

HANSARD

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COMMITTEE

ON

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Tuesday, May 18, 2021

Via Video Conference

Paws Fur Thought: Impacts of COVID-19 and Funding Challenges

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VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

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Hon. Ben Jessome (Vice-Chair)
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[Hon. Gordon Wilson was replaced by Hon. Suzanne Lohnes-Croft.]

[Hon. Ben Jessome was replaced by Hon. Patricia Arab.]

In Attendance:

Heather Hoddinott
Legislative Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESS

Paws Fur Thought

Mike Gingell
Chair



HALIFAX, TUESDAY, MAY 18, 2021

STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

2:00 P.M.

CHAIR
Rafah DiCostanzo

VICE-CHAIR
Bill Horne

THE CHAIR: I call the meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs and I am Rafah DiCostanzo, the MLA for Clayton Park West. Today we will hear from the chair of Paws Fur Thought, Mike Jingell. Jingell? Correct, Mr. Jingell?

MIKE GINGELL: Well, it's Gingell, but as I say, I've heard them all. It's not a problem.

THE CHAIR: Gingell. How do I - I apologize. Gingell.

MIKE GINGELL: Hard G, soft G. Whatever.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Gingell.

Members, witnesses, Committee Clerk, and Legislative Counsel should keep their video on throughout the meeting with their microphone on mute unless I call on them to speak. All other staff should have their audio and video turned off. If you have another device, this is the time to turn off your cellphones - I'm just checking mine at the same time. Please try not to leave your seat unless it's absolutely necessary.

I will now ask the committee members to introduce themselves, starting with Mr. Bill Horne.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: The topic, as I said, is Paws Fur Thought, and the Impact of COVID-19 and Funding Challenges.

I'd like to welcome Mr. Mike Gingell. If you could maybe give us some opening remarks, Mr. Gingell, thank you.

MIKE GINGELL: I am the Steering Committee Chairperson for Paws Fur Thought. It's an honour and privilege to be invited here as a witness to talk about our program and some of the challenges we've been facing over the last year and several months.

It's interesting how time flies. I appeared as a witness before the Committee in February 2019, when we actually gave an overview of our organization. At that time, I had our intake coordinator and her service dog present. We can't do that now, but it seems like two years and a bit and things have certainly changed.

I don't want to get into too much. I'm sure a lot of the information that you are curious about will come out in the discussion, so really without any long introduction and briefing notes and all that kind of slide - death by PowerPoint and all that stuff - I'm just going to open up the floor and we can have an open discussion.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Gingell. Actually, Ms. Masland, if I may, we are going to do the 20 minutes for each caucus, if that's okay. That way it makes it easier for online or virtual. I will allow 20 minutes for each caucus, starting with the PC caucus, followed by the NDP caucus, and then the Liberal caucus. I will count the time after that and we can divide it.

We do have quite a bit of business after, so probably we'll stop at 3:30 p.m., and I'll calculate the time according to that. Thank you again. We can start with Ms. Masland - go ahead, please.

KIM MASLAND: Back in 2019, I was around the table then when you appeared and certainly enjoyed the presentation that day. Back then, there was a waiting list for veterans who were waiting for or in need of a service dog and I'm wondering if that waiting list still exists. Has it increased? Has it decreased? Anything you can offer about that.

MIKE GINGELL: That's always a very good question. For those who don't understand, we actually pair our dogs with our training centre down in Kansas. The process to raise a dog takes roughly 12 to 18 months, and when the veterans and dogs are ready, we send them down so that they spend seven to 10 days working with the animal and understanding how it works, and then we bring them back.

Obviously with COVID, travel has been a huge problem, not only in terms of getting our veterans down there - that adds a little bit to our waiting list - but the whole public access issues as a result of COVID have not only impacted travel but also the

training of the dogs. Last year, we lost 15 dogs out of the program because of the way that the whole bringing up and training of the dogs, from selection to fostering through to - what's very important is the public access piece, which obviously was a problem.

At that point, because service dogs are actually task-trained to mitigate specific disabilities, if they don't get past public access, we can't even do task training for them. That is a huge impact that COVID has. The travel piece is the first part, and even getting dogs properly trained with public access has been a problem.

To get back to your question, yes, we still have a waiting list. We are about a year and a half behind. The actual dogs are still being produced and trained, and we're basically waiting for the borders to open up, at which time we will probably send a cadre of 10 to 15 veterans down all at once - a Canada-only training session - and bring up the teams. We're really looking forward to that, and so are the people who have been on the waiting list, especially the ones who were ready to go down in February 2020. We had to turn them off at the last minute. It's been a challenge for sure.

KIM MASLAND: How many dogs did you expect to train last year?

MIKE GINGELL: We do 12 dogs a year, sometimes 14, sometimes 10 - it sort of depends on the dogs and how they progress through the system. They don't all pass, obviously. Our business plan basically has 12 dogs per year.

KIM MASLAND: I certainly can appreciate they don't always all pass. My son-in-law is with the RCMP and he actually trains police dogs. I know when one of his police dogs doesn't make it, he takes that pretty much to heart. They all have their own personalities.

I guess now that we're in the third wave of the pandemic, and we're hoping, you said, that around 10 to 15 veterans may travel, and we're looking at maybe late Fall, early next year for them to travel?

MIKE GINGELL: That's correct. Our current plan is tentatively scheduled for October this year. The facilities down there are ready, and once that happens, we will resume our quarterly process. We typically have three or four veterans three or four times a year, usually February, June, August, and October or September. We will resume that. We're trying to catch up. That's basically what we're trying to do.

KIM MASLAND: Maybe I missed it, Mr. Gingell, but did you say how many veterans are actually waiting right now for a dog? I know you said we have 10 or 15 that may go, but how many would be on a wait-list right now?

MIKE GINGELL: I'm not the intake coordinator, but we have no more than 20 either on the waiting list with their application and everything else completed, and we have

another 8 to 10, I believe, who are in process. The whole intake process requires psychiatric assessment and a number of other things like that - police record checks and vulnerable sector checks. We have actually received quite a few in the last couple of months. We expect that people are starting to think that they'll be travelling soon. Also with other mental health issues, it becomes more apparent that potentially a dog will help them, so they're applying.

KIM MASLAND: I want to speak briefly on funding, and then I'll turn it over to my colleague so I'm not taking all the time here. As far as funding goes, what are your funding sources?

MIKE GINGELL: Our funding sources used to be mainly donations. We have some very strong supporters: the Royal Canadian Legion, for example. The Nova Scotia Nunavut Command has been just awesome in supporting our cause. We also have the Order of St. George, who are fairly large contributors. We have a lot of personal contributors, anywhere from \$20 to \$5,000. I did mention Nova Scotia Nunavut Command Legion, but a lot of other local legions typically provide funding, \$3,000 to \$5,000 a shot.

Our biggest funding source happens to be Wounded Warriors Canada. Wounded Warriors has a service dog provider program. There are six schools that have been accepted into what they call the Wounded Warriors Service Dog Program. Because Wounded Warriors is a Canadian non-profit, they have a number of other sources for revenue, including Veterans Affairs Canada and the Dominion Command of the Legion and so on.

As part of that, one of the nice things about Wounded Warriors is that we have a three-year memorandum of understanding that gives us a particular operating budget so that we can plan, and we're not necessarily constrained by having individual donations. It has been hard. We haven't actually gotten as many of those smaller donations recently. We have received one from Veterans UN-NATO lately, about \$5,000. We did get some of the other smaller ones. Our main source right now is Wounded Warriors. However, due to COVID-19, we haven't been travelling, and we haven't actually been paying for the dogs. We're still okay in terms of funding. Once we catch up, we're going to have to resume the typical fundraising activities that we have had in the past.

KIM MASLAND: What would the cost be for one of the dogs? The cost in the travel and the training of the dog and the whole deal for a veteran to actually have a dog come back, what would that cost?

MIKE GINGELL: The cost is \$18,000. The typical dog from a provider in Canada is between \$20,000 and \$25,000. One of the reasons we actually get our dogs from the United States is that they have a very different way of training their dogs. They can actually leverage their federal penitentiary system to do a lot of the socialization and public access training. I think there are five or six prisons that they actually utilize. That keeps the costs down quite a bit, but you still have the veterinary costs, and you have the task training and

stuff afterwards. The dogs themselves, to get specific, are about \$7,000 U.S., and the rest of the money is for travel and living and after-support. We do public access training every two years here. Even paying for a Nova Scotia licence, a provincial licence.

KIM MASLAND: I'm going to pass it over to my colleague for Northside-Westmount to ask some questions now.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Ryan, you have just under 10 minutes.

[2:15 p.m.]

MURRAY RYAN: I love dogs. Nothing nicer, more beautiful than having a warm dog. They are truly our best friends. With that in mind, you spoke about COVID-19 and the impact over the last year. So with a 12- to 18-month training period, I am just curious: How many dogs do you currently have in inventory, for lack of a better phrase, that you are housing right now?

MIKE GINGELL: We actually do not keep them in inventory because we have to actually pair them after about 18 months.

What is happening is that the school in Kansas was huge. They pair 80 dogs for various disabilities over the year. Between 12 and 20 are for psychiatric assistance dogs, but the other types of service dogs are for diabetic alert, autism support, seizure alerts, mobility, that sort of thing. What is happening is, because the restrictions down in the United States are not travel-related like they are here, they are basically pairing those dogs off with people who can use them.

Essentially what will happen is when we are able to travel again, then the dogs will come up and will be ready for us to come down. The problem is if you have a dog that is ready to go after 18 months, they become socialized a little bit too much. We've had issues in the past where the dog has been two years or more and the bonding, the actual task training, alerting, and stuff may or may not work. We typically have really good success if they are between a year and 18 months.

MURRAY RYAN: Thank you very much - that makes sense. That was one of the other questions I was going to have because if these dogs were just basically in a holding pattern for the last number of months, I can only imagine the work that would be involved with keeping their training totally top-notch and up-to-speed, because animals being animals, they could lose that pretty quick. It's hard not to teach a dog how to sit when they've just been sitting there.

Over the last year, have you been able to place any dogs with veterans in the last 14 months since the pandemic began? I'm thinking, you know, back to last Summer and Fall when things were improved a bit between waves.

MIKE GINGELL: Unfortunately not. We've had a few false starts, if you want, where we've tried to set things up and then things change, restrictions come online again. It is unfortunate, but no.

MURRAY RYAN: That is totally understandable. There could have been a window of opportunity there, but it is just such a very - to say it's a fluid situation is an understatement.

On average, you are doing about 10 to 15 dogs a year - would that be correct? I am just wondering, per my colleague's question earlier about the waiting list with quite a backlog now, the demand hasn't ceased or let up at all. Veterans are still either probably more anxious with the mental impact of isolation and quarantines and having to stay at home.

MIKE GINGELL: Yes, that is absolutely true. It is one thing to be on the waiting list. It's another thing to actually have a dog and have problems, which is sort of a different subject. To get back to your question, now that we are part of Wounded Warriors Canada, we've stopped actually taking applicants from Ontario. We used to cover eastern Ontario as well as Atlantic Canada. I think for a little while there were some rumours floating around social media that we were not taking applicants, so that slowed things down. The word is out that we are still taking applicants, and we are getting more.

Yes, to be quite honest, it is really hard on our intake people to try and set expectations because hey, we have that Atlantic bubble, everything is looking good, so we were trying to make sure everybody had passports and all their police record checks and everything up-to-date for travel in February - and no, you know? So it is another facet of the problem that we have to deal with the people not only on the waiting list but, as I said, there are implications for people who have dogs that have to get public-access-tested every two years, as well as when we start having problems or issues where in the past we would be able to go and visit and correct them. Anyway, I'm kind of getting off-topic but that is another significant piece that we're dealing with because of the pandemic.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Ryan.

MURRAY RYAN: That's it for me, Madam Chair. Mr. Gingell, thank you so very much. It's been a pleasure chatting for a few moments.

THE CHAIR: You have five minutes left, Ms. Masland. Would you like some more minutes or do I move on to the NDP? Five more minutes.

KIM MASLAND: I can probably ask a couple more questions here. In 2016-17, several members of the Nova Scotia Legislature supported an initiative to provide a federal

medical expense tax credit for service animals. Are you aware - has this tax credit eased the burden for veterans who rely on service dogs?

MIKE GINGELL: You know, every little bit helps. It's not a lot of money, and a lot of people don't actually qualify if they make money, but it is an acknowledgement by the government that they do recognize service animals. Even with the lack of federal standards to define what a service dog really is, it is still up to people to apply. As I said, every little bit helps.

KIM MASLAND: Is there any funding that comes from the provincial government?

MIKE GINGELL: No, not at this time.

KIM MASLAND: That is it for me, Madam Chair. We can pass along now.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. It is 2:22 p.m. and we now move on to the NDP, and who would like to start? Ms. Roberts, go ahead.

LISA ROBERTS: Mr. Gingell, I thought I would begin by just taking an opportunity to hear through you what you can say about the experience of veterans in your network during COVID-19. I think many Nova Scotians have had struggles of all sorts during the past year and some. Certainly, life has changed daily. People aren't out so much. There aren't so many gatherings. There are countless changes that we've experienced and I'm wondering if you would share a window into your world, based on the veterans whom I assume you remain in some contact with who have been paired with a dog through current Paws Fur Thought.

MIKE GINGELL: It has been challenging, I will admit. We maintain contact with all of our teams - it's part of our client services - in order to make sure that they are doing all right and that they are looking after their animals and the animals are looking after them.

One of the problems we find is that in a lot of cases, veterans who are suffering from PTSD don't like to go out in public, so they've almost been using this as an excuse to stay home, which is not good for the dog because the dog has to practise public access in order to maintain its ability to go out. It's not that they're not being useful in terms of dealing with night terrors and triggers and that sort of thing from their task training, but if they are used to being home and you take them out to a store and if they don't practise that, there's a problem. We found that a lot of the veterans are using it as an excuse not to go out every day and take their dog for a walk and those sorts of things.

The other aspect of it is the veterans have more anxiety issues. It's bad enough as it is, but they do tend to have anxiety issues and even though they don't go out and deal with public access, the dogs are still doing very well in terms of being a companion, watching their back, so to speak, waking them up from nightmares, alerting them when

they're going to trigger. So in and around their house and families and homes, they are still being very effective, from what we know.

LISA ROBERTS: I wonder if you could elucidate a little, explain to me a little, "public access." I think the example that you just gave of accompanying a veteran to the grocery store would be one example of public access, but you also referenced - and I was looking at the Hansard from the last time that you appeared - that how the dog performs with public access is something that's actually - is it measured or monitored or tested, as well? Maybe you could just expand a little bit, because it's coming up so often in your answers.

MIKE GINGELL: In Nova Scotia, we're fortunate that the Province has legislation that basically defines what a service dog is and how it qualifies. In order to maintain that certification, there are two ways. If the actual school that provides the dog is what we call ADI certified, or part of the Assistance Dogs International organization, then they're given a waiver because they're tested because they are a member of ADI. If they are not an ADI-accredited school, then Nova Scotia has testing. You can call them up, they do a test - just like a driver's licence kind of test - every two years. They will take the team and they will go through an actual formal test. At the end of that, they're given a card and they're good for a couple of years. That's how we maintain and certify public access for service dogs.

LISA ROBERTS: And do I recall that the dogs that are placed through Paws Fur Thought are not trained at an ADI-certified school and therefore they do need to be tested? Has that changed at all?

MIKE GINGELL: No, that is correct. In order to belong to ADI, you have to be a non-profit charitable organization. As well, you have to go through their whole process and certification. Our provider was an ADI-certified school at one point in time, but they are not anymore. Therefore, we do in fact have to be recertified up here.

LISA ROBERTS: I can only imagine how complicated that has been with COVID-19. So both the dogs and their owners or their pairs - I don't know the terminology you use - have not been getting out and being in all those situations where, like you said, the dogs need to practise. I can't imagine that that kind of testing has been kept current, given how much of government has redeployed to support various aspects of the pandemic response. Do you want to maybe update us about that? How has that affected that process of certifying?

MIKE GINGELL: Actually, the certification process has not changed. It's just been a little bit more complicated. We just had one team recertify last month. They were concerned about public access, so we were able to have somebody go through the test with them a couple of times before they actually did the formal test. We've had several do the same process. We have other teams that have decided not to recertify at this point in time

and are going to wait until they decide either they're going to be going out in public more often and need to be recertified or not.

To be honest, a lot of them think it's unenforceable unless you're a store owner and somebody who actually insists on seeing that card. It makes it difficult. And then having dogs out on patios and allowed in restaurants outside, that causes other problems in terms of public access, too, because a lot of handlers don't want their dogs who are certified to be attacked or deal with other aggressive behaviours. That's causing other access issues for the actual teams themselves. Again, off track.

[2:30 p.m.]

LISA ROBERTS: I appreciate that. I think when a witness appears at committee, it is an opportunity for all of us to get a window on an experience that we might not otherwise have.

I was wondering about that change that was announced just a couple of months ago around creating potential, the actual - that dogs are now allowed on patios. I heard a little bit at the time from the disability community expressing concerns around that, but I don't think I heard a lot specifically from folks who work with service dogs. A couple months in, what is the conversation around that change and the possible consequences?

MIKE GINGELL: I think the bottom line is that service dog teams just will not go to those places. What we're doing is basically restricting them from those areas. Some will, some won't. It's sort of like dog parks. Dog parks are really risky for taking a service dog. It only takes one aggressive dog attacking a service dog to basically ruin it and make the service dog anxious itself. That just compounds the anxiety that the handler has and generally negates the dog, in which case we have had to retire them in the past. That's hard on the handler, not to mention the wait time to get dogs.

LISA ROBERTS: I think I will hand off to my colleague for Dartmouth South after maybe just one more question. One thing that I've been following with some interest, mostly because I have a 10-year-old who would really like a puppy, is the great COVID bump in demand for dogs and for puppies. I wonder if you can give us any insight into the consequences of that COVID phenomenon for the availability of dogs to be trained as service dogs. I don't know if it has an impact or not, frankly.

MIKE GINGELL: It really doesn't impact the ability to get and train a service dog, because of the way that the training is so rigorous and goes through the various stages of training and certification. One thing I do worry about is that a lot of people are now working from home. Dogs have a tendency to bond with their owners, and if the owners go away and they're used to them being there, then the dog itself can suffer from anxiety and have those sorts of behaviours, which are not fair on the dog either. I worry about that a little bit too, if people actually start going back into the office.

THE CHAIR: We're moving now to Ms. Chender - or still Ms. Roberts?

LISA ROBERTS: I am ready to cede to Ms. Chender if she is ready.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Sure. How much time do I have?

THE CHAIR: You have nine minutes.

The honourable member for Dartmouth South.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Thanks for being here today, Mr. Gingell. It's always good to hear, as my colleague said, about the experience of different folks, especially through the pandemic.

Because we are a provincial government committee, I'd like to ask a few questions connected - you mentioned at the beginning that it's been difficult, and of course it's been difficult for everyone given the extenuating circumstances, as the epidemiology has changed, the restrictions have changed, and the travel regulations have changed. How are you getting that information in a timely way and conveying it to your members? Do you have a good sense of communication around that and folks that you're in touch with in the government?

MIKE GINGELL: Your last part, "in the government," changed my answer.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Or anywhere. Are you having direct communications with folks who can help guide you and your members?

MIKE GINGELL: We do. In fact, we coordinate with the other six schools that are part of the Wounded Warrior Service Dog Program, and we kind of commiserate together. We try to deal with issues in a way that's common across all the schools. We have social media, we have email, we have people reaching out to us. Some people will follow up and say, hey, how's it going? Public access is coming up, do you need help? In the past, we would run refresher training every year. We would bring the trainers up from school and everybody would come down and do refresher training every year just to keep up to speed with what's going on.

I lost my train of thought.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Okay. Well, I guess shifting, then, back to the conversation about dogs on patios, there were, as my colleague mentioned, certainly some words of caution that came through, particularly from the disability community and folks who have service dogs, but we didn't hear a lot from - I mean, I guess I didn't particularly hear the perspective of your members. I'm wondering, were you consulted or were any of

the other schools consulted or asked to make submissions on that policy before it came through?

MIKE GINGELL: No, we were not consulted. We heard about it when it was announced. It caused some anxiety and some concern amongst our teams and handlers. As I mentioned before, if they're not designated places - if it could be any restaurant - then we could potentially have veterans who would not go out just because of that.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Have you subsequently made any submissions or applications to clarify that, such that your members would have more freedom of movement - or veterans wouldn't have that concern?

MIKE GINGELL: To be honest, we haven't thought about it. Most of our handlers and teams are already suffering from PTSD, so to try and get them to focus on one thing is very difficult. It's not like a service dog for a diabetic or somebody who has their faculties about them. We have to be very careful with our community that we don't trigger them, and it just makes things worse. For a veteran PTSD service dog team to try and address these things, it's very, very difficult. We need clinicians who can help us - people like myself, and even folks like yourselves - make that case because our service teams just - they can't.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Yes, and so, to that end, how would you want to see that policy clarified? What would you want, given that this policy has now been enacted? What changes would make it more certain and less challenging or anxiety-producing for those teams?

MIKE GINGELL: That's actually a tough question. I'd have to take it back and think about it and probably ask some of our handlers what would help them deal with that situation. That's fine. I can take that back to our committee and they can reach out to some of our veterans. Maybe I can provide some clarity on that.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I think that would be great. I think, you know, we want to hear from you and where we have policies that would disproportionately impact a group that perhaps weren't thought of or consulted in the planning, we want the information. We need to help make that better.

Is there anything else that you feel - you mentioned that you don't receive funding from the provincial government, but obviously you are impacted by policies. Is there anything else that you'd want to communicate to the committee about that in terms of ways that you could be supported by the provincial government now, or other things the government could be doing to help you and the separate teams?

MIKE GINGELL: The one thing that comes to mind is maybe we need to review the legislation on the Service Dog Act. There are some issues we have, and it's very - it's

kind of entrenched in the lack of a Canadian standard for service dogs which prevents VAC on funding service dogs, for example. There is not a clear definition or a standard across Canada. So one of the primary concerns with the service dog back in Nova Scotia - it's similar in British Columbia that has something very similar - is public access. Just because a dog passes a public access test, it does not make it a service dog because it has nothing to do with the task-training activities that are designed to mitigate the medical issues.

So I could take a dog from the SPCA and I could train it and I could get it to pass a public access test probably without too much difficulty, to be honest - get a card, right, without any other further testing or certification. I can take the dog anywhere now, based on the current legislation. When we first brought that up it was, hey, you know, the legislation is new, let's give it some time to see what happens, but I think that's one of the things on my to-do list that I need to bring up again.

THE CHAIR: You have one minute, Ms. Chender.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: I think that is really helpful. It's really helpful for the Committee and it is great to have this opportunity to sort of hear about how there is a lot of legislation on the books and some of it is kind of fresh and current and does what it is meant to do and a lot of it needs to be reviewed and it sounds like that is a piece of legislation that falls into that category. I appreciate that and thank you for answering my question.

THE CHAIR: Perfect timing, and we move on now to the Liberal caucus. Who would like to start? Mr. Horne followed by Ms. Lohnes-Croft. Mr. Horne, go ahead.

BILL HORNE: Thank you. Sounding very interesting, what's been going on. I'm a dog lover. I've had dogs for 35 years of my 73 years, so I do enjoy them but they probably wouldn't make a great service dog: an Irish Setter. If they are well-trained, even they can be trained.

My first question is generally on - it will take probably 10 minutes and I will pass it on - the Royal Canadian Legion, of which I am a member, and I have an interest in what they give out to your organization and other organizations. I am wondering: Do you look at each Legion separately, or is it the Central Command that you deal with in getting funding, Mr. Gingell?

MIKE GINGELL: The Nova Scotia Nunavut Command has actually supported us since the very beginning. They helped us out looking after our financial piece out of the Command Benevolent Fund. They are, sort of, the primary people who we have been working with. What we are finding, though, is that all of the other smaller Legions across the province, actually through Atlantic Canada, have members who are veterans and understand the problems that they are faced with and will basically do fundraising out of their own funds, however they do it. We will have presentations, go to Windsor, go to St.

Peter's, go to wherever it happens to be to accept these cheques. That is in addition to what the Nova Scotia Nunavut Command has provided.

BILL HORNE: Yes. That's what I was hoping you would say because I know a lot of the Legions like to work with dogs and feel that they are very important for their veterans.

On another thing, Medric and Jocelyn Cousineau are the founders and they have been - it's been founded for about two years now, maybe a little longer. I am just wondering if you could let some of the newer MLAs understand just how that came about and just talk about the organization itself.

[2:45 p.m.]

MIKE GINGELL: I'd love to give you a history lesson. We are into - in June it will be eight years since this happened. Medric Cousineau is a veteran who was injured in service - an operational stress injury - who had severe PTSD that debilitated him to the point that some help was needed. Jocelyn, his wife, his partner, basically started to look around at alternative therapies other than just providing drugs and other kinds of therapies that really weren't working.

They looked into this thing called a service dog. They saw some studies down in the United States and over in Europe that said these provide benefits and they researched it. He went down to Kansas, he got a service dog, came back. Within a year he understood that it had saved his life. It turned him around and he wanted to pay it back. Right at the beginning - actually, through an association with myself and Becky Kent at the time, who knew Medric - I got involved, because my wife also has PTSD from an operational stress injury that she had over on tour in Africa. We paired her up with a dog. She was one of the first three to be paired up with a dog.

Part of that whole effort led to Medric saying, I need to pay this forward, I need to make a point about this. He created what he called his Long Walk to Sanity, which was essentially he left Eastern Passage and walked to Ottawa, to the Parliament Buildings, and did fundraising along the way. He took a service dog with him, Thai, and that's how we got started. Through what he called compassion fatigue and other things, he had to kind of bow out about three years ago, which is when I stepped up, because it saved my wife's life as well, and other veterans whom we've paired through the years. It really has changed their life. It has turned it around 90 per cent of the time. That's not bad when we're dealing with animals.

We're paying it forward. That's where we've come from and that's where we intend to go and grow.

BILL HORNE: A couple of quick questions: What kind of breeds of dogs do you train, or do they train in Kansas? Are there a few that are preferable over others?

MIKE GINGELL: The pat answer is it depends. We find that with the types of issues where we're trying to have, for example, a dog take a veteran and pull on the leash and take him out of a situation, it has to be a little bit of a bigger dog. We look at golden retrievers and Labradors and that sort of stuff as a preferred breed. However, we've had Australian shepherds, we've had Newfoundland dogs, and we've had a little terrier. It just depends a lot on what the disability is and what the veteran can make the most use of.

We've had veterans who have mobility issues as well, so you need a larger dog, maybe a shepherd. We've had a couple of Great Danes. We tend to prefer, as I said, the Labrador's size. The smaller dogs don't necessarily have the strength, depending on what they are trying to do for the veteran. It's one thing to have an 80-pound Labrador jump on you in the middle of the night and wake you up, as opposed to a 10-pound small dog. We also try and avoid the larger dogs for public access - for example, try and get a Newfoundland dog on a plane. Another biological aspect is that bigger dogs don't live as long, so they can't stay in service as long. That's sort of it.

We stay away from the rottweiler, pit bull, the ones that have aggressive sorts of tendencies. You can train them out but there's still that instinctual thing that those dogs have that if it became protective in any way - service dogs are not supposed to be protective - then having a large dog or a dangerous dog like that is really not an option.

That's kind of the smorgasbord of dogs.

BILL HORNE: How long is a dog that has been trained serviceable for the clients? At what kind of age do they give them up?

MIKE GINGELL: It's typically around the eight-year mark that we start to plan for succession. We've had a number of dogs that unfortunately had to be retired for medical reasons. One we had to put down - he had cancer. Sometimes they'll have TPLO, which is a leg problem, surgery, and it can be a problem after because they can't do what they're supposed to do, but typically about the eight-year mark, we start looking at successor dogs if the veteran feels that he needs another dog.

In fact, we've had some pretty good cases where the veteran has said no, I'm good now, I can get out in public. Sure I have to work at it, but I don't need another dog. Let's give it to somebody else. That's a good news story.

BILL HORNE: How much time is left?

THE CHAIR: You have 12 more minutes.

BILL HORNE: After this one last question, I'll turn it over to whoever is next. I guess I wanted to just ask you: How many organizations like yours are across Canada, and how many dogs would they train and where would they get them, that sort of thing? Or is it all independent?

MIKE GINGELL: There are many, many organizations that train service dogs. However, the lack of national standards, and some of these organizations are actually more for making a profit than looking after the veterans, those sorts of organizations - I'm not going to speak for them. We've had some issues with people who had service dogs from those organizations, and as a matter of fact we've picked up some pieces and helped other pairs out.

Across Canada, what we're trying to do is, because of lack of federal standards, Wounded Warriors Canada has taken it upon themselves to certify schools across Canada. We have one in mainland B.C., one on Vancouver Island, we have one in Alberta, we have two in Ontario, one in Quebec, and ourselves that go through a rigorous process that the initial founders of the Wounded Warriors Service Dog Program - we all got together and said, these are the standards that we want to meet. We based them on Assistance Dogs International standards and we based them on our experience with PTSD and training and basically the client care after the fact.

To get back to the numbers, Vancouver Island Compassion Dogs - I think there are six to 10 dogs a year. They've increased their capacity recently. That covers all of British Columbia. Alberta was three, National Service Dogs in Ontario is - I'm talking about PTSD service dogs - four, Les Chiens Togo in Quebec is three or four, and us, who have 12. We've got a fairly good production. A lot of it is building up capacity. We're working on actually expanding ourselves to have potentially a school starting up in New Brunswick to help. That's on our road map.

THE CHAIR: We move on now to Ms. Lohnes-Croft.

HON. SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Thank you for being here. I'm more familiar with Audeamus dog training for PTSD with veterans. I have a close relative who's an instructor with them, and we communicate quite often. I'm quite interested in your program. Your program is international?

MIKE GINGELL: No, it's not international, it's Canadian, but our dogs come from the United States for now. They're our provider.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Do any of your dogs come from Canada?

MIKE GINGELL: No. Primarily we're bringing our dogs up from Canine Assistance Rehabilitation Education Services (CARES) in the United States for a couple of reasons: They've been in business for 27 years now, and we can actually get more dogs

for less money and pair more veterans, which is our major goal, looking after veterans, by doing it this way. We've had great success, and at this point in time we don't want to change something that's working.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Lohnes-Croft.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Do you do any of the - when the dogs are young, come and live with a Canadian family here, or is that all done in the United States?

MIKE GINGELL: At this point, all of that is done in the United States. They do the fostering, they do the socialization, they do the public access, they do the task training down there. Then we do the pairing and the training after the fact. We just don't have the resources. We just simply don't have the resources to do that up here.

We are very small. We are a team of three and everybody has to do everything. We're bringing, through collaboration, through the Service Dog Program, with employers - we can collaborate across schools and we can share stories and experiences. Right now, we're a small team and it's hard to get volunteers who actually understand the problem.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: What type of program do you use for your training for PTSD?

MIKE GINGELL: I'm not really sure I understand the question.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Like the assistance dog, is it the Assistance Dogs International program that your group falls under? What sort of certified training program are you using?

MIKE GINGELL: The training program we use is based on the ADI, PTSD service dog standards. So from whelping up to actual training, all of those standards are maintained and met, plus Wounded Warriors Canada, the schools that are part of that have created our own set of guidelines that enhance the ADI standards to specifically target PTSD service dogs, as well as client care after the fact. We are creating our own standards because there is no Canadian standard.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Is your organization working towards obtaining Canadian standards?

MIKE GINGELL: We're involved whenever there's a call for this sort of thing. We get involved, we participate, we talk about the issues that we've had before.

One of our concerns is that Veterans Affairs Canada is talking about standards when, in my opinion, they should just adopt standards that are already adopted in Europe and elsewhere. Australia has standards, over in Europe they have standards, so why are we

trying to create another standard? Even if they adopted ADI standards without the ability to join ADI as a non-profit only, we feel that would be good.

It's not so much the standards that we're worried about - and when they get into the standards discussion, they talk about how to raise the dog and train it. I don't care about that, I look at the product at the end - can it pass public access? Can it do task training? Can it actually work for the veteran? If the dog is not trained properly, then those three things won't happen.

The last time the Standards Committee met and failed miserably was because they were talking about how to train a dog, how to bring it from A to B and not what the end result was. So when we get into these sorts of discussions, the VAC wants to do more research, they want to do more studies. There's a Purdue study. There was one that was done by McGill that was sponsored by VAC.

It gets to the point where we've got a good program going and sometimes we don't want to get involved in the politics of all that stuff because there was a lot of damage done the last time they actually tried to make Canadian standards across the board.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Lohnes-Croft, you have approximately two minutes left.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: With your own program, you have three people who are trained and then you put out a call for volunteers. What qualifications are you looking for in your volunteers?

MIKE GINGELL: Our volunteers have a certain level of dog training and we basically reach down to the school for advice if it's something out of the ordinary. Essentially, our volunteers are veterans with PTSD. We are worried about the clients. We let the school worry about the dogs. If there are any issues with training or whatever - as I said, we bring them up every year to do refresher training - they're very good to help us. Actually, one of our new volunteers is going through a training certification program as well.

We've also got part-time veterinarians and veterinary assistants to help with things like diet, nutrition, and looking after the dog. That's how we do it. It ain't great, but that's what we're doing.

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: So it's purely voluntary and non-profit. How have you managed through COVID-19?

MIKE GINGELL: Well, we're volunteers. We just do what we have to do to keep things in the pipe. As you know, we're trying to make sure that everything's coordinated and that we can catch up. Our intake coordinator is an ex-army logistics officer. One of the other ones is a warrant officer clerk, retired. I'm a software engineer by trade, but a program

manager as well. We've got some qualifications. Plus, with the help that we get from the other schools and Wounded Warriors and the Legion, we muddle through.

[3:00 p.m.]

SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Sounds like you have some good resources on hand.

MIKE GINGELL: Yes, we do. They go above and beyond, and sometimes I don't know how they manage to deal with it. Dealing with mental health issues is challenging in its own right. Remember, all of our teams have mental health issues, so we get all kinds of things going on. The patience and just the compassion that the other volunteers have is the only way this is really resonating with the veterans we work with.

THE CHAIR: The time has elapsed for the Liberal caucus. I'll pass the 20 minutes for each of the three caucuses. I would like to ask my colleagues if they have other questions they'd like to ask, or if they would like us to let Mr. Gingell give us a final remark and let him go a little early if you don't have further questions, and then we can do committee business. It's up to you.

Mr. Horne.

BILL HORNE: Okay. Probably should be a fairly quick question. We have, in Canada, the CKC - the Canadian Kennel Club. Do they take any part in any of your dogs - what dogs, where they come from, and what kind of . . .

THE CHAIR: Sorry, Mr. Horne. Mr. Horne, before you speak, it's really the PC Party. I want to get a consensus first and then go in sequence if we're going to continue - either ten minutes or five minutes each, and then we will go in the same sequence: PC, NDP, and then Liberal. I thought you were giving us a comment on that.

If I may ask my colleagues, we can do five minutes each for the second round. If you're okay with that, raise your hand. I can do the ten minutes, but I'm not sure if - no. Five minutes each? We'll do a quick five minutes each, and then we'll let Mr. Gingell give us his final remarks. Is that okay with everyone? Agreement? Perfect. Thank you so much.

Okay, we'll start with the PC Party with five minutes, starting at 3:03 p.m.

KIM MASLAND: I have no further questions, Madam Chair. Maybe my colleague for Northside-Westmount does.

THE CHAIR: Sure. Mr. Ryan, do you have any?

MURRAY RYAN: No, Madam Chair. Thank you very much, but no, I'm good. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Perfect. We'll go to the NDP. Would you like five minutes, Ms. Roberts? Go ahead.

LISA ROBERTS: I don't know at all that this will necessarily take five minutes, but I did have one question that I was interested to ask.

Mr. Gingell, a number of times you've referenced how some of the teams are doing well and some of the teams are struggling. Obviously, mental health is a challenge. That's what brings people to the program and to the dogs. I'm wondering - again, just because it's always so helpful to have a witness appear at committee who gives us a window into the experience of some Nova Scotians. What additional therapy or services, apart from Paws Fur Thought, would you say is really making a difference for how veterans are doing with their life with PTSD? Is there some service in Nova Scotia that is available or that should be available more easily that is making a positive difference? Or the opposite: Is there a particular challenge associated with the provincial government which is undermining veterans' recovery and/or life with coping with PTSD?

MIKE GINGELL: That's a tough question to answer. A lot of the problem - anyway, there are other opportunities for veterans to seek help who have mental health disorders, PTSD. For example, Wounded Warriors has an equine program. They also have a couples therapy type of program that they run and a few other things. Mental health first aid and these sorts of things.

One of the things that I think is a bit of an impediment is that it's the federal government that funds health care for veterans. It's not a provincial thing, so access to actual medical staff, psychiatrists, social workers, that is not bad, and it's not necessarily the availability of these resources, but how they get connected to the veteran, because they always have to go through VAC. VAC funds all of that. I'm not sure it's a provincial problem so much as it's a federal problem of getting us connected to the resources within the province that we need. Not sure if that really answered the question, but hopefully that helps.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Horne.

BILL HORNE: Just a couple of quick questions, one on the Kennel Club. I don't know if you have any knowledge about how they work with breeders or dogs, purebred. I'm wondering if you have any comments about that, Mr. Gingell.

MIKE GINGELL: We actually like to go three generations back in terms of genetic history on the dogs. The Kennel Club, or CKC, are resources for that. One of the reasons we do that is because hip dysplasia and TPLO kinds of things are genetic issues, genetic

problems, so we don't want to have an unknown dog, like a rescue dog or an SPCA dog, necessarily in the program if there's a problem two years after it's paired. Not to say that rescue dogs and SPCA animals and things like that cannot be trained, but if we have that extra measure, then it's just that much better.

BILL HORNE: I'm just wondering, maybe you've already stated this, but I'm just not aware of what you said. Are you only looking to help Nova Scotians with your organization, since you are from Nova Scotia, or do you take people that need dogs from other parts of Canada?

MIKE GINGELL: Due to the nature of having to support people, we are primarily Atlantic Canada. We have teams in Newfoundland and Labrador. I think we only have three or four teams in P.E.I. We've got quite a few teams in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia as well. Now that the service dogs are sanctioned by Wounded Warriors, we're letting National Service Dogs and Fire Team K-9's deal with Ontario. We used to do eastern Ontario, but we found it really difficult to support them for refresher training and stuff like that. There's a lot of travel involved, and what we're trying to do is minimize that and basically increase our impact on the teams that we currently have in Atlantic Canada.

BILL HORNE: One more question. You know there are a lot of people who have dogs who buy jackets for them and they call them service dogs and there's no way to know if they're qualified or not qualified. Have you experienced any of that with dogs, or your trainers have heard of?

MIKE GINGELL: Yes. Fortunately - and Nova Scotia's progressive in this - we do have the legislation that provides that ID card which has a picture of the handler and the dog. Other than that, you can buy a vest from Amazon or something, put it on the dog. If it's really well behaved - as I said before - you could assume it's got public access training, and then it's anybody's - yeah, it is a problem, and it really, really annoys veterans with real service dogs when they see that.

BILL HORNE: Thank you very much. I found it very informative. I think there's a lot of information there that needs to get out into the community, and I believe that Nova Scotia is a great place to be doing this. Thank you so much for your time.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, everyone. On behalf of the committee, if I may ask one question as well. If there is anything for MLAs to promote for you, if you have things - I know it's very hard to raise money right now, but if you're doing - some people have come out with 50/50 online, or any other ways of raising money that you have come up with, to please let the MLAs know and we'll promote it for you. That is something we can do for the future. I'm just asking you if you have any final remarks to give us before you leave.

MIKE GINGELL: No. I thank you for your offer. We will reach out. When we have events and things like that, it's important to have public representation, so I thank you very

much for that. I also thank you all for the opportunity to speak. You can probably tell I'm pretty passionate about this. It saved my wife, it saved my family, and I'm paying it forward. Getting the message out to everybody who really needs to be educated about what a real service dog is and what it does is super-important for me. These sorts of opportunities are, as I said before, a real honour and privilege to be witness to. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you again. I just wanted to show you that I still have my pin from 2019, and I wear it often and I get questions on it. I wear it for that reason. Again, thank you for your wonderful presentation. We had quite a few questions and tired you out. I hope you have a great afternoon. You can leave and we will be continuing our committee business. Thank you, Mr. Gingell.

[3:15 p.m.]

MIKE GINGELL: Thanks, and stay safe.

THE CHAIR: You too.

Committee members, we have committee business. There was an email poll conducted on April 12, 2021 seeking unanimous consent to postpone the April meeting of Veterans Affairs as a result of a technical issue from Cobequid Veterans Memorial Park - raised on April 11, 2021, poll conducted on April 13th. We all are aware of that. Any discussion? I see none. I move to the next one.

We also have received two requests to appear as witnesses for the Veterans Affairs Committee. The first one is an email received March 30th from David MacLeod, CD MA, to discuss the importance of military medical files to the provincial health care system - the veterans and the spouse and family of veterans. This was emailed to members on March 30th and attached with meeting material from today. Any discussion? Ms. Roberts.

LISA ROBERTS: Just to say that, frankly, I've lost track a bit of where we are in the agenda-setting process for this committee - how many topics or witnesses we have coming up. I thought that this was an excellent topic and so I'd be glad if the committee considered it to be put on our agenda. The only suggestion I had was to maybe add a witness, to have a more fulsome conversation about the topic. I actually reached out to David MacLeod and he suggested Dr. Abraham Rudnick, who is the clinical director at the Operational Stress Injury Clinic. I thought that would be a very interesting and informative committee meeting. I don't know if that is viable, but if so, I would welcome it.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I do believe we have our witness for the next meeting in June. That is already set up. We have one lined up as well for September, because we do not meet in July and August. I will let the clerk confirm what I just said and when our next agenda-setting is so we can add this topic to it.

HEATHER HODDINOTT: The next meeting would be in June. We have the topic set for that and in September. October, I am still trying to iron out the details with the Memorial Park. That's a discussion that maybe you and I can have if there's still an ongoing issue, but that would be the last item, and we can tack the agenda-setting onto the October meeting.

THE CHAIR: Perfect. Is everybody in agreement? Then we can add this topic at that time and we can bring it in as your NDP topic, Ms. Roberts.

If there's no further discussion, I'm going to read the second one. We also received an email on March 19th from Mercedes Brian from Branch 74 Royal Canadian Legion, to present to the Nova Scotia Veterans Affairs Committee to discuss "the many events they are hosting to engage a range of participants and their ambitious fundraising campaign which will allow them to undertake major renovations to their facility." This was emailed to members on March 22nd and attached with their meeting materials for today. Any discussion? Ms. Roberts.

LISA ROBERTS: It just sounds like likewise we might add that to our proposal, in which case perhaps one of the other caucuses would support the proposal from David MacLeod, but we can have that conversation between now and October.

THE CHAIR: Perfect. That's exactly what I was going to tell our clerk, so there are two topics for our agenda-setting in October.

Thank you, everyone. Our next meeting will be Tuesday, June 15, from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. The topic will be veterans' physician assistants' role in the health care system. The witnesses are the Canadian Association of Physician Assistants; the director is Peter Thibeault and alternate director Erin Sephton, I believe, if I pronounced it correctly. Then also from the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia, Dr. D.A. Grant - Gus Grant. That's all for the next meeting, June 15th.

Unless there are any other topics, we are adjourned. No further discussion?

Thank you so much for appearing today and for a very interesting gentleman who presented us on Paws Fur Thought, something that I am very proud of. Thank you.

[3:19 p.m. The committee adjourned.]