

# **HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**VETERANS AFFAIRS**

**Tuesday, February 20, 2018**

**Legislative Committees Office**

**Boots on the Ground Campaign &  
Guitars for Vets**

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## **VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

Mr. Bill Horne (Chairman)  
Mr. Ben Jessome (Vice-Chairman)  
Mr. Chuck Porter  
Mr. Hugh MacKay  
Ms. Rafah DiCostanzo  
Hon. Alfie MacLeod  
Mr. Tim Halman  
Hon. David Wilson  
Ms. Tammy Martin

[Mr. Tim Halman was replaced by Ms. Barbara Adams.]

### In Attendance:

Mrs. Darlene Henry  
Legislative Committee Clerk

Mr. Gordon Hebb  
Chief Legislative Counsel

### WITNESSES

#### Veterans Emergency Transition Services Canada

Mr. Jim Lowther CD -  
President & CEO

Ms. Debbie Lowther,  
Co-Founder



House of Assembly  
*Nova Scotia*

**HALIFAX, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2018**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS**

2:00 P.M.

CHAIRMAN  
Mr. Bill Horne

MR. CHAIRMAN: I'd like to call our meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

I'd like to introduce a new member to the committee, Mr. Tim Halman, who isn't here today. He is the MLA for Dartmouth East and is now a regular member of our committee. Ms. Barbara Adams is now replacing Tim today, thank you.

Before we go more into our meeting I'd like to just discuss a couple of motions. (Interruption) Okay, first we'll do the introductions, I guess, starting with Mr. Porter.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: We are receiving a presentation today by Veterans Emergency Transition Services of Canada - Mr. Jim Lowther, President and CEO; and Ms. Debbie Lowther, co-founder.

Before we start the presentation, I would remind people to make sure their phones are on silent or turned off, and members and witnesses to please wait to speak until after the Chair has recognized them.

Mr. Porter.

MR. CHUCK PORTER: I just want to address an issue, bring it back around from last month, whereby Mr. David Wilson put a motion on the floor and we had graciously asked to be able to take that back and to bring it back today for discussion and vote, if we could.

I would like to move an amendment to that motion, if I could. I move that this committee write a letter to the provincial Minister of Health and Wellness and the federal Minister of Veterans Affairs Canada to express support for enhancing medical services for veterans, as proposed by Sergeant Roland Lawless. The letter should request that the respective departments continue to work with Mr. Lawless to partner on a plan of action.

I would move that as an amendment to Mr. Wilson's motion.

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

The motion is carried.

Mr. Wilson.

HON. DAVID WILSON: Thank you for that amendment. I think the clerk can write into the motion what we had last month, and now I take it that we're going to vote on that motion. Is that appropriate, I think, because it was an amendment to the motion, right?

I think it was a bit more specific. The last motion was that the Nova Scotia Veterans Affairs Committee write to both the federal and provincial ministers responsible for Veterans Affairs and health care to support the proposal of a pilot project brought forth by Veterans' Memorial Medical Centre Society. So if we just add in what Mr. Porter brought in, I guess I move that motion as amended. Now vote on it?

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

The motion is carried.

Okay, the presentation. Welcome to the witnesses and we'd like you to introduce yourselves.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Lowther.

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, and committee members. It is our pleasure to appear before you once again. Thank you for the invitation.

As we already mentioned, we are Debbie and Jim Lowther, the founders of Veterans Emergency Transition Services (VETS) Canada. To provide you with some background on VETS Canada, we were founded here in Halifax in 2010. Our aim is to provide immediate, on-the-ground assistance to veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces and the RCMP who are in crisis, at risk of becoming homeless or who are already homeless.

What began as a grassroots initiative here in Halifax quickly expanded across the country and in 2012, we received charitable status from Revenue Canada. In 2014, we were awarded a contract with Veterans Affairs Canada, making us their service providers in the field of homeless and in-crisis veterans outreach.

We're a volunteer-driven organization with only four paid staff to manage the entire country. One of those staff is dedicated to our Guitars for Vets program, which Jim will speak about in a minute. We have an extensive pool of hundreds of volunteers across the country who provide hands-on support. The majority of our volunteers are either veterans themselves, still-serving members or family members, which lends to a great environment of peer support, which we've learned is a key component to successfully help the veteran transition from their current state of crisis to a more stable life.

Our work involves both a proactive and reactive approach. Proactively, our volunteers conduct what we call Boots on the Ground walks where they patrol the streets and visit the shelters in search of veterans who may be in need of support. Reactively, we respond to referrals from outside sources such as Veterans Affairs case managers, shelter staff, family members and self-referrals from veterans themselves.

We believe that what sets us apart from other organizations and what contributes to our success can be summed up in four categories: the peer support component, as I mentioned; our proactive approach; our non-judgmental approach; and the immediacy with which we can assist. We have the ability to immediately assist a veteran because we don't have strict criteria that they must meet in order to receive assistance. We simply ask one question: did you wear the uniform? We do have the ability to verify service very quickly through a contact within Canadian Forces. We don't judge the veteran or their situation. We simply help them.

We'd like to share with you what we are seeing across the country and, more specifically, here in Nova Scotia. Since being awarded our contract in 2014, we have responded to over 3,000 requests for assistance. Our numbers have more than doubled each year, and in 2017 we received 1,956 requests for assistance; 304, or 16 per cent, of those requests came from here in Nova Scotia.

We have learned that there are many reasons that lead a veteran to need our assistance. This past year, our organization conducted an informal research project where we asked a number of the veterans that we had assisted a series of questions. One of those

questions was what they felt the reasons were that contributed to their situation that led them to need our assistance.

We learned that the top three reasons could be broken down into financial instability, health concerns - both physical and mental health - and a lack of social support. What surprised us the most was that overwhelmingly, more people identified a lack of social support as their biggest obstacle. One veteran made a comment that resonated with me. He stated that when he was serving he felt that he was a member of a family, and when he took off his uniform he became an orphan.

Our volunteers provide peer support throughout the process of getting the veteran back on their feet and then we try to address the lack of social support by encouraging the veteran to engage in something that interests them. Perhaps they might join a regimental association to reconnect with some of their fellow veterans or perhaps they can take up a hobby that forces them out of the house to overcome self-isolation.

Many veterans have had great success with our Guitars for Vets program, which Jim will now speak about.

MR. JIM LOWTHER: Thank you for having us. The Guitars for Vets program was something that we came up with because of necessity. I'm a veteran myself; I served for 15 years in multiple tours. I suffer from PTSD. Playing the guitar actually helped me kind of work through my dark times. That led to me actually just going out myself to volunteer in the community when I ran into a homeless veteran, which started VETS Canada.

What we are seeing across the country the more we do this is a lot of the veterans that we assist suffer from PTSD as well. It was a problem. We got them help. We got them help through Veterans Affairs and we kind of moved on to the next veteran.

I wanted to circle back around. What happened was a chain of events where we had a lot of back-to-back soldier and veteran suicides. It was 2014, I think. It really bothered me. I thought, okay, what helped me? My guitar helped me.

So I figured, okay, if we can give a guitar to these soldiers - I want to add still-serving members too because it's a major problem in the Canadian Armed Forces. I asked, how can we get these guitars to soldiers and veterans? We didn't have the money to buy guitars. We just didn't because all of our resources were going to homeless and in-crisis veterans.

I figured, everybody has a guitar under their bed or in their closet in the case, brand new, that they have never used - that they got for Christmas or gave their kids. It's a true story. I had one too. So what if we got those guitars in the hands of soldiers and veterans? What if ordinary Canadians donated their slightly, gently-used guitar?

We put this idea together, and we came up with Guitars for Vets Canada. The idea was to give a guitar to a soldier or a veteran with some online lessons. We had some online lessons too. But we decided to take it a step further because we're a volunteer-led organization - Debbie and I are volunteers ourselves - and we're good at volunteers. What if we had volunteer guitar instructors who could give 10 lessons? That's what we started to do.

We started Guitars for Vets, and I figured it would be popular. We have volunteers right across the country so what we would do if someone had a guitar in B.C. is just get one of our volunteers to pick it up and hang on to it until we had someone in B.C. who wanted to use it. Well, we were very successful - too successful. We had 40 guitars that we had to pick up across the country, and I didn't know what to do. Yeah, we were too successful. There was a lot of suffering out there.

Long and McQuade here has been very good to us. They have helped us with strings, setting up the guitars for us, and things like that. I was back and forth in an email to them and telling them, I don't know what to do here, we have a problem - we have all these guitars that people want to drop off brand new. It went back and forth. There's a little email that came in there in the chain that said, Jim, don't worry about dropping off guitars; you can use every Long and McQuade in the country as a drop-off point. That fixed that problem.

To date, we have been able to get nearly 1,000 guitars in the hands of soldiers and veterans who are suffering with mental health and PTSD. We get so many letters from veterans and soldiers who say, this guitar saved my life, I was ready to pack it in until I went to the mail and opened this guitar and started playing it.

We have assisted thousands of veterans who are in crisis through VETS Canada. The most amount of thank-you cards and letters we get are from people who are doing the Guitars for Vets program. Last year, we put on a big concert with Sean McCann in Ottawa - Sean McCann, Jeremy Fisher, Joel Plaskett, and Sarah Harmer. We raised enough money to purchase another 500 guitars. Yes, we're going strong.

The thing that's amazing about this is that it didn't cost anything. People are always looking at ways they can get involved in their community. We came up with a way that we got 1,000 guitars, and probably another 400 to buy; that cost nothing. There are ways to help.

So yes, we're looking forward to this year potentially doing another concert in Ottawa to support this cause. It's a bright future. Thank you everyone.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Wilson.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Thank you for coming to the committee. I think it's important for the committee members to realize some of the work the groups do out there. I think some of us were familiar with the work you do and just the sheer number. I wasn't aware of some of the numbers so it's impressive that over 3,000 requests for assistance, about 16 per cent in Nova Scotia, which is astonishing.

[2:15 p.m.]

I think you hit it right on with PTSD and the isolation that comes with that is so important. I know even just the enticement of maybe learning how to play the guitar, I think it can break that cycle that those people are in.

My first question is, when is there a concert in Halifax?

MR. JIM LOWTHER: We would absolutely love to do something like that and getting provincial support would be wonderful. Yes, it's something that we're looking at potentially doing down the road as well. The success of our Ottawa show was pretty eye-opening so it's definitely something we want to do.

MR. DAVID WILSON: I just kind of put your feet to the fire . . .

MR. JIM LOWTHER: You can organize it for us.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Definitely we can promote it and get people. I think there would be a lot of interest in Nova Scotia, definitely.

What's your biggest hurdle right now in providing care or support? Is it the financial component of it, or is it identifying the veterans? I know I see many programs and a lot of coverage about your organization and the Boots on the Ground and just getting out and trying to identify because often that's the key, identifying those veterans who are isolated, who are not calling out for help. I think that's where your organization comes into play.

What is your biggest hurdle to achieve what you want to achieve in the next coming year or two?

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: I would say that one of the biggest hurdles for us across the country is lack of affordable housing. We don't have a problem locating veterans. It seems that in the past couple of months our numbers have been well over 200 a month, veterans that either we have located or are coming forward to us. The challenge is finding affordable housing. It's challenging here in Nova Scotia but in other parts of the country, Vancouver and Toronto, it's near impossible, especially when we're looking at a veteran who doesn't qualify for benefits from Veterans Affairs and they are relying on provincial social service systems.

Just to give you an example - in B.C., with social services, the amount somebody would receive is \$607 a month. The average rent in Vancouver is \$1,500 and their vacancy rate as of November was 0.04 per cent. That's a big challenge.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Adams.

MS. BARBARA ADAMS: I'm amazed that you are able to do all of this with just four staff so kudos to you. I know you are probably familiar with them, but I'm wondering if you do any work together with the Society of Atlantic Heroes.

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: We do, actually. When they first formed, we were part of their organization and then we just got too busy doing what we were doing to be able to really do any justice by dedicating our time to them.

We actually have a veteran coming into town in the coming weeks who will be utilizing the apartment that they have here. We have a veteran coming in for medical treatment who will be accessing their apartment.

We are an organization that understands that it takes a village. It's not just one organization that can solve a veteran's problem so any like-minded organization, we want to work with them.

MS. ADAMS: I know they are going to be opening an office in March; I think it is in Burnside, I'm not 100 per cent sure of the details. Do you have an office location yet?

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: We do, actually. Our office is in Dartmouth as well - actually coincidentally in the same building as Tim Halman's. So yes, we do have one office across the country.

MS. ADAMS: Okay, thanks.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Porter.

MR. PORTER: Thanks for being here today and giving us your presentation. It's very interesting what you are doing. As someone who plays a little guitar - and the old guy across the table there, his is probably under his bed, he is probably the example.

MR. DAVID WILSON: No, I practised last night.

MR. PORTER: Oh, there you go. (Laughter)

What an interesting concept to develop. I have a brother-in-law who has just retired after 27 years who suffered terribly with PTSD, who has done numerous tours around the world. I don't need to explain any of that to you, but to have something to do. He is not a

guitar player, but I'm going to talk to him and he may become one. It may be an outlet, because as you say, there are a variety of different outlets that need to be offered, and that's a great thing.

Today's point about Halifax - we're a big city here on the east coast. We're also a big military province with Halifax, Dartmouth, Greenwood, et cetera around the province, so it would make a lot of sense as well if that's something we put together.

I don't know that I've ever seen it on Facebook or social media and websites. Is there some way that we can help you promote what you're doing or do you want any more promotion of what you're doing?

MR. JIM LOWTHER: We have about 180,000 followers on social media. It's Guitars for Vets Canada and VETS Canada, so we're pretty active on social media. If you can look that up, you'll definitely find it.

MR. PORTER: I'll definitely look it up. So the guitars that are coming in, you're purchasing now with money that you've raised, but I assume you're still looking for the donations that are up at Long and McQuade and so on?

MR. JIM LOWTHER: Yes, we're still getting a lot of donations. We can purchase some guitars because of our concert, if there's none in that area. It works out really well.

MR. PORTER: Is Long and McQuade shipping them?

MR. JIM LOWTHER: Sometimes they'll ship them from store to store for us if we buy them, because they'll ship them if we buy them. They've been more than kind to us.

MR. PORTER: Is there a value in dollar that you're looking at? You can buy a \$200 guitar or \$2,000 or \$6,000 guitar. What is your average?

MR. JIM LOWTHER: We would like to have the \$6,000 guitar and then we would take that \$6,000 guitar and we would auction it off to buy a whole bunch of \$150 guitars, because that's all you need. I mean, let's be fair. You need just a starter guitar - something that has to be able to stay in tune. So that's what we would do with a \$6,000 guitar.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. DiCostanzo.

MS. RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I see that you have a 24-hour toll free number. Can you tell me more about that number - who is minding it, what kind of services you can offer through that number, and how we can promote it for you as well?

MR. JIM LOWTHER: Yes, we do have a 1-800 number, and that is truly 24/7. We have a director of operations, Julie Bibby, who will take calls any time the phone rings.

Our field operations managers across the country - we have field operations managers in almost all cities in every province where there are direct contacts. Wherever there is a veteran that the call comes in - it could be B.C., it could be Newfoundland - the call will come in and it will go to Julie. Julie will then contact the field operations manager and they'll get their volunteers underneath them out to assist the veteran.

It is definitely true 24/7. We're like a rapid response team.

MS. DICOSTANZO: What are your numbers, if you could give me some numbers of how many calls that you receive?

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: I'm glad you asked that question because Julie just gave me her numbers the other day for the month of January. She took almost 600 calls through her line. Not every one of those was a veteran in crisis, but through our phone system we are able to track how many calls are coming in. She took almost 600 calls to her line in the month of January.

MR. JIM LOWTHER: Last year wasn't it almost more than the veterans Ombudsman? We took almost more calls than he did, which is interesting.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Jessome.

MR. BEN JESSOME: You answered one of my first questions coming in here. My girlfriend and I were kind of talking about why veterans become homeless, typically, or as generally as you can get data on.

I apologize as I can't remember - I've been on this committee for four years now so I'm not entirely sure whether the information that I'm thinking of is coming through a previous presentation from yourselves or another group. I seem to remember some commentary on trouble tracking veterans interprovincially, as a way to kind of collect data and find out - use data to best serve veterans. If I'm shopping at the wrong store at this point in time - can you provide any commentary on your ability to track veterans who may migrate from or to another province?

MR. JIM LOWTHER: Yes, we absolutely can. What we do, all the veterans we assist we have all the stats on them because at the end of the month we have to give those stats to Veterans Affairs, so we actually do keep stats on every province, every city, where they are.

It's funny that you say that because we've had veterans where we've tracked them right across the country, literally. They might have started in Newfoundland and Labrador and then we get a call that there's a veteran in New Brunswick and we'll get our team to assist them in New Brunswick, and then they'll be back out to Winnipeg and then back

down to Nova Scotia. Our teams will track and assist these veterans right across the country.

As to how veterans become homeless, I mean there's a lot to serving in the military. We've had 12 years of peacekeeping, which I was part of - there was not much peacekeeping, there was a lot of war - and we had 12 years of war. There's a lot of damage done physically and mentally for soldiers and the New Veterans Charter did not help at all because a lot of guys and gals got a chunk of cash and basically that was it, and as soon as they were injured they lost their jobs. That definitely doesn't help.

We had the Bosnia conflicts, going back to Korea. The age bracket for us is 18 to 94 so we see all aspects.

MR. JESSOME: Thank you for that response and additionally your comments around the rationale for veterans to end up without a place to go. You indicated as a third rationale for that to take place being social support. I kind of think of it generally, but I'm just wondering if you are able to provide some type of distinct definition of what social support is. I'm thinking kind of generally and maybe you can help me narrow it down, please.

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: As Jim mentioned, some members get out of the military gravely injured and dealing with mental health issues, occupational stress injuries, marital breakdown. Mental health issues lead to family falling apart, so that's one social support network. The biggest one is when they leave the military, they lose that family - their military family - and then often they lose their actual, biological family. Then they end up in situations that we see quite frequently - the situations they end up in causes them to be more isolated because they are not happy about the situation they are in. They feel a lot of shame, so they don't want people they have served with to see them in that situation.

There's kind of a two-part thing. They lose their social support network from the military but then they also kind of withdraw from it a little bit themselves, because of the situation they are in.

MR. JESSOME: Okay, thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. MacKay.

MR. HUGH MACKAY: I'm a bagpiper. Maybe we'll just leave that on the table, unlike some of my guitar-picking colleagues here.

I'm going to come back to my colleague Mr. Jessome's comments here on the social side of that. Certainly I think many people recognize the value of music for social support, individually when perhaps a person is in a dark place and then how it can provide comfort

at that time and then draw them into a broader support network, both with other veterans but perhaps larger in the community as well.

[2:30 p.m.]

What I'm hearing about here is an organization that has done very well with volunteers. I commend you for that. I'm a great supporter of organizations that stand on their own two feet without always needing government handouts and that depend on volunteers, that work successfully with volunteers. I'm wondering, how do you recruit your volunteers, and what could we as MLAs do to help you in building your volunteer network?

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: We recruit our volunteers in a number of different ways, mostly by word of mouth, and as I mentioned earlier, the Boots on the Ground Walks that we do. We try to do three or four events a year surrounding Boots on the Ground Walks. Our teams do those quite regularly, but a couple of times a year, we do them as kind of public events.

In June of the last two years, we did what we called our Tour of Duty. We did basically a Boots on the Ground Walk like we always do, only we coordinated it so that every team across the country is doing it on the same day. We invite MLAs, we invite Members of Parliament, and we invite mayors and the general public to come out. When we do those events, we get a lot of media attention. The reason behind that is certainly not to exploit the veterans or the homeless population, but it's to keep the conversation going and to encourage people to do two things - to get out and volunteer and hopefully to donate. That's one way we try to keep public awareness going.

The other way is that we do presentations in different locations across the country. If we know that we are in need of volunteers in a certain location, we will go and do a presentation maybe at the MFRC in that location. We also take advantage of Reserve units because there are veterans not just in the major urban centres across the country, some are in more remote locations, which is where the Reserve units are. To give you an example of that - a couple of years ago we received a call that there were 13 homeless veterans in Thunder Bay, and we had one volunteer there. I made a couple of calls to the Reserve unit, and within a week, we had 15 volunteers. We actually had more volunteers than veterans. Tapping into those reserve units is a great resource.

The big thing is word of mouth, making the public aware that this is a great volunteer opportunity. People who are serving in the military, it's a good volunteer opportunity for them because they can follow the organization as they get posted across the country. We have volunteers who get posted from city to city, and they maintain their volunteerism with us.

As far as the guitar instructors though, again, that's word of mouth. Sometimes we will have to advertise. We'll put an ad out on Kijiji if we're looking for guitar instructors in certain areas.

MR. MACKAY: I'm glad to hear of your use of the Reserve units. I served with the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa, as a bagpiper primarily. Don't hold that against me.

MR. JIM LOWTHER: That's a good thing.

MR. MACKAY: Yes, I think so.

My follow-up question is, do you accept both acoustic and electric guitars or only acoustic guitars?

MR. JIM LOWTHER: We try to keep it to acoustic guitars because when you get into electric guitars, you have to get amps. There are things you have to get with that. So that's an added expense. It's best to learn how to play guitar on an acoustic guitar.

When it comes to your last question on funding, we're always looking for funding. It's great to have hundreds and hundreds of volunteers across the country, but being as busy as we are, bringing in 200-plus a month, we desperately use up the funds that we get and what we get from the government. I thought I would just touch on that.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. MacLeod.

HON. ALFIE MACLEOD: Thank you both for being here again. I appreciate that. I want to thank you, Jim, for the service that you have given to the Armed Forces. It's people who give that service who make it possible for us to do our jobs, so I'm very much in awe of someone who does service for their country. I thank you for that.

Hearing the numbers you mentioned and the stuff that you need to do and have accomplished, you mentioned earlier that in 2014 you got a contract with Veterans Affairs Canada. I'm curious as to the details of the contract, like what is it that they expect from you, how much it is, and is there a duration to it? If in two years' time it's up and you've started all these programs and you are left in the air - I'm curious as to the foundation of your funding and what is expected of you for that funding. That will probably lead me into some more questions.

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: When we were initially awarded our contract in 2014, it was valued at \$300,000 a year for three years. About two-thirds of the way through that contract we discovered we had undersold ourselves and that it was not enough money to do what we needed to do.

A portion of that funding was allocated and that was something that Veterans Affairs said to us in the beginning - you need to have an office, you need to have staff, so part of that money was allocated for the staff. At that time, we had two staff so it did cover the overhead.

As I said, about two-thirds of the way through that contract, we went back to them and we said, this is not enough money. One of the things we did notice when we were awarded that contract was the donations kind of dropped off because the general public thought we just won the lottery with the government.

So they did change our contract; they gave us more money. At that point it was almost double. They changed the reporting method. Initially we got \$25,000 a month and that was it. No matter what we did, no matter how many veterans we assisted, it was \$25,000 a month. Then partway through they changed it to kind of a reimbursement model, so we were allowed up to a certain amount each month for overhead, up to a certain amount each month for veterans' assistance and the value on the contract then became \$600,000.

When that contract was about to expire at the end of May 2017, just a couple of months before, they awarded us an extension until November 2017. Then in November then gave us another extension, so we are extended until the end of March of this year. We are at February 20<sup>th</sup> right now and we have no idea what is happening.

MR. MACLEOD: So the challenge that you folks have right now is that come March, you don't know if you are going to be able to continue on with the program yet.

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: Exactly.

MR. MACLEOD: When you were here before, one of the things we talked about as a group was seeing if we could help assist with office space. I know some letters went back and forth but I don't know if that ever materialized and I'm guessing that it didn't, if I can remember some of the responses to the letters. So you are now at a stage where come the end of March, you've got a huge number of people who are relying on you, 600 people a month calling in to your crisis line, guitars all over the place and no idea if your funding is going to be continued or at what rate it is going to be continued.

During that time since you last appeared here until now, has the provincial government provided any resources to help make your job easier for our vets?

MR. JIM LOWTHER: That's something that we are going to try to bring up. That's one of the problems that we see across the country - provinces are not getting involved helping veterans. They say that it's a federal problem and they will literally pass the buck.

We have a veteran who is in crisis - we've assisted, say, a number of 900 veterans in your province and we need the government, all aspects of government, to work together.

There should be something provincially, funding-wise, to help veterans, help veterans who are in crisis, who are homeless.

We would like to have a meeting with the Premiers across the country - the Premiers' Challenge, we'll call it - to get them to engage in this problem with homeless and in-crisis veterans. We believe we can end homelessness for veterans but like Debbie said earlier - municipal, provincial, and federal - we all have to work together to do this. It's an interesting time right now where we're kind of waiting to see if the government is going to renew our contract. We would definitely like a chance to sit down with the Premier to discuss maybe somehow getting some funds from the province, for sure.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Adams.

MS. ADAMS: I'm just going to go back because I know you were talking about the homelessness as an issue, but health is also an issue and of course when you're in the military you get your health care covered - you have access to the specialists and the doctors. Then once you get out, you're at the mercy of whatever health care system you are up against in the province.

I'm wondering whether the health issues change for the group that you're focused on - whether they've changed because they now have less access to health care services that they had when they were in the military. We always talk about treating PTSD, but I'm wondering from your experience personally and with the group, if they have recommendations to how we can reduce the incidents and what the military can be doing differently so that there's not such a high incidence in the military.

MR. JIM LOWTHER: I can answer that question. We could drastically reduce PTSD if we didn't go to war. PTSD is going to be one of those things where if you're a soldier, if you put on the uniform, if your country is in conflicts, it's going to affect you - not everyone, but a lot of people.

The problem we have with health care is trying to find doctors throughout the country. It's difficult to find doctors.

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: I will say that there has been a lot of talk lately. The DND Ombudsman has been mentioning it for years, the Veterans Affairs Ombudsman has been mentioning it for years, I've mentioned it myself many times. Men and women in uniform should not be released from the Canadian Armed Forces until everything is in place, and something as simple as having a family doctor before their release would be huge.

We've seen people who release from the military and they have maybe a three-month supply of their prescriptions and most of those prescriptions are narcotics that cannot be prescribed from a walk-in clinic. Three months is up and they still don't have a family

doctor, so they either turn to street drugs or they don't fill their prescriptions at all, and everything just becomes a snowball then.

MS. ADAMS: I appreciate what you're saying about the stress of going to war. I realize that those decisions are made on a much higher level. I'm wondering if there is anything that the military or the provinces can be putting in place to help mitigate the impact of going to war that they're not already doing now.

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: With regard to that, there has been a little bit of improvement. I can say that when Jim came home from Bosnia, basically they were told that the media is going to be there when you get off the plane and don't say a word. There was no encouragement of opening up and talking about things. Now I know that at the end of a deployment they have what they call the third location deployment, so they send the guys and girls off to another location to kind of decompress. I think that's been a little bit of an improvement, but I think that there could be a little bit more done with regard to that.

I know that when people are deployed and you're dealing with war it's not really an appropriate time to be talking about what's happening, but I think that having the opportunity to debrief and decompress as soon as possible after a traumatic event would be helpful.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Wilson.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Just three quick things. Just prior to your presentation you heard that we had a motion here. We had a presenter at the last meeting trying to advocate for a medical centre geared towards veterans, and specifically PTSD and mental health. I would assume that you support this initiative that the Veterans' Memorial Medical Centre Society - their new name - has been pushing for. Am I correct in assuming that?

MR. JIM LOWTHER: We have actually been pushing for that with Veterans Affairs for years. Yes, so we helped them get established.

MR. DAVID WILSON: The other two talk about funding. The first one is, have you reached out yet to the Premier to request a meeting and sit down? If not, I encourage you to do that. As a committee or even just as individual members of the committee, we can make sure that the Premier knows that that's important.

He's the Minister responsible for Military Relations - I think that's what we have in Nova Scotia. I think we're the only province that actually has that, recognizing the deep military service that we have here. Have you written to him? If not, will you write to him so that we can encourage him? Then I have just one quick follow-up after that.

[2:45 p.m.]

MR. JIM LOWTHER: No, we haven't yet, but we will, probably this week. We would definitely love letters from everyone to the Premier telling him how great an idea this would be to help veterans who are in crisis and homeless.

MR. DAVID WILSON: The other thing is - members of the committee, I know I moved a motion last week, so I'm going to trial this. One thing that this committee has done well over the last 15 years - I have been on the committee maybe 10 of those 15 - is advocating for organizations. I'm wondering if there might be an appetite from the committee members to write to the federal minister to say that this organization really needs a response of what their funding looks like in the upcoming years. Is that something I could maybe do at the end without any kind of controversy?

MR. CHAIRMAN: I think that's agreeable.

MR. DAVID WILSON: We'll try to do that. As a committee, we work in a non-partisan way 99.9 per cent of the time. I don't think there are too many times when we're divided at the table. We just want to help organizations that support our veterans here in Nova Scotia, so whatever we can do.

I think hopefully we can help you achieve even just getting an answer or a response. I know it's budgetary, but I think the budget is on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February. They may even have a decision before they get a letter from the committee, but at least they know that in Nova Scotia we have a committee - even if it's on a provincial level - that supports Veterans Affairs initiatives and supports organizations like yours.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. DiCostanzo.

MS. DICOSTANZO: I'm learning a lot today from this. Also, an idea came to me. I have a new organization doing something similar to Boots on the Ground, a young university kid who started an organization called Greater Love. He started this with a few university friends. He came to me back in August, and I think there were only 10 or 12 students. Now he has 85. What they do is just go down and spend time with homeless people on the streets. He was really affected by the idea of - sorry, I can't remember the name - the gentleman who was burnt at the bus stop. He started this idea that they are human beings.

I'm just wondering how this organization can work with you. Maybe he comes across veterans. How do you work with other organizations, and what can I tell this young man who has 85 people now? They go every Saturday to sit with the homeless. They look forward to meeting them and coming. It's really like a snowball idea within six months.

How can I connect that organization with you guys to find out if there are any veterans that they are talking to?

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: I would certainly love to have the opportunity to meet with them. I think that if they became aware of our services, when they do come across a homeless person who has served - there's some education that goes along with that.

We don't ever use the question, are you a veteran? Jim doesn't consider himself a veteran. The younger generation don't consider themselves veterans. The question that we ask is, have you served in the Canadian Armed Forces or the RCMP?

I would say that if they do come across a person who has served, they could reach out to us then for additional supports. Yes, we would love to have the opportunity to have a sit-down.

MS. DICOSTANZO: I'll take your card and I'll make sure - his name is Mark and he is in third year neuroscience, that's all I remember.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Jessome.

MR. JESSOME: I'm going to go down the line of questioning that Mr. MacLeod was alluding to earlier, talking about the ongoing funding and responsibilities of different jurisdictions, acknowledging that it's important for all levels of government to play some type of role. I'm just wondering what your relationship is kind of with, I'll say the Department of Community Services, as a provincial entity, Housing Nova Scotia, what have you.

The province plays a role generally to the public as a whole but are there point people within those organizations that you can rely on to help you navigate the system and if you want to look at it as plainly as that's one of our responsibilities in I guess not only supporting veterans but - what's your relationship with the provincial government and the different arms that would I guess tap into this issue of homelessness with veterans?

MR. JIM LOWTHER: We have to become experts when it comes to trying to house people. We have relationships with all the provinces, with anyone who is in the housing business because we have to find these veterans homes. We definitely utilize everything we possibly can that's in the community and in the province already.

The problem we find with the province is it doesn't specifically help veterans. They will kick it up to the federal and say it's a federal problem. If they change that view, it would be so much easier to get veterans the help they need. Do you have anything to add when it comes to that?

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: I think it kind of relates to a question that we've been asked before - should veterans be considered a specialized population when it comes to housing? Should they have priority over somebody else?

I know that most of the veterans we've assisted would say no, they feel as though they shouldn't. My opinion is that they served their country and maybe they should be given a position of priority.

The challenge we do face is that dealing with housing organizations or the provinces or municipalities, depending on who deals with housing, there's always such long waiting lists. I know that even in B.C., for example, we are looking at a seven-year waiting list for some people and it's ridiculous.

We do try to access Community Services and housing agencies but it's not always successful because of the waiting lists.

MR. JESSOME: Thank you for that answer. I'm not looking to marry you to this statement but just looking for some feedback. Is it more important for a provincial government to focus solely on the general management of the system or to support an individual organization such as yours? Would you like me to clarify it a little bit?

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: Yes, if you could clarify.

MR. JESSOME: We talk about the jurisdictional responsibility as something that comes up in conversation quite frequently, and again acknowledging that it is important for all levels of government to play some type of role. But if there are some lines to be drawn as to what level of government is responsible for what, do you think it's more important for the provincial government to focus on that service of providing housing or providing funding to a specific organization such as yourself.

MR. JIM LOWTHER: I would think both. The provincial and federal governments can't do it by themselves. Our volunteers were an extension of that, and they provided us funding so we can reach and we can get out there to help the veterans that they just wouldn't be able to do. They work 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., no weekends or holidays, so we're providing a service to the government.

It would be the exact same to the provincial government. We would be providing a service to the provincial government that would take a certain percentage of the population off the streets. To me, it's no different than any other category when it comes to homeless persons' category. I think that it would be fairly easy to do. They could just copy what they're doing federally.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. MacLeod.

MR. MACLEOD: Thank you. I want to go back and talk a little bit about your funding because all the work you're doing could come to a halt in March, from what you're saying. Has there been any indication at all from the federal government if your contract is going to be renewed? Have you had any discussions with them lately? It's the end of February and the end of March isn't that far away. Even I can figure that out.

MR. JIM LOWTHER: Yes, we've met with the Minister of Veterans Affairs many times - probably four or five times, and we've talked to him personally about this. He on two occasions told us not to worry about it. What that means - it's getting down to the wire - I'm starting to worry about it. We mentioned the funding that's coming up and he said basically not to worry about it - once in Ottawa when I was with Lieutenant General Walter Semianiw and once here with you when he was here doing the round tables. So I don't know. We think - sort of.

MR. MACLEOD: A definite maybe.

MR. JIM LOWTHER: Yes, a definite maybe, for sure. When a Minister of Veterans Affairs tells you not to worry about it - I would like to have had an answer, yes or no, because like you said, we have hundreds of veterans who are suffering who we assist. They could be losing homes. The amount of support that we provide is huge.

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: I just wanted to add to that that a lot of the dialogue that we're hearing surrounding funding for veterans who are in crisis in the last couple of months - maybe even since the last budget - the response tends to be that the federal government announced a \$1 million emergency fund that would be available. So it's \$1 million a year for the next four years starting in April this year, I believe. So when the question is asked about veterans who are homeless and in crisis, that seems to be the response - that they go back to that \$1 million emergency fund.

The concerns that we have are that there are already emergency funds in place through the Department of Veterans Affairs. Veterans that we are assisting will access those funds. The problem is, I think the word "emergency" gets lost in translation a little bit because to me an emergency is immediate. With the Department of Veterans Affairs, in receiving those emergency funds, 48 hours is the minimum time that you would see those funds.

So this new emergency fund is something different from those emergency funds, but the question that we have is, who is going to administer that emergency fund - particularly after 4:00 p.m. and on the weekends and over holidays? We've had Veterans Affairs case managers say to us, I wish they would just give you guys that money because we don't want the responsibility of it. There are a lot of unanswered questions around that. So again, it's an unanswered question.

[3:00 p.m.]

The other thing is that this is not a problem that just requires money to be thrown at it. I think that there is also the education piece involved educating other organizations - civilian organizations that are in a position to help the homeless population or people who are in crisis, that don't have the education to be able to deal with somebody who served in the military. I think that that's an important component as well. It's not just a problem that should have money thrown at it.

MR. JIM LOWTHER: Debbie's right. Veterans Affairs case managers have large, large loads of clients. They have 40-plus clients. What we're able to do that they really appreciate is - when they have a veteran who's in crisis or homeless, and they have to spend time on it, they don't have the time to spend. It's time. Our volunteers, a lot of them are retired. They can spend the time on the file for the case manager. That has nothing to do with extra money.

The problem never was the emergency funds because they always had emergency funds. Adding more to it is great. But what we provide is the time to actually help the veteran work through their problems.

MR. MACLEOD: I'm curious because we've been hearing the discussion about whose responsibility it is - kicking it upstairs and downstairs and all around the ground. At the end of the day, we're talking about Canadians who need help from the Canadian Government. To my simple mind, we're supposed to be helping the ones who can't help themselves. It doesn't really matter what level they fall into.

When it comes to your volunteer base, I'm curious if you have any kind of association with doctors. Is there any group of doctors who are helping you out - mental health professionals in particular? When we talked to Rollie Lawless about the clinic they're hoping for, it was their belief - and I believe they're right - that a vet can talk to a vet more easily about some of the challenges that they're having, but they still need to have that medical professional there to help out.

I'm just wondering if you have any medical professionals at least in Nova Scotia who are helping with some of the challenges that you fellows have identified and are dealing with. At the end of the day, it has just got to be hard. It has to be hard.

MR. JIM LOWTHER: We absolutely do. Within our organization, we have volunteers who are doctors, nurses, and lawyers. We have so many different levels of expertise. Here in Nova Scotia is Dr. Heather MacKinnon. We have been around the same people for a long time - Dr. John Whelan.

We have to find doctors and psychologists and psychiatrists for these veterans who need the help. We go until we find them. In every location, we have our kind of go-to

doctor. If he's full, then he'll try to find someone else. It's hard across the country, it is, with the lack of doctors. We can find them. We're pretty good at finding them. And housing - we're pretty good at finding housing, too, when no one else can. It's because we don't give up. We can't. We can't give up.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Porter.

MR. PORTER: My question is around housing, actually. I was thinking about it as we're talking about a variety of things. I don't know what it's like on bases, as an example. Where I come from in the Valley, there's the old naval base. I don't even know if you're familiar with it or not, but it's in Newport Corner.

Outside of that naval base, where the old towers used to be - all the communications around the world used to take place there. I guess they used to be referred to as PMQs at one point. They were houses where members would live. Most of the time, though, from my experience, the bulk of them are empty.

Is that a place that would ever be considered doable for someone looking for housing? Or would they go back to that feeling of being in the military if they were living there? I don't know what that does, but I'm just thinking about options for housing and what does exist that might exist. Maybe it's not an option, I don't know, but I thought I would ask.

MR. JIM LOWTHER: There are thousands of empty PMQs across the country, thousands. You are right, they absolutely would be great for veterans who are in crisis who are not able to make it on their own.

It comes back to, who is in charge of it? How do we do that? How do we get those allocated for veterans who need them? No one seems to know. You have to go to the federal government again because if it's a base, it's federal. So there's lots of ways to really help end homelessness for veterans, it's just getting everybody in the same room and discussing it.

MR. PORTER: I understand the bureaucratic piece of it but you'd know better than me, there would be some colonel or general or somebody who would be in charge of everything and then it would work its way on down. I wouldn't think it would be that hard but in other things - having been around this place for a while - everything seems hard some days when it comes to trying to get simple answers.

There must be a mechanism though. Maybe that's where we can come in and help, as local members who represent the province. In each of our areas, there are probably respective opportunities like that where we'd pick up the phone and call somebody in Ottawa or our MP or somebody and say, who is the person in charge of base A, B or C, and start working a little closer with you on those kinds of relationships.

I mean the federal government, the Canadian taxpayer - they are paid for, they are probably heated and powered and everything anyway, what a great opportunity to set somebody up, if they are able to live in such a facility.

MR. JIM LOWTHER: Yes, we would definitely like to look into that. It comes back to the point where you know who owns the land. Will the federal government be giving it back to the province, do you know what I mean, when they move out? Do you have anything to add to that, Debbie?

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: To my knowledge, PMQs fall under the Canadian Forces Housing Authority, which is not necessarily a DND entity, it's separate. So that just adds another layer to the mix.

MR. PORTER: Well I not only speak for me but every one of us work through a line, I'll call it, of bureaucracy every single day, trying to find our way somewhere or through something or to resolve an issue. So if we can help you - I don't have business cards - call me, I'm not hard to find. We'd be happy to work on the ones specifically that I'm thinking of and there may be more in your area, I don't know, but on that one a few calls here or there would not hurt, especially where there's somebody looking for a home that we can put them into. By all means, reach out to us.

MR. JIM LOWTHER: Absolutely.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Jessome.

MR. JESSOME: I'll jump back to Ms. DiCostanzo's line of questioning about the 1-800 number here. I just wanted to ask if your organization is familiar with the provincial Mobile Crisis Unit and what your relationship with that has been.

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: Yes, we are familiar with them and we have utilized their services. We've had situations where veterans we know are in crisis and not reaching out, so we've reached out on their behalf and contacted the Mobile Crisis Unit. Definitely a valuable resource, and we certainly have used them.

MR. JIM LOWTHER: If I could add, they actually call us as well - when they come across a veteran they don't know what to do with, they call us. It's a two-way kind of thing, a two-way partnership that works quite well.

A lot of times their only option is to take a veteran to the ER, then they'll call us and we'll go in and sit with the veteran to make sure they get the help they need. It's interesting - they are the emergency service and they'll call us. It's good, we have a great relationship with them.

MR. JESSOME: That's wonderful to hear. I guess to that effect, it kind of sounds like there's kind of like an unwritten relationship that either party knows they can reach out to one another to kind of make it work.

Do you have any examples of policy across the country even, and not exclusively pertaining to the Mobile Crisis Unit - could you cite an example where there is a more formal policy that would kind of outline the protocol for dealing with military personnel or veteran personnel in kind of a similar way? Again, this kind of sounds to me like it's slightly informal. Do you know of any examples of where people have solidified a protocol for handling those types of situations?

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: Nothing that I know of that's formal, but I know that in a lot of cities across the country our teams have reached out to police services and paramedics and those people - mobile crisis units as well - in other parts of the country who are aware of us.

We actually had a situation on Christmas Eve, unfortunately, where a veteran that we were assisting in Edmonton reached out to the volunteer who had been working with him and he had attempted suicide. Our volunteer immediately contacted the police and just luckily that the police officer that was on duty that night was a veteran himself and so they literally jumped into action together. The police officer showed up with his partner and he had his partner stay outside because his partner was not a former military member. Our volunteer who is a veteran and the police officer kind of took control of the situation.

It's definitely a valuable resource and I know of police officers across the country who are veterans who actually will wear their military medals or their ribbons on their uniform because they do find it beneficial when they're out - that they can be easily identified as having served.

MR. JIM LOWTHER: We also have an MOU with the RCMP. When the RCMP come across a veteran who is in crisis, they'll contact us as well because we help RCMP officers as well. We have that, it's pretty formal. It was almost like an interrogation when I went in to do that. It was quite funny.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. DiCostanzo.

MS. DICOSTANZO: As you were speaking, I was thinking about your volunteers. Do you know if any of them - which riding they live in, which areas - and if you can let us know who they are, we would love to acknowledge them? We have these member statements that we do and I'm always looking for people who have done some volunteering and ideas that come up promoting them as well, and if you have any fundraising events. You know that all MLAs, we have money to help you in each riding, depending on where you're doing it to help you advertise it, to get people to come. If you could let us know, we will be more than happy to publicize it for you. Those are two things we can do.

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: Thank you for that. We can definitely get you a list. We have volunteers across the country - across the province here. We do actually have an event coming up on March 3<sup>rd</sup>. As I mentioned earlier, we do Boots on the Ground walks a couple times a year that we make more public.

On March 3<sup>rd</sup>, we'll be doing one called In Her Boots. We started it last year in recognition of International Women's Day and also to recognize the fact that last year we saw an increase in the number of female veterans in crisis that were coming forward. Basically, it's just a regular Boots on the Ground walk, but our female volunteers will be visiting the women's shelters to drop off donated items, so we are asking members of the public if they want to join us for those events.

MS. DICOSTANZO: Yes, if you could send me that information, we would love to do that. Women's status is huge for me.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Adams, you have the floor.

MS. ADAMS: I hope you can send that to all of us because I think that would be awesome.

To continue on with that, I'm wondering about the statistics breakdown in terms of the number of men versus the number of women, the age. I'm assuming you know those because you guys are really well organized. I'm wondering if there's information on your website or if there's a breakdown that you could send to us so that we know that, because I'm also wondering whether it's officers or regular Forces members and I'm wondering whether it's the Army, Navy, or the Air Force.

My son is in the Air Force - that's not why I'm asking but I'm just wondering if there is a difference between which part of the services. You mentioned that it was both mental and physical health issues. I understand the mental health side but I'm wondering what the physical health issues might be, whether it's they can't walk or this and that.

[3:15 p.m.]

The other thing I'm wondering is whether the ones that you are finding, particularly those who are homeless, whether they are the ones who don't have access to a physician, so they are the ones who - if you are seeing a physician on a regular basis, he might have gotten you access to some of the community services.

So I'm just wondering if there's a statistical breakdown you could share with us.

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: We can definitely send you our statistics. We actually are in the process of having them uploaded to our website. We are going to be launching a

new section of our website kind of called By the Numbers where we will be publishing our numbers each month.

I can tell you that, as far as male-female, in 2016, 16 per cent of the veterans we assisted across the country were female. In 2017 that actually went down to 12 per cent. As far as the age category, the most common age category that we see of all veterans is between 50 and 69 - 45 per cent of the veterans we assisted in 2017 were between that age category. We can definitely send out the numbers.

MR. JIM LOWTHER: When it comes to the physical injuries you can look at a guy like me. I have three herniated discs, I have three shoulder surgeries, I have traumatic brain injury. I'm a pretty busted-up soldier and looking at me you wouldn't know that. If I had lost a leg or an arm or was in a wheelchair, then yes, you would absolutely notice that.

You get beat up a bit when you are in the military. So that's the physical side of physical injuries, and plus I have PTSD, so just wrap it all up. Those are kind of the injuries - the soft injuries, the backs, the legs, that type of thing.

MS. ADAMS: Thank you for that. I am a chronic pain specialist so I can appreciate that there are a lot of invisible physical illnesses that you can't see.

I'm going to ask again because I'm really interested in whether it's the officers or the regular forces - whether it's Army, Navy or Air Force - if you have a sense of that.

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: We do, actually. I mentioned earlier that we had done kind of an informal study last year. What we have found is that it's the non-commissioned members, sergeant and below, who tend to be more at risk. Army tends to be the most common element that we see. I think it's because of more combat trades.

MR. JIM LOWTHER: I would agree, so when you look at going to war, when you look at conflicts, the bulk of it is the Army. Having said that, I was on *HMCS Halifax* here after September 11<sup>th</sup> and it was pretty crazy there, when we were with NATO. So you can get it from both sides but it's more so the Army.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. MacLeod.

MR. MACLEOD: I'm just curious, do you have educational packages or something that you distribute to your volunteers for them to be able to do that? I think if you had something like that and would distribute that to the different caucuses I think that would be helpful for us to understand. It would also be good for our CAs to have in case somebody comes into our office in the situation that requires your assistance.

I'm curious, are you involved with the service officers in the Legions and what kind of a connection you have with Nunavut Command here in relation to again your program and if there's any supports that are given through Nunavut to help with what you are doing?

MR. JIM LOWTHER: When it comes to the Legions, we have a MOU with Dominion Command. The individual Legions are fantastic. Provincial Legions, it depends on the province, but the individual Legions have been great across the country.

To answer the other part of your question, to be a volunteer with VETS Canada, there's a lot you have to do. Debbie, you can talk about what has to be done.

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: Our volunteers go through a screening process. They start with a telephone interview that's a half-hour or 45 minutes. That's more or less looking for any kind of red flags. One of the big things for us is that we are a non-judgmental organization. We just put our heads down and do the work. We're not interested in having a volunteer who is judgmental or a volunteer who's interested in utilizing our organization as a platform for their own agenda.

The screening interview is partly for that and partly to see if the veteran has the skills required. Then there are confidentiality agreements and code-of-conduct agreements. Then they go through about an hour-and-a-half orientation with Julie, who is our director of operations. Then she provides monthly kind of training modules to those volunteers.

Because most of our volunteers are veterans or still-serving members themselves, a lot of them have some valuable training. They have mental health first aid or assist or suicide intervention training. We have the valuable training already.

We are actually in the process of kind of formalizing a bit more of a training program. We have somebody coming on board for whom that's going to be their sole responsibility, kind of increasing the capacity of our volunteers by outsourcing training opportunities within the communities.

As far as having something that you can have in your constituencies, we actually do have some brochures - we should have brought them with us. We can definitely make sure that you have those for your offices in case you come across somebody who needs some help.

MR. MACLEOD: That would be great. I would love to have that in our constituency office. I would also suggest to you that it might be worthwhile for your organization to do an information/education session with MPs. The MPs are the same as we are. They get a lot of traffic into their office looking for help. It could be a two-way street. It would be a chance for you to let them know what you do, and it would also be a chance for you to let them know that you need their support when it comes to the funding

levels that are above and beyond. If there's anything we can do to help facilitate those kind of meetings, I would be glad to try.

MR. JIM LOWTHER: We do. We have a great relationship with all the MPs, especially from around here, throughout Nova Scotia. They're actually in our corner. They have been pushing for us to find out about our contract, really hard.

We actually have been, myself personally, in a couple of offices of MPs who have had a veteran come to the office who is not doing well; very, very angry. Our volunteers would have to actually go down to their office, talk to the veteran, find out what the problem was, and help them out. We have done that many times. We have been in a few MPs' offices here.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you so much for being here. I applaud you on what your organization does not just provincially but all across Canada. I don't know how you do it, to be honest. It sounds like it's a very daunting challenge. You two seem to be working very well together, and seem to have a lot of accomplishments. I thank you very much.

I'll ask you if you have anything final to say or present.

MS. DEBBIE LOWTHER: I would just like to say thank you for having us here. As I mentioned earlier, we're always wanting to keep the conversation going and increase the awareness about not just what we do but also the fact that there are veterans out there who are not doing so well. Thank you for giving us that opportunity.

MR. JIM LOWTHER: I would like to say, too, that the reason we do this is because for me and Debbie, these are our family members out there who are suffering. There's a saying in the military: you don't leave anyone in the field. We can't leave them behind. I feel it's a responsibility.

In 2010, when we first started, no one knew about homeless veterans. There was no information on homeless veterans when it came to Canada, so we were the pioneers to push this issue right across the country. We feel that we can put a dent in this, we could end this. It's a passion of ours. It has become our life's work. That's why we do it: because we have to.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you so much. We'll just take a minute here to allow you to excuse yourselves.

Mr. Wilson, do you want to talk about a motion?

MR. DAVID WILSON: Since we're already writing one letter to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, I would like to make a motion that the committee write the Minister of

Veterans Affairs on behalf of VETS Canada, inquiring when they would anticipate approval of their budget.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Thanks.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Porter.

MR. PORTER: Next on the agenda was the meeting schedule and something I did a little differently the other day. I don't know if any of you were part of the committee I was in, but it struck me that throughout the course of the mandate, every Spring and every Fall we go through this process of making a motion to not meet during those times.

I made a motion the other day and I would move it the same today that the Veterans Affairs Committee does not meet during sittings of the House in the Spring and Fall - from now throughout the course of the government's mandate, however many years that might be - so we don't have to repetitively go through this each and every single time when it has been common practice for at least the 12 short years that I've been here. I would so move.

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

The motion is carried.

We have a postponed meeting from March 20<sup>th</sup>, but that's fine, we'll leave that postponed until the House is finished.

Thank you all for the good questions. The committee is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 3:28 p.m.]