no consultation and that makes it very challenging. We try as hard as we can to be proactive, however the unilateral nature of some of the federal withdrawal has made it extremely challenging for not only this jurisdiction, but jurisdictions right across the country. In many instances, provinces have no indication.

So health care cuts - they will be cumulative and they're really substantive. We're in the middle right now of some very sensitive negotiations around the labour market programming; again, a unilateral federal program, the Government of Canada decided that they would implement a new program. We've spoken to employers across the country. The programming proposed does not work. It emphatically will not work for Nova Scotia and it has been imposed as a *fait accompli*. The Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs has been

extremely proactive on that file, and as a result we're in more protracted negotiations than any other province because we are pushing to try to preserve some of the federal funding that's being unilaterally pulled away, and that's just the beginning.

On the labour market side, again, that is one agreement - that's the Labour Market Agreement. Within the next two years there's the Labour Market Development Agreement which is worth about \$100 million to Nova Scotia.

The federal cuts, they're big, they are substantive and, again, the relative size and capacity of the federal system compared to the provincial system, we're trying to be very proactive in areas that are the most tactical. We have a myriad of disadvantaged populations that the federal government seems to be very easily walking away from, so I have to say I commend the committee for focusing on one of the populations, but there are more.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Wilson.

HON. DAVID WILSON: Just a couple of questions on a couple of different areas. First thing, you mentioned possibly seeing an increase in your budget, so I guess as Opposition members we'll keep an eye on that to see if Treasury Board approves that. I think it's a good cause. I know, for example, as the Minister of Communities, Culture and Heritage, there was a fund that we funded for the Navy League Cadets, some uniforms, which I thought was just absurd that they couldn't get federal funding. So we'll keep an eye on that when the budget is tabled, whenever it's tabled.

I know other departments or other ministers in departments like Health and Wellness, Education, and Energy, have FPTs - federal-provincial-territorial meetings. I know Intergovernmental Affairs usually falls with the Premiers, which I know the Prime Minister doesn't attend. Is there an FPT meeting, for example, for Military Relations or Veterans Affairs? I know not every jurisdiction has a Minister responsible for Military Affairs. Is there any other avenue that the Premier can advocate or have in front of him a minister of the federal government so that he could advocate even stronger the next time they meet?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: Thank you for the question. There actually is not a comparable FPT forum, so the federal Minister of Veterans Affairs doesn't engage with provincial counterparts. There isn't an interlocutor, if you will, in Nova Scotia so we are the only province that has a Minister responsible for Military Relations. So again, we don't have a natural group of allies, if you will, that we can come together with.

That said, I do speak very often with my colleagues across the country and our closest, most comparable jurisdiction is actually B.C. because of the coast. I can tell you that in the context of shipbuilding, I have spoken with federal officials about parity

between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. So we do what we can, but there is not a natural connection, as you say.

DAVID WILSON: So quickly, I know in recent months there has been a lot of awareness brought around an increase in suicide by currently serving service personnel. Coming from sitting at the table and being in the Department of Health and Wellness, I think there was, on a monthly basis, potentially new downloads of federally funded programs in Health. Has there been any correspondence from the Premier as the Minister responsible for Military Relations to his colleague, the Minister of Health and Wellness, on some of the concerns around suicide and some of the programming that might not be there for service personnel?

I'm not here to blame anybody, I'm just wondering if the Premier has engaged with the Minister of Health and Wellness to say, listen, are there some gaps that we need to be aware of. Even though the federal government is downloading, I think there is a responsibility, especially in health. I know the Department of Health and Wellness has picked up a number of things, especially through the immigration downloads for health care and such. Has there been any correspondence between the Premier and his colleague, the Minister of Health and Wellness, on some of the gaps that might be there - especially when we hear about the number of suicides that we've seen over the last, really, six months, maybe even less?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: I'm not aware of any correspondence between the Minister responsible for Military Relations and his Minister of Health and Wellness. I do know that we're tracking very carefully the expenditure reductions and what's happening. At our officials level there are ongoing conversations. I'm not aware that there would be any correspondence, however.

PAUL GILLIS: Ms. Blewett referenced the group VETS Canada, the Veterans Emergency Transition Services Canada organization, which is a non-profit organization. The minister has met with that organization and this is a group that's focused on helping recent vets and the populations that are at most risk of challenging reintegration back into society. One of the things that we're working with is informing them of all the programming within the province that these veterans could avail themselves of. I'll leave it to the chairman, but I would suggest that might be a group that could present to your committee as well and speak to how the province can support its veterans, especially the ones who are most at risk.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Rowe.

ALLAN ROWE: Vis-à-vis Mr. Wilson's comments and concerns a moment or two ago about filling in the gaps, I want to go back to something that you said a few moments ago that kind of surprised me, if I can be honest, and that was that in discussions between



provincial and federal officials, there were some programs and services offered provincially that the federal people weren't even familiar with.

I have two quick questions. One is, is that because they're necessarily unique to this province, it's something different that they don't know about, it's different for Nova Scotia and not existing elsewhere, and maybe shed a little more light on what some of those programs might be?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: I think that relates to the VETS Canada folks. Again, they were not interested in accessing additional funds, but as we met with them, it became very clear that they weren't aware of the provincial programs that were available for homeless vets and vets at risk and probably some of that population that you reference. We're pointing out areas that programming already exists and Paul, you might actually be able to fill them in.

PAUL GILLIS: Perhaps I should provide a little bit more clarity. VETS Canada, the Veterans Emergency Transition Service, is not actually a federal government organization. It's a not-for-profit organization that was actually spearheaded by somebody from Dartmouth, but has now become a national organization. It is a group of volunteers - many of them former vets - who literally go out and try to engage veterans who are struggling with reintegration into society, some of them being homeless people, and they're basically working with those groups and getting them back up on their feet.

I didn't mean to intone that Veterans Affairs Canada is not aware of provincial government, the federal department is not aware of our program, but it's this non-profit organization that we're working with.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Orrell.

EDDIE ORRELL: I guess my biggest question is the veterans advocate is not going to be backfilled by the province, there are no discussions around the province for providing an advocate for the veterans in our province to liaise with the Veterans Affairs Minister in Ottawa. Is there a plan to go forward - us, as a committee, and Military Relations - to deal with the federal government on what may be done to help fill in the role of the veterans here in the province, but what may be coming in the future to prevent further issues like this happening, so we can be proactive in preventing further cuts, I guess, to the Military Relations part of it here in the province and downloading more stuff to our veterans?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: Thank you for your question. Of course, we are actively sort of weighing and we have very seriously looked at the recommendations in terms of a provincial advocate. Again, though, it really is at the feet of the Government of Canada, where we have to have them step up to their fiduciary responsibility to veterans. I think, again, I really commend this standing committee and everybody's participation to highlight some of the challenges. Whatever we can do through Intergovernmental Affairs

to support the committee, we're very, very happy to do. Again, like everybody, I think we're waiting to hear back from Veterans Affairs.

EDDIE ORRELL: I guess I must have misunderstood the whole idea of the motion set forth by introducing a veterans advocate here, so we could have that veterans advocate deal directly with the federal government in the changes that have happened, whereas you, as a government, and myself and everybody here as an MLA, may have difficulty getting to the veterans people in Ottawa. This veterans advocate that we would have created here in the province would have been able to go to that and get the answers sooner or easier than we could have gotten them because that would be their job to do.

If it was for six months or for three months until the problems had been settled or answered to our liking, I guess, but unless they were going to keep the veterans offices open - I guess no one is liking what the federal government is doing here. So that was my idea of what the veterans advocate was supposed to do that we announced here, not to be backfilling it in, but that is the plan to go forward, to make sure that we can push the federal government to keep their responsibilities.

CATHERINE BLEWETT: If I may, the other point I think about advocacy that's pretty important, again, it's looking at where veterans live across the province. There are 51 MLAs, each of whom knows their constituents many ways and you feel it day in and day out, I would bet. The beauty of the Legislature is that there are actually 51 advocates for veterans in their areas and, respectfully, creating an additional official, we would be funding that, provincially, to do that work. It's a totally editorial comment on my part, but you have more influence as 51 members of the Nova Scotia Legislature, and I think that's a strong position.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Gosse.

GORDON GOSSE: Actually that's in the second letter you handed out, the 51 advocates . . .

CATHERINE BLEWETT: I read it.

GORDON GOSSE: I know myself, I do a lot of DVA stuff in my office, I've been doing it for years, but that's my own personal thing. I don't know how many of the 51 members do DVA appeals or any of the federal issues, but the reason I had asked for that motion on the closure of the Sydney office was to help some of these veterans who are without the proper support that they have now. That seems to be the problem - they moved somebody from that office.

I know that also, in the letter dated March 6<sup>th</sup>, when I sent my letter that they're downloading the services, I mean, I'm quite well aware of that in Cape Breton. The EI call centre in Glace Bay, gone; the post office in North Sydney, gone; the DVA office in

Sydney, gone. I'm well aware of the down services in Cape Breton, but I just thought that, you know, they were there for us in our time of need so I thought we'd be there for them. That's why I introduced that motion - hoping that we would be able to provide some kind of proper support to help them navigate through the system.

If you followed this from day one back in 2003 when this all started, telling a veteran of World War II or a Korean veteran to use an app on the computer, to call on the telephone. I mean, you have seniors today - these men are all in their 80s. You recently mentioned too what was going to happen to any veteran that has served after the Korean War in 1954, that those beds are not going to be paid for here in the Province of Nova Scotia, those long-term care beds. We do have now, in Taigh Na Mara and North Sydney, those homes that are earmarked for veterans, with the downloading of that, we're losing the funding for those, and I think you said it was like \$42 million.

CATHERINE BLEWETT: That will be the impact per year in Nova Scotia.

GORDON GOSSE: For those types of things. So with all of the downloading and I just described some of them just in Cape Breton, not across the province, to say that that's why I thought it would be proper for us to have a veterans advocate to support those people in their time of need, to help them navigate that system, to help the MLAs. The veterans advocate can work with the 51 MLAs, work with the federal government to just decide if there is an appeal process or what can they do to help that person get long-term care, to help that person with tinnitus or hearing loss or help that person to be an advocate for them. If you had a navigator in the system like a veterans advocate or any kind of advocate - and I do understand that we are all advocates, all 51 of us, but I think it's important because it's a very difficult system to navigate.

I've had the Appeal Board of Veterans Affairs come to Cape Breton. I've argued before the Appeal Board. I've had appeals go right to the courts in Veterans Affairs in my office. I just thought it was important, in looking at this, saying that given the unique needs of our veterans I thought it would be important. I understand the downloading of services and I understand the political part of it - I just thought it was important that we have an advocate here.

My other question is, do we know the number of veterans in the Cape Breton area who use the Sydney office who are going to be affected by the closure of the Veterans Affairs Office? It has been two months now. Is there any way of doing a follow-up to see what the actual consequences of this action are?

CATHERINE BLEWETT: We actually have followed up with Veterans Affairs Canada and they are not getting back to us. Again, we've asked for the demographics, how many, where, what they've served, what services they're accessing, what services they might need to access and I got a very perfunctory "your request is in the system" sort of e-mail. We're not hearing back from them.

I really take your point, Mr. Gosse, but my counter, if you will, to appointing a provincial or trying to advocate for a provincial liaison - I work a lot with the federal system and so there is a federal Ombudsman. What happens - and I'm sure it would happen in your system as well - if you're not hearing anything, if nobody within your own system is agitating for something, it's less impactful.

I think if the federal Ombudsman was to be called by this committee and started to hear some of the issues - I mean, we're doing what we can. I should say, just thinking about the service, this is why we've regularized some of the staffing. I've been talking to, and our officials - we connect with Service Canada. We're very concerned about their capacity - again, EI recipients, the changes to EI that are going through. The labour market opinions that are required so that we can try to bring in skilled workers and bring people to Canada in some resource industries - we want people to come to Nova Scotia - but again, it's Service Canada. Now they're layering veterans onto Service Canada and we're very concerned about their lack of capacity.

Again, I think if that is only heard, for example, within the provincial system, I think it's pretty important that the federal Ombudsman hears it, understands how serious and how valid the concerns are that have been brought up around this entire table, I couldn't agree more.

THE CHAIR: Any further questions? I'll ask if you'd like to finish up with a closing statement, please.

CATHERINE BLEWETT: Thank you. I actually had not prepared a closing statement, maybe that's a good thing, although now I want to go back and change my budget submission. (Laughter)

Thank you so much for your time and I appreciate the very important questions for veterans who are very important and who have made a contribution to the province and the country.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms. Blewett and Mr. Gillis. We are going to take a recess at this time.

[3:01 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[3:11 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: I will call this meeting back to order. On the table we have correspondence from Dennis Manuge, and it has been circulated. I don't know if anyone has anything to add to that - no one? Okay.

We will move on to our meeting schedule. The committee usually doesn't meet while the House is sitting. Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: Madam Chairman, I just wanted to suggest that we bring forward the tabled motion from the last meeting. I believe it was Mr. Gosse who put forward a motion that we tabled. Would the procedure be to make a motion to remove that from the table and deal with it now?

THE CHAIR: Okay, there's a motion on the floor. Mr. Hebb.

GORDON HEBB: I don't think you would remove a motion from the table; it's part of the record of the House. You can deal with the motion, you can call it forward and defeat it, or you can pass a motion not to deal with it. If it's not on the agenda, I don't know that there's a need to deal with it, but I'm not really sure what that would mean to remove it from the table. Being tabled, it's part of the record of the committee, it's there. I don't know the significance of the motion, whether that would even be in order. I'm not sure what's trying to be accomplished by saying that it's removed from the table.

It is part of the record of the committee and the committee hasn't got it on its agenda so in that case, if the committee decides not to do anything with it, it would just sit there until such time, if ever, the committee decides to deal with it. It would be unusual to call it forward unless it was for the purpose of voting on it.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: I used the wrong language - I'm still trying to understand Robert's Rules versus the Rules of this House. Perhaps I could ask that we vote on the motion that was brought forward at the last meeting.

THE CHAIR: There is a motion on the floor. Would you like to read the motion? Do you have the motion?

The motion states 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.

Is there any discussion? Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is defeated.

We're going to move on to the next meeting date. (Interruption) Oh sorry, Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I wanted to introduce a motion that this committee write a letter to endorse the Minister responsible for Military Relations' letter. I think that it would be good for one to come from this committee endorsing the essence of that letter. I move that the committee write a letter, perhaps to be drafted by the chairman.

THE CHAIR: Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Are you going to have some discussion on that? Go ahead, Mr. Orrell.

EDDIE ORRELL: I'm just not clear on what Mr. Jessome has brought up there, the letter supporting the minister's letter. What minister's letter and what . . .

BEN JESSOME: The letter that we have in front of us right now to Minister Fantino, drafted by the Minister responsible for Military Relations in support of a federal advocate.

EDDIE ORRELL: How could we support a federal advocate? We just shot down putting a provincial advocate in place? It seems to me we have the opportunity right here in this committee for wanting to get an advocate that we can control and we can have some say in it and now we're going to promote getting a federal advocate instead of a provincial advocate.

THE CHAIR: Any further discussion on that? Mr. Rowe.

ALLAN ROWE: Just briefly, I think we're coming back to what we've been saying all along - this is a federal responsibility and it should be a federal advocate. I fully support that it should be a federal advocate and that this committee, I believe, should support that in going forward. This is a federal responsibility.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Orrell.

EDDIE ORRELL: Yes and I'm not disagreeing that it's a federal responsibility, but we could use a provincial person. It could be a staffer that is already in place that we could promote as an advocate to deal with some of the issues that are here right now with the provincial government, with provincial veterans and be able to have the ability to deal with the federal people. It would be easier for us to take a provincial advocate to start working right away and get that working, than it would be to push for a federal advocate. It doesn't have to be a new position, it doesn't cost the government anything to promote somebody to do a little bit of work with that. Someone who we can go to, someone the veterans can go to and someone we can go through that way, that's my two cents worth.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Gosse.

GORDON GOSSE: My concern is I know personally I sent them a letter in November, long before the office closed and we sent the letter from the Minister responsible for Military Relations here in Nova Scotia and I imagine they sent lots of letters. He hasn't responded to anything that we've sent to him yet. I don't know if he'll respond to this letter or if he'll ever, I mean, you know, he just hasn't responded to us. We heard the presentation today about the downloading of services so we know what the federal government is up to. Maybe what we could have done, if we had supported my motion - we could have just billed the federal government for that.

THE CHAIR: Any further discussion? Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: I think what we heard today was clear that this committee should do everything it can to be advocates, so I think the motion is entirely within that context of us being proactive on this.

I would also suggest, just so I don't go to the microphone again after this motion, is that staff from Intergovernmental Affairs has shone light on that there are certainly at least three organizations that we could perhaps invite to this committee to again use our role as advocates by inviting the federal Ombudsman here, the Veterans Advisory Committee and also the not-for-profit organizations. I would like to suggest that that be part of our agenda-setting into the future. I don't think there is any harm in supporting the motion put forward by my colleague. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Wilson.

DAVID WILSON: I've been around the Legislature for over a decade so I know what kind of a game we're playing. We're taking our motion off because you didn't support it fully, you're going to put another motion on. Listen, we support a letter going to Minister Fantino, I think everybody supports that, encourages that. But what we were saying and what we suggested is we've seen the practice of the current government with the *MV Miner*, for example, saying that we'll just bill the federal government. I don't think the letter is going to do much, as my colleague said, the federal minister hasn't responded to his correspondence, hasn't responded to the Premier's correspondence. I don't think it will do any good.

I think truly a good step would have been to create this position, as my colleague, the member for Northside-Westmount - over the decade they shouldn't have changed any names or I'd remember them all - our witnesses just indicated that they were moving staff around and I would hope that maybe at this time, especially over the next few months, that they'd find the opportunity to have somebody advocating on behalf of veterans. I just think we could go on next week or the next meeting and have another letter sent off, I think truly, if the government wanted to send a strong message to the federal government, that they would put someone in place and they would send them a bill just like they're going to do for the *MV Miner* cleanup. Thank you.

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

The motion is carried.

Thank you, Mr. Jessome. Mr. Orrell.

EDDIE ORRELL: If I may, since we're on the topic of veterans, education and promotion of veterans affairs, I would like to put forth a motion that this committee write a letter to ask the House of Assembly Management Commission to consider a break in the regular Legislature sitting to allow MLAs time to travel to their local constituencies to attend Remembrance Day services that usually happen at schools and service clubs before the actual Remembrance Day ceremonies take place.

This year Remembrance Day takes place on a Tuesday, which would allow us in the outlying areas to attend our school ceremonies and/or our service club ceremonies that may happen on Monday and/or if it was a Wednesday, the Monday or Tuesday, usually they happen before that. I would like to put that motion forward that we send a letter off to the Management Commission to see if we can make that happen.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion? Mr. Rowe.

ALLAN ROWE: Just for clarification, you're asking for a letter to be sent to all three House Leaders basically saying that we consider the opportunity for MLAs to be able to return because of the dates that Remembrance Day falls on. Ok, thank you.

EDDIE ORRELL: A few days before when some of the services that take place within our communities, I mean myself, I'm four hours away. Last year when we were having an election or just after the election when we weren't sitting at that time, we were able to attend junior high school and high school Remembrance Day services, which was very good for them and very good for us to see what they're doing in trying to promote veterans offices.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Jessome.

BEN JESSOME: I'll second that motion.

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

The motion is carried.

Okay, so that's it for that. Mr. Jessome.



BEN JESSOME: Just a point of clarification, through the chairman, who's going to draft the letter, the chairman of the committee? Okay perfect.

THE CHAIR: This committee generally doesn't sit while the House is sitting and we're going to look at our next date. Should we move on to see when the House is finished sitting and then find out when our next meeting is going to be? Mr. Irving.

KEITH IRVING: Madam Chairman, yes, I think we should leave it in your hands to determine when we should meet after the House concludes. I would suggest that it's probably going to need an agenda-setting meeting, as I suggested three options for witnesses going forward.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Langille.

KIM LANGILLE: Just so that you're aware, you did approve a number of witnesses back on February 13<sup>th</sup>, so I would be proceeding to schedule those for after the House is out of session. We can also have an agenda-setting at some point as well, yes.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Any other business?

If not, we will conclude. I adjourn this meeting.

[The committed adjourned at 3:26 p.m.]